

Mothers or Warriors? Women Combat Soldiers in the Face of Gender Stereotypes in the Israel Defense Forces

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BA International Studies Thesis

Leiden University

2014

Date: 8 January 2015

Leiden University

ABSTRACT

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A thesis presented on the reinforcing effects of gender stereotyping during military missions by the Israeli Defense Forces. Acts of selected gender inequality in the army still exist in spite of legal amendments made to the National Service Law. This unequal treatment stems from specific gender roles attributed to women and men, and a masculine point of view in the military. The presented case studies illustrate continuity and intensification of gender inequality during war operations in Lebanon, West Bank and The Gaza Strip. Thus, the recent formation of a new co-ed combat unit will not have a significant impact on women's emancipation in the Israeli army. Future work on gender inequality might include the implications of gender inequality in the army on the Israel-Palestine conflict, including its impact on the peace process and the role of women could play in this process.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	6
Chapter 1: Historical Overview.....	9
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	13
Chapter 3: Battle Zones.....	17
Chapter 4: Birthing Future Soldiers.....	25
Conclusion:.....	28
Bibliography.....	30

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Ennis for her guidance and advise during the thesis seminar; Dr. Batmanghelichi for always asking the right questions and patiently helping me to put the pieces of the puzzle together during the process of writing this thesis. In addition, special thanks go to all those who responded to my inquiries, proof read my draft and provided valuable feedback.

“Girls generally make excellent soldiers – better than boys who sometimes behave hysterically and irresponsibly at the front.”

Ryszard Kapuściński

INTRODUCTION

“I don’t believe in using women in combat because females are too fierce.”

Margaret Maude

Early morning on November 13, 2014, the official spokesperson of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) released a tweet in which it announced that a second co-ed infantry battalion, named the “Lions of Jordan”, had been established.¹ The tweet was accompanied with a photograph picturing two female soldiers in full combat gear, clutching their rifles with tense looks on their faces – their piercing eyes scanning the desert through the darkness of the night. The creation of this battalion seems to be a part of an effort by the IDF to include more women in combat positions and promote the idea of gender equality in the army among the general public. In fact, the first mixed gender unit, called Caracal, was created in 2000 due to pressure from the public and criticism of the small number of combat positions available for women. This battalion, named after a desert feline whose gender is indistinguishable (referring to the co-ed character of the unit) falls under the Southern Command, and is responsible for securing the border with Egypt (“Caracal Battalion” 2014). The new combat unit falls under the Central Command and will operate in the Jordan Valley. Its main operations will include field intelligence collection and preventing terrorist infiltration on the eastern border (Lapin 2014). A *Haaretz* article on the new unit also mentions Lt. Col. Oshrat Bachar, the first woman to command a combat battalion. She is in charge of the Field Intelligence Battalion 727, which is responsible for collecting field intelligence along the border with Egypt (Cohen 2014). The IDF takes pride in being a “people’s army,” where soldiers represent a broad section of society and its values are mirrored on the social values which the Israeli society supposedly represents: “unity, formality, and equality” (“IDF General Staff Meeting”). From an outsider’s perspective, the Israeli army seems to have a

¹ Twitter account of the IDF Spokesperson. <https://twitter.com/idfspokesperson/status/532911181204164608>

reason to boast about its recent accomplishments – for instance, the new mixed unit and a female soldier appointed to a commanding position.

Moreover, 92 percent of all military jobs are open to women – of whom 3 percent serve in combat positions, and 33 percent of all IDF personnel are women (Rudoren 2014). When taking a closer look however, it appears that the army faces many of the issues which presently are facing Israeli society: a wealth gap, racism and gender inequality. Since the 1980s, gender inequality in the army has gained considerable interest from scholars, mostly due to a rise in feminist awareness (“Research on Gender” 73). The subject itself seems to touch a sensitive nerve in Israel, considering the fact that the country has been in an almost perpetual state of war since it gained independence in 1948. When a society goes to war, the nation’s priority becomes the effectiveness of the army, while women’s emancipation becomes a matter of second category (Golan 583). In 2014, a book published by former Colonel Raz Sagi, named *Equality in the Army?*, sparked a feminist debate in Israel. According to Sagi, the army is not a place for feminism, simply because of the fact that women are not physically built for combat (Sagi 2014). Other conservative voices have also criticized the idea of women in battle. Colonel Talya Lanki, one of the first female battalion commanders in the IDF claims that the society and the army are not ready for women in combat roles, especially not in attack ranks (*i24News.tv*). A 2007 Segev Committee report drafted for the army called for full gender equality and contained recommendations on how to achieve full equality between men and women (Harel 2014). While the IDF publicly supported the report, by 2011 it was clear that in practice, the army had done nothing to implement its recommendations. It was reasoned that due to increased pressure from both the religious establishment and also from secular conservative senior officers, who did not want to include women into assault units (Harel 2014). Moreover, the debate on women in combat takes place against a backdrop of new strategies adopted by United Nation member states (such as Ireland, the Philippines, and South Sudan) to encourage and promote women in leadership positions, especially in the sphere of conflict and peace. One example is Resolution 1325 of the UN Security council, which passed in 2000. The guiding principles of the Resolution emphasize women’s presence in peace negotiations and protection of women and children against violence in conflict situations. Although Israel was one of the first countries to construct a law based on this resolution, implementation of the law has been difficult, especially in relation to state security (Ashkenazy, *Heinrich Böll Foundation* 2011). Since military elites (mostly men

with combat experience) become involved in politics and foreign policy making after finishing their military career, women find themselves excluded from the possibility to make this transition, since their presence in combat positions is minimal (Izraeli 206).

