

The achievements and challenges of women in combat:

A comparative study of Israel and Canada

by

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## **Abstract**

In 1993, the recognized Oxford scholar John Keegan, made the following assertion in his book *A History of warfare*: “*Women, however, do not fight. They rarely fight among themselves and they never, in any military sense, fight men. If warfare is as old as history and as universal mankind... it is an entirely masculine activity*”. Almost 30 years have passed after combat roles were opened to women in at least 25 military institutions around the world and still, the mere presence of women in combat duty keeps being challenged. This investigation asks, what achievements and challenges women face while serving in military combat and combat-support positions? This research is expected to contribute to the studies of women’s representation, recognition, and visibility in warfare, defense forces, strategic studies with the analysis of women’s integration into military combat units. My research fills a void in Feminist IR theory inclined to view the women combatant based on the barriers and abuses they have experienced while serving in the military. I demonstrate and explore women’s unsuccessful and successful incorporation into the armed forces of two states: Israel and Canada - democratic industrialized nations that have enforced defence policy shifts to actively incorporate women into combat roles as earlier as 2000-2001.

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To my husband and my family.

To all the extraordinary women who fight.

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# Chapter 1. Women in combat

## Introduction

This thesis asks what achievements and challenges women face while serving in military combat and combat-support positions? This topic links to studies of women's representation, recognition, and visibility in warfare, defense forces, and strategic studies. The overarching conception of this study is feminist security, which argues that gender is "conceptually, empirically, and normatively essential to studying international security"<sup>1</sup> (Sjoberg, 2009). By exploring and analyzing women in combat and support combat roles, my thesis aims to support feminist consciousness, defined by Cynthia Enloe as "what keeps one taking seriously and staying intellectually curious about the experiences, actions and ideas of women and girls" (Enloe, 2004). The unique contribution of my study to these subject areas is the analysis of women's integration into military combat and combat support roles. My research fills a void in Feminist International Relations (IR) theory, inclined to view women combatants based on the barriers and abuses they have experienced while serving in the military. Using an empowerment-centred approach, I explore women's unsuccessful and successful incorporation into the armed forces of two states: Israel and Canada. For this quest, combat positions, once identified as the "last bastion of male privilege in the national security agenda" (Jacoby, 2018), are the best place to look for women's accomplishments and challenges.

This research challenges the perception of women as non-violent actors through the exploration of women's combat achievements, while also giving space to understand the challenges they face, through their own voices and perspectives. A significant objective is to reinforce the idea that the historical exclusion of women from the battlefield was a result of socio-

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<sup>1</sup> Sjoberg, Laura, "Introduction to Security Studies: Feminist Perspective Contributions" *Security Studies*, Volume 18, Issue No.2 (May 19, 2009), 183-2013, <https://doi-org.uml.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/09636410902900129>

cultural issues rather than lack of skills, wrongfully attributed to their biological sex, as described by Canadian academics Margaret MacMillan (2019) and Megan Mackenzie (2015).

The supporters of gender equality values suggest that the inclusion of women in the military increases operational effectiveness (Dee Gibbon, 2013), improves gender relations in militaries (MacKenzie, 2013), and potentially decreases the rates of sexual violence within the armed forces (MacKenzie, 2013). The inclusion of women in national armies, especially in combat roles, contributes to healthier military organizations, hereby understood as military organizations with high cohesion and low reports of discriminatory practices, while potentially reducing the groupthink and hyper-masculine destructive behaviors commonly observed in all-male units. Some feminist scholars such as Joan Acker, Cynthia Enloe, and Laura Sjoberg argue that to change masculine institutional cultures, more than just the integration of women into the militaries is required.<sup>2</sup> Instead, the actual integration of values associated with femininity must prevent the masculinized expectations of militaries when women are integrated into their ranks (Enloe, 2004, Acker, 1990; Sjoberg 2015). While this thesis recognizes the importance of the aforementioned argument, it should be noted that the inclusion of values associated with femininity into a military environment is virtually inexistent without the integration of women into the armed forces due to the gendered world we live in as described by Kara Ellerby and Lauren Wilcox. (Wilcox, 2009; Ellerby 2014). For Ellerby, Wilcox as well as Sjoberg, gender is understood as “the social associations that we have between women and femininities, and men and masculinities. This social associations are often extended to interactions between groups, companies, states, and even international organizations”.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Acker, Joan, “Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations,” *Gender & Society*, Vol 4, no.2 (1990): 129-158.

<sup>3</sup> Sjoberg, Laura, “Sex, gender and sexuality in international security,” *International Journal*, Vol. 70, No3 (September 2015) p. 434-453.

In 1993, British military historian, John Keegan made the following assertion in his book *A History of Warfare*:

“Warfare is, nevertheless, the one human activity from which women, with most insignificant exceptions, have always and everywhere stood apart. Women look to men to protect them from danger, and bitterly reproach them when they fail as defenders. Women have followed the drum, nursed the wounded, tended the fields, and herded the flocks when the man of the family has followed his leader, have even dug the trenches for men to defend and labored in the workshop to send them their weapons. Women, however, do not fight. They rarely fight among themselves and they never, in any military sense, fight men. If warfare is as old as history and as universal mankind, we must now enter the supremely important limitation that it is an entirely masculine activity”.

The preceding paragraph is the only mention Keegan made about women in his 400 pages encyclopedic review about the humankind and its relationship with warfare. According to Hayle Noble, the publication year of this quote is interesting because it hints at what was happening inside contemporary western militaries. These “inaccurate and sexist sentiments” (Noble, 2019) expressed by the author in the early '90s, overlapped with military women breaking through previously male-exclusive and off-limits jobs, such as combat and support-combat roles, inciting the debate about the role of women in the military.<sup>4</sup> Noble made a similar remark in relation to another one of Keegan's books *Face of Battle*, published in 1976. This was the same period of the Second Wave Feminism and women’s admission in to four of the five military academies in the United States. Noble extended her views on Keegan’s “outdated histories” (Noble 2019) to his inexistent statements about Russian women being involved in military affairs. She said that Keegan incorrectly relegated Russian women to “field wives”, which alludes to the women in the Red Army as prostitutes. This constitutes an emblematic example of how women were included in military narratives at all in the 1980s and 1990s. (Noble, 2019).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Noble, Hayley, “Women in Combat: The Soviet Example” *Boise State University History Graduate Projects and Theses Department of History* (2019), 10.

[https://scholarworks.boisestate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1008&context=history\\_gradproj](https://scholarworks.boisestate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1008&context=history_gradproj)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

Almost 30 years have passed since combat roles were opened to women in at least 15 militaries around the world. However, still, the mere presence of women in combat duty keeps being challenged. On January 16, 2019, Heather McDonald, an American political commentator, essayist, and fellow of the Manhattan Institute, wrote an article in the *Wall Street Journal* titled “Women Don’t Belong in Combat Units” arguing that US military institutions were “watering down fitness standards because most female recruits can’t meet them” and “lowering these physical requirements risks reducing the American military’s lethality”.<sup>6</sup> The lingering argument of women’s incapacity or unwillingness to participate in warfare, both represented in the academia and mainstream media outlets, opens the opportunity to a deep further analysis on the actual conditions on women enrolled in military combat duty.

## **Research Questions**

This thesis addresses the following four questions: after the longstanding campaign to incorporate women in to combat, (1) Were women’s experience in combat or combat-support roles, positive, negative, or mixed? Have women achieved their goals in the right to fight in combat units? (2) What are the main achievements of women who served in combat roles? (3) What are the main challenges of women combatants? and (4) What downsides have been recognized or have combat women expressed any regrets as a result of their combat experiences?

To answer these questions, I conducted a comparative analysis of the experiences of women in military combat and support-combat roles in the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) and the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). Despite the many evident differences between the two states, such as size, conscription vs. volunteer army, professional vs. people’s army, and protracted conditions

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<sup>6</sup> Heather McDonald “Women don’t belong in combat units”, *Wall Street Journal* (2019) Accessed February 27, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/women-dont-belong-in-combat-units-11547411638>

of conflict vs. peaceful state, I focused on the similarities of the processes to incorporate women into combat roles.

I selected Canada and Israel as comparative case studies for the following reasons:

- Both are democratic industrialized nations that have enforced defence policy shifts to actively incorporate women into combat roles as early as 2000-2001. Canada eliminated formal barriers to all military roles and positions for women in 2001<sup>7</sup>. Israel started incorporating women into combat roles in 2000.<sup>8</sup>
- In both cases, the incorporation of women into combat roles was accomplished due to legal battles carried out by active military members against those institutions arguing discrimination. The exclusionary policies were finally abolished after the legal intervention of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal<sup>9</sup> and the Israeli High Court of Justice.<sup>10</sup>
- The combat units in both countries are voluntary and mixed, conformed by male and female combatants. Although Israel has compulsory conscription for both men and women, female soldiers who serve in combat roles volunteer for this type of service.<sup>11</sup>
- Finally, both units have experiences on the battlefield that can be comparable. They have been deployed in irregular warfare scenarios and counterinsurgency (COIN) operations, targeting non-state actors, like Islamist militias.

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<sup>7</sup> Government of Canada, "Timeline: Those who served" *Veterans Affairs Canada*, March 29, 2017. Accessed on April 21, 2021, <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/those-who-served/women-veterans/timeline#saw>

<sup>8</sup> Israeli Defence Forces, "Caracal Battalion," Last updated in 2021. Accessed on June 1, 2021, <https://www.idf.il/en/minisites/caracal-battalion/>

<sup>9</sup> Canadian Human Rights Tribunal "Brown v. Canadian Armed Forces," Canadian Human Rights Tribunal "Brown v. Canadian Armed Forces," File Number: D. T. 3/ 89, (February 20, 1989) p. 1-31. Accessed on March 29, 2021 <https://decisions.chrt-tcdp.gc.ca/chrt-tcdp/decisions/en/item/7013/index.do?q=Combat+Related+Employment+of+Women>

<sup>10</sup> Idit Shafran Gittleman, "Women's Service in the IDF: Between a 'People's Army and Gender Equality'," *The Israel Democracy Institute*, Last updated on November 10, 2020. Accessed on June 29, 2021, <https://en.idi.org.il/articles/24554>

<sup>11</sup> Israeli Defence Forces, "Caracal Battalion," Last updated in 2021. Accessed on June 1, 2021, <https://www.idf.il/en/minisites/caracal-battalion/>

As will be explored later, a public media scan of news and articles talking about women in combat and combat support roles in Canada and Israel will give a starting point to understand the areas of public attention that they generally received and how these women are perceived. By doing so, we found areas of opportunity to explore with an academic mindset. Furthermore, the inclusion of the media reports will allow to compare the information publicly consume and displayed in media outlets vs. the voices of real women with actual experience in combat arms.

The Public media reviews showed the following phenomenon: In the case of Israel, the media reports fall on a spectrum that goes from categorizing the increase of women in combat roles as a positive tendency to total rejection of the IDF's decision to open more combat units to women, arguing the endangerment of national security due to a feminist agenda. This inclusion vs. exclusion paradigm limits the overall accomplishments of women to their enrollment in combat roles. No more attention is given to the actual performance, duties, or challenges of the women combatants, besides the fulfillment of their basic combat training. In the case of Canada, the spectrum goes from the integration of Canadian women in combat roles as a positive tendency to cases of sexual harassment and assault that women have endured in the Canadian military. Like the Israeli case, accomplishments and challenges of the women combatants are reduced to a positive integration vs. sexual misconduct paradigm.

My investigation focuses on the achievements and challenges of women combatants. These achievements are generally understood as any accomplishments during their military careers while performing combat roles, or as a direct consequence of their participation on the battlefield. Some of these accomplishments may include, but are not limited to, the following examples: military awards and other forms of recognition as exemplified by medals and honors, promotions, participation in victorious battles, and events considered successful in public opinion. While the concept of the challenge will be understood as barriers and obstacles that intervene or influenced,

commonly in a negative way, the effective performance of the combatants' duties. It is important to note that these concepts were not previously explained to the participants so they would freely develop their own concepts of achievements and challenges, with neither pre-conceived notions nor expectations.

The structure of this thesis is organized into six Chapters:

Chapter One introduces the research questions and conceptualizes the key terms and definitions used in the study to make it intelligible and coherent.

Chapter Two explains the contextualization of the issue of women in combat, provides the theoretical framework and the methodology that were implemented in the research.

Chapter Three presents the case study of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). The Israeli case elaborates on the interviews of women who served or are currently serving in combat and combat support roles in different units. It also summarizes the military achievements of women in combat roles in the IDF.

Chapter Four presents the case of the Canadian Defence Forces and shows the accomplishments of the women in combat and combat support roles through personal testimonies and military awards.

Chapter Five analyzes the results of the investigation and compares the experiences of the women in the two different military institutions.

Chapter Six presents a summary of the outliers found in the study and offers a condensed view of the findings by addressing the questions initially presented and the concluding remarks.

## Conceptualization

The key concepts for my investigation are:

- **Direct Ground Combat** – Engaging an enemy on the ground with individual or crew served weapons, while being exposed to hostile fire and to a high probability of direct physical contact with the hostile force’s personnel. Direct ground combat takes place forward on the battlefield while locating and closing in on the enemy to defeat them by fire, maneuver, or shock effect.<sup>12</sup>
- **Combat Arms** – a term use to described combat and combat support roles, understood as military troops within national armed forces who participate in direct ground combat. Combat Arms may include but is not exclusive to the following units: Infantry, Armour, Artillery, Combat Engineering, Combat Aviation, and Field Air Defence.<sup>13</sup>
- **Combat Support Roles** – a combat support role is any military role that provides fire support, operational assistance, logistical support, and other services required by soldiers in combat units. This definition is carefully designed to include experiences from combat service support roles (health care, logistics officers), to acknowledge the high probability of direct physical contact with the hostile force’s personnel that occurs in irregular warfare scenarios. Training of these military roles varies from country to country; however, the decisive element is the battlefield experience of the soldiers to be categorized as combat-support roles and not exactly the nominal designation of the role by its country as a “combat support”.

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<sup>12</sup>US Secretary of Defence, “Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule,” Memorandum for the Secretary of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Assistant Secretary of Defense (Personnel and Readiness), Assistant Secretary of Defense (Reserve Affairs), January 13, 1994.

<sup>13</sup>Rush, Robert, *Enlisted Soldier’s Guide*, (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books), 2006.

- **Military Woman** – Any individual who self-identifies as a woman with military experience.<sup>14</sup>
- **Achievements** – Any accomplishments obtained during women’s military careers while performing combat and combat support roles, or as a direct consequence of their participation on a field operation. These include actions performed or experiences lived and considered by the combatants as successes.
- **Challenges** – Barriers and obstacles that intervene or influenced, commonly in a negative way, in the effective performance of the combatants’ duties. Some challenges may include physical or psychological demands, adaptation to military life, gender discrimination, and cultural differences, among other things.
- **Gender** – A system of symbolic meaning that creates social hierarchies based on perceived associations with masculine and feminine characteristics.<sup>15</sup> For this thesis, gender is an analytical category that can also be defined as the social associations Western societies impose on women and femininities, and men and masculinities. According to Feminist IR theory, these social associations often extend to interactions between groups, companies, states, and even international organization.
- **Gender Symbolism:** The way in which the terms masculine and feminine are assigned to various dichotomies that organize Western thought by which men and women tend to place a higher value on the first term, in this case values associated with masculinity.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023

<https://eige.europa.eu/thesaurus/terms/1430#:~:text=Female%20human%20being%3B%20a%20person,defines%20herself%20as%20a%20woman.>

<sup>15</sup> Sjoberg, 2009. The textual definition of Sjoberg is: A system of symbolic meaning, as expectations and assumptions assigned to people on the basis of their (presumed) biological sex, and as dependant on time, place, and context.

<sup>16</sup> Sjoberg, 2009 and Wilcox 2009.

- **Gender Social Hierarchy:** social construction and a structural feature of social and political life that profoundly shapes our place in and view of the world.<sup>17</sup>
- **Gender lens:** Special focus on gender as a particular kind of power relation, which traces the ways in which gender is central to understanding international processes.<sup>18</sup>
- **Gender-based violence:** According to the United Nations definition, gender-based violence against women shall be understood as “violence or a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination -that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Sjoberg, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Jill Steans phrase quoted by Laura Sjoberg in “Introduction to Security Studies: Feminist Contributions,” *Security Studies*, Volume 18, Issue 2 (19 May 2009), 187.

<sup>19</sup> United Nations, 1993

## Chapter 2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This chapter contextualizes the issue of women in combat, the theoretical framework, and the methodology used in the research.

### Contextualization

Although women have engaged unofficially in combat and military leadership roles since 1200 BCE<sup>20</sup>, combat roles in modern armies formally opened their ranks to women at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>21</sup>. Norway was the first country to eliminate formal barriers for women's access to enter all military roles and positions in 1985, under the leadership of the first female Prime Minister, Gro Harlem Brundtland<sup>22</sup>. Over the last twenty-one years, some states have modified their domestic legislation to allow women's enlistment in the military while others have allowed women to engage in combat positions. Currently, 25 out of 195 states in the United Nations allow women to serve in combat roles: 21 states have no restrictions (US, UK, Canada, France, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Australia, Lithuania, Romania, Poland, Ireland, Israel, Eritrea, South Africa, South Korea, and the Philippines) while four states offer select combat positions (India, Pakistan, Japan, and North Korea). The road to

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<sup>20</sup> According to evidence found by archeologist in 1976 in Anyang, China Fu Hao, or Fu Zi, one of the consorts of King Wu Ding of Shang Dynasty (1600 -1100 BCE), commanded the largest recorded army in Shang Dynasty's history of 13,000 troops against the neighboring kingdom of Qiang. She is recognized as one of the first women in ancient history with high military and political power. Lily Xiao Hong Lee and A.D. Stefanowska "Fu Zi the Shang Women Warrior" in *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women: Antiquity through Sui 1600 B.C.E. -618 C.E.*, Lily Xiao Hong Lee and A.D. Stefanowska (eds.) (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2007), 19-25.

<sup>21</sup> Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly "Women in the Armed Forces: Promoting Equality, Putting an End to Gender-Based Violence," Last updated on June 1, 2016. Accessed on June 08, 2021, <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5836fccd4.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Williamson, "Jegertroppen: Norway's all fighting, all- female special forces unit," *Norway Today*, March 20, 2021. Accessed on June 28, 2021, <https://norwaytoday.info/culture/jegertroppen-norways-all-fighting-all-female-special-forces-unit/>

obtaining “the right to fight”<sup>23</sup> as described by Jacoby (2018), has been slow, arduous, and controversial.

The case of Israel is particularly unique as one of the few states with compulsory conscription for both men and women, since its establishment in 1948.<sup>24</sup> However, after the War of Independence, no women were allowed to serve in combat positions (Jacoby, 2018). The Defence Service Law and the Israeli Security Service Act signed in 1949, excluded women by granting them exemptions based on their gender. Rules for service conditions included: shorter service periods for women, different reserve duties, and exemptions for women from compulsory service because of marriage, pregnancy, parenting, and declaration of a religious lifestyle (Robins & Eliezer, 2000; Herzog, 2019). Gendered distinctions and gendered segregation were the ultimate basis for personnel selection, training, and placement (Herzog, 2019).

