

# The Israeli Defence Forces: first for women

When it comes to gender equality, no armed forces outrank the IDF, says retired brigadier general Yehudit Grisaro

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When Yehudit Grisaro says "I am not Wonder Woman," she speaks in a gravelly, deliberate voice. This might be because English is not her first language. Or because she wants to make sure she has your full attention, something she attracts easily from women forging careers in the military as well as many from her native Israel.

As brigadier general and advisor on women's issues to the army chief of staff, Grisaro was the highest-ranking female officer in the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF). Nothing since her retirement in 2010 has dulled her enthusiasm for breaking down the gender barriers which remain in the army.

When asked whether she ever encountered sexual harassment during a 26-year service that started with compulsory national service at 18, she grimaces. "I don't know if there were men brave enough to take the chance. This is not an issue in the IDF."

Though the Israeli military has a very macho equality, at least. Almost one third of the force and 50% of its officers are female. In the UK, only 13% of the armed forces are women, while there are only slightly more in the US army (13.4%).

So Grisaro, 49, seems genuinely perplexed by the idea that she, or any of her colleagues, might have been abused, belittled or patronised by male colleagues. "The men in the IDF are educated and aware about the issues of sexual harassment, so it is not a phenomenon. I used to say that the most sophisticated weapon against sexual harassment was improving the awareness of men. The majority of soldiers know the rules and recognise the contribution of women. Women are treated in the same way as the men, and they are judged the same as the men. They are paid the same as the men."

The British military is one of several around the world that has sought advice from the IDF on equality, though the UK is unlikely to catch up in the short term, despite recent efforts to do so. Without compulsory national service to showcase careers for women, the British military has struggled to alter the attitude that life in khaki is best suited to men. The MoD has also acknowledged it should be more flexible towards women who want to have a family while they are in service.

The situation is very different in Israel. There are laws that demand women must be recruited to the IDF, and a series of legal challenges have shattered barriers to what they can do thereafter. The process started in 1949 with a law that demanded equality in the IDF - and 92% of roles in service are now open to women.

Sixteen years ago, a civilian pilot, Alice Miller, won a watershed case in the high court of justice which ruled the Israeli air force could not exclude women from fighter pilot training. Women now regularly serve in anti-aircraft brigades, in the artillery, and as fighter pilots. They are not, as yet, allowed in combat units to fight "face to face", but Grisaro says it is only a matter of time.

Her assessment of the number of women in the IDF is unforgiving. "It is *quite* good. It is a meaningful number which shows they are not there for decoration. This is a marathon, not a sprint."

In the UK, women remain banned from small units in the frontline because of fears that, in the heat of a battle, male colleagues may seek to look after them, rather than concentrate on fighting. Grisaro pulls that face again. "If you are going to adopt this state of mind you will sit and do nothing," she says. "The decision makers have to ask themselves: Do I have the privilege to be able to give up half the human manpower available to me? Skills are important, not gender. On this issue, I think it is about time for a change. If we were sitting here 30 years ago and talking about the options for women in service now, then what has happened would seem unbelievable. So the changes are coming step by step, and I think this is the right way to do it."

Did she get help from the military as her career progressed? After all, she was juggling work, a marriage and bringing up three boys. "The IDF does not have kindergartens on bases! And I am not Wonder Woman. I hired support, I had a nanny and I relied upon my husband, parents and friends. I never felt discriminated against because I had a family or because of my gender - the opposite was the case. I got married, I had children and I watched them grow up when I was in the military. It is not simple, but it is possible."

Her "get on with it" attitude is accompanied by a golden rule for all those women who have made it into senior positions. "I had two goals," she says. "To be a professional and to be a role model for other women. All women have a duty to behave like this ... If I had to make an appointment and there was a man and a woman with the same skills, I would always promote the woman. You cannot expect women to become senior officers unless you have women at all levels."

Grisaro left the military to become a vice-president of the Israeli airline El Al. She passed the IDF baton on to another woman, Orna Barbivai, who has become the first woman to achieve the rank of major general. Her promotion, Grisaro says, is a "very, very significant point in the long race for women being integrated into the IDF ... Israeli society is very liberal towards women. But I would like the change to happen faster."