This thesis will discuss the practice of excluding women from actual direct combat in the IDF, which can be tied to a broader problem of enforcing stereotypes about women's roles in the army. These stereotypes become evident especially during war campaigns, when women are relegated to combat-support positions. Hanna Herzog claims that national security has been used in Israel in order to maintain the social order, including gender inequality (213). I will argue that these gender demarcations are constructed especially during war campaigns, in order not to disrupt the socially constructed gender roles of men as fighters and women as nurturers. This perspective could answer the question whether the creation of a new co-ed unit will bear any significance.

This thesis is divided into five parts. The first section provides background information about women's participation in the armed forces before and after the independence of Israel, followed by a review of scholarly literature discussing the topic of militarism and gender dynamics in the army, and the connection between the nation-state and position of women during war. Thereafter, I will provide several case studies of military operations by the IDF during the First and Second Lebanon War (6 June 1982- June 1985; 12 July 2006- 1 October 2006); women combat soldiers during the First and Second Intifadas (8 December 1987 – 12 September 1993; 28 September 2000 – February 2005) in the Occupied Territories; and operations in Gaza, including Operation Cast Lead (18 December 2008- 18 January 2009) and the most recent Operation Protective Edge (8 July 2014 – 26 August 2014). By including the most recent war between Israel and Gaza, the thesis will contribute to a body of scholarly research on women's roles in combat zones in Israel. In light of these case studies and given my analysis of military and government discourse, I conclude that mixed gender battalions in the current state will not have a significant effect on women's emancipation in the Israeli army.

CHAPTER 1: HISTORICAL REVIEW

We do not intend on drafting women into combat units... The training that we see necessary for women is basic military training and agricultural instruction... I fully agree with those who pointed out the importance of our birthrate, but for that reason there is a need to train women... If we want our young daughters in their places of settlement to get married and have babies – we have to allow them to protect themselves and their babies.

These words were uttered by David Ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel, in a 1949 speech to the *Knesset*², during which he introduced a draft of a law that would later become the Defense Service Law (Rimalt 11). It contains the regulations on and obligations in the Israel Defense Forces, established officially on May 30th 1948 (Yacoby 46). He continued by saying:

When debating the status of women, two things must be remembered—and both at the same time. The first - the special mission of the woman - the destiny of motherhood. There is no greater task than this in life... We should honor and value mothers, and place women in the most comfortable and appropriate conditions when they are to be mothers... no duties should be placed on the woman that interfere with the practice of motherhood. (Rimalt 10)

What Ben Gurion failed to acknowledge, is that women have been active in protecting their communities *and* that they took part in missions carried out against the “enemy” – whether the opposition were Palestinians or the British – since the pre-state period (Grant de Pauw 282). When Zionists began to settle in Palestine in the 20th century, waves of immigrants from Eastern Europe began to establish settlements in the isolated countryside – without receiving any protection from the Ottoman authorities which only controlled and secured the towns in the region (Creveld 83). Women were a part of this process from the very beginning. In their new homeland – known as *Eretz Israel* – Jewish pioneer women aspired to challenge the rigid gender

² Knesset is The Israeli Parliament

roles that existed in the homelands they left far behind, mostly in Eastern Europe. Their ambition was to establish a new society based on gender equality, where no one – man or woman – would be excluded from any kind of work based on gender alone (Bernstein 2). These dreams were never realized however. Men took charge of all matters deemed important, including that of security. In 1908, in order to secure the crops, the settlements, and to escort people moving from one settlement to another, a defense organization was established: the *Hashomer*³ (Creveld 83). Women’s participation in *Hashomer* was up for dispute; some men and women were opposed to their equal participation and other men and women supported it. Eventually, a few women were granted equal organizational rights and others were simply recognized in the organization, as wives of other members (Grant de Pauw 238). Regarding the defense of the settlement or standing guard, even though some women carried pistols for self-defense, they were relegated to the domestic sphere, where they could cook, clean, and take care of the children (Creveld 83). The *Hashomer* became an authoritarian organization “that reinforced the ideology of violence and male superiority” (quoted by Rein in Jacoby 45).

However, not all women accepted the roles into which they were forced. Meir Chazan tells the story of women on the communal *kibbutzim*⁴ (collective community) and their struggle to be included in guarding duties. Jewish women demanded to be allowed to guarding duty in settlements that were constructed in Galilea and Judea between 1903 and 1914. In 1918 they demanded to be allowed to volunteer for the Jewish Legion, a unit of the British army that fought against the Ottoman Empire. Their demands were rejected in both cases. The idea of the “new Hebrew woman” was for her to realize Zionism in other fields, like culture and economy (Chazan 86). The demands of women to join guard duty in the *kibbutzim* were revived and given impetus during the Arab Revolt which began on April 19, 1936. The Revolt was a spontaneous reaction of the Arab population to Zionism, British imperialism and corrupt Arab leadership. The violence that swept through Palestine involved both the Jewish and Arab communities attacking each other, and a general strike by local Arab resistance committees (Bunton 238, 239). The little Jewish settlements were often in the frontline of fighting between Jews and Arabs. During attacks on a *kibbutz*, women and children were told to hide in the dining halls, where they were supposed to wait for an all-clear signal from the men. Many women started to feel humiliated

³ From Hebrew ‘The Watchman’.