During the 1973 War (October War), Israeli women participated in instructors’ roles in field units replacing men needed in new combat battalions. In the 1982 Lebanon War and the First Palestinian Uprising (*Intifada*, 1987), women replaced men in instruction, inspection, and essential operations roles. (Herzog, 2019; Izraeli, 1997). But it was only in 1995, when an Israeli woman soldier Alice Miller filed an appeal to the Israeli Supreme Court, demanding her right to participate in the prestigious pilot’s course, a combat course closed to women that the campaign for the ‘right to fight’ solidified. The Court ruled in her favor and forced the Israeli Air Force to make accommodations for women in their training courses (Jacoby, 2018; Herzog, 2019).

After the Miller precedent, the Equality amendment to the Defense Service Law, published in 2000, stated that men and women have equal rights to serve in any role in the IDF. The Caracal

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<sup>23</sup> Tami Amanda Jacoby, “Gender relations and national security in Israel,” in *Redefining Security in the Middle East*, eds. Tami Amanda Jacoby and Brent E. Sasley (Vancouver, UBC Press, 2018) 83-100

<sup>24</sup> Other states with compulsory conscription for both males and females are Norway, Sudan, Sweden, East-Timor, and Côte d’Ivoire (*World Population Review*, 2022). <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/countries-with-mandatory-military-service>

company, a mixed combat company, was the first infantry unit created to incorporate women in to combat roles. This unit patrols Israel's southern border with Egypt. In the following years three additional mixed companies were created: the Lions of Jordan Battalion in 2014, the Bardelas or Cheetah battalion in 2015, and the Lions of the Valley Battalion in 2017.

In the Canadian case, women participated actively, providing medical services in combat zones since World War I. Between 1914 and 1918, approximately 3,141 women served as nurses in the Royal Canadian Medical Corps. Around 2,500 of them went overseas to work in hospitals, aboard hospital ships, and field ambulance units.<sup>25</sup> Women participated unofficially in combat zones in every international conflict Canada was involved in - from World War II and the Korean War in 1951 to its latest interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003.

However, women's official incorporation in to combat roles would come in 1989 when the Canadian Human Rights Commission ruled that "all obstacles to women's access to any military job must be removed, with the exceptions of service aboard submarines and Catholic chaplains".<sup>26</sup> This marked the full legal integration of women into the CAF with the final obstacle to submarine service lifted in 2001.

The existent scholarly literature on women and armed conflict focuses on the barriers that women have faced in this integration: discrimination, anonymity, sexual harassment, and abuse, etc. For instance, in *Women and Gender Perspectives in the Military: An International Comparison* (2019), eleven scholars reviewed the integration of women into national armies, and its impact on gender mainstreaming<sup>27</sup>. They explored the overall challenges that women have faced

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Government of Canada, "Timeline," *Veterans Affairs Canada*, March 29, 2017. Accessed on April 21, 2021, <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/those-who-served/women-veterans/timeline#saw>

<sup>27</sup> Defined by Egnell and Alam (2019) as "achieving gender equality by assessing the implications for women and men of any legislation, policy, and programs in all areas and at all levels" in *Women and Gender Perspectives in the Military: An International Comparison*.

during their incorporation process, the integration of gender perspectives in military operations, and the implementation of UNSCR 1325. Earlier, in 2015, Megan Mackenzie, in her book *Beyond the Band of Brothers: The US Military and the Myth that Women Can't Fight*, examined the role of women in the US military and the key arguments used to justify combat exclusion for women. This policy was reversed in 2013.

However, limited information is available about the achievements that women in combat roles have had in different militaries. This project demonstrates women's successful integration into combat roles, the overall implications of this integration to the gender-equality debate, and the extent to which gender matters in combat duty. My investigation focuses on the combatants' achievements and challenges. These achievements should be understood as any accomplishments obtained during their military careers while performing combat and combat support roles, or as a direct consequence of their participation on the battlefield. Some of these accomplishments may include, but are not limited to, the following examples: military or civilian awards and other forms of recognition such as medals and honours, promotions, participation in victorious battles, and events considered successful in public opinion. Some challenges may include physical or psychological demands, adaptation to military life, gender discrimination, cultural differences, etc.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical point of departure for this thesis draws from the subset of Feminist IR theory –Feminist Security Studies, an area of study, which argues that gender is “conceptually, empirically, and normatively essential to studying international security” (Sjoberg, 2009), and focuses on developing an interest in the ways that the process, nature, and practice of gender reflect

and are reflected in war and conflict”,<sup>28</sup> (Zalewski, 1995), and for this case, reflected also in various aspects of militarization and soldiering (Golan, 1997).

This thesis also explores the anti-“victim feminism” approach, that argues that “women are no longer oppressed as a group”<sup>29</sup> developed by authors such as Naomi Wolf and Katie Roiphe, and criticized by Alyson M. Cole, with the intention to challenge mainstream victim-centred focuses on women and fully understand the lived and diverse experiences of women in combat and combat support roles.

### **Feminist Theory in International Relations**

Feminist IR theory emerged after the Second Wave of feminist movements flourished all over the world in the 1960s and 1970s<sup>30</sup>. These movements were the precursors of Feminist theories in which sex and gender are analyzed as social constructions to be modified rather than facts of nature. (True, 2010). The interests of many Feminist theorists in IR as an area of study, come from their personal involvement in feminist peace politics and negotiations; from efforts to broker international peace and security in the League of Nations – before World War I - to Cold War peace movements<sup>31</sup> (Rupp 1997; True 2010). Influenced by their activist experiences, Feminist scholars consider it a moral imperative to include women’s voices to change the subjects and objects of studies of women and the military. (Tickner 2006; True 2010). The main contributions of Feminist IR theory are in making women visible and exploring gender as a socially constructed identity and as a powerful organizing logic to influence international politics. Feminist IR theory challenges women’s invisibility in classic IR theory and practice, women’s

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<sup>28</sup> Sjoberg, 2015

<sup>29</sup> Cole, Alyson M., “There are no victims in this class: On Female Suffering and Anti-“Victim Feminism,” *NWSA Journal*, Vol 11, No. 1, p.72-76

<sup>30</sup> Jaqui True, “Feminism and Gender Studies in International Relations Theory,” School of Social Science Monash University <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.46> Published in print: 01 March 2010 Published online: 30 November 2017

<sup>31</sup> Rupp, L. *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women’s Movement*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press;1997).

marginalization from decision-making processes and the assumption that women's daily lives are not impacted by or important to International Relations. (Smith, 2017). Feminist theory in IR suggests that traditional IR is not gender-neutral, whereas gender and IR are two separate spheres that do not influence each other. Instead, they are gender-blind – where no distinctions are marked between male and/or female sexes, or the distinctions are ignored, leading to assumptions and biases in favour of existing gender relations (Smith, 2017).<sup>32</sup> Feminist perspectives on International Relations seek to understand existing gender relations – the dominance of masculinities over femininities – to transform how they work at all levels of global social, economic, and political life (True, 2010).

The first journal that dedicated a special issue to women and international relations was *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* in 1988. In that issue, Fred Halliday, an IR academic from the London School of Economics, published his article “Hidden from International Relations: Women and the International Arena”.<sup>33</sup> He argued that “the exclusion of women's lives and experiences from study results in a partial, masculine view of international relations” meaning that the claim of dominant IR theories to explain the reality of world politics has a strong masculine bias. At the time more scholars such as Rebecca Grant and Kathleen Newland, added that IR was “excessively focused on conflict and anarchy and a way of practicing statecraft and formulating strategy that is excessively focused on competition and fear”.<sup>34</sup> In their vision, this perspective impoverished the field of International Relations by excluding the “soft politics” for their feminine nature such as the studies of norms, ideas, and processes like structural violence including poverty,

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<sup>32</sup> Cambridge Dictionary, retrieved on December 20, 2021, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/es/diccionario/ingles/gender-blind>

<sup>33</sup> Term first used by Sheila Rowbotham

<sup>34</sup> Grant, Rebecca and Newland, Kathleen, *Gender and International Relations*, Indiana University Press, 1991, 5.

environmental injustice, and sociopolitical inequality that many scholars argue are the root causes of international conflict and insecurity. (True, 2010)

Many of the feminist articles published in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* and in other journals in the early 1990s challenged the conventional ontologies and epistemologies of International Relations. In the early 1990s, feminist scholars such as J. Ann Tickner, V. Spike Peterson, Jan Jindy Pettman, Ann Runyan, and Christine Sylvester (1994) sought to deconstruct Realism, the dominant “power politics” approach to International Relations and challenge the exclusionary, state-centric and positivist nature of the discipline (True, 2010). The argument of some feminist scholars was that “women’s lives on the margins of world politics afford us a less biased and more realistic understanding of international relations given their distance from dominant institutions and elite power” (Runyan and Peterson 1991; Tickner 1992; True 2010). In 1989, Cynthia Enloe asked the question “Where are the women?”, encouraging scholars to find the role of women in global politics and demonstrating that they are essential actors in the international system. She deconstructed the distinctions between the “international” and the “personal” spheres and showed how global politics is shaped by the daily activities that men and women do based on their gender identities. (Enloe, 1989; Smith, 2017)

Finally, Laura Sjoberg explains how feminist contributions to the discipline of International Relations and implementation of a “gendered lens,” as described by Jill Steans, is “to focus on gender as a particular kind of power relation”, or to discover how gender is central to understanding international processes (Sjoberg, 2009). Sjoberg contends that each individual lives and experiences gender in a different culture, body, language, and identity, and therefore no one exclusive gendered experience of global politics, international relations, or international security exists. For Sjoberg, Feminism, is not just about women or the addition of women to male-stream constructions like the military. Instead, she maintains the argument that it is about “transforming

ways of being and knowing, as gendered discourses are understood and transformed”, and contemplating the fact that there is not one but many feminist approaches to International Relations theory that challenge multiple perspectives including realist, liberal, constructivist, critical, post structural, postcolonial, etc. (Sjoberg, 2009: Peterson 1992: p.187)

## **Methodology**

### *Research Design*

Since this study develops a comprehensive understanding of the achievements and challenges of women in combat and combat support roles, it is characterized as a qualitative, inductive research design based on a set of interviews with former and current members of the IDF and the CAF. The interviews were carried out mostly through digital media (virtual calls, phone calls, social media correspondence, and E-mail) for pragmatic and safety reasons, and to reduce the costs of the investigation. In-person interviews were held with the research subjects, whenever possible. The analytical focus is centered on the challenges faced and achievements made to explore women’s self-perceptions of their successes and failures to comply with the initial objective of this thesis, i.e., to explore the accomplishments and challenges of women in combat duty. To locate the study within an analytical framework, I completed a literature review and evaluation of academic and journalistic sources, as well as a study of available government documentation in relation to Feminist Security Studies.

### *Data Analysis*

The combination of the achievements and the challenges of women in combat roles, as variables, gives us compelling picture about their experiences and helps to discover patterns of thought and perception. The literature review enhances the neutrality of the study, tempering the subjective judgements of the researcher and the research subjects. Finally, this study can be applied

to analyze the achievements of women in combat units in different armies, as the variables can be identified through academic literature review or interviews in other contexts.

*Operationalization*

The abstract concepts I explore in terms of achievements and challenges are measured by dividing them into different categories according to the answers of the participants. For both, the IDF and the CAF, the achievements were very similar and therefore divided into the following categories: overcoming obstacles, leadership opportunities, service to others, gender component, and institutional recognition. For the challenges, the categories were significantly different depending in which military they served, so a division was made between the challenges of women who served in the CAF and women who served in the IDF, as described below. I carefully observed the gender component in each answer given by the participants, to see in how many questions they acknowledge their gender and in what nature. These variables will be explored in-depth in the following chapters.

<b>ACHIEVEMENTS</b>	
Overcoming Obstacles	
Leadership Opportunities	
Personal Growth	
Service to Others	
Institutional Recognition	
<b>CAF Challenges</b>	<b>IDF Challenges</b>
Sexual Harassment & Assault	Physical and emotional Challenges
Work-Life Balance	Gender Discrimination
Life Disruption due to deployments	Cultural Differences
Gender Discrimination	Preserving their feminine side

## Chapter 3. The case of study of the Israeli Defence Forces.

### The IDF and the women serving in combat roles

#### *The Early Struggle for the right to fight*

The Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) are the combined military forces of the State of Israel, which include the Israel Ground Forces, the Israeli Air Force, and the Israeli Navy. The IDF was strongly cemented in relation to the establishment of statehood. The IDF had its origins in the *Haganah*, the mainstream paramilitary organization formed in 1920.<sup>35</sup> The *Haganah*'s purpose was to defend the Jewish settlements during the British Mandate of Palestine (1920-1948) from internal uprisings and incursions by the native Arab population.

Women faced greater obstacles than men in joining the *Haganah*. It was in 1925, under the initiative of Rahel Yanait, one of the two initial female leaders of the *Haganah*, that women members began to be formally inducted into the organization. They were identified as “essential to the organization”, however their function remained undefined (Boni-Davidi, 1999). Once a part of the *Haganah*, they faced pressure from their male leaders and fellow soldiers to perform traditionally feminine auxiliary functions such as providing first aid, cooking, cleaning, and serving as motherly figures to the male soldiers. However, after facing higher recruitment standards than men, going through twice as hard meticulous processes, and dealing with the gender perception of women's performance as “one of mistrust”<sup>36</sup>, they succeeded in acquiring new roles for themselves, including those considered to be masculine domains like firefighting, overseeing secret weapons hideouts, and engaging in combat (Boni-Davidi, 1999). Finally, women's new

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<sup>35</sup>The *Irgun* (also known as IZL, Etzel, or National Military organization) and the *Lehi* (Fighters for the Freedom of Israel or Stern Gang) were Zionist paramilitary groups formed in 1931 and 1940 respectively. The *Irgun* broke off from the *Haganah* with a right-wing and nationalist vision, based on a proactive approach rather than only self-defense. For instance, *Irgun* militants believed in retaliation against Arab attacks. The *Lehi*, the smallest group that broke off from the *Irgun*, was the most radical of the Jewish Resistance and focused entirely on fighting the British authority. (Morris, 2001; Jacoby, 2014; *Jewish Virtual Library*)

<sup>36</sup> Boni-Davidi, Dganit, "Haganah," Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women. 31 December 1999. *Jewish Women's Archive*. (Viewed on September 1, 2022) <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/haganah>.

roles did not come at the expense of the old traditional feminine roles, but rather in addition to them.

Between 1920 and Israel's Declaration of Independence in May 1948, the *Haganah* was illegal as the territory of Palestine remained under control of the British Mandate. By 1937 the total membership of the organization was 24,974, with 5,487 (21%) women. The cause of this increase can be traced to the 1936-1939 Jerusalem riots and the accompanying need for manpower (Boni-Davidi, 1999). According to the Israeli revisionist historian Benny Morris, it was only after November 1947 that the Haganah command shifted to a more institutionalized mode and began to reorganize for war. This reorganization assumed that the enemies the Haganah would face were not only the Palestinian people but the neighbouring Arab states as well, namely Jordan, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon (Morris, 2001). Furthermore, the military organization expanded, adopted regular army norms in the fields of logistics, personnel, and intelligence, and became the official Israel Defense Forces (IDF) (Morris, 2001).

The IDF's initial purpose was to repel an existential threat towards the newly formed State of Israel. It entered a state of war immediately after its formation in May 1948. The first stage was a civil war between the native population and the new Israeli citizens. The second stage was an intra-state war initiated by the combined Arab armies of Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and irregular forces from other Arab states such as Iraq (Jacoby, 2014; Morris 2001).

This historical timeframe marked the early struggle of Israeli women for the right to fight. Their victory was a consequence of organization, internal support, and highly motivated individuals willing to undertake the challenge of breaking the status quo. The political instability and warfare made the State of Israel aware of the desperate need for manpower and womanpower and thus consolidated women's efforts to serve in combat roles. This paradigm repeats itself in history almost in a universal and contradictory way. During times of war, women in combat are

indispensable as opposed to times of peace when women are barred from combat. Israeli women were banned once again from engaging in combat roles when the 1948 War of Independence ended (Jacoby, 2018). Although official military conscription was established for both men and women in 1948, women were relegated to secondary status within the IDF.

### *The importance of Women Combatants in Israel*

It was only in the late 1990's when combat positions started to open for Israeli women. This change was generated by legislative amendments initiated by women who fought for the right to fight and defend their country. Hanna Herzog explores the waves of gendering and de-gendering in the IDF since its transformation towards its contemporary context. These gendering and de-gendering waves are understood as complex processes that mold women's integration in to the IDF. Either by establishing a clear gendered distinction or segregation as the ultimate basis for personnel selection, training, and placement (gendering) or implementing policies that do not take into consideration the gender of the individual at all to achieve equity (de-gendering). In other words, gender mattered when gendering took place, and it did not matter when de-gendering took place (Herzog, 2019).

According to Herzog, the gendering and de-gendering processes occurred simultaneously, even in the creation of combat and combat support units in which women were allowed to serve. This meant the idea of gender navigated through the IDF as either a key element for human resources and its accompanying rules, or as simultaneous efforts to make gender disappear completely from the "design of the Israeli soldier" (Herzog, 2019). The participation of women in combat roles is particularly important in Israel. As Herzog describes, in an immigrant society where the military is perceived as "the melting pot" of the Jewish nation, military service is a means for acquiring human capital that can be converted into the labour market and in politics later. (Herzog, 2019; Jacoby, 2018). The simultaneous policies of inclusion and exclusion of

women, in theory and practice, and the meanings attached to them, reach far beyond the period of military service, and play a central role in shaping women's mobility in Israeli society as a whole (Herzog, 2010).

### *Combat units for women*

At the time of writing, 90% of combat assignments are open to women. According to the Jewish Virtual Library, the number of women in combat roles has increased steadily in the last decade. For instance, in 2012, 600 women joined co-ed combat battalions. By 2017, more than 2,700 women were recruited in to mixed gender battalions. Approximately 7% of women in the IDF serve in combat roles today, as opposed to 3% in 2012.<sup>37</sup> In 3,300 women enlisted into combat roles, compared to 2,900 in 2020 and 2,600 in 2019. This is the highest number of women serving in combat positions in the history of the IDF. Reportedly, in the past six years, there has been a 250 percent increase of women in combat units.<sup>38</sup>

The following are some examples of combat units that have accepted women in the IDF<sup>39</sup>:

- Chilutz Vehatzala - Search and Rescue, Home-Front Command
- Karakal – Infantry Corps
- Bardelas – Infantry Corps
- Arayot Hayarden – Infantry Corps
- Isuf Kravi (Modin Sade) – Intelligence Corps
- Totchanim – Artillery Corps
- Mishmar Hagvul – Paramilitary Police Force

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<sup>37</sup> Jewish Virtual Library, "History of women in the IDF: Combat units," Accessed on October 25, 2021, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/history-of-women-in-idf-combat-units>

<sup>38</sup> i24News, "Israel military: A record year for women in combat units," Accessed on October 25, 2021 <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/diplomacy-defense/1637001832-israel-military-a-record-year-for-women-in-combat-units>.

