

March 6, 2015

Iron maidens

If you are standing in riot gear, leading a hundred men, are you still a ‘real’ woman?

It was a bitterly cold night as the car rattled through the badlands of the Chambal to Gwalior. When the driver stopped for tea at a dhaba filled with truckers, I chose to stay hidden in the car. I was the only woman for miles around, or so I thought till a jeep pulled up and three police constables and a young Superintendent of Police got out. She checked the trucks parked alongside, moving the tarpaulin and jumping in and out with practised ease, while the constables checked the drivers’ licences. She sat on the charpoy and waited for them to finish and that’s when I caught her eye. “Join me for a cup of tea,” she called out. Still unsure, I did and we got talking. While I sipped, she gulped down her cup — she clearly was in a hurry. “I have the whole of the Morena-Bhind border to patrol before daybreak and a couple of police-stations to inspect. I want to get through them quickly — my two-year-old is unwell.” “Another cup?” I asked her. “Oh no!” she laughed. “There are no restrooms for the next couple of hours.”

As I journeyed on, I thought of all the women in uniform I had met. Pema Singh of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police— the lone woman constable at her post, south of the Karakoram. I found her whistling to the winds on a beautiful sunny day, pointing trekkers in the right direction across those invincible mountains. Major Shwetha, an Army doctor, who ministered to counter-insurgency casualties in Kupwara while her son grew up with her parents in far-away Chennai. Major Preeti Jamwal from a cantonment town in Punjab who I watched roar into her office on a Yamaha bike, run cross-country with the men she commanded and beat them at basketball. I also watched her single-handedly raise a one-year-old, as her husband was posted in another cantonment town. “It’s so damn hard,” she once told me. “But I love every minute of it.”

Like all working mothers, women in uniform face the same challenges at work and more, in addition to the dance of domesticity. No one hands out medals for trying to be both officer and mom. There’s also the constant belief that since they work offbeat hours, and are away from their families, they are less devoted mothers. And, at home, there are the usual suspects — guilt for coming home long after the children have gone to bed, anger that the son won’t eat quickly enough for you to leave for that all-important meeting, guilt again for wanting some ‘me’ time and hope that when the kids grow up they won’t remember a mother who always yelled at them to clean up.

And how does the other stuff pan out — when the domestic help is unwell and so are you, only you have to pop that paracetamol and carry on? Or the PTA meeting you couldn’t go to? If you are standing in riot gear, leading a hundred men, are you still a ‘real’ woman?

What drives women, in uniform or otherwise, to carry on when every instinct says ‘give in’? I’ve had a harrowing day — fixing a flat tyre myself or else the daughter would’ve been late to school, a full day’s work with lots of travel thrown in, lugging a gas cylinder up a flight of stairs and then carrying the sleepy son to bed. The husband works elsewhere; so, it’s all up to me, as must be with millions of women. I’ve arrived as a young bride at a frontier town, travelling alone in a Gypsy and on a pony, waited in never-ending queues while sick with nausea, and done a lot of other unmentionables as a single working mother that won’t make it to a novel. Sometimes, there’s help, at most times, there isn’t. And here’s the thing — you discover yourself best when outside your comfort zone.

As my eyes glaze with exhaustion in front of the laptop, here’s what I say to all the women I know who are cast in steel. “Madam! You are Adam.”