

9. FUTURE ROLE PROSPECTS

Making a small beginning in ensuring a greater role for women in the Army, the Indian government has decided to grant Permanent Commissions in select cadres that do not entail direct combat or possibility of physical contact with enemy. However, the larger issue of opening up the portals of training establishments like the National Defence Academy (NDA) and the Indian Military Academy (IMA) to women has yet to be addressed. "A beginning has been made. Other issues will be addressed down the line," a Defence Ministry official said. Among the cadres in which women will be granted Permanent Commissions are the Judge Advocate General's branch and the Army Education Corps. A tri-Service study carried out in 2006 on all aspects of service conditions of women officers in the Services recommended that they be excluded from induction in close combat arms where chances of physical contact with the enemy was high. It was further recommended that it was essential to obtain feedback on their performance based on revised pre-commission training, from 24 weeks to 49 weeks, detailment on courses such as Junior Command Course and assessment of their performance as sub-unit commanders, especially in field areas, for holding higher ranks and the grant of a Permanent Commission. A gestation period of 10-14 years was considered essential to assess on-ground performance of women officers before the issue of Permanent Commission or otherwise could be examined.

But there are always two sides to a coin. Therefore the same is applicable to this discussion too. We will now summarize the two versions before recommending the way ahead.

9.1 Environment's Opinion

It is a universally accepted fact that militaries are not created to generate employment and hence have nothing to do with gender equality. They are tasked to ensure national defence and that is the sole reason for their existence. They need only the fittest - men or women.

Army requires personnel who are physically strong and mentally robust to be able to handle battle-field pressures. The fighting potential of a force depends fundamentally on its cohesion, mutual trust and faith in the leadership. Nothing should be done to weaken these traits. The whole concept of women's integration in the Army has to be viewed in a holistic and objective manner. It should be to ascertain whether the required preconditions, as mentioned above, exist to warrant women's integration into the mainstream Indian Army. Here is a brief appraisal:

- (a) In India the number of male volunteers is overwhelming.
- (b) India is still a second generation technology force which is trying desperately to graduate to the third generation, whereas the US and the Western nations are already well into the fourth generation. Indian Army is manpower intensive needing physical ground effort in all types of inhospitable terrain and adverse climate conditions.
- (c) Indian society is passing through a phase of transition from traditionalism to modernity. Societal and cultural ethos continue to be mired in sex discrimination.
- (d) A major part of the Indian Army is deployed on combat duties at all times. Peace tenures are rare and there are very few periods of comparative lull.

9.2 Women Counter-Arguments

With the induction of women, the Army is now coming in line with the mainstream where social change in favor of the female gender began with the freedom movement.

- (a) There are sufficient number of male volunteers. Information technology revolution has opened an entire gamut of alternative careers for men where material benefits and climbing the corporate ladder as fast as possible have become the main incentive. The Army has gone down in the priority list as men's traditional career choice. Thus, the gap in recruitment of motivated men to fill the officer cadre is being filled instead with the rise in the women's desire to prove them.

(b) Women are weak. Our physical standards will go down if women are allowed in. However it has been found that strength and cardiovascular fitness measurement is something that must be determined on an individual basis. Not all men are physically capable and some women are physically capable of performing combat-related activities. This is not a gender issue but an individual issue as proved by the Military Enlistment Physical Strength Capacity Test (MEPSCAT) conducted by the US Army in 1982.

(c) There is likely to be an adverse psychological impact on our troops who generally hail from rural areas and are orthodox. This perception is fast changing with soldiers, which is evident in words of a soldier serving as a "sahayak" to a lady officer that he had decided to send his daughter into the army after he saw her getting so much respect from others.

(d) Women can never withstand demanding and extreme conditions of our deserts, cold and high altitude areas. Already women who have been inducted in the Armed Forces in the short service commission are deployed in these areas serving in the combat support arms, the most recent example being the "OP PARAKRAM" where the complete Armed Forces of the nation were deployed on the borders for over six months.

(e) Army is mobile; women will not be able to keep pace and may cause hindrance when it moves. This has proved to be a misconception as proved during the Gulf War where nearly 7% of the forces deployed were women. Even pregnancy did not affect the conduct of operations. Back home women were deployed in "OP PARAKRAM" in no less than field conditions.

(f) Additional expenditure necessary to create dedicated facilities and infrastructure for women is unjustified. The experiment would involve frittering away of resources. Agreed that going on convoys is a practical problem. There are no toilets. But is that not a basic necessity for everyone including males?