<sup>39</sup> Draft IDF, "Women in the Army", Accessed on October 13, 2022. <http://draftidf.co.il/women-in-the-army/>

- Oketz – Infantry Corps

Combat support roles:

- Chovesh/et – Medic – Medical Support
- Kishrey Chutz – International CO-OP Unit
- Matpash – Government Affair Coordinator
- Dover Tzahal – Army Spokesman Unit

### **Lived Experiences of Israeli Women in Combat**

Research towards this project involved interviews of eight women who formerly served in combat and combat support roles in Israel between 2010 and 2021. The women were asked a total of 10 open-ended questions that allowed me to build a trajectory of the meaningful and unique experiences of women in Israeli combat duty. The questionnaire I created includes questions about their motivations and challenges, the institutional impact on their careers, their significant experiences, personal change, and regrets. Their opinions about the importance of gender in combat will be analyzed in the following chapters (Chapter #5). The analytical focus is centered on the challenges faced and achievements made to explore women's self-perceptions of their successes and failures to comply with the initial objective of this thesis, i.e., to explore the accomplishments and challenges of women in combat duty. The testimonies of the participants have not been altered in any way to maintain the integrity of the investigation. However, extra caution was taken during the formulation of the following excerpts from the interviews to protect the identity and anonymity of the participants.

The women I interviewed participated in active combat during an average of two and a half years in the following units: School of Commanders and Infantry- Biscaj, Special Forces Artillery Corps (Totchanim -Rochev Shamaim), Paramilitary Police Force (Mishmar HaGvul), Infantry Corps

(Karakal Battalion), and Search and Rescue Brigades (Chilutz Vehatzala), among others. Some of the military ranks of the participants included Sargent, First Sargent, Captain, and Commander.

### *Achievements*

The Oxford Dictionary defines *achievement* as “a thing that somebody has done successfully, especially using their own effort and skill”<sup>40</sup>. However, it was very interesting to note how *achievement* can mean different things to different people and although strong similarities can be found, the nature of the answers are different. The participants were asked the open-ended question: “*What are/were the greatest achievements of your military career?*” This question was intentionally ambiguous to ascertain what the women themselves understood and considered as a “success”.

Interestingly, most of the participants’ achievements had at least one of three interrelated elements. First, a leadership component or the knowledge that an opportunity to lead and share their skills and knowledge was given to them. Second, the acknowledgement of a difficult obstacle they overcame. And third, the gender component, which was exposed when the participants made an explicit comment about their gender or the gender of their male counterpart.

The testimonies of three participants (Subjects #1, #3 and #4) attested to experiencing the three components simultaneously. For instance, the achievements of Subject #1 were:

Contributing to the education of non-Hebrew speakers in the military as well as mentoring young, enlisted women. The experience included overcoming gender discrimination and ethno-cultural stereotypes, developing leadership skills, and having the opportunity to actively participate in a War Room, despite being classified as a 64 medical profile.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (Oxford University Press 2022). Reviewed in April 2022  
<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/achievement>

<sup>41</sup> The medical profile is the numeric symbol that reflects the medical suitability for soldiers’ participation in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). This crucial personal data has an impact on the role and nature of one’s future military service. The medical profile ranges between 21 to 97. The profile scale represents the level of fitness, in which the highest number is the most fit, and soldiers are recommended for all combat and elite positions and depending on medical problems and their severity, the number decreases. <https://www.mitgaisim.idf.il>

The achievements of Subject #3 included leadership and obstacle components, identified as achieving her goals despite being a woman (gender component):

Subject #3 lead and trained a team on her own, formed exclusively by male soldiers despite being a non-Hebrew speaker and an immigrant woman. She said: “I trained my own team. I was responsible for eight soldiers directly, all of them were men. Being a woman who trained eight men was an incredible, empowering, and meaningful experience. I did that despite being from another nationality and barely understanding the Hebrew language at the beginning.”

Subject #4 answer described:

Being recognized with a Certificate of Excellence at the end of her basic training. She developed and implemented a highly demanding, physical fitness training program for all the officers in the unit, including men. She mentioned that The IDF created a job exclusively for her so she could contribute to the physical training of her unit, regardless of the health issues related to an ankle injury she neglected due to her training responsibilities.

Subject #5 responded with the following statement when asked about her achievements. The gender component in her answer is signalled by the attributes she needed to become a “good soldier”:

“Not quitting my military service. You needed to be a very aggressive and strong woman, so I became one. Not everyone made it, a lot of my friends quit. I did not quit. That was my biggest achievement.”

In addition to the previous testimonies, Subjects #2, #6, and #7 also remarked on the obstacle component, mixed with an element described as a “journey of self-discovery/improvement.” Something important to note is how in contrast to subjects #1, #3, #4, and #5, these subjects did not make any comments acknowledging their gender. When answering

the questions they focussed on their achievements as individuals, not consciously considering themselves part of the collective they belonged to. These answers relate to Sjoberg's argument that everyone experiences gender in a different way, and from a different perspective (Sjoberg, 2009). This means that every subject in this investigation had a different idea of what it means to be a woman in a combat or combat-support role. Sjoberg argues that "each individual lives and experiences gender in a different culture, body, language, and identity, and therefore there is not one exclusive gendered experience of global politics, international relations or international security, but many."<sup>42</sup>. Her statement explains why these subjects displayed a subtle gender-blindness<sup>43</sup> vs. the gender-awareness of subjects 1,3,4, and 5. From the self-perception of subjects #2, #6 and #7 their gender was neither relevant nor had any relation to their achievements.

Achievements of Subject #2:

"Being in the army is the best school of life. It teaches you a lot about yourself. It teaches you about your limits and you understand the power of the group." She described this process as journey of self-discovery.

Achievements of Subject #6:

"I have gone through a journey in the army for self-improvement. I think it has reached its limits with two points for me. The first is when I was first in my course in the 'mofet' category. *Mofet* means a person who everyone aspires to emulate. It is a person who always volunteers and helps and has a great attitude and is socially active. The other point is when I became the commander of the Unit, I served in. During the COVID pandemic, the army couldn't approve commanders' places due to budget problems, so they chose me as the

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<sup>42</sup> Laura Sjoberg (2009) Introduction to Security Studies: Feminist Contributions, *Security Studies*, 18:2, 183-213

<sup>43</sup> European Institute for Gender Equality, "Gender Blindness," November 10, 2022, Access <https://eige.europa.eu/thesaurus/terms/1157>

new commander even though I was a regular soldier. I was very flattered and glad to do that job. I then realized how much they valued me and my work.”

Achievements of Subject #7:

For Subject #7, her most significant achievement was being able to provide medical assistance and help injured soldiers during an operation in the Gaza sector, commonly known as a dangerous and “hot area”. She succeeded and saved lives even though she was only 19 years old. She said: “When you can watch blood and screams, but still can operate under stressful and difficult circumstances, which is an achievement.”

Subject #8’s answer is described below:

Joining a combat position in the IDF gave her the opportunity to travel around Israel while serving her country. She described the overall experience of “being trained to help people” as an accomplishment.

In the responses of the participants, five elements are present: a) the satisfaction of overcoming outstanding obstacles in six testimonies, b) the development of leadership skills expressed by five participants, c) the realization of how their gender has an impact on their combat and combat support duty, explicitly mentioned by half of the group, d) the sole accomplishment to serve others referred to by three interviewees, and in two cases, e) official institutional recognition.

## KEY COMPONENTS OF THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF WOMEN WHO SERVED IN COMBAT AND COMBAT SUPPORT ROLES: ISRAEL

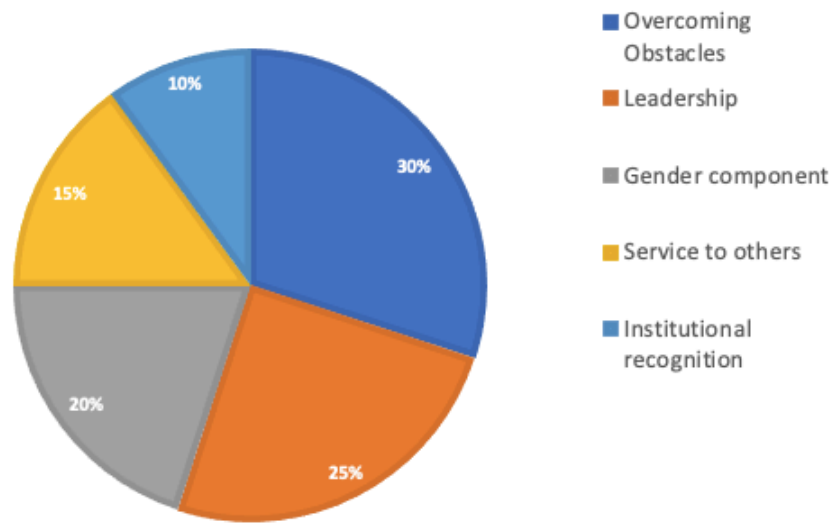


Figure 1: Achievements of women in combat – Israeli Defence Forces

One observation of these results is how the difficult and overwhelming obstacles are seen as an inherent part of the successes by most of the participants. Their achievements could not have existed without the obstacles they faced. The second feature is a leadership experience or the development of management skills as fundamental to the participants' achievements. Leadership increased women's morale and ingrained in them sentiments of empowerment and accomplishment that resulted in pride towards their service, their country, and the military. These two elements were more important for most of the subjects interviewed than having official institutional recognition. Finally, half of the participants did not make any explicit or implicit references to their gender, for instance, pointing out the fact of being women enrolled in what is called "traditionally masculine military roles was not significant".

### *Motivation and Challenges*

When the participants were asked about the underlying motivation to join combat roles or combat support roles, the most common answer was that they wanted to contribute to their military service in the best way possible. These women were on a quest for meaningful experiences that

challenged them. The majority had a genuine curiosity about what they were capable of doing, and they were looking for a “real challenge”. In the cases of Subjects #2 and #4, their motivation was related to family tradition, having a close relative who was enrolled in the Israeli military and served in active combat duty.

The only exception was Subject #1 who answered that her enrollment was mandatory. She had no option due to obtaining a low profile in her physical examination. She mentioned that the initial support role she was appointed to changed drastically due to an escalation of hostilities in the area where she was deployed. Therefore, her support role was suddenly changed to a combat support role due to the extenuating circumstances. Overall, the evidence ascertains that the women who chose to enroll in combat or combat support roles were highly motivated individuals looking for mental and physical challenges. They were likely to seek difficult tasks and take great pride in concluding their training with all the difficulties this may have included.

Regarding challenges participants faced, this investigation identifies four categories common to all: the physical challenge of combat training, an experience of gender discrimination, adaptation to a culturally diverse environment with linguistic differences, and the preservation of their feminine side in a hyper-masculinized environment. This last observation matched with the argument of the dangers of losing the feminine voice, made by Baruch Nevo and Yael Shur at the symposium “Women in the Israel Defense Forces” held on November 2002 at The Israel Democracy Institute. The argument was that the unique feminine voice conquered and developed by Israeli women in the political and social arenas, through the relative detachment of the systematic male discourse in Israel, was in danger of becoming lost when speaking of equality and the full integration of women in the IDF (Nevo and Shur, 2003). According to Nevo and Shur, there may be some women who do not want this feminine voice to disappear because of integration

and therefore, there was a need to explore “how to achieve one without losing the other”.<sup>44</sup> To some extent, all the participants explicitly mentioned a challenge related to these four categories.

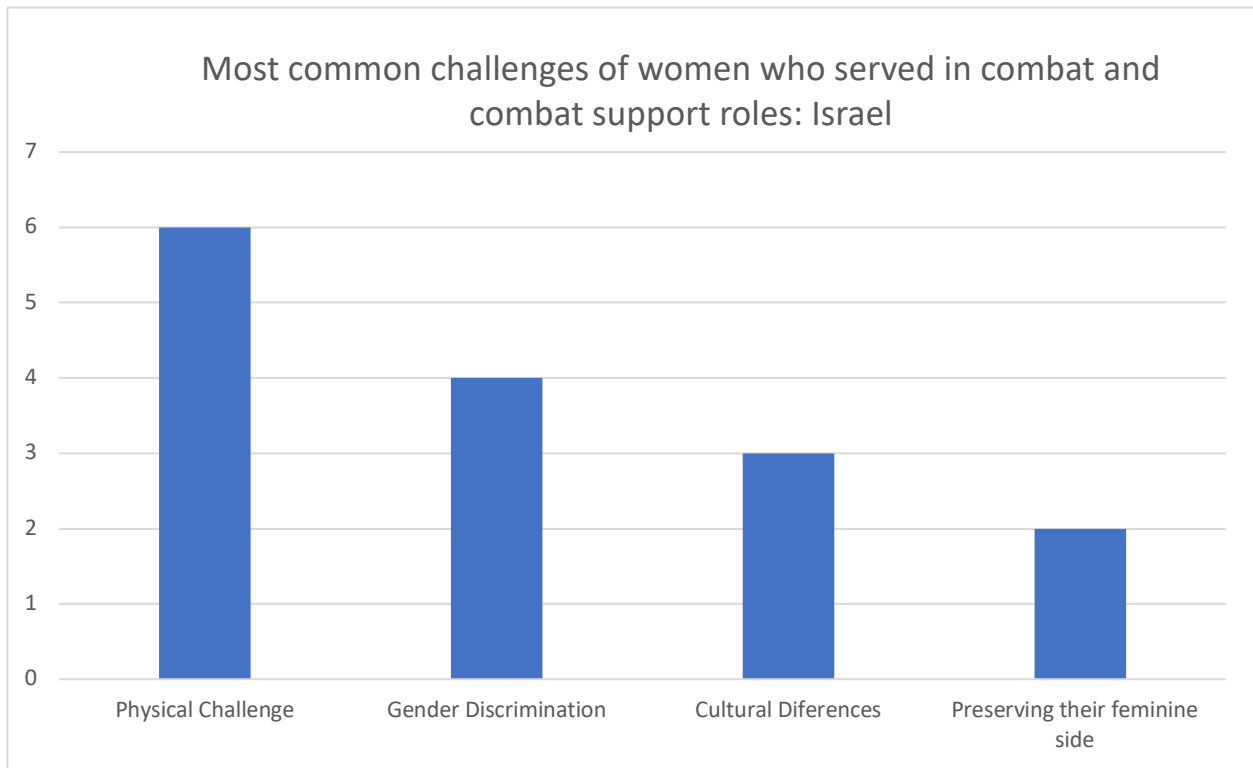


Figure 2: Challenges of women in combat – Israeli Defence Forces

Other challenges identified by the participants were related to living under strict and sometimes incoherent rules and missing the privilege of privacy in their daily routines. Despite half of the subjects categorized as “lone soldiers”<sup>45</sup> and immigrants to Israel at the time the interviews took place, only one subject made an explicit mention of this condition and framed it as a challenge, while adding that feeling very lonely and tired all the time was also challenging for her (Subject #7). No mentions of missing their families were made.

<sup>44</sup> Nevo, Baruch and Shur, Yael, “Women in the Israeli Defense Forces: Costs”, *The Israeli Democracy Institute* (Jerusalem, November 2003), P. 27

<sup>45</sup> A “lone soldier” is a specific status of Israeli soldiers serving in the IDF. These are individuals with no immediate family are in Israel for many reasons such orphanage or being a new immigrant. The lone soldiers have specific rights and responsibilities, and a social support network created by the Government of Israel and the IDF.

One challenge highlighted by a participant was living with strong and permanent safety concerns about their physical integrity while wearing their military uniform in civilian scenarios. She said “You do not feel safe wearing your uniform. You feel threatened all the time. You can protect your country, but you cannot protect yourself. It is the paradox of being part of a humanitarian army; you cannot attack civilians even if they attack you first”. She mentioned an incident in 2014 when two Israeli soldiers were killed and captured by terrorists. This had a significant impact on her military service and how her feelings of insecurity while wearing the uniform increased since then. It can be noted that the vision of Subject #7 of an “humanitarian army” contrasts with “international public opinion that typically sees the IDF as the armed structure of an “occupying force” (Jacoby, 2022)

#### *Personal change and regrets*

Two questions obtained similar or equivalent answers by all participants. The first question was: “How, if at all, did combat duty change you (your character, confidence, future goals, etc.)? All the participants responded that their military service impacted their lives in a positive way. Some made explicit mention of how they became better people after their service. Others mentioned their experience made them more confident, strong, and resilient. Most of them acknowledged the experience as a radical change in their life that made them more accountable, responsible, and taught them how to deal with adversity and manage themselves effectively under stressful situations. Despite recognition by some interviewees of experiencing feelings of loneliness, depression, and physical injuries, all the participants identified their personal change as both radical and highly positive. When asked if they wished to describe any downsides or regrets, they had during their military careers, the participants unanimously answered that they had no regrets, except for one Subject who, after reconsidering, mentioned that maybe she regrets not continuing with her military career.

### *The Role of the IDF in their military careers*

The interviewees were asked about how the IDF impacted their military careers. Half of the participants' answers were favourable to the IDF support, especially those of 'lone soldiers' - Jewish individuals born in foreign countries that immigrated to Israel and voluntarily enlisted in the IDF. Four individuals mentioned that the IDF's support for their military careers helped them with social integration in civilian life. For instance, one of the subjects mentioned how the IDF helped her with social and religious integration into Israeli society through her conversion to Judaism after being categorized as a "non-Jewish person" by civilian authorities. The IDF supported her religious conversion, so that she could have all the benefits that Jewish people acquire when immigrating to Israel. The Law of Return, passed in the Knesset (Israel Parliament) on July 5, 1950, granted every Jew from around the world the right to immigrate to Israel. Despite their country of origin, every Jew is entitled to Israeli citizenship. In 1970, the law was amended by expanding automatic citizenship to the non-Jewish children, grandchildren, and spouses of any Jew, and to the non-Jewish spouses of their children and grandchildren. These additions were made to ensure family unity and to enhance a safe haven in Israel for non-Jews subject to persecution because of their Jewish roots.<sup>46</sup> The process of immigration to Israel, received the name of *Aliyah*, and the people who made Aliyah received benefits such as: a free one-way flight to Israel and free transportation to the airport, six months of financial assistance, free health insurance and Hebrew language classes, and income tax benefits, among others<sup>47</sup>. As a new immigrant who decided to become a "lone soldier" in Israel, the benefits are assigned on a case-by-case basis and are

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<sup>46</sup> Jewish Agency for Israel, "The Law of Return," Accessed July 30, 2022. <https://archive.jewishagency.org/first-steps/program/5131/>

<sup>47</sup> Jewish Agency for Israel, "Aliyah to Israel – Benefits," Accessed July 30, 2022. <https://archive.jewishagency.org/aliyah-benefits/program/8231/>

determined by the IDF's authorities. Additionally, there are associations such as the Association for the Wellbeing of Israel's Soldiers (AWIS), that aids lone soldiers. They are the following:<sup>48</sup>

Financial benefits:

- Monthly stipend
- Holiday gift card
- Flight tickets to visit family
- Food stipend
- Economic fees for medical reasons
- Special 30 days vacations

Housing benefits

- Rent support
- Lone soldiers' apartments
- Residing in Kibbutzim (Collective Settlements)
- Additional personal days.