⁴ Singular: *kibbutz*.

and frustrated with the fact that they could not protect themselves or their children. In fact, some children admitted they saw their mothers as “cowards,” who were unable to protect themselves (Chazan 100). From the start of the Arab Revolt in 1936, women published bulletins addressing the issue of women’s inclusion in guarding duties. Many men opposed this; however slowly but surely, the idea of women as extra “man” power and the need for women to be able to defend themselves (but not to participate in attacks), started to affirm itself in the minds of *kibbutz* leaders. Kibbutz Ein Harod, situated north of the West Bank in what is contemporary Israel, became the first to allow women to perform guard duties (99). In the meantime, when attacks by the Arabs increased in force, the *Hashomer* was considered unable to respond to security risks, and secret organization called the Haganah⁵ was formed (Grand de Pauw 283). Because of the secretive nature of this organization, no official documents regarding women’s participation has been found. Historians agree that based on personal memoirs and letters, the participation of women evolved over time, as the Haganah tried to adapt to the always shifting demands created by war (Boni-Davidi). However, there is no doubt that while the women were included in the organization since its founding, and the fact that they received equal instructions in discipline and in how to handle fire arms, Jewish women ended up doing jobs that were considered safe: communications, first aid and medical assistance (Yacoby 45). The majority of women did not protest this decision, and internalized the stereotypical view of the caring mother, who took care of the men when they came home from battle (Boni-Davidi). Some, however, did not accept being excluded from battle and insisted on going through difficult training, which they passed. The few women who were allowed to fight on the frontlines alongside men, knew this was only temporary, especially during the Arab Revolt (Boni-Davidi). In 1941, when the British started to suspect that the Nazis wanted to invade Palestine, a Jewish full-time force of volunteers was established, named the Palmach (lit. assault companies). The Palmach was considered a part of the Haganah, and was responsible for the most difficult and dangerous missions (Grand de Pauw 284). While women were still not allowed to join actual combat, the Palmach was the first organization where women and men trained together and even shared the same living space, with adjacent tents (Crevelt 85). On 29th of November 1947, a week after the United Nations voted to partition the British-ruled Palestine Mandate in a Jewish and an Arab state, a group of male and female soldiers was ambushed by Palestinians in the Negev desert. All were killed and their

⁵ From Hebrew ‘The Defense’.

bodies were cut in pieces. In response, the Hagana decided that all women should be taken out of combat units. A few Palmach commanders still allowed a small number of women to participate in combat and combat-supportive positions. A year later, in 1948, Israel declared its independence and a temporary truce between Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and the Syrian Arab Republic was signed (“UNTSO Background”). For the few women combat soldiers, this meant that they would become the last Israeli women to fight in direct combat (Creveld 85; 86). For, on the 8th of September 1949, the Defense Service Law was passed by the Knesset. This law, which Ben Gurion presented to the Knesset in his speech, declared that women would not be drafted for combat.⁶ A few Parliament members opposed the gendered nature of the law. A few Parliamentary members protested against the gender discriminatory nature of this law. Some even called for allowing women to resume serving in combat roles (Robbins 371). In 1952 the law contained several directions involving women’s roles in the army:

1. Motherhood takes precedence over security needs and is essential to the survival of the nation;
2. Recruitment of women enables men to be transferred from home front positions to the battlefield;
3. During times of emergency, the role of women may be re-examined (Drori et al. 8,9)

The law also established that combat roles for women would be closed, out of fear they could be captured by the enemy. Furthermore, the gender discriminatory nature of the law became apparent in the regulations regarding the duration of army service (36 for men, women 24), reserve duty (for men until the age of 40; women 24) and exemptions from military service (women can be exempted based on pregnancy, motherhood, marriage, or religious practice) Men’s roles were defined as combat positions; women’s roles as combat-support (Drori et al. 9). Women were given jobs that kept them away from the front lines of battle, like: administrators, secretaries, communicators, welfare workers, and medics in non-combat units (Creveld 89). As will become clear in the next chapters, women soldiers will get to ‘see some action’, but the principal rule established in the Defense Service Law would remain the same: the men do the fighting.

⁶ See page 9.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

man (n): *gê'ver* [גְּוֵר]

hero (n): *gibôr* [גִּבּוֹר]

Heb. root: G-V-R

To understand how gender inequality is connected to exclusion from combat positions, it is important to look at scholarly literature which discusses concepts like militarism, masculinity and how these two are related. Furthermore, research on gender roles in the IDF explains gender dynamics in the army and the way women are assigned roles based on their perceived image as mothers and care takers in the IDF. While gender inequality in the army can be discussed on many different levels, including its influence on the society (and vice versa), the scope of this research only includes women's roles in the military and how they are constructed in contrast to men's roles.

Militarism and Masculinity

The relation between militarism and masculinity in Israel can be traced back to Zionism. The settlement of Jews in Palestine created an opportunity for Jewish men to create a new image of the Jewish man: strong, manly, physically productive, and free (Mayer 101). The Zionist man had to be constructed as an antithesis to the Eastern European Jew who was regarded by Zionist thinkers as weak, helpless, passive and feminine (Mayer 100). As was already mentioned in the history section, Jewish men took upon themselves the defense of the early Jewish settlements in the pre-state era. The guards from *Hashomer* were regarded as the prime example of the New Jew and of Jewish masculinity (Mayer 106). This tradition of constructing masculinity in a militaristic sphere continues to present day. According to Sasson-Levy, militarism is an intrinsic part of masculinity because it is in fact the notion of masculinity that shapes the military

(“Constructing Identities” 358). The glorified image of the male warrior is based on the idea of hegemonic masculinity, which motivates men to fight (Goldstein quoted in “Women Breaking the Silence” 743). Hegemonic masculinity itself is a rather obscure idea of an ideal type of masculinity which no one can ever attain. Nevertheless, hegemonic masculinity classifies any other type of masculinity as less desirable (“Constructing Identities” 358). It is no surprise then, that young men see military conscription as a rite of passage to male adulthood (Klein 49). Mayer discusses the disappointment of some (male) members of elite military units who felt betrayed by the army, after it started to train soldiers for peacekeeping missions in 1994, a year after the Oslo Accords were signed. The soldiers thought the army would make ‘real men’ out of them, whereas peacekeeping missions were turning them into ‘zeros’ (Mayer 97). In fact, military service is seen as an inherent and unavoidable part of maturation for young Jewish Israelis:

