



Women and Special Forces: A Difficult Relationship Between Extreme Selection and Legal Battles

Published on 01/10/2026

Women now serve in virtually every branch of Western armed forces. They fly fighter jets, command combat units, operate tanks, and take part in frontline missions. In recent years, many of the last formal barriers preventing them from seeking entry into Special Forces have also fallen.

Yet when moving from theoretical opportunity to the reality of operational units, the picture changes dramatically.

Green Berets, Navy SEALs, SAS, Sayeret Matkal, Shayetet 13, Italian raiders: despite policy changes and trials, the number of women who have actually completed the required pipelines to become Special Forces operators remains extremely small.

Before addressing the issue, however, one fundamental distinction is needed: **serving within a Special Operations organization does not necessarily mean being a Special Forces**

operator.

Intelligence, communications, medical support, languages, HUMINT, logistics, air support, and numerous other specialties are essential to operations. But they are different from having passed the selection and training pipeline required to join an operational detachment assigned to special reconnaissance, direct action, or counterterrorism.

It is precisely this distinction that explains many of the figures and controversies surrounding the issue.

United States: all doors opened in 2016

In December 2015, U.S. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter announced that, beginning the following January, **all military occupations and positions would be opened to women without exception**, provided candidates met the required standards.

The decision also included the Special Operations Forces. In March 2016, the Pentagon approved the implementation plans of the various services and USSOCOM.

The policy change, however, did not result in a large-scale influx of women into operational units.

In July **2020**, a National Guard servicewoman completed the **Special Forces Qualification Course**, becoming the first woman in the modern era selected to join a U.S. Army Special Forces team as a Green Beret.

Another historic milestone came in July **2021**, when a woman completed the **Special Warfare Combatant-craft Crewmen, SWCC** pipeline, becoming the first female operator to emerge from a Naval Special Warfare selection program.

The distinction matters: SWCC are Special Operations operators specializing in the employment of watercraft for infiltration, exfiltration, and special forces support, but **they are not Navy SEALs**.

For the SEALs, the situation remains different. More than ten years after the opening, publicly available information current as of 2026 **still shows no woman who has completed the full pipeline and earned the Navy SEAL Trident**.

USSOCOM's overall figures must also be interpreted with caution.

According to the Government Accountability Office, women account for **less than 10% of U.S. Special Operations Forces personnel**, compared with around 19% of the entire Department of Defense. But that figure includes all personnel within the SOF community and does not represent the percentage of women serving as assault operators.

22^o SAS: access granted, numbers classified

The United Kingdom has followed a similar path.

In **2018**, London completed the opening of all Armed Forces roles to women. The British government subsequently made it explicit that, since 2018, women have been able to serve **in any role, including the Special Forces**.

Official British documentation is now unequivocal.

The **UK Special Forces Briefing Course**, a mandatory preliminary step for those wishing to undertake subsequent selection, is open to volunteers **of any gender** from the Royal Navy, British Army and Royal Air Force.

The same documentation lists subsequent pathways including the **22 SAS and the SBS**.

A woman may therefore apply for the pathway leading to the 22^o Special Air Service.

Another question is how many have succeeded.

The UK Special Forces apply an extremely strict policy of confidentiality regarding their composition. There is insufficient public data to state with certainty how many women, if any, have completed selection for the 22 SAS or the SBS.

The absence of public names, therefore, **cannot automatically be treated as proof that there are no female operators**.

What we know is that the door is formally open and that candidates are assessed on their ability to complete the required course.

Israel: change has only just begun

Israel arguably offers the most interesting case study today.

The IDF identifies among its top-tier units the so-called **“Elite 4”**: **Sayeret Matkal, Shayetet 13, Shaldag and Unit 669**. They are joined by other special units such as **Yahalom and Oketz, and the Commando Brigade with Duvdevan, Maglan and Egoz**.

For many years, several pathways remained exclusively male.

Then something changed.