The IDF also supports their professional careers with good work-related opportunities and the development of personal skills such as physical training and discipline. On this issue, the interviewees answered in a positive-to neutral tone.

However, during the research, I identified three outliers with strong opinions about the role of the IDF:

Subject #7 expressed a very positive attitude towards the institution of the military in Israel. Full of pride and mentioning the superb conditions of the IDF, she said, "all the street children that came from nothing enter the Army (IDF), and start rising; they have a salary, they have a job, they

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<sup>48</sup> Waldman, Edyn, "Rights and Obligations of Lone Soldiers," (2019), Accessed on November 10, 2022 <https://www.mitgaisim.idf.il/%D7%9B%D7%AA%D7%91%D7%95%D7%AA/english/rights-and-obligations/rights-of-lone-soldiers/#/>

have educational opportunities. You have social services and social support that are always available for you. There are special services for lone soldiers like me: you have people who come to your house and open your fridge to ensure you have food, and they are always looking to help you. At the Army, you have the best insurance and pension, you can retire at 42 years old, and if you do well and climb the ladder, your salary can be very high, and you can have a driver". She mentioned that the only reason why she did not continue with her military career was that she wanted to be a pilot, and that was not an option for her in the IDF, as she did not have the health profile required by the Israeli Air Force.

By contrast, the testimony of one subject, who will remain anonymous for confidentiality purposes, expressed dissatisfaction with the Israeli Military Health Service's deficiencies when asked about how the IDF has impacted her military career. She mentioned that family tradition and attachments to the IDF and the State of Israel were solid reasons for her decision to enroll. Her grandfather was a soldier in World War II. He fought in the 1948 Israeli War of Independence, and her brother volunteered in the institution, so she felt the duty to follow the tradition. However, after her service, she expressed frustration with the low quality of military healthcare and how the combination of negligence and poor-quality services affected her well-being. She mentioned that not everything was terrible, but she defined it as "the best-worst experience of my life." The worst part was the cultural adaptation as a new immigrant and having to deal with the bureaucracy of the military institution. The best part was gratitude for the opportunity to learn how to deal with adversity and response under pressure while handling a lot of responsibility. The subject emphasized the value of her military duty as a learning experience where you gain a lot of knowledge about yourself and that it was an "incredible experience."

Another subject who will remain anonymous expressed a similarly negative opinion. She mentioned observing a lot of male chauvinism and discrimination against women while serving in

the IDF. She said: "Women must constantly demonstrate how good and strong they are, and then they get injured terribly, and they receive no help. And that is another thing I would like you to write about, the Israeli Army does not always take care of their military personnel, and people need to know this". She was very critical about the role of the IDF in the well-being of the soldiers, especially women, and she expressed how negligence is a common practice regarding health and mental health issues in the IDF combat positions. Her dissatisfaction with the IDF and other cultural aspects of Israeli society expressed her strong desire to leave Israel and emigrate to another country as soon as she could.

These diverse testimonies lead us to conclude that the IDF has a significant impact on the lives and careers of women in combat roles. As we can appreciate, each combatant has a unique experience and relation with the military institution. It can be observed that if the soldier lives a positive or neutral background, it tends to be seen as a "common" or "normal" experience without further analysis or consequences. Meanwhile, if the incident is negative, it can lead to intense feelings of disengagement, poor opinion about the institution and the country in general, and even risking their *Aliyah* process.<sup>49</sup>

### **Israeli women combatants in public media**

To investigate the achievements of Israeli women in combat roles reported in public media, I performed a review of the phrases: "Israeli women in combat roles"; "Israeli women" "combat" "achievements"; "accomplishments "female combatants" "Israel" in online search engines and news media aggregators. Approximately 120,000 results were analyzed. Most of the public media reports are either informative about the status of women in the IDF and/or involve opinions

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<sup>49</sup> A common name of the immigration process to Israel from Jewish foreign nationals is "making Aliyah". This term is used to refer to any Jewish person who undergoes the administrative process of immigrating to Israel from their home-country to obtain the Israeli citizenship.

questioning women's enrollment in combat forces. The public media reports I found covered three main points: 1) the history of Israeli women in the IDF and their enrollment in combat roles, 2) the challenges they faced mostly related to gender equality and 3) the milestones and the future of the military institution. In some cases, opinions are published questioning the entire participation of women in combat roles and opposing it, demonstrating the typical physiological differences between sexes.

Some examples of the titles of the latest articles and media reports can be seen below:

- “Opinion: Women in the Israeli Military Just Aren't Cut Out for Combat Roles
- “The Israeli army is deluding itself and risking the well-being of its soldiers by pretending men and women have equal strength”. Written by Liza Hameiri (Haaretz, 2018)
- “Israel military: A record year for women in combat units” (i24News, 2021)
- “Women In Combat: Some Lessons from Israel's Military” Written by Larry Abramson (NPR, 2013)
- “IDF to open female-only combat platoon to accommodate religious servicewomen” (Times of Israel, 2022)
- “How Has the Israeli Army Developed Its Policy on Women in Combat? Its Own Experts Aren't Sure. Committee chairman didn't attend the meetings, army had limited information to work with” (Haaretz, 2021)
- “International Women's Day: Number of female IDF soldiers rose by 170%” (The Jerusalem Post, 2022)
- “Israeli military sees 160 percent rise in number of females in combat roles. ‘The IDF must aspire to let every person maximize their potential during their service, women and men alike, ’ says Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee chairman Zvika Hauser.” (Jewish News Syndicate, 2020)
- “IDF appoints first-ever female combat doctor in elite reconnaissance unit. The female officer will join Sayeret Matkal this summer after she graduates 'Tzameret' program — which aims to train doctors for military service; appointment is part of military's new policy to integrate more women in combat units” (The Jerusalem Post, 2022)
- “These women are the first IDF tank crew preventing drug smuggling along Egyptian border. Meet the 10 women making history operation Israel's first female tank crew along the Egyptian border, preventing drug smuggling.” (The Jerusalem Post, 2021)

- “As Israel Debates Women in Combat Again, 75-year-old Letter Has a Familiar Ring. An op-ed that turned up in the archive’s points to the multi-front war faced by female soldiers, accused of 'confusion and corrupted morals'” (Nov 13, 2022 Haaretz)
- “IDF Manpower head: Not all combat positions suitable for women. A record breaking 1,000 women drafted into combat positions this summer” (The Jerusalem Post, 2019)
- “A red beret and a stethoscope, Dr. Nofit Shmuel, 28, only the second woman to serve as a combat doctor in the IDF, speaks to Israel Hayom about breaking down barriers. "I look forward to the day when women in combat is something routine, and we don't need to write articles about it," she says. (Israel Hayom, 2021)

The main limitations of these public media searches were that they were only published in English, with an IP location from Canada and restricted in time to the last 10 years. It is worthy to consider that the content on public media articles might not represent the general sentiment of Israeli society regarding women in combat roles. Instead, newer reports are more likely to represent the specificities of how-to better portray an attractive narrative to their public audience, readers, and subscribers, looking for engagement and ultimately to sell a story.

The media reports fall on a spectrum from seeing the increase of women in combat roles in recent years as a positive tendency and an achievement *per se*, to rejecting the decision of the IDF to open more combat units to women, arguing lack of physical strength and endangerment of national security due to a feminist agenda. This spectrum of the inclusion vs. exclusion paradigm limits the overall accomplishments of women to their sole enrollment in to combat roles. No more attention is given to the actual performance, duties, or challenges of the women’s combatants, besides the fulfillment of their basic combat training. In both areas of the inclusion vs. exclusion paradigm, the media tends to oversimplify the experiences of women in combat roles as either positive and ground-breaking or negative and inadequate. The lack of diverse experiences contrasts with the results of my investigation, that some women have successes and felt very accomplished in their combat roles, while others do not.

## Chapter 4. The case of study of the Canadian Armed Forces

### The CAF and the women serving in combat roles

#### *The evolution of integration policies*

Women's involvement in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) can be traced to the origin of the military institution and even a few decades earlier at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Women have been part of Canadian military history since 1885, when female nurses participated in the Northwest Rebellion – the insurgency war fought between the Métis and First Nations against the Canadian government (Von Hlatky, 2019) <sup>50</sup>. In the Rebellion, the participation of Métis and indigenous women was mostly in combat support roles like the supply of ammunition. (Seraphim, 2021).<sup>51</sup> However, for this investigation, women's representation in the Canadian military focusses on the period after the military reform of 1904, when the British Commander was replaced with the first Canadian Chief of the General Staff -William Otter - and a Militia Council in 1908.<sup>52</sup> According to the *Canadian Encyclopedia*, this reform marked the beginning of the Canadian military regular forces and the incorporation of the auxiliary corps. Perhaps the most memorable example of women's leadership in 1908 is Georgina Fane Pope who became the first Chief of the Canadian Army Nursing Corps. She oversaw the recruitment of nurses and military hospitals' management.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Stéfanie von Hlatky, "The Gender Perspective and Canada's Armed Forces" in *Women and Gender Perspectives in the Military: An International Comparison*. eds. Robert Egnell and Mayesha Alam, (Georgetown University Press: Washington DC, 2019).

<sup>51</sup> Joanna Seraphim, "Métis Women's Roles in the Resistances", *National Arts Centre* (Ottawa, ON), 2021. Accessed on April 19, 2021, <https://nac-cna.ca/en/wildwestshow/historique/les-roles-des-femmes-metisses-dans-les-resistances>

<sup>52</sup> Jason Ridler, Richard A. Preston, Desmond Morton, S.F. Wise, W.A.B. Douglas, Richard Foot, Tabitha Marshal, "History of the Armed Forces in Canada," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, Last updated on December 16, 2020. Accessed on April 20, 2021, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/history-of-the-armed-forces-in-canada>

<sup>53</sup> Veterans Affairs Canada, "Timeline," March 29, 2017. Accessed on April 21, 2021, <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/those-who-served/women-veterans/timeline#saw>

During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Canada witnessed a continuous increase in the participation of women in its military forces. Almost every decade, a rule was changed, or a new policy was modified to include women in the Canadian military. The main reason for women's gradual inclusion was the need for manpower/womanpower to fulfill Canadian overseas commitments with its historic military allies (United States, United Kingdom, and eventually North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members). Furthermore, for Canada, an extensive territory to defend with a limited population is a challenge that ultimately contributed to gender equality in its military forces. The greatest periods of change are explained below:

*World War I – Nursing the wounded.*

Between 1914 and 1918, approximately 3,141 women served as nurses in the Royal Canadian Medical Corps. Unlike Israeli women who enrolled in the *Haganah* and fought to break into more traditionally masculine roles in the military, Canadian women's first participation in their military institution was limited to provide medical support to male soldiers. Around 2,500 of them went overseas to work in hospitals, aboard hospital ships, and in field ambulance units,<sup>54</sup> considered to provide care and support on the frontlines as a typical contemporary combat support role. In Europe, these nurses were called the Nursing Sisters, also known as the 'Bluebirds'. They were the first women allowed to vote legally in the Canadian federal election of December 1917, along with women who were relatives of military servicemen.<sup>55</sup> Similarly to the Israeli case, the engagement of women in military service, especially in a combat support role as the medical services of that time functioned, helped women to achieve more benefits in civilian life, such as suffrage. These changes laid the foundations for a slow increase in women's participation in public life, which would only continue to grow over the years.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid

<sup>55</sup> Canadian Museum of History “1917 – Bluebirds at the Ballot Box”. Accessed on April 21, 2021, [https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmhc/exhibitions/hist/elections/el\\_006\\_e.html](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmhc/exhibitions/hist/elections/el_006_e.html)

## *World War II – Women's Divisions in Canadian military forces*

With the outbreak of World War II, the configuration of the Canadian military forces changed forever for the benefit of women. In only one year, from July 1941 to July 1942, Canada agreed to the creation of the Canadian Women's Army Corps (CWAC's), the Royal Canadian Air Force Women's Division (RCAF-WD), and the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service (WRENS), with the participation of approximately 50,000 serving in their ranks.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, the Canadian Government recruited members from the WRENS and the CWAC for code-breaking and espionage duties during wartime. (Miller Chenier et al, 2020)<sup>57</sup> The presence of the Women's Division in the three branches of the Canadian Armed Forces, although initially established as temporary auxiliary services, was decisive for subsequent integration into the military institution. However, the establishment of Women's Divisions was not an easy task, as the image of "women as warriors" did not fit the gender stereotypes of the 1940s.<sup>58</sup> Their background is rooted in the activism of numerous women that, facing the threat of total war, formed volunteer training programs for young women who wished to assist in non-combat roles in the military. That was the case of Joan Kennedy, a Canadian woman who joined the program of the British Columbia Women's Service Corp (BCWSC) in 1939. According to the Canadian War Museum, Kennedy lobbied for two years for the inclusion of supportive roles of women in the military until the Canadian Government authorized them in 1941.<sup>59</sup> She argued that Canada should follow the example of the British Armed Forces, where at least 500,000 women served in supportive and non-

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<sup>56</sup> "Timeline," *Veterans Affairs Canada*, March 29, 2017. Accessed on April 21, 2021, <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/those-who-served/women-veterans/timeline#saw>

<sup>57</sup> Nancy Miller Chenier, Dominique Millette, Niko Block, Eli Yarhi, Tabitha Marshal, "Canadian Women at War," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, Last updated on October 30, 2020. Accessed on April 25, 2021, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/women-and-war>

<sup>58</sup> Barbara Dundas and Dr. Serge Durlflinger, "The Canadian Women's Army Corps, 1941 – 1946 - Dispatches: Backgrounders in Canadian Military History", *Canadian War Museum*.

<sup>59</sup> Accessed on April 25, 2021, <https://www.warmuseum.ca/learn/dispatches/the-canadian-womens-army-corps-1941-1946/#tabs>

combatant roles, such as communications, logistics, administrative, and medical support tasks. After the consolidation of the women's division in the Canadian military, she became Lieutenant Colonel, Commandant of the CWAC, and is recognized today as Canada's first female soldier.<sup>60</sup>

Despite the success of women's involvement in military activities, the Women's Division faced two main obstacles: salary disparities and social disapproval. For instance, a CWAC member received only two-thirds of a regular soldier's wage; 90 cents a day versus \$1.30. The argument for this difference in wages was that CWAC members did not have to participate in guard duties and were not exposed to training or operational hazards unlike men soldiers. Fewer responsibilities translated into lower salaries.<sup>61</sup> Although a logical argument, it exposed the institutionalized segregation of women in the military forces. As Captain Simpson, Major Toole, and Player explained in 1979, "in Canada during World War II, the sole purpose for uniformed women was to release men to combat duties" (Simpson et al, 1979)<sup>62</sup>, and not to allow women to develop a successful career in the military.

The second obstacle was external and less tangible: the social disapproval of women in uniform. According to the Canadian War Museum, in 1943 national public opinion in Canada regarding women's enrollment in the army was negative; only 7% believed that joining the military was the best way for Canadian women to contribute to the war effort, as many believed women's place was at home and not on the frontline.<sup>63</sup> A poll conducted by an independent firm upon request of the Canadian Government revealed that Canadian society had strong prejudices against women

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<sup>60</sup> Senator Mobina Jaffer, "Remembrance Day: A Tribute to a Hero – Mrs. Joan Kennedy," *The Honourable Mobina S.B. Jaffer, Q.C. Senator for British Columbia*. Accessed on April 25, 2021, <https://mobinajaffer.ca/blog/2019/11/11/remembrance-day-a-tribute-to-a-hero-mrs-joan-kennedy/>

<sup>61</sup> Dundas and Durflinger, "The Canadian Women's Army Corps, 1941 – 1946 - Dispatches: Backgrounders in Canadian Military History" (2021)

<sup>62</sup> Major Suzanne Simpson, Major Doris Toole, Ms. Cindy Player, "Women in the Canadian Forces: Past, Present and Future," *Core- The Open University*, p. 267-283, (1979). Accessed on April 27, 2021, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/322498915.pdf>

<sup>63</sup> Dundas and Durflinger, "The Canadian Women's Army Corps, 1941 – 1946 - Dispatches: Backgrounders in Canadian Military History" (2021)

in the military, believing that only "loose women with low moral standards" joined the Canadian Forces (CF). These civilians' behaviours were described as "insulting and harmful for morale", causing the reduction in women's enrollment despite the CF efforts to refocus public attention towards the valuable contribution of the CWAC to the war.<sup>64</sup>

The Women's divisions were disbanded on September 30, 1946, as they were "no longer necessary" in peacetime. However, the speech given by Brigadier-General W.H.S. Macklin, to all ranks of the CWAC, acknowledged for the first time in Canadian history, "women's equal responsibility in peace as in war".<sup>65</sup> This recognition of women as citizens with civic and patriotic responsibilities and as valuable assets to the CF by high-rank military personnel, would change history forever. The direct consequence was observed in Canada's involvement in the next international conflict; the Korean War in 1950. After the outbreak of the conflict, the corps were reinstated, and women were integrated officially into the CF. Their enrollment was authorized by the Royal Canadian Air Force in 1951, the Canadian Army in 1954, and the Royal Canadian Navy in 1955 (Simpson et al, 1979).<sup>66</sup> At least 5,000 women served in the Korean War, providing medical services in combat zones.<sup>67</sup>

### *The 1960's and the Royal Commission on the Status of Women*

In the early 1960s, the improvement of technologies and the implementation of automated equipment in roles in which women were concentrated, questioned the entire permanence of women in all trades of the Canadian military (Simpson et al, 1979).<sup>68</sup> By 1965, the Canadian

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid

<sup>65</sup> Ibid

<sup>66</sup> Simpson, Toole, Player, "Women in the Canadian Forces: Past, Present and Future," (1979). Accessed on April 27, 2021, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/322498915.pdf>

<sup>67</sup> "Timeline," *Veterans Affairs Canada*, March 29, 2017. Accessed on April 21, 2021, <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/those-who-served/women-veterans/timeline#saw>

<sup>68</sup> Simpson, Toole, Player, "Women in the Canadian Forces: Past, Present and Future," (1979). Accessed on April 27, 2021, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/322498915.pdf>

Government decided that women would continue to be part of the CF, even though many of the support duties assigned to women were being replaced by automated equipment. The new policy established a fixed ceiling of 1,500 female elements in the regular forces (1.5% of the total military at that time). The 1,500-ceiling prevailed until the unification of the three services (Army, Navy, and Air Force) into the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) in 1968.