(h) Women would invariably fill those jobs in cities and locations preferred by men returning from hard field areas. Similarly, the low medical category personnel would also be denied choice postings to these places of preference. Once women are inducted into the Permanent Commission cadre they would have to serve with the unit they are posted to, be it peace or in field. A majority of women wanted to serve with their units and viewed their exclusion from the combat zone prejudicial to their career. Moreover we already have women in the Medical, Nursing and Dental Corps whose posting profiles are fully balanced and we hardly find any heartburns among their male counterparts.

(j) Women are prone to gossip. Their induction will cause breaches in security. Battle of Britain, 1940 exploded many myths and theories that women can't keep secrets, women won't work for women; women can't stand discipline & nervous strain.

(k) Male drinking would become a problem. Women are bound to cause much distraction to men. There are black sheep everywhere and some male officers behave in an un-officer like manner, which is not attributable to women's presence.

(l) Since we do not have women in other ranks, we cannot have women officers. Who'd they command? Also, how can they be given any command or position of responsibility without combat experience? The issue could be resolved in a later time frame when the Indian Army is ready to induct women in its Other Rank cadre, wherein an organization on the lines of the WAC (Women Auxiliary Corps) can be explored or nearer home we can replicate example of our para military forces, i.e., the Mahila Battalion of Central Reserve Police Force.

(m) There is certain logic in not utilizing them in direct ground combat roles. Israel has made it optional for their women officers. To a senior army officer, society is still not ready to face the prospect of our women, as Prisoners Of War or with terrorists. To a woman officer, all women officers do not go for combat roles, but if one opts in she should have the right to join. Technology is increasingly making attributes like

physical toughness redundant. Nevertheless, women in technical fields such as meteorology, weapons development, cryptography, software development, ordinance, navigation, and so forth may be equally capable as men. Some will be superior. In an increasingly technological army, the light-switch phenomenon asserts itself: no special gender advantage for flipping a light switch on or off. This phenomenon — a product of modern technology — is the great equalizer of the sexes.

(n) Women officers are neither been trained for command nor given the responsibility so far. Hence, they can't be granted Permanent Commission nor given Commanding positions. Women normally get commissioned at the age of 23 to 25 years. Soon, thereafter, family pressures start building up on them to get married. Many women confess that managing married life with military service is difficult, though marrying a service officer helps. Subsequent pregnancy and motherhood prove very demanding. The forces are going in for a large Short Service Commission base and a lean permanent commission cadre. Granting permanent commission to existing women Short Service Commission officers will hit the entire restructuring process. This must be based on military needs and organizational requirements, not social factors, or pressure exerted by some groups. It has to be a gradual process. There are operational problems in women being deployed along the borders or in counter-insurgency operations which need to be addressed.

(o) If similar numbers are inducted due to above reasons, administrative burdens and impairment of cohesiveness in a formation will affect its operational effectiveness. This has already been proved wrong by the Gulf war experience where a sizeable number of women were deployed and who performed exceedingly well in combat.

9.3 Suggested Future Role Prospects for Women in the Indian Army

As we summarise the viewpoints given above, the following are suggested in respect of the future role of women in the Indian Army:

(a) Their expertise, talent and dedication should be profitably utilized in areas which are non-combat in nature and where their competence can be fully harnessed. As is being done at present, they should continue to serve in supporting arms and logistics. But they must be granted Permanent Commission.

(b) Certain specialist branches/tasks/ appointments may be earmarked for them in view of technological advances of the times and futuristic battlespaces. In such branches they may be granted Permanent Commission because of specialist nature of job.

(c) If the current provision for 14 years' service should remain in force, then they can be absorbed in the Military Engineering Service, Directorate General of Quality Assurance, Defence Research and Development Organisation, other defence PSUs or in the para-military forces of the country.

(d) The current policy of non-induction of women in combat arms should now be reviewed. The induction to combat arms should be voluntary based without sacrificing the physical and mental standards.

(e) The women should also be inducted in the Army in ranks below officers. Initially, certain all-women units may be established on an experimental basis and may be tasked to perform specific functions. They need to be integrated gradually into the mainstream Army.

(f) The Army is not opposed to the entry of women per se but demand that a number of crucial issues, as discussed above, be addressed as well. Decisions which have a far reaching effect on the functioning of the Army must be taken with due diligence and after a careful study. Under all circumstances, the national interest has to be supreme.

In view of the discussion hence, and considering the current status of induction, role and employability of women in the Indian Army, some future role prospects for women in the Indian Army are suggested. These suggestions have taken into account the following inputs:

- (a) recommendations and suggestions received from the environment by means of the questionnaires.
- (b) the analysis of the status prevalent in other major Armies of the world.
- (c) personal interactions with the various stakeholders.
- (d) opinion of the environment on the current levels of intakes, status of employability, grant of Permanent Commission, combat exclusions and induction of women in ranks below officers in the Indian Army.