The IDF officially identifies **2024** as the year women were admitted to **Unit 669**, which specializes in tactical recovery and rescue, and **Yahalom**, the combat engineering special unit.

Female admission trials had already begun in January 2023: around 130 candidates were expected for Yahalom, while eleven were initially deemed eligible to attempt those for Unit 669. The IDF specified that candidates would be required to meet the established requirements and complete the prescribed training standards.

Then came **Sayeret Matkal**.

In December 2024, a pilot program was launched to assess the integration of women into the unit. On **June 4, 2026**, the IDF announced that a servicewoman had successfully completed a dedicated training program lasting more than a year and a half, after passing the preliminary selection process and meeting the required criteria.

It is a historic precedent.

However, it is important to read the Israeli statement in full: at the end of the course, the IDF specified that **the terms of her integration into Sayeret Matkal operational activities had yet to be defined**, in accordance with operational requirements and regulations governing joint service.

It would therefore be premature to simply say that Sayeret Matkal is now a fully integrated unit.

Shayetet 13: the door that remains closed

The picture changes again with **Shayetet 13**, Israel's naval commandos.

The unit is trained for operations from the sea, on land and in the air, and its operators undergo a course covering infantry, naval combat, diving, counterterrorism, guerrilla warfare, operational parachuting and maritime assault techniques.

In 2026, Shayetet 13 **does not appear to be open to the standard female combatant/commando track.**

The issue has also been at the center of legal battles that in recent years have led to the opening of other units. One of the women behind the legal challenges to the restrictions said in July 2026 that her original dream had been to join Shayetet 13, only to discover that the unit was closed to women. The court actions helped open Sayeret Matkal, Unit 669 and Yahalom, but not yet Shayetet 13.

This is perhaps Israel's most striking contrast: **Sayeret Matkal is testing the admission of women, while Shayetet 13 still maintains an essentially male operator track.**

Spain, 2019: the MOE controversy

Spain, meanwhile, offers a perfect case for understanding how important it is to distinguish between belonging to a Special Operations structure and being qualified as an operator.

In **April 2019**, during a visit to the **Mando de Operaciones Especiales, MOE**, Defense Minister Margarita Robles said she wanted to increase the female presence in this field. The project was also part of an expansion of the command's staffing.

The controversy erupted the following December.

The newspaper **ABC** published an article with a particularly harsh headline: *“Defense creates a team to slip women into Special Operations”*.

At the center of the affair was the establishment of an **Equipo de Capacidades Especiales** with a significant female component. According to reports at the time, not all servicewomen assigned to the new formation had necessarily completed the traditional **Curso de Operaciones Especiales**. The criticism was therefore clear: was a pathway being created to bring female personnel into the MOE while bypassing the selection required of operators?

The controversy was such that Spain's **Observatorio de la Imagen de las Mujeres** subsequently included ABC's headline among the cases it challenged, deeming its wording disparaging to the professionalism of female service members.

However, the Ministry of Defense's official version described a more complex reality.

The **MOE 35** project did indeed call for the creation of *equipos de capacidades especiales* comprising men and women, but they were intended to provide specific capabilities: **knowledge of local languages and cultures, communication, negotiation, and interaction with local populations**, particularly useful in military assistance and intelligence-gathering activities.

In other words, it was not about covertly replacing an assault team with unqualified personnel.

It was about introducing **specialist capabilities within the Special Operations structure**, some of which were particularly valuable precisely because of the presence of women—for example, when engaging with women in societies where male service members would have had difficulty gaining access.

The semantic issue, however, remained real.

A female service member assigned to the MOE for language skills or HUMINT **did not automatically become a qualified Special Operations operator by completing the relevant course**.

But Spain already had genuine female “green berets”

The 2019 controversy could also suggest that no woman had ever managed to complete the actual Spanish Special Operations pipeline.

That is not the case.