In the 1960's and 1970's, most of the western world, including Canada, saw women's fight towards the achievement of respect, equality, and equity in public life, especially against employment barriers and gender-related salary gaps. This movement, identified as feminism's Second Wave, became the driving force for new social changes, materialized in the country with the creation of the Royal Commission of the Status of Women in Canada on December 7, 1967.<sup>69</sup> The Commission presented a revolutionary report in the Canadian Parliament, which included 167 recommendations to the legislative system and addressed critical issues for women in eight categories: women in the economy, education, women in the family, taxation and childcare allowances, poverty, participation of women in public life, immigration and citizenship, criminal law and women offenders.<sup>70</sup> Six of the 167 recommendations made by the Commission directly involved women's integration in the CAF: 1) Standardization of enrollment criteria, 2) equal pension benefits, 3) women's attendance at Canadian military colleges, 4) that neither marriage nor 5) pregnancy be a reason to release women from the military, and 6) opening of all trades and job classifications to women. (Gouliquer, 2011).<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Government of Canada, "Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada," Last updated April 14, 2021. Accessed on April 28 <https://women-gender-equality.canada.ca/en/commemorations-celebrations/royal-commission-status-women-canada.html>

<sup>70</sup> Ibid

<sup>71</sup> Lynne Gouliquer, "Soldiering in the Canadian Forces: How and Why Gender Counts!" (doctoral dissertation, McGill University, 2011), p.1-5 Accessed on April 27, 2021 [https://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.item?id=TC-QMM-96779&op=pdf&app=Library&oclc\\_number=1032882405](https://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.item?id=TC-QMM-96779&op=pdf&app=Library&oclc_number=1032882405)

In 1979, Major Suzanne Simpson, Major Doris Toole, and Cindy Player published "Women in the Canadian Forces: Past, Present, and Future". In this document, they detailed how in 1971 the Defence Council eliminated limitations on the employment of women in the CAF, in agreement with the Commission's recommendations and with the exceptions of primary combat roles at remote locations at land and at sea. At that time, the authors explained that "no industrialized nation utilized women in combat units during hostilities" (Simpson, 1979). Despite this, they mentioned that by 1979, servicewomen worked with their male counterparts in the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF II) in Egypt, providing communications and logistic support<sup>72</sup>. Furthermore, by that year, women represented 5.9% of the total strength of the CAF, a significant increase compared to the 1.8% reported in 1970.<sup>73</sup> Simpson *et al* provided historical evidence of the gradual changes and improvements that the CAF have made towards women's integration in the past. Moreover, their investigation demonstrated the inadvertent flexibility of the Canadian military and the fact that when considered necessary, the most rigid institution in Canadian society knows how to adapt to social changes.

#### *From the Tribunals to the Submarine Services*

The proclamation of the Canadian Human Rights Act in 1978 prohibited discrimination in employment practices based on gender, while allowing the exceptions of *bona fide* occupational requirements.<sup>74</sup> This milestone opened the door to legal battles and military social experiments

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<sup>72</sup> Thobo-Calsen, Paul "Looking Back: UNEF II Military Police," *Canadian Military Police Association*: "The United Nations Emergency Force II (UNEF II) was established in October 1973 to supervise a ceasefire between warring parties after the 1973 Arab - Israeli War. Further agreements in 1974 and 1975 made UNEF II responsible for supervising the redeployment of Egyptian and Israeli forces and controlling a buffer zone between them. Canada's main contributions throughout the life of the mission were in the areas of air transport, logistics, communications, and military police support." <https://www.cmpa-apmc.org/lb-unef-ii-military-police.html>

<sup>73</sup> Simpson, Toole, Player, "Women in the Canadian Forces: Past, Present and Future," (1979)

<sup>74</sup> Canadian Human Rights Tribunal "Brown v. Canadian Armed Forces," Canadian Human Rights Tribunal "Brown v. Canadian Armed Forces," File Number: D. T. 3/ 89, (February 20, 1989) p. 1-31. In the CAF's context, *bona fide* occupational requirements refer to "occupational effectiveness"; where the risk of individual failure is sufficient to justify exclusion from employment or where the risk touches upon the safety of public as well as employee groups".

that eventually led to the full integration of women in the CAF. One example of such a social experiment was the Servicewomen in Non-Traditional Environments and Roles (SWINTER) project, a series of controlled tests with women in non-traditional roles between the years 1979 to 1984 in the land, air, sea, and isolated environments. The goal of this project was to determine the impact on operational activities of the employment of gender-mixed groups. The results of the SWINTER project, known as one of the most ambitious studies among western military establishments, showed that the integration of mixed units was successful and satisfactory and did not compromise military effectiveness as both men and women were held to the same high training standards.<sup>75</sup> Based on evidence from the results of the SWINTER project, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal found that "there was no risk based on the physical capability to the inclusion of qualified women in all-male units and occupations"<sup>76</sup>. Therefore, the argument of the *bona fide* "occupational requirements" was marked as null and void.

Another example of legal battles for women's positions in the military was the Combat-Related Employment of Women (CREW) trials; a series of complaints brought forward by Isabelle Gauthier, Joseph G. Houlden, Marie-Claude Gauthier, and Georgina Annbrown before the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, protesting gender-based discrimination while attempting to seek a job in the CAF. The trials took place between 1986 and 1989. Before the verdicts came out, the Canadian Human Rights Commission ruled that "all obstacles to women's access to any military job must be removed, with the exceptions of service aboard submarines and Catholic chaplains".<sup>77</sup> This

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In that case, the employer must provide "scientific evidence" in sufficient quality and quantity to indicate that gender is a danger to public safety because it exposes to undue risk the physical well-being of other employees and the community and because it is a factor in the less than adequate performance of the occupation. After the SWINTER project, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, found no compelling scientific evidence to ruled gender as a valid reason to apply an occupational requirement in the CAF. Accessed on March 29, 2021 <https://decisions.chrt-tcdp.gc.ca/chrt-tcdp/decisions/en/item/7013/index.do?q=Combat+Related+Employment+of+Women>

<sup>75</sup> Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, "Brown v. Canadian Armed Forces," (1989)

<sup>76</sup> Ibid

<sup>77</sup> "Timeline," *Veterans Affairs Canada*, March 29, 2017. Accessed on April 21, 2021, <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/those-who-served/women-veterans/timeline#saw>

marked the full legal integration of women into the CAF, with the final exception made to submarine service lifted in 2001.

### *Canadian women in combat*

Twenty years have passed since the full and legal integration of women into all branches of the CAF. According to the Government of Canada, until 2019 15.7% of CAF members were women.<sup>78</sup> Despite the challenges of integration, women's participation in combat operations brought unprecedented attention during Canada's participation in the US-led War in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021, especially with the death of the first female Canadian combat soldier, Captain Nichola Goddard (Eichler, 2013). The War in Afghanistan was the first combat operation in which Canadian women were integrated into all combat positions. Female soldiers made up approximately 8–10% of the deployed troops, whereas 8.3% of the women deployed to Afghanistan between 2001 and 2011 served in combat units - the equivalent of 310 women (Eichler, 2013; Carrier-Sabourin, 2012).

Since 1999, enrolment of Canadian women in combat roles has increased by 4.5%. In 2019 approximately 4.8% of combat personnel in the regular forces and primary reserve were women<sup>79</sup>. Currently, all combat assignments are open to women in the CAF. The following are some examples of combat roles in the CAF:<sup>80</sup>

#### Air Force

- Pilot
- Air Combat Systems Officer
- Air Operations Officer

#### Army

- Ammunition Technician

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<sup>78</sup> Library of Parliament, "Women Veterans Experience a Different Reality than their Brothers in Arms," (April 2, 2019), April 2, 2019 <https://hillnotes.ca/2019/04/02/women-veterans-experience-a-different-reality-than-their-brothers-in-arms/>

<sup>79</sup> "Canadian Women and War." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Historical Canada. Article published February 07, 2006; Last Edited October 30, 2020. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/women-and-war>

<sup>80</sup> <https://forces.ca/en/careers/combat>

- Armour Officer
- Armoured Soldier
- Artillery Officer
- Combat Engineer
- Electronic-Optronics Technician (Land)
- Gunner
- Infanteer
- Infantry Officer
- Weapons Technician – Land

#### Navy

- Naval Combat Systems Engineering Officer
- Naval Warfare Officer

#### Special Forces Command Units (CANSOFCOM)

- Joint Task Force 2 (JTF 2)
- Canadian Joint Incident Response Unit (CJIRU)
- Canadian Special Operations Regiment (CSOR)
- 427 Special Operations Aviation Squadron (427 SOAS)

By February 2020, women comprised 16% of CAF personnel: 19.1% of officers and 15.1% of non-commissioned members. The highest percentage of women served in the Navy (20.6 %), followed closely by the Air Force (19.8%). Up to 13.5% of the Canadian armed forces is currently made up by women.<sup>81</sup> To date the percentage of women in Special Forces Roles (i.e., CANSOFCOM) has reached 10.3%<sup>82</sup>, approximately 255 women.

### **Lived Experiences of Canadian Women in Combat**

This project involves interviews of eight women who formerly served in combat and combat support roles in the Canadian Armed Forces between 1975 and 2017. The women were asked 10 open-ended questions (Appendix I). This method let me identify the significant and exceptional experiences of women in Canadian combat duty. The testimony of the participants has

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Government of Canada, “Recruitment and Retention of women in the Canadian Armed Forces,” Accessed April 21, 2021, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/women-in-the-forces/recruitment-retention.html>

not been altered in any way to maintain the integrity of the investigation. The necessary precautions were taken to protect the identity and anonymity of the participants.

Most of the women I interviewed engaged in 12 to 40 years of military service with an average of 22 years. They were enrolled in the following combat and support combat roles: logistic officer, general surgeon, combat engineer, and artillery officer, among others. At least four of them reached high ranking positions of senior officers like Lieutenant – Colonel or above before retiring.

### *Achievements*

When the participants were asked the question “*What are/were the greatest achievements of your military career?*”, all the answers matched with the categories previously established for the Israeli women. The women mentioned accomplishments related to overcoming obstacles, institutional recognition, having opportunities to develop their leadership skills, being in service to others, and having a gender component that in all the Canadian cases will be expressed as “being the first woman” appointed to a certain role, position, task, etc.

For instance, Subject # 7, mentioned four of the five categories: overcoming obstacles, helping others, being the first woman in one of her appointments involving a leadership position:

“I am proud of the fact that I survived, of having a successful career and being able to retire as a Lieutenant - Colonel. Also, of obtaining my education (bachelor’s in arts, master’s in business administration, and Master of Arts degrees). The CAF teach me to love education.”

As well, she mentioned feeling pride in being the first woman appointed Commanding Officer and Battery Commander<sup>83</sup>, which involved a leadership opportunity. Finally, she mentioned she was

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<sup>83</sup> The Officer Commanding (OC) is the commander of a sub-unit or minor unit in the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth. Normally this would be an officer commanding a company, squadron, or battery. Commanding Officer is an appointment that confers additional powers and responsibilities on the appointee. A Commanding Officer controls administration of all formations, bases, units and elements allocated to the command and is directly responsible to the Chief of the Defence Staff or such officer as the Chief of the Defence Staff may designate (Government of Canada – QR&O: Volume I – Chapter 4 Duties and Responsibilities of Officers).

proud of having mentored and influenced young women and overall, she was proud of her longevity in the army.

Gender integration in the CAF historically has been a leadership issue (Davis, 2007). It is not about having male or female soldiers but about accepting soldiers for who and what they are and the need to identify the correct differences not the perceived differences.

### *Leadership, Gender, and the Institutional Recognition*

For Subject #8 her achievements include receiving numerous institutional awards; she was made commander of the Order of Military Merit, the recipient of the US Meritorious Service Medal for her service in Afghanistan and the Canadian Meritorious Service Medal, among others. Subject #8 was the first female to be appointed to a top position above the rank of Lieutenant – Colonel in the CAF as well as being the first woman in many roles. These trailblazers’ experiences indicate intrinsic leadership throughout their military careers, especially in their appointments at the front of numerous deployment operations. Although Subject #8 mentioned she does not like to be seen as a model for women in the forces as she considers herself “a bit of an anomaly,” she was aware of her role as a mentor and inspirational model to younger female officers joining the forces. Not all people or even all women experience gender in the same ways. While genders are lived by people through the world, “it would be unrepresentative to characterize a ‘gendered-experience’ as if there were something measurable that all men and women shared in their life experiences (Sjoberg, 2009)

According to my investigation, the professional achievements of Subject # 6 included being the first woman to lead a joint task force deployment, being named commanding officer.<sup>84</sup> She earned the United States Defense Meritorious Service Medal and the Canadian Meritorious Service

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<sup>84</sup> Commanding Officer -

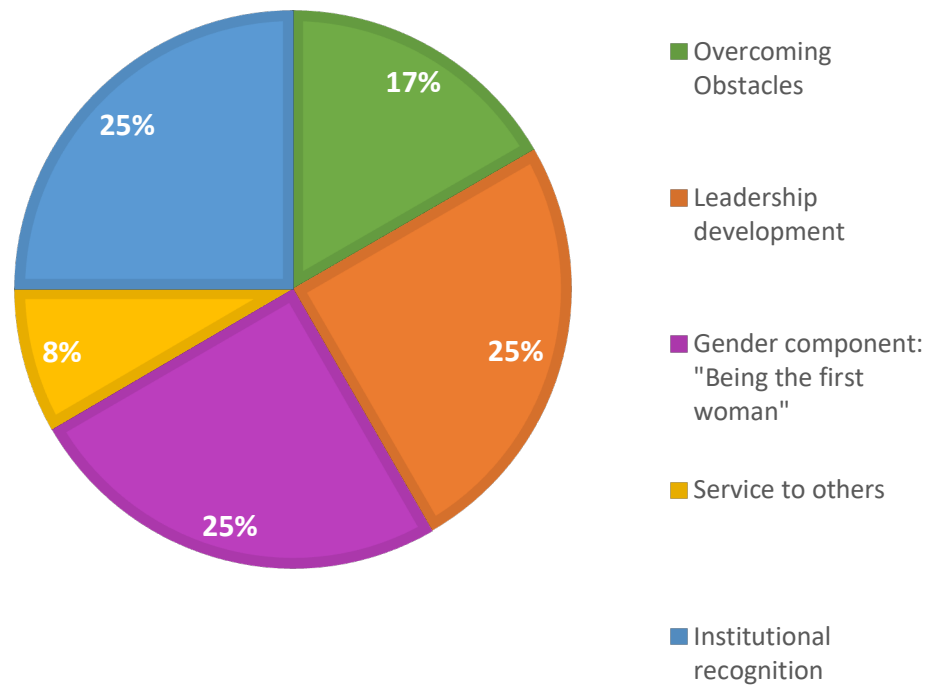
Medal (MSM). She was also recognized as one of Canada's Top Women in Defence by Esprit du Corps Magazine. She mentioned her personal achievements as well, which included having a family and raising her children; she considered herself a "very proud mom".

Subject #1's achievements were developing perseverance and a fighting spirit during her basic training. For Subject #3, it was becoming the leader that she became, where she had a wonderful relationship with her team, and was told many times that people loved working with and for her. She was assured that being missed when she retired was an accomplishment by itself that meant so much to her. The accomplishments of Subject # 4 were meeting her husband with whom she is still married after 25+ years, being awarded the Silver and Golden Jubilee medals,<sup>85</sup> and several letters of commendation. Finally, for Subject #5 her accomplishments included receiving the Commander's commendation and numerous deployment medals.

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<sup>85</sup> Silver and Golden Jubilee Medals – Letters of commendation

**KEY COMPONENTS OF THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF WOMEN WHO SERVED IN COMBAT AND COMBAT SUPPORT ROLES: CANADA**



*Figure 3: Achievements of Women in combat - Canada*

*Motivation and Challenges*

According to this study, the motivation for the subjects to join the CAF in general was to achieve paid and high-quality post-secondary education, long term, and stable employment opportunities, and to travel around the world. Five of the eight subjects interviewed, the equivalent of 62%, mentioned having a close relative or friend serving in the forces or retired when they decided to join such as grandfather, father, uncle, brother, or best female friend.

When asked specifically about enrolling into combat arms the answers were different. For Subject #1 and #2, being a soldier serving in combat arms was described as a childhood dream that they accomplished, besides having a close relative with military experience. Subject #3 joined the CAF for the free education and the overall challenge; she wanted to serve for the mandatory period of 5 years but ended up with 13 years of military career in which she felt empowered, challenged, and developed great relationships with her peers. Subject #4 was already part of the CAF when combat arms were opened to women in 1988-90. She mentioned she preferred to stay in a combat support role, so she didn't have to experience the overwhelming physical challenges but still make a meaningful contribution to the forces. Subject #5 found in the CAF the stable and well-paid employment she was looking for and the opportunity to travel the world. Subject #6 saw combat arms as the natural step to becoming a competitive athlete and enjoyed the physical challenges of the role. Subject #7 always wanted to be an artillery officer and when women were allowed into combat roles she directly enrolled in that position. Finally, Subject #8 was initially interested in the education opportunities, had close relatives enrolled in the CAF, and since her basic training she enjoyed the structured and disciplined environment of a military life. She ended up building a military career of 38 years.

Regarding the challenges experienced by the participants during their military career, the following information was obtained.

Subject #1 mentioned that everything that she lived was in certain ways a challenge, from basic training to living away from her family house and having almost no personal life. For Subject #3 the worst challenge was experiencing the feeling of insecurity, not feeling safe and having the knowledge that bad things can happen to her physical, emotional, and psychological integrity at anytime and the little control she had in preventing them. She mentioned that going through that experience, along with undergoing harassment and assault during her service, finally made her

take the decision to leave the forces. She said, “that was probably the final straw for me, the realization that even my career path wasn't safe no matter how much of a high performer I was.”

Subject #4 said that balancing her personal life with work was one of the hardest challenges; having little to no family life, not getting to choose where you will be deployed and having very little control over your life as you cannot choose virtually anything. For Subject #5 the challenges included life-disruption due to deployments, isolated geographic postings, especially when you are on IR (imposed restriction) for four years. Subject # 6 described two types of challenges: the external ones, such as being separated from family, being deployed to five different locations, and many times being the only women in posting to a specific location. The other challenges were internal, like dealing with impostor syndrome, learning to lead in her own way, and facing the high demand of physical activity.

Subject #7 mentioned that unlike what many would think (including herself) the initial combat training was not the hardest part at all. For her, the greatest challenge was managing the expectations of being part of her team and coming to terms with the fact that she was never going to be fully accepted by some people – sometimes a lot sometimes a few, for being a woman in combat arms. “When you are different to everyone else, is not very much you can do, to be accepted: managing expectations of being part of the crew. She said “No matter what I did, no matter how good I was I was not going to be accepted because they didn’t think I should be there, because of what I am, not who I am. You can’t change what you are. It took me a long time and it was a very difficult lesson to learn. Understanding that I was never going to be fully accepted as a member of the artillery family.”

