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My colleagues and I would prefer to engage with issues such as work and family. But silence in the face of the risk posed to female soldiers from the obsession with segregation and modesty is not feminist.

Yofi Tirosh | Mar 19, 2017 11:50 PM

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Kobi Niv is concerned by feminists' seeking equality for female soldiers in the Israel Defense Forces ("A warped brand of feminism," March 16). The true mission of feminism, he reminds us, is to offer a radically alternative vision that doesn't fall into the trap of militarism and insist that women can serve in tanks.

It is tempting to submit to this criticism. It is sophisticated and ideologically precise. But it is a purist, disengaged position that abandons the young women who are conscripted by law. The current battle isn't focused on women in tanks. It concerns every female soldier who, in today's IDF, could be turned into a logistic burden or a dangerous temptation that must be restrained.

Niv is right – the army is a hierarchical and violent institution, while feminism is based on lateral relationships, nonviolence, global solidarity among women, and the courage to imagine and bring about an alternative social, economic and political reality. Israeli feminism seeks to undermine the existing order. For example, most feminist organizations here have been involved for years in implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325, concerning the protection of women during armed conflicts and securing their place in the negotiations to resolve them.



But those same feminists understand that they cannot ignore the changes threatening women in the military that the public is not aware of. The IDF is sincerely trying to balance between the new religious-Zionist demands for separation and modesty, and its commitment to open roles to women and to protect them from sexual violence. But its efforts to remain “the people’s army” could fail, because the new arrangements relating to religious men serving alongside women undermine women and are likely to harm them further.

The current struggle is not dealing with female soldiers in the turrets, but with stopping the threat to their emotional and physical safety. I urge Niv to read the Joint Service Command carefully [capital letters for a name of a document]. The document deals obsessively with separate living quarters, with the height of the tarp between the tent encampments and with blocking the view between male and female soldiers. Its main subjects are there-but-not-there – women soldiers who are all regarded as potential breaches of modesty.

If, for example, their roles may lead to an “immodest” appearance [this is a critical error], the religious soldier has the right to demand not to serve with them or be trained by them. The ultra-Orthodox have a commitment from the IDF to service sterilized of women, as if that is how their civilian lives look. The cost of opening separate groups for religious soldiers falls on the units and not on the IDF; as a result, women will not be assigned as instructors because they will

become logistical headaches and budgetary burden.

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My colleagues and I would prefer to engage with issues such as work and family. But silence in the face of the risk posed to female soldiers by the obsession with segregation and modesty is not feminist. Once again women are being asked to pay the price of a charged social reality that must be fixed, that men created and from which men benefitted and continue to benefit, as they cluck their tongues at women's efforts to defend themselves from it. It would behoove Niv and others to engage in what they say they really care about – making the army a less prominent institution. But that struggle is much more complex and thankless than preaching to women about what they shouldn't do to protect themselves and their equality.



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