In 2021, the Spanish Ministry of Defense officially recognized a service member as the **first female command cadre in the Ejército de Tierra to complete the Curso de Operaciones Especiales and subsequently hold command in units of this type**, also taking part in international missions.

Spain therefore illustrates both sides of the issue.

On one hand, women capable of completing the actual Special Operations pipeline.

On the other, female personnel assigned to the MOE for specialist capabilities, without this necessarily equating to operator qualification.

Both are legitimate realities, but they are profoundly different.

Italy: women are there, but words must be chosen carefully

Italy, too, requires avoiding overly simplistic statements.

Today, the **Comando Forze Speciali, CoFS**, officially lists the **9º Reggimento d'Assalto Paracadutisti "Col Moschin"**, the **Gruppo Operativo Incursori**, the **17º Stormo Incursori**, the **Gruppo Intervento Speciale**, the **4º Reggimento Alpini Paracadutisti "Ranger"**, the **185º Reggimento Paracadutisti Ricognizione e Acquisizione Obiettivi "Folgore"**, and the **1º Reggimento Carabinieri Paracadutisti "Tuscania"** among Italy's Special Forces units.

But this classification is the result of the sector's gradual evolution.

And it is precisely this that makes some Italian female precedents interesting.

A woman in the Ranger many years ago

There is, in fact, a public precedent involving the **4º Reggimento Alpini Paracadutisti "Ranger"**.

As early as **2018**, a publication dedicated to the Special Forces noted that a career servicewoman in the Alpini paratroopers battalion had **passed the selection process and joined the Ranger**.

At the time, the 4º was classified as a **Special Operations Force**, not yet in the category to which it belongs today.

This detail is important.

It would not be historically correct to take the current classification and apply it retroactively. But it is equally incorrect to claim that no woman has ever passed operational selection in a unit that now officially belongs to the Italian Special Forces.

The precedent exists.

Tuscania and the first female Carabinieri paratrooper

A similar case concerns the **1º Reggimento Carabinieri Paracadutisti "Tuscania"**.

An account published directly by the Arma dei Carabinieri documents the presence of a woman who completed the unit's training pipeline, becoming the **first female paratrooper of the Tuscania**.

In her account, she recalled that the course provided no shortcuts based on sex and that the goal was to complete the required training. She subsequently also carried out assignments and international missions.

Today, the official Tuscania procedure includes psychophysical screening and a training course lasting about **nine months**; after passing the final tests, the Carabinieri paratrooper transfers to the Battalion and carries out operational activities.

In this case as well, however, the female precedent predates the unit's current placement within the Special Forces system.

The significance nevertheless remains clear: **women have already passed selective training pipelines and served operationally in Italian units that are now part of the SF community**.

And what about the 185º RRAO?

It is more difficult to publicly reconstruct the situation of the **185º Reggimento Paracadutisti Ricognizione e Acquisizione Obiettivi “Folgore”**.

The unit is now officially classified among the Italian Special Forces.

However, the verifiable public sources reviewed do not provide sufficient clarity on a case comparable to that of the 4º Ranger or the Tuscania to state with certainty that there is publicly documented evidence of a woman qualified as a **Target Acquisition Operator** and assigned to the unit's operational component.

This does not necessarily mean that no such case exists.

Units in this sector understandably maintain a high degree of confidentiality regarding the composition of their detachments. But for that very reason, in the absence of a verifiable source, it would be incorrect to turn a hypothesis into a fact.

And the Italian commandos?

The same caution is even more necessary when the focus is narrowed to **9º Col Moschin, GOI, 17º Stormo Incursori e GIS**.

Publicly available sources do not reveal comparably well-documented cases of women who have attained the relevant operational qualification as **Incursore** or joined the assault components of these units.

The same principle applies here: **the absence of public evidence does not necessarily constitute evidence of absence**, particularly in a field where the identities and composition of operational units are often protected.

However, this is what can be stated based on publicly available data.

The real issue: the selection bottleneck

Why, after years of openings, do the numbers remain so low?