Subject #8 mentioned that she did not feel she had a particularly significant challenge, but rather faced small challenges every day in her career. Some of those challenges in her professional life were constantly proving her value and herself in all the roles she was in, sometimes as the only

woman there, and having to dig deep into herself to find moral and physical courage to accomplish inherently dangerous missions or activities. She also discussed personal challenges that she faced such as getting married and raising a family in the military at the time when these activities were discourage for female soldiers. She remembered not having any role models who were female soldiers raising a family in the CAF, which made it particularly difficult, especially when she had to leave them at home and missed important milestones.

It is noteworthy that two of the participants are public survivors of sexual harassment and assault and publicly advocate for cultural change in the CAF. However, this investigation used open-ended questionnaires and interviews to allow women with military experience to express themselves regardless of pre-conceived notions of victimhood of sexual misconduct. The identity of the participants of this study remains anonymous.

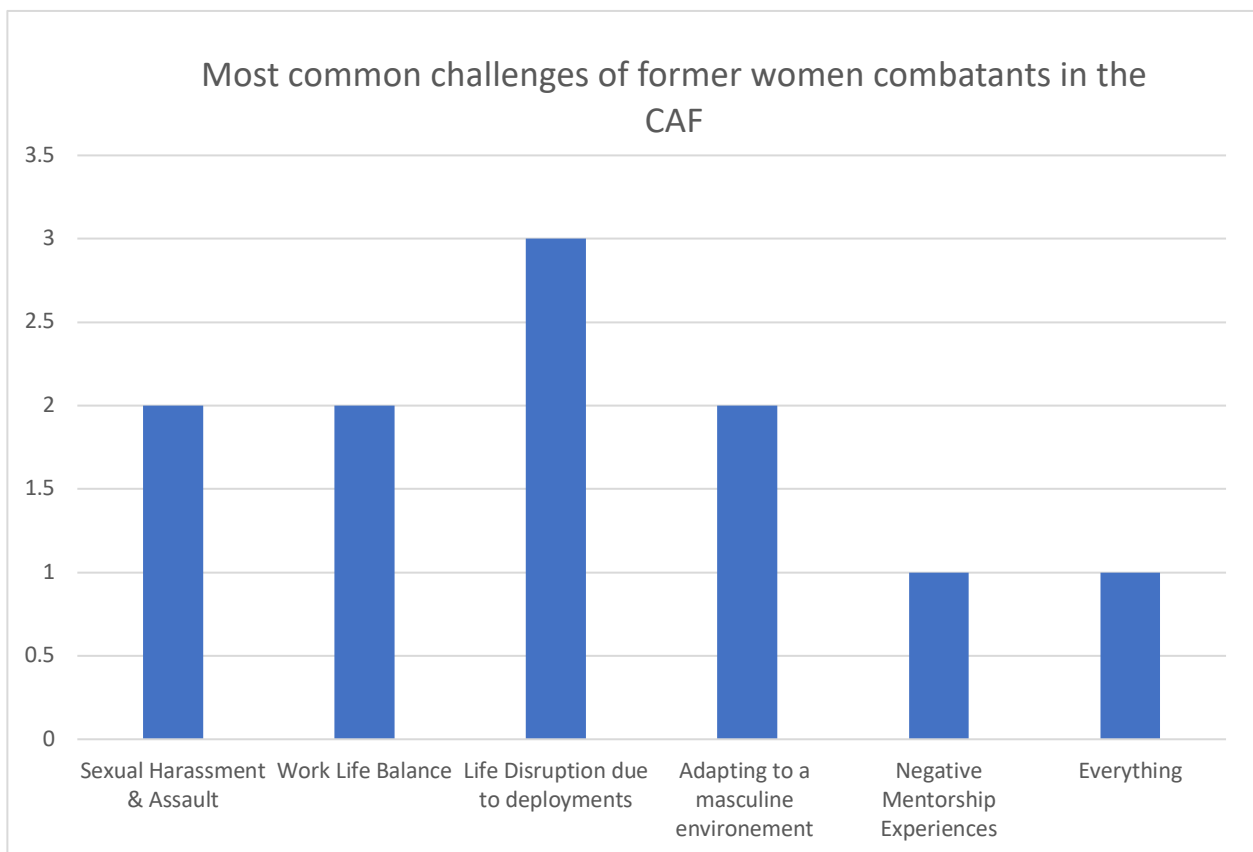


Figure 4: Challenges of women in combat - Canada

### *Personal change and regrets*

The participants gave few details when asked how joining the CAF has changed them. The common response was that joining the forces made them more confident and stronger mentally and physically. Some of them, especially the ones with longer careers explained how they grew up inside the military institution and became adults - from joining at 19 or 20 years of age until their retirement. All of them recognized how being part of the military impacts every aspect of their lives, personal and professional, including getting married inside the military. Subjects #6, #7, and #8 mentioned that their leadership style also changed during their military careers from an aggressive and overall masculine approach to a more understanding, and empathetic style at the end, a style that worked better for them.

Participants were asked if they have any downside or regret in their military careers, whereas 50% of them answered that they have no regrets (Subjects #1, #2, #4 and #5). Subject #8 said that professionally she does not have any regrets, however, she acknowledges that personally, one major downside was not being there for her children when they were little, missing a lot of important moments in their lives and moving her family around Canada on different occasions. Subject #3 commented she wished she understood and learned her lessons earlier. She regrets not trusting herself enough and trying to lead as somebody else in an unauthentic way. Subject #6 said she wished she was confident enough as a junior officer to be a better leader at the time. Finally, Subject #7 said that her greatest regret was that she was not kind, and modelling her leadership behaviour until 2015, late in her career. She thought that to succeed, she needed to be the toughest, meanest, and hardest person. She said she didn't understand the power of kindness and that is a regret that now brings her sentiments of shame.

### *The role of the CAF in their military careers*

When the subjects were asked to describe the role, the CAF had played in their military careers, all of them described the institutions as a provider of positive experiences that helped them grow. The experiences varied from special training to developing skillsets useful in both the military and civilian worlds, experiencing new challenges and helping build personal confidence, to growing up in the institution, marrying in the military, participating in sports teams, and developing long-standing friendships. Some of the subjects mentioned having a global view and having “open eyes to a broader world” thanks to their enrollment in the CAF, along with having access to higher education. These are opportunities that most of them thought they would not have accessed in any other way.

### **Canadian women combatants in public media**

To investigate the achievements of Canadian women in combat roles reported in public media, I performed a review of the phrases: “Canadian women in combat roles”; “Canadian women” “combat” “achievements”; “accomplishments “female combatants” “Canada” in online search engines and news media aggregators. Approximately 280,130 results were analyzed. Most of the public media reports are either informative about the status of women in the CAF or the history of women in the CAF, explaining their contributions with emphasis on World War I and World War II. The public media reports I found covered three main points: 1) the history of Canadian women in the CAF and their enrollment in combat roles, 2) the challenges they faced mostly related to sexual misconduct incidents, and 3) recent foreign missions in which the soldiers participated.

Some examples of the titles of the latest articles and media reports can be seen below:

- Women This Week: New Report Condemns Failed Efforts to Combat Sexual Violence in Canadian Military (Council of Foreign Relations, 2022)

- A military in crisis: Here are the senior leaders embroiled in sexual misconduct cases (CBC News 2021)
- Women are a growing group of Canadian military veterans, but services are lagging (The Canadian Press, 2022)
- Canada apologises for 'scourge' of military sexual misconduct (BBC 2021)
- Women have served in armed forces for decades, but the military is still a man's world (The Conversation, 2021)

The main limitations of these public media searches were that they were made only in the English language, with an IP location from Canada and restricted in time to the last 10 years. Content on public media articles might not represent the general sentiment of Canadian society regarding women in combat roles. Instead, new reports are more likely to represent the specificities of how to better portray an attractive narrative to the public audience, readers, and subscribers - looking for engagement and ultimately to sell a story.

The media reports fall on a spectrum from describing the integration of Canadian women into combat roles in recent years as a positive tendency and an achievement per se, to reporting the cases of sexual harassment and assault that women have endured in the Canadian military. Like the Israeli women combatants, the spectrum of the integration vs. sexual misconduct paradigm limits the overall accomplishments of women to their sole enrollment in to combat roles and focuses on the cases of sexual misconduct reported in the CAF. No more attention is given to the actual performance, duties, or challenges of the women's combatants, besides the fulfillment of their basic training.

## **Chapter 5. Compare, contrast and outliers the investigation's results**

### **Women in combat: similarities and differences**

This comparative study had access to the testimony of combat and combat support experiences of 16 military women from two very different institutions: the Israeli Defense Forces

and the Canadian Armed Forces. To have a better understanding of these testimonies and experiences, a description and contextualization of the subjects are pertinent.

Women enrolled in the IDF, as a group, have similar characteristics; all of them served in the military for a period between one and three years during their youth<sup>86</sup>. Their experiences are part of their compulsory military service as 18 years-old Israeli citizens. Six out of the eight participants were immigrants with a place of birth outside of Israel. Four of them were characterized as “lone soldiers”. All of them served between 2012 and 2020.

Meanwhile, most women who had served in the CAF were high profile and experienced veterans who served between 10 and 30 years in numerous roles in the CAF, besides combat and combat support arms. All of them were born and raised Canadian nationals, who served from 1970 to 2021. In most of the cases, the CAF combatants mentioned their marital status as being married and having children.

These group characteristics sometimes played a role in the testimony of the subjects, especially in the questions of *What challenges did you faced? And Does gender matter in combat roles?* For example, the challenges differ from one group to another considering the experiences as new immigrants to Israel of their status as Israeli lone soldiers who must adapt themselves to the cultural differences of Israeli society versus their own culture. While one of the challenges mentioned by the Canadian combatants was the life disruption due to deployments in foreign territory outside Canada and the difficult accommodation of the work-life balance experienced in military life. These challenges are different in nature and inherent to the military institution’s differences: one is conscript army facing a protracted conflict and the other is a voluntary army in peaceful times that occasionally sends troops to foreign wars. Overall, while considering the examination of

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<sup>86</sup> 15 to 24 years, according to the United Nations.

women's experiences while serving in combat and combat support roles, it is important to consider that we are talking about 16 unique personal experiences and points of view. Nonetheless, the research showed a similarity among the achievements reported, as described below.

### **Similar achievements**

The experiences of women in combat roles are very diverse in some respects and universal in other respects. During the open-ended interviews it was very interesting to see what they consider to be "an achievement" and the personal and unique dimension that these achievements can have. These can be as simple as "not quitting the training" or "being proud of the fact that they survived" to receiving a certificate of excellence, Golden or Silver Jubilee. Many of them include being a "woman in charge", able to teach others, able to learn about themselves, and having the honour to protect.

One lesson of these results is to observe how the difficult and overwhelming obstacles are seen as an inherent part of the successes by most of the participants, almost in an existential way in which their achievements cannot exist without the obstacles they faced. These observations were constant especially for the Israeli case, where six out of eight women explicitly mentioned succeeding "despite" the obstacles they faced. The second point is that interacting with a leadership experience, or the development of management skills is fundamental to the participants' achievements. It increases their morale and ingrains in them sentiments of empowerment and accomplishment that result in pride towards their service, their country, and the military institution. These two elements were more important for most of the Subjects interviewed than having official institutional recognition. Finally, half the participants did not make any explicit or implicit reference to their gender, for instance, pointing out the fact of being women enrolled in what is called "traditionally masculine military roles".

The testimonies of the accomplishments of the 16 participants can be categorized into five categories; overcoming obstacles, having leadership opportunities, provide a service to others, being awarded institutional recognition, and experience personal growth. Some examples of the 16 testimonies are mentioned below:

*Overcoming obstacles:*

Completing combat training *despite* having a low health profile. Overcoming cultural stereotypes of being from Russian heritage in Israel and gender stereotypes for being a woman in a combat support role. Being appointed leader and commander of a team of eight male soldiers *regardless of* being an American woman and new immigrant to Israel who barely understand Hebrew. Being hired by the IDF in a fitness instructor position specially created for her *despite* being severely injured during her training. Being promoted to commander of her unit, *even though* all promotions were suspended due to Covid-19 sanitary emergency. Helping injured soldiers get better medical assistance *despite* being only 19 years old at the time.

*Leadership opportunities*

The opportunity to develop leadership skills while participating in a war room. Leading and trained her own team and being directly responsible for eight soldiers, which she described as an “incredible empowering and meaningful experience”. Learning how to operate under stressful circumstances. Learning how to lead. Being named commanding officer on an overseas operation. Finally, one participant expressed “becoming the leader that I became”

*Service to others*

Contributing to the education of non-Hebrew speaking soldiers in Israel. Helping injured soldiers and saving lives. Serving her country and being trained to help people. Having the

best evaluation in the *mofet* category in the IDF, a category that evaluates volunteer work, service to others and a positive attitude. Being a mentor to young women who enrolled in the CAF.

### *Institutional recognition*

Being recognized with a certificate of excellence in her basic training. Being the best in her class in the *mofet* category. Having several letters of commendation and being awarded the Queen Elizabeth II Golden and Silver Jubilee Medals. Having a Commander's Commendation and Deployment Medals. Being awarded the United States Defense Meritorious Service Medal for her efforts. Being recognized with a Canadian Meritorious Service Medal (MSM) and celebrated as one of Canada's Top Women in Defence by *Esprit du Corps* Magazine.

### *Personal growth*

Engaging in a journey of self-discovery. Learning about her strengths and limitations. Not quitting. Going through a journey of self-improvement. Being proud of the fact that she survived. Having a successful career. Retiring as a Lt. Col. Obtaining her undergraduate and post-graduate education (Bachelor in Arts, Master in Business Administration, and Master in Arts degrees) and learning about education in general, thanks to the CAF. Gaining longevity in her military career. Achieving a job as an Assistant Professor at the United States Command and General Staff College. Developing perseverance and a fighting spirit in her training.

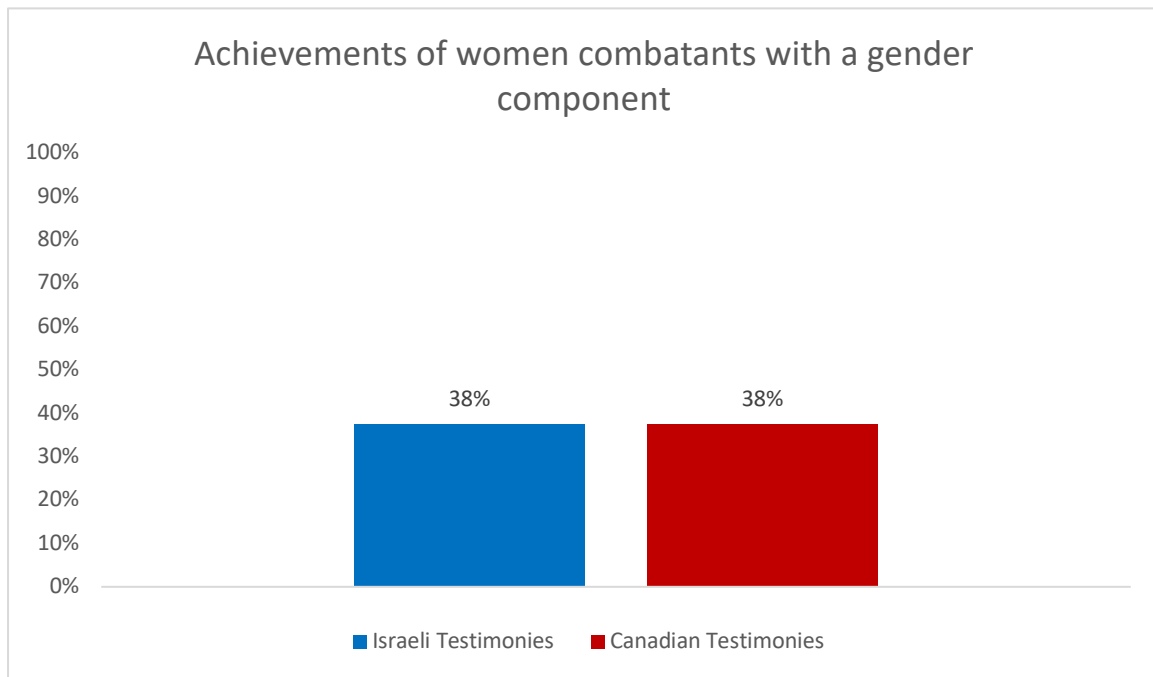
Some of the testimonies overlap in two or more categories such as obtaining institutional recognition for providing service to others or developing leadership skills while overcoming obstacles.

### *Gender component*

Regarding the categories of leadership opportunities and providing service to others, it can be observed as a “gender component”, which for this research is an explicit reference to either the subject’s biological sex (female) or gender identity (women) in comparison to male soldiers or men. This gender component was found in six out of sixteen subjects’ testimonies listed below:

1. Overcoming gender stereotypes and being mentor of a group of young women – Israeli testimony #1
2. “I trained my own team. I was responsible for eight soldiers directly, all of them were men. Being a woman who trained eight men was an incredible, empowering, and meaningful experience. I did that despite being from another nationality and barely understanding the Hebrew language at the beginning.” – Israeli testimony #3
3. Developing and implementing a highly demanding, physical fitness training program for all the officers in the unit, including men. – Israeli testimony #4
4. Being the first women appointed to lead an Operational Task Force overseas in Eastern Europe. Becoming a mother. – Canadian testimony #6
5. Being the first women appointed officer commander and the first female to be battery commander. – Canadian testimony #7
6. Being the first woman in many roles, including a three-star general. – Canadian testimony #8

As the testimonies were analyzed, this thesis faced additional questions. For instance, to what extent is the participants’ gender related to their achievements? Do their accomplishments have any relation at all to their gender? This research pointed out that in 38% of the cases, gender was mentioned as a part or a component of their achievements. This result is seen in three out of eight Israeli testimonies and three out of eight Canadian testimonies.



*Figure 5: Gender component of achievements of women in combat*

These results show two things. First, at least 38% of participants experienced gender consciousness<sup>87</sup> and express it as part of their achievements. This means they consider that being a woman was at least part of the accomplishment they conquered. The experiences of these six women are articulated by Lieutenant-Commander (Retired) Karen D. Davis, former member of the CAF. David argues that women who enrolled into combat arms in the early the 1990s lacked any female role models and were almost completely on their own to find their place. (Davis, 2007). Davis suggests that “success meant that from the very beginning these women combatants had to possess many of the qualities of a good leader for them to survive in a hypermasculine environment because there was no one there to show them the way. This was the case for the testimonies of Canadian combatants #6, #7 and #8, all of whom enrolled in the CAF in 1997, 1995, and 1982 respectively.