Military service is internalized by members of the Israeli Jewish collective as essential to a boy’s right to belong to this group and, more specifically, to the inner circle of adult males. Literally a rite of passage, it is related to and spoken of in fatalistic, quasi-religious terms, as an inevitable, inescapable, pseudo-biological phase of male maturation. (Mazali quoted in Klein 53)

In a situation of prolonged conflict, the military assumes a central role in society, and this is especially the case in Israel (Golan 581). In Israeli society, militarism and the absence of peace have decreased the value of girls – and increased the value of boys (Golan 583). Thus, according to Cynthia Enloe, there exists a relationship between militarism and patriarchal masculinity “because of the great significance of combat in the construction of masculine identities and in the justification of masculine superiority” (quoted in “Gender Performance” 267). D’Amico provides another example of the gendered nature of militarization, which begins at military training:

The essence of military training consists of the subordination of the individual to the institution, a desensitization to violence, and a dehumanization of the potential opponent. For male recruits, it also includes a process of masculinization where female and feminine are defined as “other” and as unworthy. The military seeks “to make a man out of you” or “to separate the men from the boys,” and from the women. Military service

constitutes a quintessentially male activity, a confirmation of masculinity, a proof of manhood. The military as an institution is thus sustained by this gender differentiation. (383)

Although the military is a place for “quintessential male activity”, the IDF drafts both men and women. Women are given an opportunity to serve and protect their country – just in a different way. The following section shows how women’s roles challenge the traditional gender dichotomy by entering male profession in the military. Above all however, it becomes clear that notions of femininity and masculinity shape existing gender roles in the army.

Women’s roles in military

Extensive research on women’s roles in the IDF has been conducted by Orna Sasson-Levy, a sociologist and gender studies expert from Bar-Ilan University. She concludes that women who enter “masculine” roles in the military are stripped of their identity as women, through the practice of:

1. mimicry of male bodily practices;
2. distancing from traditional femininity;
3. trivialization of sexual harassment. (“Feminism and Military” 447)

While women soldiers in masculine roles subvert traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity, they also adapt masculine identity practices, like wearing baggy and dirty uniforms, swearing and lowering the tone of their voices. These practices disconnect the female body and feminine gender with combat (“Feminism and Military 447). In other words, a woman is seen not as an integral part of the army – a woman is not a natural soldier and thus needs to mask her gender by mimicking men in order to justify her presence in the military. Noya Rimalt suggests that although the traditional gendered division of labor has been under constant attack since the mid-1990s (with women entering some positions that were previously exclusively male), soldiering remains to be constructed through a gendered mechanism (“Women in the Sphere of Masculinity” 1107). According to a study carried out in 2002 by the Office of the Advisor for Women’s Issues, integration of women in training for combat roles has mostly failed due to exclusionary practices and over-protection by the commanding officers. Women were completely excluded from all kinds of combat, guarding the settlements, or securing their base in the West Bank. Women combatants in the Israel Border Police (further referred to by its Hebrew

abbreviation *Magav*) were teamed up with men (“Women in the Sphere of Masculinity 1114). More information regarding women in the *Magav* and their roles during the second *Intifada* will be discussed in the next chapter. This protectiveness of female soldiers results from seeing women’s bodies as weak, vulnerable, soft and even “rape-able” (Sered 68). A woman’s body represents national purity and honor but is unable to defend or define the nation (Sered 69). Exposing women to danger is seen as worse than exposing men to danger. Sered argues that this is because women in combat positions could be taken captive and possibly be raped by the enemy (which the author describes as Arabs). Furthermore, this would force male soldiers to go after female soldiers and save them (83). This reason cannot be found in official IDF regulations. Rather, it is a popular fear among the general public, that women could be raped under captivity (84). Two discursive constructions become visible in the fear of Jewish female soldiers becoming prisoners of war (POW’s): the enemy raping women and women as reproducers of the nation. These constructions fit into a larger discourse that is characterized as the “home front” and “battle front,” or in sociological terms – the separation between public and private spheres. Women continue to be seen as a part of the “home front,” where they are responsible for reproduction and affective relationships when the men come home. The men by contrast, dominate the “battle front” as soldiers, policy makers, and in general, the breadwinners (Yacoby 40). This home front and battle front discourse can be found within the IDF as well. Roles are divided between the “front” and “rear,” with women largely being part of the supportive “rear” roles (Lomski-Feder 6). It becomes clear that it is not the IDF which imposed these rules. Rather, it is Israel society that defines the gender roles, which are then reproduced by the military. For it is the society that is responsible for defining social roles of men and women, and it sets the rules according to how much deviation from the established roles might be tolerated (Kummel 629).

CHAPTER 3: THE BATTLE ZONES

The case studies presented in this chapter are war campaigns Israel engaged in in Lebanon, the Occupied Territories and Gaza. In all these wars, women soldiers were involved in some of the operations, but were mostly excluded from any direct combat. At the time of this writing, the last case study, Operation Protective Edge, ended a little over five months ago. Thousands of families in Gaza still live in tents next to the ruins of what used to be their homes. While I am aware that writing about female soldiers and the extent to which they were involved in this war might evoke negative emotions, it is crucial to understand that ultimately, gender inequality in the army translates back to how these conflicts are being approached by the IDF – which is by military force. The practice of excluding women from certain positions in the army is related to a discourse within Israeli society that does not allow for alternative solutions to the conflict with its neighbors. In the following examples, information provided by newspapers, academics, an official IDF Spokesperson and journalists, it becomes evident how traditional ideas about gender roles create an almost exotic image of the ‘female soldier’ – especially when some women get involved in operations over the border in Gaza or Lebanon.