9.3.1 Role Prospect-1

The first suggested prospect is an extension of the existing situation. As of now, the women are inducted only as Short Service Commissioned officers for an initial contractual tenure of 10 years. These women are inducted only in the officer cadre in the branches of the Army called the 'Services' (i.e. the branches that are not involved in direct combat role) vis-a-vis the Arms or the direct combat role branches which are not yet open to women. Based on their qualifications, they are inducted as Technical, Non-Technical or Law Graduate Officers.

The suggested prospect takes into consideration the factors suggested for incorporation while inducting these women into the officer cadre of the non-combat branches of the Indian Army. It doesn't, however, recommend the induction of women into the ranks below the officers. Once the women are chosen for induction as officers in the Services, they should be given a choice to exercise the option of a Short Service Commission or a Permanent Commission. Being officers in the Services of the Army, the women should not be denied the opportunity to serve as Permanent Commission officers. As we go up in hierarchy of the organization the criteriae for selection gets tougher. Even for gentlemen officers the percentage of officers who make it to higher ranks mandatory for handling prestigious posts of commanding troops is very less. The officers have to meet the laid down standards and fulfill the criteriae. When these systems are already in place, then why deny women an opportunity to be considered for Commanding positions? They should be given a fair chance to compete with their counterparts. If found successful, they would be capable to discharge the duties of command as well. The filter has already been placed by the organization at the time of induction of

women. They are considered only for Services in the Army and not for any direct combat role. Once an opportunity is given to them to serve as officers in the Services, then the system should be gender insulated. Women officers should be treated in a fair and transparent manner along with the gentlemen officers. The suitable officers should be selected for respective appointments irrespective of their gender. All Services of the Indian Army can grant Permanent Commission to the women officers and treat them at par with the gentlemen officers.

9.3.2 Role Prospect-2

This prospect suggests incorporation of further filters at the time of induction of women officers in the Indian Army. This prospect doesn't suggest inclusion of women in ranks of the Army other than officers. As discussed during the previous part of the study, the changing nature of the warfare worldwide demands the operational, technological and combat readiness of the Army. The future battlefield is envisaged as IT and electronics communication dominated. Although training of all ranks of the Army will play a major role in their operational readiness in the technological scenario, but, inducting trained manpower will definitely be a plus point. IT trained women are in no way inferior to their male counterparts. Also, the specialization of officers may compensate for the aspect of physiological inferiority of women. Keeping the need of the hour in mind, at the induction stage, the branches of the Army may be identified for granting Permanent Commission to women. Some specialized roles like IT, law, major repairs to equipment, supply chain management and etc. performed by the Services of the Indian army may offer Permanent Commission to the qualified and suitable women candidates. In other words, an option is given to them at the time of induction like the gentlemen officers to choose between the Short Service or the Permanent Commission. Once they opt for Permanent Commission, then the service should be gender insulated. The organization must treat them at par with their male counterparts in terms of career management, postings, promotions, training, detailment on courses, etc. There should definitely be the provisions of compassionate consideration on

case to case basis which is also as much valid for gentlemen officers as it is for women officers.

In other words, at the time of induction, a broader choice should be given to the women officers. If need be, the existing Services of the Army may identify the specific domains wherein Permanent Commission may be granted to the women officers. The suitably qualified candidates may then be selected and inducted accordingly. Also, if the choice of opting for Short Service or Permanent Commission be given at time of induction only, it would lead to lesser frustration at a later stage of the career. The women joining their chosen commission would be mentally prepared to serve the organization for the designated term.

9.3.3 Role Prospect-3

The very aim of inducting women officers in the Indian Army was to cater for the shortage of officers in the middle ranks of the organization i.e. from the rank of Lieutenant to Lieutenant Colonel. The organization presently uses the women officers during the prime of their career and to serve in these middle level ranks and then close the door on them for further promotion to the Commanding ranks. Hence there is a lot of frustration and dissatisfaction among the women officers in spite of the challenging job and glamour of the uniform.

This prospect suggests that the women officers when serve for 14 years in the organization, they gain invaluable experience that shouldn't be wasted. After serving 14 years in uniform, if the organization doesn't grant them Permanent Commission, then they may be considered for lateral absorption in the sister organizations of Ministry of Defence like the DGQA, DRDO, DOI, DRDL, MES, Ordnance Factories Board or many defence PSUs working under Ministry of Defence, like BEL, HAL, BDL, etc. While doing so, due consideration should be given to their experience in the Army and they should be laterally absorbed in an equal rank/position. This would prove to be a win-win situation as the women officers would be permanently reabsorbed in a relatively stable organization and their relationship with the Ministry of Defence of the country would continue. The organization would also benefit from their wide exposure and rich experience of the Army.

