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The Israeli woman soldier: The under-utilized potential of women in the Israeli defense forces

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Women have always been a part of the Israeli military. From the first wars fought post-independence to the most recent conflicts with Lebanon women have been required by law to participate in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Due to the compulsory military service requirements for both sexes much of the world views Israel as a progressive model for gender equality. However, not only are the requirements for service different for men and women, but the number of exemptions from service granted is much higher for women than for men due to more lenient standards applying to women. Upon further inquiry into the true role women take on as soldiers in the IDF it is apparent that historically women have been relegated to less meaningful tasks than men. Women are only allowed to occupy specific positions in the military, and until recently were completely barred from any combat position. Not only does this functionally render the sexes unequal, it also translates into fewer rewards for women such as achieving higher ranks within the military. Women also must struggle with the general notion held within Israeli society that women's most meaningful contribution to the military is bearing sons who will be the next generation's soldiers. While the IDF and Israeli society have recognized this variation in treatment the process to correct it has resulted in women becoming either gender neutral objects or women embracing masculine characteristics. In order to receive respect in new positions females must lose much of their femininity. This is a result of the Israeli "nation-in-arms", a culture fixated on constant conflict. The military could work to find meaningful ways for women to contribute; however, they have yet to embrace a model of inclusion that allows for women to do satisfying tasks, instead expecting women to simply fulfill men's role. Through these actions the IDF sheds the responsibility of being a trail-blazer in women's rights in Israel. Yet in a society where the military is the culture bearer, the military should lead the charge in promoting women's rights more seriously, ensuring women and men are truly equal.