The First Lebanon War⁷

The first time women were allowed into a war zone since the days of the Palmach, was during the First Lebanon War. When the IDF entered South Lebanon in 1982, women soldiers were prohibited from crossing the border with Lebanon. Two years later, to lift the spirits of the male soldiers serving in Lebanon, women were allowed to cross the border and serve as communicators, medics and administrators (Creveld 93). The IDF had to ensure the safety of the female soldiers, fearing a public relations blowback if a woman would die in the field (Creveld 93). Another measure taken as a precaution was that women soldiers had to return to the Israeli side of the border before dusk (Gal 53). Furthermore, the few hundred women who joined the male units were barred from carrying heavy ammunition, and were given orders not to leave their

⁷ Also known as “Operation Peace for Galilee” in Israel. In Lebanon referred to as “The Invasion”.

bases unless accompanied by two male soldiers (Robbins 324). The media and army publications painted an image of women soldiers bringing a “touch of home” by organizing parties on Friday nights and putting flower boxes in the windows. Newspaper articles were accompanied by pictures showing women wearing jewelry and make up, with their hair loose (Robbins 324). Nevertheless, the women who served in Lebanon supported the mission and felt that they contributed in their own way to Israel’s safety. This in spite of objections made by some of the male soldiers to the war itself: the initiation of the war by Israel without a clear reason and a subsequent conquering of an Arab city for the first time in history (Robbins, 325). Hundreds of reservists went to prison for refusing to serve in Lebanon and according to Parrein, this was the reason why the IDF allowed women to go to Lebanon in the first place – to fill the ranks (24).

The First Intifada

The Palestinian uprising against the military occupation of the West Bank started on December 8, 1987 and would last until September 12, 1993. The Intifada created another situation where female soldiers were semi-included in the fighting. They served in military bases in the West Bank, but were not allowed to leave them, unless they were going home for the weekend (Robbins 326). Women soldiers were certainly not allowed to join any combat forces, and as one general put it: “Every woman who performs her job here makes it possible for another male soldier to go fight in the field” (Robbins 326).

Also in this case, the media highlighted the nonmilitary image of the female soldiers; one author reported that women’s presence added “color, fragrance, vitality, happiness, the feeling of home, softness, consideration, warmth, motherly attention, aesthetics ... and breathtaking beauty” (Robbins 326). Women continued to be excluded from combat positions, even though the National Service Law was amended in 1987, after which it authorized the Chief of Staff to make rules regarding women’s service. Technically, the amendment no longer provided legal grounds to exclude soldiers from particular positions based on their gender alone (Sered 74). In practice, nothing changed for women in the army. Israeli historian Martin van Creveld, a critic of women in combat, even testified before a U.S. Presidential commission studying the implications of allowing women in combat, saying “We are proud of the fact that we have not had women in combat [since 1948] even in the most desperate of times” (“Israeli Women Won’t See Combat” 2003). However, a change started to occur in how female soldiers saw themselves: as combat

soldiers. Robbins suggests that this was due to the fact that these women were serving in the occupied Territories, which were regarded as dangerous – even though they were not participating in fighting or training as combat soldiers (Robbins 335). The allure of women soldiers serving in quasi-combat positions was supposed to – yet again – motivate male soldiers whose willingness to serve in the regular army and the reserves declined since the first *Intifada* began (Robbins 334).

Second Intifada

Between the end of the first *Intifada* in 1993 and the beginning of the second in 2000, a few things had changed regarding women's positions in the army. In 1994, Alice Miller sued the Israel Defense Forces for not allowing her to be a candidate for a position in the Israel Air Force as a fighter pilot. She had all technical qualifications, and she was already an experienced civilian pilot. However, the army made it clear to Miller that it was military policy not to allow women into combat positions, including air force pilots (Laufer-Ukeles 328). The legal battle lasted until 1995, when the Supreme Court of Israel ruled in her favor, adding that the army had to allow Miller to enter "aviation aptitude examinations" and allow her to continue her education in the military pilot's course if she passed the test (Rimalt 1105). In the end, Miller did not pass the examinations and was disqualified from entering the fighter pilot course. However, in 2000, the Supreme Court issued another amendment which stated that "any female inductee has the same rights as a male inductee to fulfill any service role" and "the exclusion of a female inductee from any particular role will not be seen as an infringement of her rights if the nature or characteristics of that role demand it" (Drori et al. 10). In short, women were granted equal opportunities for a job if they were found physically and mentally suitable for it. Military leaders were given the authority to decide who was and who was not suitable for the particular job (Gelfond – Feldinger 2008). Another decision to include women in semi-combat positions was made in 1996, which resulted in women joining the Border Police (which only operates in Israel and the Occupied Territories). Technically the Border Police does not belong to the army and it is generally perceived by the public as being staffed by soldiers who are less educated, less important and less respected than those in the army (Golan 582). Nevertheless, female Border Guards started to participate in counter insurgency operations in the Territories in 2001 (Parrein

32). Yet, they were only allowed to take part in real security missions if they were teamed up with men (Rimalt 1114).

In 2002 one of the women from the Military Police unit *Sahleb*, nineteen-year old Corporal Keren Ya'akobi became the first female combat casualty of the Second Intifada. She was shot dead while guarding the Tomb of Patriarchs in Hebron ("Cpl Keren Ya-akobi"). In general women remained excluded from other combat positions. It ought to be noted that the mixed gender Caracal battalion – set up in 2000 – was not operating in the Occupied Territories. The issue of women serving in the Territories is rather complicated. As the IDF insists on referring to the West Bank as "Judea and Samaria", it could be argued that this is the reason why some women are allowed into a few limited combat positions, like in the Border Police - simply because the Occupied Territories are seen as part of Israel and not foreign territory, except for Area A which is under full Palestinian control. Furthermore, it would be rather difficult not to allow female soldiers to enter the Territories, considering some soldiers live in settlements spread throughout the West Bank. Women are also present at checkpoints set up in the Territories. Their presence can be explained by the fact that male soldiers are not allowed to search female Palestinians. The fact that the army uses female soldiers at checkpoints can be seen as necessity (Perrein 75). However, in 2002, during the Second *Intifada*, women were forbidden to guard the settlements since the commanding officer in the Territories declared he did not want female soldiers to serve in the region (Rimalt 1114). Thus, whether or not women are allowed to serve in more dangerous areas still depends mostly on the discretion of the commanding officers.