Even now, many gentlemen commissioned officers from the Army, Navy and Air Force are sent to such organizations on deputations. Suitably qualified officers with relevant experience in the desired field will definitely benefit the organization.

9.3.4 Role Prospect-4

This prospect is an extension of Role prospect-3. The women officers in the Indian Army after completion of their contractual period of 14 years in the Army are still in the prime of their career. For those looking for stability in their career in view of domestic circumstances, Role prospect-3 is a more suitable option. But for those who give a front seat to a challenging career and glamour of uniform, a lateral absorption in the para-military forces of our country is recommended. The para-military forces of our country like CRPF, CISF, BSF, ITBP, RPF etc. already have women as officers and also among ranks. The modalities for lateral absorption of women Army officers in para-military forces commensurating their rank and position can be worked out and suitably implemented. The training and experience of women Army officers will definitely make them suitable to manage a parallel position in the para-military forces of our country. The absorbing para-military force may impart an orientation cum induction course for these officers for their smooth absorption. Since these forces have women among their ranks, to begin with, it would be a suitable option to have all- women units like Mahila Battalions of CRPF also Commanded by women officers. All- women units will save the constraints of limitations of women deployment along with men in field conditions. The all women units shall have designated roles and shall be deployed accordingly for accomplishing the assigned tasks. The number of such women units can be increased and modalities of absorption of women officers can be worked out. Certain specific domains can be nominated for absorbing such officers and their promotional prospects along with career progression be worked out.

9.3.5 Role Prospect-5

When it comes to technology advancements and all-round nation building, India stands at par with major countries of the world. The Police forces and the para-military forces of India

have acknowledged the capabilities of our women and have also found them to be comparable with the men. The concept of all- women units has also been proven and well-established in these organizations. An article in an Indian daily mentioned the decision to send an all- women Police flying squad to Jammu and Kashmir due to spurt of crimes against women in Srinagar. This squad will be deployed at sensitive places to check crimes against women. Similarly, women constables and officers of BSF and CRPF have proved themselves many a times. Their courage and shooting skills bear testimony that women are not less than men when suitably trained and employed.

In spite of all these success stories from organizations of our own country, the Indian Army is yet to open doors to women in their ranks below the officers. All major Armies of the world have been inducting women in their ranks for years. The Indian Army too made this beginning in the year 1993 by inducting the first batch of women officers. However, the women ranks below officers in the Indian Army is yet a dream.

This prospect strongly recommends induction of women in ranks below the officers. To begin with, the women may be inducted in the Services of the Indian Army where no direct combat role is required. The concept of all- women units may also be experimented side-by-side. However, if women are inducted in the mainstream Services, it would effectively sensitize the environment and make the male dominated organization better adapted and more tolerant towards women at a faster pace. The men in ranks below officers when in company of women colleagues will adjust better under the Command of a woman officer too.

So this prospect suggests that women soldiers be inducted in the Services of the Indian Army as per the similar qualitative requirements as laid down for men soldiers. Then they should be suitably trained to join the respective service in the mainstream. The all-women units should be introduced only as per the required deployment options. For example, such units may be effectively used by the Intelligence Corps of the Indian Army.

9.3.6 Role Prospect-6

This prospect is an extension of Role prospect-5 and is the coveted dream of most daring and talented women of our country. This prospect although has least chances of acceptance in the present circumstances of our country. However, the paradigm shift in the mindset of our decision making authorities is sought at the earliest. The major armies of the world including the UK and the USA have already taken the decision to induct women into direct combat role. The thought process underlying this decision is that when suitable standards are set for operational effectiveness of the Army, then the selection process can be gender-insulated. The individuals, irrespective of their gender, whosoever meets the standards should be given the chance to join the Army. And then be suitably trained and employed to optimally serve the nation to the best of their abilities.

This prospect, therefore, recommends the induction of women in the Indian Army into direct combat role Arms too. The women may be inducted as officers and also as personnel below officer rank. To begin with, their numbers can be restricted. All-women units can be raised in combat arms like Infantry, Armoured and Artillery and employed for suitable tasks. On sufficient sensitization of the organization and environment, the women officers and soldiers can join the mainstream direct combat arms of the Indian Army.

This will definitely be the most ideal situation for the Indian Army with no discrimination of gender whatsoever. The most qualified individuals shall be inducted, irrespective of being men or women, suitably trained and employed without compromising the operational effectiveness and readiness of our Army.