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## **Extending Women's Service in the IDF**

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Discussion is currently underway on a proposed amendment to Israel's Defense Service Law that could have historic implications for the status of women in the IDF and in Israeli society. The special committee headed by MK Ayelet Shaked will soon conclude its deliberations and forward the proposed amendment to a vote in its second and third reading in the Knesset. The bill, known as the "Equal Burden Law," deals primarily with drafting yeshiva students in the IDF, but it also contains two clauses on the length of military service of men and women. The bill would cut men's service from thirty-six months to thirty-two, and lengthen women's service from twenty-four months to twenty-eight. This means that the gap between men's and women's service would be reduced from one year to only four months. The initiative for the amendment comes from the IDF, since shorter service for men would create gaps in manpower. The army's intention is to bridge such gaps partly by drafting yeshiva students and partly through longer service by women.

Three main positions emerged in the discussions in the Shaked committee on lengthening women's service in the IDF:

1. Opposition to longer service for women in the IDF, from an ideological belief that it is better for women not to serve in the IDF or that their service should be limited as much as possible.
2. Opposition to longer service for women, since women would be paying the price for the reduction in the length of service for men, which is an infringement of their rights.
3. Support for longer service for women out of a belief that this allows for better realization of women's potential in the IDF and contributes to their advancement in the army and in Israeli society.

Women's service in the IDF has undergone many changes over the years. At the time the IDF was established, the guiding principle was "an army of men with women as assistants." Seventy percent of the women served as secretaries and in "traditional" support roles. Later progress, particularly as more men were placed in combat roles, saw

women trained for professional roles in order to fill positions that were vacated by the men (combat instructors, communication operators, drivers, aircraft mechanics, and so forth), and the expression “women as substitutes for men” was coined. An important milestone in the 1990s was the Supreme Court's decision in the Alice Miller case, ordering the IDF to enroll women in the Israel Air Force flight course. Military service then began to be perceived in terms of rights; the demand for formal equality of opportunity increased, and bureaucratic and economic excuses for the failure to increase equality were rejected. In 2007, a committee headed by Major General (ret.) Yehuda Segev made a number of far reaching recommendations to promote service by women. The principle guiding the committee was to exchange service on the basis of gender for the principle of “the right person in the right place.” Most of the committee's recommendations have not yet been implemented, although the status of women in the IDF has improved, with the general trend today being to promote both more meaningful service for women and a respectful attitude toward them.

The IDF is based on the model of the “people's army,” which means that it is seen not only as an institution responsible for maintaining Israel's security, but also as having a social function, a melting pot of sorts and a mirror of society. Military service has implications for the future, and many times serves as a lever for advancement in civilian life. Furthermore, military service in Israel affects the formation of self-identity and the sense of self-esteem, for both young men and women. Military service influences the way in which women perceive themselves and their place in society, as well as the manner in which men perceive them. These perceptions seep into life later on, outside the army. As a result, there is much importance to promoting gender equality within the army.

Three main obstacles challenge significant integration of women in the military. First, women do not serve in combat roles, which are the prestigious core of military service. Second, the significant gaps in length of service lead to a situation in which it does not pay to open some occupations that require longer training periods for women, who serve for less time. Third, in Israel and abroad, the army is still considered a boys' club, and senior officers, who make the decisions and outline policy, are almost exclusively men.

As to the first obstacle, women today have been integrated into quite a few combat units, serving as pilots, naval officers, and in artillery. While the process of integration is slow and difficult, this is still a consistent trend. In addition, in the modern battlefield there is a constant increase in technology-based remote combat, an area in which physical differences between men and women are meaningless. Therefore, even if this obstacle cannot be overcome completely, reducing it will open extensive options that will allow women to advance in the IDF even if they have not come from the combat aristocracy.

As for the second obstacle, the solution is simple – a legislative amendment. Indeed, the proposed amendment under discussion is an opportunity to remove this obstacle. Equalizing the lengths of service for men and women, or at least reducing the gap between them, will make it possible to assign women to significant occupations, without depending on their willingness to volunteer, and thus enable the planning of personnel to reliably include potential women recruits.

Regarding the third barrier, social change undoubtedly takes considerable time. Nevertheless, the status of women today in Israeli society (and in the Western world in general) and in the IDF, compared with the situation fifty or even thirty years ago, indicates that there has been significant progress. As more women are integrated into more substantial positions and accordingly, advance higher in rank, the changes in the atmosphere on the issue of gender will presumably be accelerated.

Therefore, the proposed legislative amendment should be adopted to narrow the gap in the length of military service for men and women (and later, to eliminate it entirely). At the same time, the concern that extending service would ultimately harm women and increase their burden without sufficient compensation must be addressed. Therefore, in addition to the legislative amendment, the army should formulate a comprehensive plan that will ensure substantive equality of opportunity. There is a need for complete equality in the draft – in selection, training, and assignment – according to identical qualification criteria. The advancement of talented women must be ensured, as well as consideration of their needs during their service. To that end, it is necessary to work with commanders, beyond a program in the General Staff, to make sure that the decisions are implemented. At the same time, the status and dignity of women in the army must be preserved, particularly given the challenges arising from the interface with religious soldiers, whose numbers are expected to increase with the expanded drafting of yeshiva students.

In tandem, the legislature should reexamine the process allowing exemptions from military service for young women based merely on a declaration of religious outlook and practice, which leaves room for draft evasion, as well as the archaic exemption for married women. Indeed, women with particular needs, such as religious women, should be encouraged to join the army while having their particular needs addressed. Furthermore, emphasis should be placed on launching an educational process, that is, ensuring that young girls in school assimilate the values of service and motivation and do not meet them for the first time the day they arrive at the induction center. At the same time, the decision on extending military service should not wait until a comprehensive solution has been found for all these issues.

The importance of ensuring the equal status of women in Israeli society reflects a basic normative concept of the values of equality and human dignity. The best way to achieve this goal is by turning the fulfillment of women's rights into an interest. If the way is opened to a more meaningful integration of women into the IDF, preservation of their status will be in the system's interest, which in turn will promote the advancement of women, both in the IDF and in Israeli society in general.