The Second Lebanon War

A year before the Second Lebanon war broke out in 2006, the Military Chief of Staff's Advisor for Women's Issues published a report summarizing the status of women in military service since the *Miller vs Israel Defense Forces Supreme Courte* case in 1995. It concluded that only 2,5 percent of women were active in combat roles, and that most combat positions remained formally closed to women (Rimalt 1113). The term 'combat roles' should be understood in a broader meaning, since the face-to-face combat positions, the Special Forces and the armored corps remain closed (Gazzar 2008). While not a combat role, the appointment of a female IDF Spokesperson during the Second Lebanon War was branded as a historic achievement:

“[Brigadier General Miri Regev] is already becoming a symbol of this particular war” (Almog quoted in “Women at War” 2006). During this war, 14 percent of female reserve soldiers were called up and most of them served as medics (Gazzar 2008). To be precise, of the 14 percent, 21 percent were doctors, 11 percent worked in combat positions (mostly Border Guards and artillery – both in Israel territory) and the rest worked in Intelligence units (Parrein 33). Women who did enter Lebanon required special permits (Pfeffer 2009). Berger and Naaman analysed news coverage of women soldiers by *Haaretz*, an Israeli daily, and *Yediot Ahronot*, the most popular tabloid in Israel.⁸ *Haaretz*’s coverage was minimal – proportional to women’s presence in Lebanon - and the paper presented a rather conservative view of women in the army. *Yediot Ahronot* on the other hand, used more sensationalist reports to celebrate and emphasize women’s presence in the army (287). For example, a few female reservists who were interviewed by *Yediot Ahronot*, admitted that they were met with skepticism of the male soldiers. She said, “at first, men *degraded* us, but soon understood that we were in the exactly the same position” (Chason 2006). [emphasis added] One of the male reservists mentioned that there are additional benefits to having women in the field: “When you finish training all sweaty and sandy and out of nowhere they offer you a moist towel, what could be better than that? Only for that it’s worth it to enlist women into the army” (Chason 2006).

In the meanwhile, when some male soldiers believed women were good for handing them “moist towels,” a female soldier gave her life in a war zone when her helicopter got shot out of the sky by a Hizbullah rocket. The first – and only – female soldier to die in Lebanon was Sergeant Major Keren Tender, a flight mechanic. The attack killed her and four other members of the flight crew (Sinai 2006).

Operation Cast Lead

On December 18th 2008, the Israeli army launched a ground offensive in Gaza, in response to incessant rocket fire coming from inside the Gaza Strip. The IDF sent in the infantry, tanks, engineering and the artillery corps, while thousands of reservists had been called up (Kershner 2009). The women who joined the Cast Lead operation were mostly active in typical roles of

⁸ The readership of *Haaretz* consists primarily of intellectuals and politicians.

caretakers, e.g. taking care of children in school near the Gaza border (Ben Dror 2008). However, a few advancements had been made in regulations regarding the involvement of women during war. For example, some women worked as look-outs from the Field Intelligence Corps Battalion Nesher. Their job was to scan the territory and pass on the information to forces in the field (Sneh 2009). Female munitions officers accompanied combat forces into Gaza and for the first time, women were not required a special waiver to enter enemy territory (“Breaking the Mud Ceiling” 2009). In addition, more women are now accepted into the technical field; there are simply not enough men who are willing to serve in technological positions. As result, more than 20 percent of draftees in technical roles are women (“Breaking the Mud Ceiling” 2009). In honor of International Women’s Day in 2009, the newspaper *Jerusalem Post* ran a story on female paramedics who were inside Gaza during the operation. According to Meshi Sa’ad, a paramedic who spent 13 days in Gaza, some (male) reservists and career officers were not used to seeing women in the field working next to men. Sa’ad was the only woman inside an armored personnel vehicle in Gaza (Katz). Other women worked as tank mechanics, and while their positions were described by the army as combat positions, these women worked in special zones inside Gaza, which were protected by combat soldiers (Parrein 34). No female soldier was among the nine soldiers killed during this war (“Operation Cast Lead: IDF Soldiers Killed.” 2014).

Operation Protective Edge

This war can be seen as a continuation of Operation Cast Lead. The operation was launched on July 8, 2012 and the objectives remained fairly the same: to stop rocket fire from inside the Gaza Strip (“Operation Protective Edge” 2014). The number of women soldiers serving in Gaza during this war was the highest ever during a military conflict – 50 women joined the men inside the Strip, mostly as paramedics and in combat support positions (Sharuz 2014)⁹. Elana Sztokman, Israeli journalist and women’s activist, claims the recent Gaza conflict was a man’s war: all casualties were male combat soldiers; the negotiating team in Egypt did not include a single woman; and fewer than 10 percent of all news pundits during the war were female (“Gaza: It’s a

⁹ Personal interview over the phone with IDF spokesperson – European Desk.

man's war" 2014). In the same report, she claims that female soldiers are not allowed over the border. This is a puzzling statement, since female mechanics and paramedics have been allowed into previous operations in Gaza and a few even entered Lebanon, as already mentioned. When asked about her choice of words, Sztokman explained: "I spoke to several army representatives about it and it's a pretty well established rule [that women soldiers are not allowed to cross the border]... The IDF Spokesperson is trying to change this image so they posted a story about four women who went over the border – all medics, no actual soldiers" (sic). An example of such story was posted in *Yediot Ahronot* and it included an interview with four female medics who spent several consecutive days in Gaza, mainly with the armored corps (Meidan 2014). A picture that was posted along with the article shows four women in a row, M16 rifles slung across their chest, holding helmets in their hands, with tanks in the background. The IDF posted a similar article on the official IDF blog, featuring stories of three young female paramedics ("Fighting for Live: The Female Paramedics" 2014).