The first reason is statistical.

Women represent a minority within the Armed Forces, and an even smaller percentage voluntarily choose the most demanding ground combat roles. The initial pool for Special Forces selection is therefore much smaller.

Then comes selection.

Special Forces selection pipelines are designed to eliminate a very high percentage of candidates, even when the initial group consists almost exclusively of young, already-serving, physically trained men.

Loaded marches, carrying equipment and casualties, sustained combat, cold, water, sleep deprivation, the ability to recover, and maintaining performance over extended periods are recurring elements.

It is precisely at the extremes of physical performance that average physiological differences between the sexes become statistically significant.

This does not mean that every man is stronger than every woman, or that a woman cannot meet the standards. Existing precedents prove otherwise.

It does mean, however, that the proportion of the female population able to simultaneously achieve certain levels of strength, endurance, load-carrying capacity, and musculoskeletal resilience tends to be lower.

The British Ministry of Defence addressed the issue directly before opening ground combat roles.

A 2016 study found that, among the population studied during initial Army training, women faced roughly twice the risk of musculoskeletal injuries as men, as well as a higher risk of certain stress fractures.

London did not decide to keep the doors closed as a result.

Instead, it chose to open them while maintaining **physical standards based on the work to be performed rather than sex**. Official British statistics continue to state in 2026 that there are no quotas for women in combat roles and that standards have not been lowered for female personnel.

But physiology does not explain everything

Reducing everything to physical differences would nevertheless be too simplistic.

The U.S. GAO has also highlighted potential **cultural and organizational barriers**, career-related difficulties, and issues involving discrimination and harassment within the Special Operations community.

The same body found that USSOCOM did not always have sufficiently complete data to fully understand why so few women pursued or remained in certain career fields.

There is also another factor: personal interest.

Opening a role does not automatically create a large pool of candidates.

As early as 2018, the United Kingdom explicitly stated that it did not necessarily expect large numbers of women in ground combat roles. The objective was to allow access to those with sufficient ability and willingness, not to automatically reach a given percentage.

Opening the door does not mean walking through it

This is probably the most interesting conclusion.

Over the past ten years, the debate has changed.

The question is no longer simply: «**Should women be allowed to join the Special Forces?**»

In many countries, the policy answer has already been given: they can at least try.

Today, the question is different: **how many actually make it through the entire process and become operators?**

In the United States, one woman has become a Green Beret and another an SWCC operator, but none has yet reportedly become a Navy SEAL.

In the United Kingdom, women can undertake the selection process for the UK Special Forces, including those for the SAS and SBS, but secrecy prevents any assessment of their actual operational presence.

In 2026, Israel saw a woman complete the experimental Sayeret Matkal selection process, while Shayetet 13 remains outside the openings documented so far.

Spain already had women qualified through the Curso de Operaciones Especiales when a completely different controversy erupted in 2019: the integration into the MOE of female personnel with specialist skills but not necessarily qualified as operators.

In Italy, publicly documented female precedents exist in the Ranger and Tuscania, both now included in the Special Forces system, while no equally clear public cases have emerged in the 185^o RRAO or the main commando units.

And this is where the title finds its meaning.

Women and Special Forces are not an impossible love. But, at least so far, it has remained an exceedingly rare one.

In many cases, the doors are open.

What happens next is determined by selection, standards, physiology, individual motivation and, above all, operational requirements.

Main sources

[U.S. Department of Defense - opening all military roles to women](#)

[U.S. GAO - Women in Special Operations](#)

[British Army - UK Special Forces Briefing Course](#)

[GOV.UK - opening all roles to women](#)

[IDF - integrating women into combat roles](#)

[IDF - Shayetet 13](#)

[Spanish Ministry of Defense - MOE and special capabilities](#)

[Spanish Ministry of Defense - woman qualified in Special Operations](#)

[Italian Ministry of Defense - Special Forces units](#)