<sup>87</sup> For this purpose, gender consciousness is defined as the awareness of how one's gender affects many aspects of life, like political preferences, professional careers, religious beliefs, points of view, and in this case military achievements (EIGE, 2022) <https://eige.europa.eu/thesaurus/terms/1147>

Regarding women in combat, Davis asked “How does a woman find her place and her pride in a tradition to which women have no history?” The answer seems to be related to the capacity of developing high and effective leadership skills, not only for opening doors for yourself, but for an entire generation that will come after you. An interesting observation is how the role of leadership in the Canadian case was also an important feature for the Israeli combatants, whereas the testimonies in which the gender component was identified (Subjects #1, #3, and #4) are similar to mentoring or training a group. These activities can be technically related to the definition of “effective leadership” established by the Canadian Defence Academy:

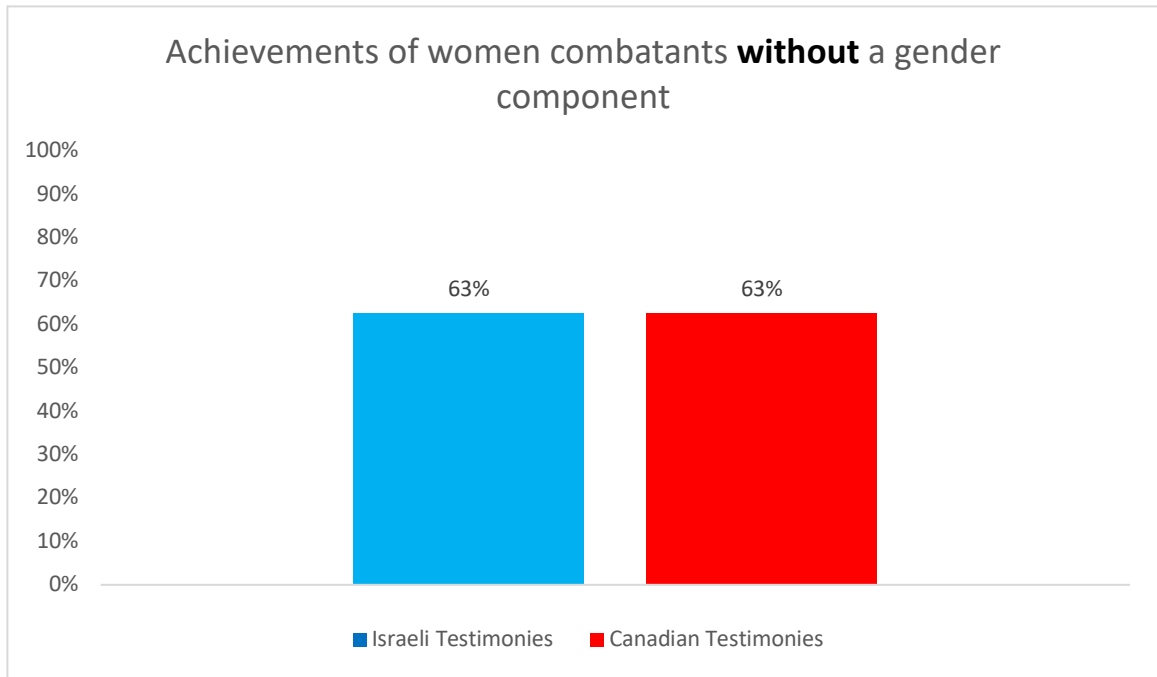
*“Effective leadership is defined as directing, motivating, and enabling others to accomplish the mission professionally and ethically, while developing or improving capabilities that contribute to mission success” Canadian Forces Leadership Institute, 2004<sup>88</sup>*

Perhaps more important is how 63% of the participants did not acknowledge their gender in their accomplishments, which corresponds with Sjoberg’s argument about how every person experiences gender in a different way. One potential lesson of this absence of gender awareness in ten of the sixteen participants add to another observation made by Davis in 2007. She said:

“Today (referring to 2007), some of the women entering combat are fortunate enough to be following in the footsteps of other successful women. Maybe with less pressure to feel responsible for demonstrating that women can do the job and deserve the opportunity to try, more energy can be focused on training and development.” (Footnote Chapter 7, p 83 Davis, 2007)

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<sup>88</sup> Canadian Forces Leadership Institute, “Leadership in the Canadian Forces,” (2005), Accessed on November 10, 2022 [https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2013/dn-nd/D2-313-2-2005-eng.pdf](https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2013/dn-nd/D2-313-2-2005-eng.pdf)



*Figure 6: Achievements of women combatants without a gender component*

Fifteen years have passed since the aforementioned statement was made. In 2022, finding gender awareness in the minority of the participants’ testimonies about their achievements indicates a positive trend towards gender integration in the IDF and the CAF. As mentioned by Davis, the trend of focusing more energy on training than demonstrating that women combatants can do the same job as men, appears to have consolidated over the last decade. However, the picture is different when we analyze the challenges women face.

### **Very Different Challenges**

A deeper review of the challenges that the participants faced begged the need to expand the categorization when we compare the two military institutions as they varied greatly, not only from state to state but from participant to participant. In the case of challenges, this research identified eight new categories for both Israeli and Canadian participants: 1) Adapting to masculine environments, 2) Physical challenges, 3) gender discrimination, 4) family-life balance and life disruption due to deployments, 5) emotional and mental challenges, 6) sexual violence, 7) cultural

adaptation, and 8) safety concerns. As mentioned before, in this thesis, three of these categories are exclusive to either one or the other military institution due to the nature of military service in each state. While category 4 - family-life balance and life disruption due to deployments are exclusive to the Canadian testimonies, categories 5 and 7, were exclusive to the Israel case. The challenges are described below:

1) *Adapting to masculine environment*

This category was mentioned in the testimony of eight participants (50%): Women avoided being portrayed as emotional. Dealing with female underrepresentation was relevant to five women in a 35-person unit. The challenge of not being feminine at all caused participants to miss their femininity. Adapting to the stereotypical male soldier of the border patrol unit was experienced as rude and disgusting. Fighting for being included and including other female colleagues took place when there were only 5% of women in a typical overseas deployment. Dealing with 'impostor syndrome' and adopting toxic masculine leadership traits were a problem in discovering proper leadership style. Having no role models and bad mentorship experiences were difficult when superiors stated that being married and having children are a liability for women in the military. In fact, this is false, and the system is the one that needs to adapt to women. Dealing with isolation while being the only female in the regiment and the only female officer on the base is disconcerting. A constant feeling of exclusion and not belonging were difficult. Preserving one's feminine side was also a challenge.

2) *Physical challenges*

This category was mentioned in the testimonies of seven participants (43%): Experiencing constant burnout, feeling tired all the time, dealing with mental and emotional challenges on top of the physical challenges. One participant in particular, experienced an ankle

fracture and underwent back surgery due to the physical training and health challenges of service.

### 3) *Gender discrimination*

A type of gender discrimination was acknowledged by seven participants during their interviews (43%): experiencing sexism by your peers and sometimes on an institutional level. Being judged, questioned constantly and having to continuously prove themselves were a liability. Women experienced much discrimination in specific roles or units such as women paratroopers. Dealing with male chauvinism was a daily occurrence. Women were given explicit advice, discouraging them from becoming pregnant and becoming a mother. Women experienced condescending and disrespectful behaviors from other soldiers, including commanders. Many women had to come to terms with the fact that many people will never fully accept women in combat.

### 4) *Family-life balance and life disruption due to deployments*

Five participants (31%) mentioned this category as a major challenge during their military careers. This category was exclusive to the Canadian case, explained mostly by the nature of the Canadian military services in which most deployments range between six to twelve months, depending on the mission. CAF members must be ready to deploy on short notice. The deployments can be within Canada or abroad and implemented for numerous reasons such as gaining new experience, training purposes, promotions, and the skill set of soldiers needed in other areas.<sup>89</sup>

### 5) *Emotional and mental challenges*

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<sup>89</sup> Government of Canada, "Moving and Relocation in the Canadian Armed Forces," Last updated November 13, 2018. Accessed November 10, 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/caf-jobs/life/moving-relocation.html>

Four participants mentioned this category exclusive to the Israeli case (25%). One of the five participants mentioned that one of the biggest challenges was experiencing deep feelings of loneliness because of her status as a lone soldier- individuals with no immediate family in Israel. Another soldier confirmed experiencing depressive episodes due to the overwhelmingness of military service and her immigration experience to Israel, also in the lone soldier category.

6) *Sexual violence*

This thesis implements the definition of sexual violence articulated by the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR), covering both Canada and the State of Israel.<sup>90</sup> Three of the participants in this study (19%) acknowledged experiencing a type of sexual violence during their military service such as sexual harassment, sexual assault, and/or rape.

To protect the confidentiality and trust of the participants, no additional information was obtained for this category as the scope of this thesis does not include the study of sexual violence experienced by women in combat arms. However, it is a remarkable fact how in such a small universe of 16 participants, three cases of victims of sexual violence were identified. Although my study is an anti-victim centred thesis, it is paramount to recognise and acknowledge the fact that sexual violence is one of the challenges women face in combat arms and military service. All the academic work and publications that explore this topic (Duval-Lantoine, Biskupski-Mujanovic,

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<sup>90</sup> Sexual violence is a form of gender-based violence and encompasses any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments, or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting. Sexual violence takes multiple forms and includes rape, sexual abuse, forced pregnancy, forced sterilization, forced abortion, forced prostitution, trafficking, sexual enslavement, forced circumcision, castration and forced nudity [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/OnePagers/Sexual\\_and\\_gender-based\\_violence.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/OnePagers/Sexual_and_gender-based_violence.pdf)

Ahronheim, Shoval, Von Hlatky, et al) are critical to further understand and ultimately change these circumstances.

7) *Cultural adaptation*

Two participants (13%) mentioned cultural adaptation as one of the major challenges they faced during their military service. This category was exclusive to the Israeli case and both soldiers represented the category of lone soldiers and new immigrants to Israel. Cultural adaptation includes learning the Hebrew language.

8) *Safety concerns.*

This category was mentioned by two participants in different contexts who felt that their lives were threatened and they expressed concern for their overall safety: The Israeli soldier mentioned not feeling safe while wearing her military uniform and feeling threatened all the time, especially between 2014-2015 when Avera Mangistu and Hisham al-Sayed, alleged Israeli soldiers were captured by the Palestinian organization Hamas (the Islamic Resistance Movement) when crossing into the Gaza Strip<sup>91</sup>. She said “you can protect your country, but you cannot protect yourself. Is the paradox of a humanitarian army”.

The soldier references the overall situation by which Israeli society lives with protracted conditions of territorial and political conflict, whereby the risk of exposure to acts of violence, such as being kidnapped and stabbed for political reasons, is high. Another contrast found in her testimony is how she sees and experience the Israeli Defence Forces as a “humanitarian army,” vs. the international public perception of the IDF as an “occupying force” that suppresses human rights organization (OHCHR, 2022).<sup>92</sup> For the Canadian soldier, the safety concern was related to

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<sup>91</sup> BBC, "Israel-UAE deal: What is at stake for the Middle East?" Last updated on August 11, 2021 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-61976009>.

<sup>92</sup> United Nations Human Rights Office of the Higher Commission, “UN experts condemn Israeli Suppression of Palestinian Human Rights organizations, ”, Last updated on August 24, 2022, Accessed on November 10, 2022 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/08/un-experts-condemn-israeli-suppression-palestinian-human-rights>

experiencing harm on behalf of her male colleagues in a toxic hyper masculinized environment. She mentioned not realizing the extent of the harm being done to her and feeling that bad things could happen to her without having any kind of power to prevent them. She said, “no matter how much of a high performer I was, my career path was not safe”.

### *Other Challenges*

Additional challenges mentioned at least once by three participants include experiencing ethnic discrimination. This involved prejudice against Israelis citizens of Russian heritage, the frustration of facing the military bureaucracy, following rules that not always made sense and dealing with the deficiencies in the Military Health System.

The following graphics show us how three out of five challenges mentioned by women combatants are related to gender-based violence against women.<sup>93</sup> For practical terms the graph does not include other challenges that were mentioned such as ethnic discrimination. According to the results of this thesis, “adapting to a masculine environment” is the biggest challenge women faced when joining combat or support combat arms.

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<sup>93</sup> According to the United Nations definition, gender-based violence against women shall be understood as “violence - a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination -that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately”

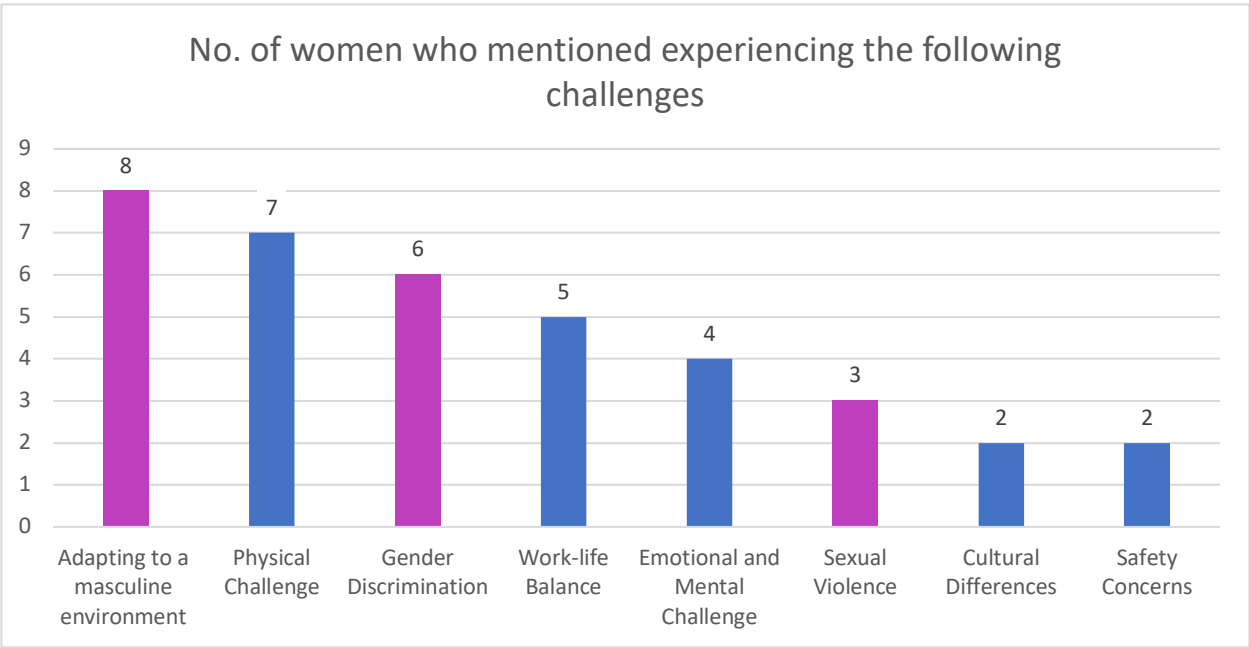


Figure 7: Number of women who mentioned experiencing the following challenges.

This result is theoretically supported by Resolution 2120 (2016) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, which states that women who pursue a military career in the armed forces, “faced with an environment designed by and for men” include many forms of discrimination such as rigid career plans and mentalities that are still rooted in a purely male approach to the military institutions.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, the research of Davis and Thomas on women and leadership in the Canadian Armed Forces, reports that women combatants face many social and psychological obstacles that affect their performance and have a significant impact on whether they were considered suitable for combat arms (Febbraro, 2007). The study by Davis and Thomas in relation to the interviews of 31 women who served in combat arms, explored how being a woman in a male-defined and male-dominated environment resulted in ambiguous perceptions and beliefs regarding women’s abilities and motivation as leaders and combat soldiers, detailing a strong gender-bias against women combatants. Additionally, women reported the need to

<sup>94</sup>Council of Europe: Parliamentary Assembly, “Resolution 2120 - Women in the armed forces: promoting equality, putting an end to gender-based violence,” 21 June 2016, Accessed on January 09, 2023, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/583734844.html>

become “one of the guys” if they were to succeed (Febbraro, 2007), perhaps in their attempt to counter the negative gender-bias and false assumptions about the abilities of women in combat roles. Considering that “adapting to a masculine environment” was the category that most combatants mentioned even above the physical demands of combat training, lead us to one of the common topics discussed in feminist Security Studies. According to Sjoberg: “the gendered nature of the values prized in the realm of international security”, where traits associated with hegemonic masculinities such as physical strength, endurance, and aggressiveness dominate social relations, in this case between peers in the military, while other values are subordinated (Sjoberg, 2009). When analyzing the military case, the problem is not the overall perception that strength is valued over weakness, but the assumption that strength is an exclusively masculine trait and weakness is intrinsically a feminine trait. Therefore, women (women = weakness) have no place in the armed forces, especially combat arms. Hence, more women experienced the necessity of adapting to a masculine environment and deemed it more challenging than the actual physical task of going through combat training. This echoes the statements of Hooper and Sjoberg about how the values socially associated with femininity and masculinity are awarded unequal weight in a competitive social order, perpetuating inequality in perceived gender difference. (Hooper, 1998; Sjoberg, 2009)

For Reiffenstein, this dilemma will be solved by further understanding of the warrior spirit – what she defined as “a visceral response to adrenaline, aggression, fear, your pride in your unit, and your confidence in your capability. It allows you to close and destroy the enemy and provides you with the motivation to inflict tremendous casualties if necessary, using direct and indirect fire”<sup>95</sup>. The ideal solution would be to inculcate that warrior spirit into the soldiers in a way that does not denigrate a particular gender or any other social perspective (Reiffenstein, 2007).

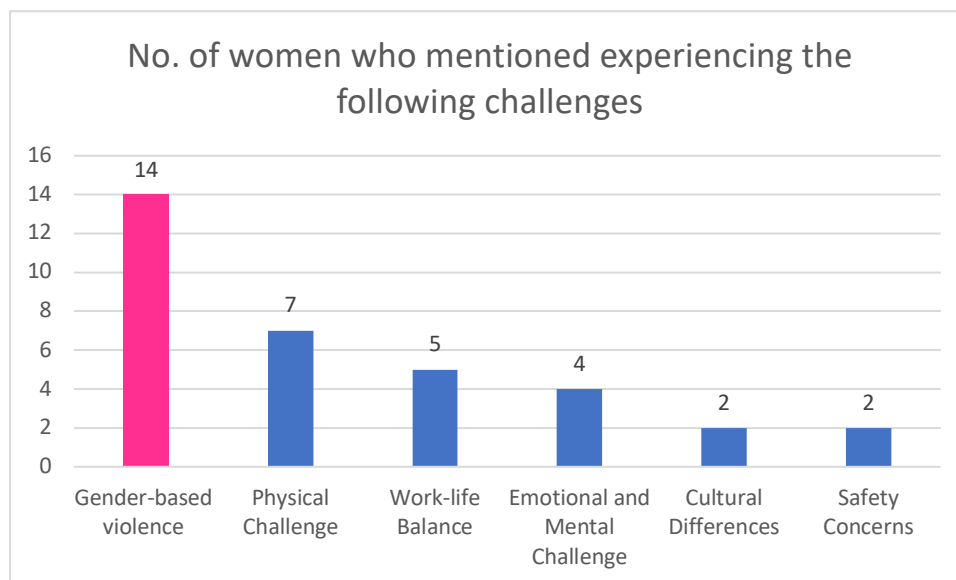
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<sup>95</sup> Reiffenstein, Anne, “Gender Integration – An Asymmetric Environment,” in Davis, Karen (ed.), *Women and Leadership in The Canadian Forces: Perspectives and Experience*, (Kingston, Ontario: Canadian Defence Academy Press 2007) P. 5

Teaching the warrior spirit to all soldiers despite their gender identity or sex, has been and still is the most pressing advocacy argument in favour of cultural change in the Canadian Armed Forces. Finally, when half of the participants in the study mentioned the challenge of adapting to a masculine environment, they reflected and reproduced the patterns of valorizing masculinities over femininities and revealed the prevalence of a gender-hierarchy in the realm of international security represented by their military institutions. (Sjoberg, 2009)

### *Through the pink glasses*

Using gender-lenses to analyze the results of women’s challenges in combat arms can be observed in categories related to gender-based violence. Adapting to a masculine environment, gender discrimination, and sexual violence are clustered together. The results show that the prevalence of gender-based violence is the main challenge experienced by women in combat and support combat arms, followed by physical challenges, and work-life balance. The results of this thesis showed that 14 out of 16 participants – accounting for 87.5% of the subjects - identified gender-based violence as a challenge while pursuing their military careers.