The information coming from the IDF's PR team seems to be contradictory. On the one hand stories are posted about tough women who join the men in battle and on the other hand – it is specified that these women were not involved in actual face to face combat. As Sztokman explained in her email, the general idea among army officers is that women do not even cross the border. Thus, while the female paramedics are seen by the IDF Spokesperson as soldiers, others inside the army insist women soldiers were not even present in Gaza. For certain, it is clear that women's presence in Gaza during Operation Protective Edge was minimal (Eglash 2014). However, it can be said that more women were called up for reserve duty than in the previous wars. Thousands of female reservists served in the Home Front Command, Intelligence, the Air Force and field operations (Ghert-Zand 2104). Israeli Channel 10 gave a more nuanced report, saying that most female reservists remained in the training bases, in the *kibbutzim* communities along the border with Gaza, and in assembly points (Nir Ne'eman 2014). Channel 2 broadcasted a report on female mortar instructors in an artillery corps unit near the Gaza border. The report highlighted the fact that these women were not supposed to be there, since their job instructors requires them to work in bases located far away from the Gaza perimeters. But since war broke out, they were sent into the field near the Gaza border as mortar instructors who controlled the mortar fire. The men who were present in the unit protected the area, and lined up the mortars since they were considered too heavy by the female soldiers. As in all previous wars, women's

hygiene remained a topic of discussion; women were continuously made to show how useful and “resourceful” they are during the war, as the broadcast ended with a quick frame displaying women’s hygiene products.

A critical note on how Israeli society thinks about soldiers in Gaza appeared in an op-ed in *Yediot Ahronot*, written by attorney Vardit Avidan, of the Tmura Legal Center for the Prevention of Discrimination. Avidan claims that the image of a woman in war remains the same as always: that of a mother and ‘supporter’ of the combat soldiers. For example, when civilians were sending care packages to soldiers during the latest Gaza war, not one package included female products; all included men’s boxer briefs, razors, and aftershave (Avidan, 2014).

All in all, while some progress seems to have been made, women soldiers are still excluded from actual combat roles and their presence in war zones, especially those over the border, remain an anomaly.

CHAPTER 4: VESSELS OF FUTURE SOLDIERS

Male friend named “Guy”: What do you mean? The army is the most fun! What, you don’t want to join?

Pigtailed girl: I hope by the time I’m eighteen there won’t be an army. Because there will be peace.

Guy: No, no, anything but that.

Pigtailed girl: What, you don’t want peace?

Guy: Of course, I want peace, but I don’t want the army to be cancelled.

Excerpt from “Goliath: Life and Loathing in Greater Israel” by Max Blumenthal.

The cases presented in the previous chapter illustrate that although small progress has been made in terms of allowing women to operate on the front lines, excluding women from direct combat and their limited presence in war zones, especially those that are considered enemy territory, remains to be a practice which the IDF seems to be unwilling to change. The main factors which contribute to this phenomenon are emotionally based. Opponents of women in combat positions often point out physical differences between men and women: women are weaker and therefore they should automatically be excluded from certain positions. However, while this argument seems to be a fairly objective one, there is still a psychological element to it. Martin Van Creveld, one of the staunch opponents of women in combat positions in Israel, himself admits that women should not so much be excluded based on their physique, but rather to protect men from feeling inferior when confronted with female warriors: “...women’s participation in war will take away one of the cardinal reasons why men fight, *which is to assert their own glory*” (qtd. in Perrein 42). [emphasis added]

Noya Rimalt points out that a study conducted in 2003 by the Advisor for Women’s Issues highlighted the issue of men feeling too embarrassed to tell their family that they were assigned to mixed-gender combat professions (1118). She adds that physical requirements are created in such a way, that gender-differentiation is made for the sake of differentiation. For example, in one course men are required to march 18 kilometers and women only 14. In the next course, men had to march 32 kilometers and women only twenty six (Rimalt 1118). Aside from

personal objections of male combat soldiers to serving with women, there are two more essential discourses to be considered: the discourse of women as the nation's mothers and the siege-mentality of contemporary Israeli society.

According to the National Defense Law, a woman gets an automatic exempt from the army when she gets married or becomes pregnant – while fathers and husbands are expected to fulfill their military duty. The equation between womanhood and motherhood is explained by Berkovitch as a result of Israel being a “warrior nation” and a strong emphasis on the family in society. While a warrior society is characterized by a “masculine ethos” and its citizens are therefore constructed as soldiers, women are tied to the familial sphere. Therefore, even when they are drafted into the army, they are still connected to their roles in the family; the roles of wives and mothers (606, 607). The national role of Israeli Jewish women as mothers also relates to the army – by birthing future soldiers. The expression “bringing a small soldier to the world” was commonly heard before the 1980s, and was used to congratulate women on their pregnancy (Yuval- Davis 669). As Israel defines itself as the nation-state of the Jewish people, the policy of the State has always been to maintain a Jewish majority in the country. Having children becomes a woman's contribution to the national goal of fighting the demographic threat – the Palestinian Israelis. (Berkovitch 616). This explains the fear of women getting captured and raped by the enemy; giving birth to an enemy's child is a “perversion of a central social value in Israel: bearing Jewish children” (Ranchod- Nilsson 214). In fact, in 1940, the Palmach started to castrate Arab men who attempted to rape Jewish women (Blumenthal 313). Rape of a female soldier equals to the rape of the Jewish people (85). Ironically, women soldiers experience more sexual harassment from Jewish soldiers, and thus have to fear their own colleagues more than the ‘enemy’ (91). This fear of the possibility of a Jewish woman soldiers getting raped by the enemy does not translate to the commitment of eliminating sexual abuse of women on a daily basis within Israel: “Israel puts up very well, every day, with all kinds of assaults against women. It manages to live quite well with the reality of women being murdered by their spouses, at a rate that exceeds the killing of Israelis by the enemy” (Levy 214).

