

Women in Commanding Role: RSTV – Big Picture

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What's in the News?

- A petition was filed in the Supreme Court to grant permanent commission to women officers in the Indian Armed Forces.
- The Supreme Court (SC) has been informed by the Centre, that women may not be suitable for command posts in the Army because male officers aren't 'mentally capable' of accepting orders from women officers.
- The Centre cited physical and physiological limitations as challenges for women officers to meet the exigencies of service in the Armed Forces.
- The Centre's contentions are contrary to the actual records and statistics of women officers who have worked at an equal level with all their male officers and performed extremely well in both hostile and combat situations.
- The Supreme Court has said that if there is an administrative will and change of mindset on the part of the government, then the women officers could be allocated command posts in the Army.

Larger Background:

- SC heard an appeal by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) against the March 2010 judgment of the Delhi High Court, which had directed the Navy to grant permanent commission to all its women officers on Short Service Commission (SSC).
- The Centre had presented multiple arguments justifying why women cannot be granted commanding posts in the Army.
- The Centre justified that command posts would distract women from fulfilling greater family demands. The absences during pregnancy and motherhood were also quoted to have a bearing on the employment of women in the Army.
- The lower physical standards maintained for women were also stated by the Centre. They said that it could cause issues in the commanding units if women were to be given commanding positions.
- Prime Minister Narendra Modi had supported the idea of permanent commission for women. He announced the change in policy during his Independence Day speech in 2019.

Women in India's Armed Forces:

- The Indian Army began inducting women into non-medical roles, only by 1992.
- Women are inducted into the Indian Army through the SSC, where the training is only for 11 months. However, the training in Indian Military Academy is for 18 months and upon exit from the IMA, the male counterparts immediately get a permanent entry into the Army.
- Male officers on the other hand, who join under the SSC scheme can opt for a permanent scheme after the completion of 10 years. This option is, however, unavailable to women SSC officers.
- 105 Indian police women were a part of the United Nations' first all-female peacekeeping force, which was deployed to Liberia in 2007.
- Women are inducted in combat roles (junior ranks) and combat supervisory roles (officers) in all wings of the Indian Armed Forces, except in the Indian Army (inducted for support roles only) and Special Forces of India (trainer role only).
- Women are not allowed to serve in combat units such as the Infantry and the Armoured Corps.

- The SSC scheme allows women to enter Army Service Corps, Ordnance, Education Corps, Judge Advocate General (JAG), Engineers, Signals, Intelligence and Electronics & Mechanical Engineering branches of the Army.
- However, women are not given permanent commissions like their male counterparts, except in the streams of Judge Advocate General, Army Education Corps (AEC) and the Military Police.

The various dimensions to this issue:

Women are being denied command positions and permanent commissions on the basis of multiple reasons, such as the capabilities of women, and the societal impact.

- **Capabilities of women:** The Centre states that although women are equally capable, if not more capable than men, there might be situations that could affect the capabilities of women such as absence during pregnancy and catering to the responsibilities of motherhood, etc.
 - The arguments are presented on the basis that a role in combat would require tough training, whereas the current training for women is different and at a much lower level than that of their male counterparts.
 - However, **Lieutenant Colonel Mitali Madhumita** and **IAF squad leader Minty Agarwal** are examples of women who stand as a testament to the capabilities of women in commanding positions.
- **Societal Impact:** The government has argued that if a woman is taken captive by insurgents/terrorists or as a Prisoner of War (PoW) by an enemy state, then it would become an international and deeply emotive issue which could have an impact on the society.
 - However, times have changed and this cannot be a valid reason for denying command roles and permanent commission to women.
- **Gender Inequality:** most of the arguments are being looked at from the perspective of gender bias.
 - The arguments could be functionally correct or politically correct.
 - The arguments presented have to be looked at from the perspective of being functionally correct rather than insisting that they are politically incorrect.
 - Women's capabilities in the commanding positions cannot be questioned, however, there is an imminent sense of hesitation to place women as commanding officers in combat positions.
 - Soldiers at the frontline expect frontline leadership, however, arguments presented state that this might not always be possible by women.

Possible challenges to women being in frontline combat positions:

According to the Army Chief, India has not placed women in frontline combat because of the changing nature of war like the proxy war in Kashmir. He also cited logistical reasons behind not posting women on frontlines. The capabilities of women aren't being questioned. The question is of women being able to manage and lead in the operational areas, which presents adverse conditions.

- **Physical Issues:** The natural physical differences in stature, strength, and body composition between the sexes make women more vulnerable to certain types of injuries and medical problems. The vigorous training might also have an effect on the health of women officers.
- **Physiological Issues:** The natural processes of menstruation and pregnancy make women particularly vulnerable in combat situations. Such positions usually leave the commanding officer with no privacy and during adverse situations the lack of sanitation can have an impact on their health.
- **Social Issues:** The issue of military sexual trauma (MST) and its effect on the physical and mental well-being of women combatants is grave. MST may lead to grave, long-term psychological problems, such as Post-traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD), and depression.
- **Conventional Barriers:** The acceptance of women officers by their male counterparts is still in question, as most of the male officers are predominantly drawn from rural backgrounds. However, times have changed, and India should adapt to it too.

Way Forward:

- A women combat squadron should be designed and studied extensively before any further development or decisions are made.
- The training provided to men and women should be similar to eliminate differentiation on the basis of physical standards.
- Administrative issues should not be cited as a barrier to women's entry in the Armed Forces. It is the responsibility of the Government to create both administrative and social infrastructure for the easy induction of women into the Armed Forces.
- The framework for the induction of women should be incorporated into a policy. As for the concern of preserving the female officers' modesty and dignity, there should be elaborate codes of conduct to ensure no adverse incident occurs.
- Women should be granted permanent commission on the basis of their abilities and not on the basis of their gender. The decision-making process should involve more women.
- Misleading information such as using the patriarchal nature of the society as an excuse to deny women their deserving opportunities should be stopped. India has come a long way, and the society should be supportive of women being inducted in to combat roles.

Conclusion:

The court emphasized that women working under SSC for decades, who are also fighting legal battles, should be brought on board as officers under permanent commission. Also, the society should be supportive of women being inducted to frontline commanding positions. Induction of women into combat positions should be on the basis of their abilities and not on the basis of their gender. The training for both women and men should be standardized to eliminate differentiation based on physical capabilities.

Additional points to be noted:

What is the Short Service Commission?

- A Short Service Commission means an officer's career will be of a limited period in the Indian Armed Forces whereas a Permanent Commission means they shall continue to serve in the Indian Armed Forces, till they retire.
- The officers inducted through the SSC usually serve for a period of 14 years. At the end of 10 years, the officers have three options.
 - They can either elect for a Permanent Commission or opt-out or have the option of a 4-years extension.
 - They can resign at any time during this period of 4 years extension.