*Figure 8: Number of women who mentioned experiencing challenges*

As demonstrated in the above graph, the gender component is present in all categories except for cultural adaptation.

### **Does gender matter?**

As part of the interviews, the participants were asked the following question:

*Do you think men and women combat soldiers are different or the same, based on their gender? In other words, does gender matter in combat?*

All the answers can be found at the centre of the spectrum between soldiers who either feel “completely the same” or “completely different”. For seven Israeli soldiers, gender does matter because of the physiological differences. Some of them mentioned that as women, the IDF makes you sign a waiver about your uterus, stress fractures are more common due to the lack of physical preparation prior to military service, and border patrol units are formed by three men and one woman for security reasons. However, the seven participants acknowledged that these sexual differences do not account for less fighting capabilities or lack of skills. All of them express that men and women soldiers need not be equal to fight as well as men in combat. Two subjects supported the segregation of genders in the IDF, arguing the effectiveness of the mission in which “women arrest women” and considered the necessity for physiological and physical differences. Another subject mentioned how “women who choose to join combat arms are generally much more motivated than men”. She said, “as a woman you have to fight to go to combat, as a man you have to fight not to go to combat”. The outlier for this case was only one participant who expressed a definitive answer regarding gender; she answered with an “absolute no” and mentioned that nowadays there is no difference between men and women in combat. The subject was asked if she ever felt discriminated against in the IDF for being a woman as a follow-up question, and she answered with a “never”. An important fact about this outlier is that she finished her military

service in 2019, which gave a very updated experience of Israeli combat service and the perception of discrimination.

For the Canadian soldiers in combat and support combat arms, six recognized the differences between men and women in combat but acknowledged them as a positive trait in field operations and expressed that diversity makes an army stronger. They agreed that soldiers from different backgrounds and with different characteristics are needed, and “sometimes gender will play a role in an operation and sometimes it doesn’t”<sup>96</sup>. For most of the Canadian participants, every soldier is different, and diversity is a strength. Two outliers were identified; one participant mentioned that personally, she did not believe gender matters at all because in combat everyone struggles as a team, and it takes strong personality and mentality rather than only physical strength. Similarly, to the Israeli outlier who finished her two years of service in 2021, this female Canadian soldier expressed an updated testimony of a women in combat arms in the CAF. In contrast, the second outlier was a participant who mentioned that most women cannot do the same work as men because of their physique and lack of strength. She said: “they are not the same, they can’t do the same.”<sup>97</sup> Regardless of the extra training women combatants receive, which she believed only add to the argument about gender differences, she emphasized that if they are equal, they are not supposed to have extra training. From her perspective, the gender differences are negative and imply the inferiority of women in combat due to their lack of physical strength.

The results of this question show that of a total of 16 participants; two believe that gender does not matter at all in combat arms, seven believe gender is a factor but does not have a negative impact on women’s performance in combat, six believe gender matters and is a positive factor while differences between the genders make the military institution stronger, and one believes

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<sup>96</sup> Direct quote from Canadian soldier Subject #7

<sup>97</sup> Direct quote from a Canadian former soldier who participate in the study

gender matters, women and men are completely different, and the physical differences translate into women's inferior strength compared to men and the overall weakness of combat arms.

These diverse results lead to three important conclusions: 1) each person lives gender in a different way and, there is not one gendered experience in global politics (Sjoberg, 2009: 2) Even long after lifting all formal barriers to women's full integration, the conflicts and tensions between equality and difference still outline the public debate on women in combat as well as women's experiences in the military (Eichler, 2013). Women who serve in combat roles find "themselves in an environment in which the dominant culture encourages their non-acceptance" (McCritall, 2019). Just as McCritall argues, the testimony of one of the participants resonates: "In the 80's, even in the trades they (military officials) made it really hard for you to be there and they said to you: "women should not be here, you should not be here".

Finally, I found a relation between the opinion of the participants about the importance of gender and the specific period they served in combat or support combat arms. The two participants who expressed that gender does not matter in combat at all, served in the military between 2017 and 2021, while the participant who acknowledges the gender differences as a negative effect and mentioned the inferiority of women's strength with respect to the strength of men soldiers, served in the military between the mid-1970s and 2015, before the Deschamps Report<sup>98</sup> was published in Canada.

This change in combatants' perceptions regarding gender differences reflects a generational shift away from the traditional valorization of hyper-masculinity traits and men to recognition, acknowledgement, and valuation of feminine traits in combat and by consequence - women. It is not that women are now stronger than in the 1970's and 1980's. Rather, that gendered

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<sup>98</sup> Government of Canada, "External Review into Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Harassment in the Canadian Armed Forces," (March 27, 2015), Accessed on November 10, 2022 <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/sexual-misbehaviour/external-review-2015.html>

perception changes with time, through an arduous uphill battle for equality, that is starting to show outcomes of an empowered generation of military women in combat arms. Additionally, one of the testimonies of a participant who retired in 2015, make insinuations about the success of military women due to sexual favours given to their superiors. “Do you know the phrase is not who you know is who you blow? Many women get to where they were by doing this”. This phrase containing the implications of women succeeding in combat arms due to offering sexual favours, or perhaps by accepting sexual harassment is the reflection of the normalization of sexual violence within military institutions and the general perception of older generations in the armed forces.

The “External Review into Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Harassment in the Canadian Armed Forces”, commonly known as the Deschamps Report, coordinated by the Supreme Court Justice Marie Deschamps, was published on March 27, 2015. Does the report indicate a breaking point between older and newer generations of military women and their perception of women in combat arms? The analysis of a generational shift towards a more inclusive and less discriminatory CAF, promoted by the Deschamps Report is out of the scope of this thesis. However, this report is an important variable to consider going forward in the study of Canadian women in combat arms.

## **Chapter 6. Summary of the findings and concluding remarks.**

The following chapter will provide a summary of the findings by addressing the research questions initially presented and stating concluding remarks.

### **Was women’s experience in combat or combat-support roles positive, negative, or mixed?**

After the analysis of the 16 testimonies of women with experience in combat and support combat roles, I conclude that the experiences were overall mixed in nature. The participants acknowledged diverse and complex combat experiences, expressing feelings of empowerment, pride, excitement,

and happiness, as well as fear, exhaustion, overwhelmingness, despair, anxiousness, and deep sadness. Some of them refer to their military service as the “best-worst experience of their lives” ultimately life-changing and difficult. However worth it, many of the challenges they perceived as “part of the package” and admitted eventually the good parts outweighed the bad.

### **What are the main achievements of women who served in combat roles?**

The main achievement of women who served in combat and combat support roles include overcoming obstacles and engage in leadership opportunities – sometimes leading their male peers and being the only women in the unit or battalion, and the only women in charge. Most of women’s achievements expressed acts of service to their country, their institutions, and the people, mentorship opportunities for youth, especially younger women, teaching foreign soldiers the native language of the country, participating in humanitarian missions and natural disasters, and saving endangered lives. The women’s accomplishments were also defined by institutional recognitions such as medals, awards, and promotions to higher ranks. Finally, experiences of personal growth, maturity, and becoming a better human being because of their military service were also expressed as part of their successes. It is important to mention that only 38% of the participants made an explicit reference to their gender while talking about their achievements. This means that the minority of the participants acknowledge a relation between being a woman and a specific success they experienced, generally expressed as pride in overcoming gender discrimination or a male-dominated environment.

### **What are the main challenges of women combatants?**

The main challenges of women combatants are adapting to masculine environments, physical challenges, gender discrimination, accommodating the family-life balance with a highly demanding job, and dealing with life disruptions due to deployments. Another of the challenges

include the emotional and mental test they experienced through their military service, as well as going through cultural adaptation in Canadian deployment or when emigrating to Israel. Lastly, the sexual violence within the organization, as well as overall general safety concerns for their lives account for the most severe challenges facing women combatants. In terms of challenges, 81% of the participants made an explicit reference to their gender. This fact shows how when speaking and analysing women combatants' challenges, gender can be a category itself that shows how the main challenge in combat arms for women has to do with types of gender-based violence rather than the physical demands of a combat role. While seven participants mentioned the physical demands as a challenge of combat arms, 14 participants recognized a type of gender-based violence as the main challenge in their careers.

### **What downsides have been recognized or have combat women expressed any regrets in their combat experiences?**

Regarding the downsides and regrets of combat arms, seven participants answer having no regrets at all during their military service. Two of the participants regret not continuing with their military careers after their mandatory service was done. The other four expressed the following statements:

- Regret #1 as told by participant number 3: "I wish I learned the lessons I needed to learn, earlier; to trust myself more, to know my values, and to stand up for myself. However, I end up being satisfied with my career."
- Regret #2 as told by participant: "Looking back, I wish I was more confident as a Junior Officer to be a better leader. Confidence is key."
- Regret #3 as told by participant: "My greatest regret is not being kind. I model my leadership behaviour until 2015. I thought that if I was the toughest, meanest, and hardest person in the room, I will succeed. I didn't understand the power of kindness. I remember

not being kind on some occasions that would have cost me nothing to be polite and understanding, and I was mean. I feel some shame about it.”

- Regret #4 as told by participant: “While I have no professional regrets, I have some personal. For example, leaving my children and my husband for very long periods of time. Missing out on important events such as birthdays and graduations. It is a high cost and I regret missing out.”

Finally, one participant expressed significant regrets, not for her military experience or for joining combat arms, but for emigrating to a country that undergoes protracted conflict, such as Israel. She expressed strong feelings of unhappiness and disappointment towards the country and her desire to emigrate to another place soon.

### **Concluding Remarks**

As part of the concluding remarks of the interviews, women were asked if the fight for obtaining “the right to fight in combat” was worth it. Thus, to answer the most pressing question of this research: Have women achieved their goals in the right to fight in combat units? All of them answer unanimously “Yes, it was worth it”. In terms of achieving their goal in the right to fight in combat and support combat units, this research shows evidence of how in conquering the right to fight, women have slowly achieved the respect and solidarity of their male peers by obtaining leadership opportunities within their military organizations, being awarded institutional recognition for their high performance, and providing service to their countries with pride. These women have moved the once hermetic and male-exclusive military institutions towards more egalitarian practices. This accomplishment does not mean that discrimination against woman has ceased to exist in combat arms or in their military institution in general. These were some of the main challenges women combatants faced, which accounted for 81% of the cases. Actions and attitudes related to gender-based violence range from having to adapt to hyper masculinized

environments, experiencing isolation and gender discrimination to suffering criminal acts of sexual violence on the road to achieving gender equality in combat arms.

This dichotomy of women combatants' successes in an environment where gender discrimination can be easily reproduced, relegates the debate of women's physical capabilities in combat arms to a peripheral place. Contrary to the idea of Heather Macdonald that having women in US military positions lowers fitness standards and requirements, this research found the opposite. According to The Israeli Democracy Institute, researchers have found that in the US military, for example, "job standards are usually raised when women are recruited to fill traditionally male positions, and that women are drawn to a military career because of the framework and unique experiences it offers".<sup>99</sup> In combat and combat support arms, women have obtained numerous achievements, demonstrating that they are equally valuable to military field operations as men. Combat training of soldiers in any military that aspires to excellence should be reviewed by operational experts periodically to provide the best military advantages, disregard of the soldiers' gender and sex.

This thesis found the main achievements of women in combat and combat-support roles include overcoming obstacles, having leadership opportunities, providing service to others, being awarded institutional recognition, and experiencing personal growth. While their main challenges are dealing with gender-based and violent experiences (adapting to masculine environments, and suffering gender discrimination and sexual violence), they also face physical, emotional and mental challenges, dealing with their family-life balance and life disruptions due to deployments (Canadian case) and struggles with cultural adaptation and safety concerns (Israeli case).

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<sup>99</sup> Nevo, Baruch and Shur, Yael, "Women in the Israeli Defense Forces," A symposium held on November 21, 2022, at *The Israeli Democracy Institute*, Page. 33

The theory and practice of feminist security studies state that gender is essential to studying international security and focuses on ways gender is reflected in war and conflict. The findings in this thesis influence feminist security studies by exposing how gender correlates with the achievements and challenges of women in combat arms. The evidence gathered shows how gender impacts the achievements of 38% of the cases, mostly when the participants acknowledged being “the first women” in a role or overcoming gender stereotypes detrimental to female soldiers. In contrast, gender was a component of 87.5% of the testimonies referring to challenges, acknowledging gender-based violence. My thesis, while exploring two military institutions with a “gender lens”<sup>100</sup>, found how the dominance of masculine structures affects women’s integration into combat arms in a negative way. Therefore, the evidence suggests that the principal liability for military operational success in units that include women in combat arms, is the gender-based violence inside the institution, not the lack of physical strength of female soldiers. This last idea remains a typical misconception reproduced by a hyper-masculinized environment and the dominance of masculinities over femininities in military analysis, such as the research by John Keegan in 1993 and Macdonald in 2017.

Finally, I sustain that my thesis is an empowerment-centred gender analysis, one that challenges mainstream victim-centred focuses on women. As Cole mentioned, women's liberation cannot be conceived or updated if women are only considered and studied like victims and nothing more. (Cole, 1999). However, ignoring women's oppression and the history behind it will not resolve the problem either (Cole, 1999). The result of this research shows evidence contrary to the anti-“victim” feminism argument that women are no longer oppressed as a group.<sup>101</sup> 14 out of 16

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<sup>100</sup> Steans and Sjoberg, 2009

<sup>101</sup> Cole’s analysis on Rene Denfeld's *The New Victorians* (1995), Christina Hoff Sommers's *Who Stole Feminism* (1994), Camille Paglia's *Sex, Art and American Culture* (1992), Katie Roiphe's *The Morning After* (1993), and Naomi Wolf's *Fire with Fire* (1993).

former women combatants, recognized having experienced gender-based violence and discrimination during their military careers. This echoes Cole's argument: "women have been and continue to be discriminated against as women, despite their great advancement over the course of the last quarter of a century."<sup>102</sup> This was true in 1999 and remains certain in 2023.

Furthermore, the implication for an empowerment-centred gender analysis, is coming to terms with the idea that victimhood is not an exclusive and permanent feature of an individual, but rather a temporary status caused by external circumstances. An individual, in this case a woman combatant, may have experienced victimhood at one point in her career and at the same time have many accomplishments and successes. Empowerment might rise from the understanding that the fact of being a victim of adverse circumstances and systematic failures will not prevent women from harvesting accomplishments and become successful. But this should not be understood as an argument to stop fighting the abolition of those material circumstances and systems of knowledge that oppress and discriminate against women. Just as the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were historic for admitting the first women into universities and systems of higher education, the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>th</sup> centuries will be recorded in history as the first time that women were allowed to formally join combat arms in modern militaries.

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<sup>102</sup> Cole, 1999

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Appendix I. Questionnaire

**Questions**

Date of interview and method:

Name/Alias of interviewee:

Active/Former Member:

Years of duty:

Rank/unit (if possible):

Region of duty:

1. What motivated you to join a combat or combat support unit?
2. What are/were the most significant achievements of your military career?
3. What challenges did/do you face?
4. What role does/did the CAF play as a military institution in your lived experiences
5. Do you think men and women combat soldiers are different or the same based on their gender? In other words, does gender matter in combat?
6. Would you share your most significant experience in combat duty if you like?
7. In your opinion, what does it takes to succeed in a combat or combat support role in the military?
8. How, if at all, did combat duty change you (your character, confidence, future goals?
9. Do you wish to point out any downside or regret you have/had in your military career?
10. Do you have any questions for me about this interview or my research?

**Thank you for participating in this research. Do you consent to the use of your testimony, partially or entirely anonymously, for the academic purposes of this research?**

\_\_\_\_\_ **E-Signature**

Appendix II. Women in Ground Close Combat

**Table 1:** Women in Ground Close Combat.

Country	Total Armed-Forces Personnel*	Women in Armed Forces*	Women as a % of Armed Forces (Nearest Whole Number)	Date of GCC Introduction	Female Deaths in Combat
Australia	57,000	8,086	14	2013 <sup>†</sup>	Second World War: 39
Belgium	34,000	2,356	7	1981	N/A
Brazil	318,000	22,208	7	2017 <sup>‡</sup>	0
Canada	66,000	9,477	14	1989	First World War: 46 Second World War: 71 Afghanistan: 4
Denmark	19,000	1,007	5	1978	Afghanistan: 1
Eritrea	202,000	≈66,660	≈33	1998	Independence War: c. 22,000
Estonia	6,000	308	5	2008	N/A
Finland	22,000	≈400	≈2	1994	Second World War: 113
France	239,000	33,348	14	1985	Second World War: 13
Germany	251,000	18,599	7	2000	N/A
Israel	177,000	≈58,410	≈33	2000	Independence War: 114 Israel–Lebanon War, 2006: 1
Lithuania	11,000	1,335	12	2000	N/A
Netherlands	37,000	≈3,330	≈9	1979	Second World War: 1
New Zealand	10,000	≈1,590	≈16	2007	Afghanistan: 1
North Korea	1,190,000	≈262,000 <sup>§</sup>	≈22 <sup>¶</sup>	1950s	N/A
Norway	24,000	1,008	4	1985	Afghanistan: 1
Poland	100,000	2,384	2	2003	Second World War: 3,000
Romania	74,000	3,124	4	2002	First World War: 1
Sweden	20,000	3,639	18	1989	0
United Kingdom	174,000	16,660	10	2016 <sup>§</sup>	Iraq War: 6 Afghanistan: 3
United States	1,569,000	202,516	13	2012 <sup>‡</sup>	First Gulf War: 15 Iraq War: 110 Afghanistan: 51

*Fitriani, 2016 – Table 2012*