According to Herzog, “the right to assault and sexually abuse Israeli women is a privilege of the male citizenry” (quoted in Levy 214). Nowadays, this attempt to protect women has created an ugly situation where racists and right-wing extremists hang posters on the streets, calling Arab

men to stop dating Jewish women and warning Jewish women from sleeping with Arab men. In these street campaigns, in the style of Ben Gurion, the Jewish women are referred to as “our daughters” (Matar 2012). Racist overprotectiveness is also found in an order given by the IDF, which forbids female soldiers to hitchhike without a male companion. In case they happen to fall prey to an Arab man, women soldiers are being equipped with “kidnapping kits” (Blumenthal 293).

The second discourse is the siege-mentality of Israeli society. Put against the background of the Holocaust, the continuing conflict with Palestinians has shaped a “military mind”, which dictates that men are the fighters and protectors, and women are the protected, the nurturing and the emotional supporters of men (Klein 48). The national belief is that Israelis as a collective are vulnerable, and constantly under attack (physically and by demonizing Israel in foreign media). Women are being made to believe that in order to survive these attacks, they have to accept the fact that only men know how to protect their interests (Sered 70). According to Ben-Eliezer, the state takes advantage of these collective fears, by turning the concept of a nation-in-arms into a political tool in order to legitimize the use of military means to solve political problems. This is achieved by making the military the business of the entire nation – both men and women (266). In a nation-in-arms, the idea of equality is largely a myth, and it is meant to mobilize large sectors of society for war (Robbins 313). This has significant consequences for the type of roles women are supposed to fulfill in the army. On the one hand women are expected to contribute to the nation by accepting to be drafted by the army; on the other hand, male dominance continues to create a gendered division of roles in the army and women are assigned to jobs according to necessity or at the discretion of the commanding officers (Robbins 312; Rimalt 1114). It can be argued that by including women in semi-combat positions, for example as Border Police in the Territories, the state legitimizes the occupation by granting women the status of “combat soldiers” – without women actually being involved in combat. By the limited inclusion of women soldiers during the Intifada, the illusion was made of a woman combat soldier who contributes to the war effort by relieving men from the jobs that would otherwise prevent them from going out into the field and fight (Robbins 326). The main argument made by Ben-Eliezer is that male hegemony in the army is not being challenged by drafting women and including them into quasi-combat roles (330). His research on gender inequality and the nation-in-arms model was published in 2000; the case studies from the second Lebanon War, and Operations

Cast Lead and Protective Edge in Gaza, show how little has changed in terms of semi-including women into battle.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

By introducing the new mixed-gendered combat battalion, the Israel Defense Force is trying to convey to the world that the IDF is a people's army; an army in which men and women equally share the burden of being drafted, and that girls are given equal opportunities to prove that "they can do it too". This image appears to be largely a myth. Ever since the early Zionists initiated the settlement project in Palestine, old views on gender roles started to dominate the new society and the Zionist dream of building a new state based on equality soon enough appeared to be a dream for men only. Despite the initial success of Jewish women in their fight to be included in proactive defense of their communities, their rights got revoked at the same time when Zionism reached its ultimate goal: the creation of a Jewish State. Since the National Defense Law was introduced, women's service has been seen as complementary to the service of men. The IDF became a man's territory, and the masculine ethos became the only valid point of view. Over the course of years, amendments to the National Service Law eliminated most legal grounds for gender inequality in the army. Despite the abolishment of these obstacles, the practice of gendering military service has remained more or less the same. Women are only marginally represented in the most respected jobs, like all combat positions. The state and the army are able to create a mirage of a female combat warrior, by allowing them to accompany male combat soldiers into enemy territory – as paramedics, drivers or technicians. These jobs get the status of combat positions, while in practice, they are merely combat-support roles.

I argue that the obstacles facing women are mostly psychological and are connected to the way Israeli society looks at women. It looks at women as though they were "national wombs" – a

term borrowed from Gal Harmat, an Israeli Gender and Peacebuilding specialist (48). Jewish women are put at task to birth new Jewish children and the future soldiers of the nation. The collective fears of the annihilation of Israel (whether real or imagined) and the demographic threat, add to the national obsession with the combat warrior – a man who can protect his country and his woman. War and soldiering make men out of boys; the glory of battle becomes an idea with which men can identify. The intrusion of women into a man’s world – the army – is seen as a threat to the traditional idea of the man as a fighter and a hero. In an attempt to control the female soldiers, the army allows women to serve in quasi-combat roles and by doing so; the State is able to legitimize its old fashioned ways of dealing with political conflicts – military force.

This poses the question whether the IDF has the intention to achieve full integration of women into the army, or whether it is in fact continuing the policy of selective gender inequality. If the last case is true, then the formation of the new co-ed battalion is simply a way to create an illusion of gender equality and the “Lions of Jordan” will be nothing more than a token symbol for the Israeli army. Front lines exist in all spheres of society; whether it is the front line in a war zone, the political arena or public space, blocking women’s struggle to the front, literally or figuratively speaking, is a sign of a dysfunctional society. Allowing women, although in marginal numbers, to enter Gaza in Operation Protective Edge is like a foot in the door. Whether the door will be shut or opened wider depends on the decisiveness and commitment of civil society activists, politicians and military commanders.

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