

## [Editorial Notes] Women in Indian Armed Forces

By IASToppers | 2020-09-28 00:00:00



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#### Introduction:

The Indian Navy announced selection of two **women officers as Observers in the helicopter stream**, making them **first women airborne combatants** who would be **operating from warships**. In another development, the Supreme Court had upheld that the **women Short Service Commission officers in the Navy were eligible for Permanent Commission**. The Navy had also inducted the **first woman pilot** last year.

#### Women in Indian Navy:

- All wings of the Indian Armed Forces allow women in combat roles (junior ranks) and combat supervisory roles (officers), **except Indian Army** (support roles only) and **Special Forces of India**.
- Indian Air Force had 13.09% and 8.5%, Indian Navy 6% and 2.8% women, and Indian Army 3.80% and 3% in December 2018 and December 2014 respectively.
- **Prior to 1992**, women officers were inducted in the Navy **only in the medical stream from the Armed Forces Medical Service**.
- **From 1992**, the Navy started inducting women, initially through a **special entry scheme and later through the Short Service Commission**, in only select branches of the Navy.
- Over the years, various branches were added to the list, and currently women officers can join the Navy in the streams of **Air Traffic Control, Observers, Law, Logistics, Education, Naval Architecture, Pilots in Maritime Reconnaissance Stream only and the Naval Armament Inspectorate**.
- It needs to be noted like in the Army and the Air Force, women are **currently only inducted as Commissioned Officers and not in Other Ranks** which are of categories of Junior Commissioned Officers and Non-Commissioned Officers.
- In the **early 2000s** women officers from the Medical and Logistics stream were **deployed on board naval ships**. While these deployments went on only for four-five years, they were **discontinued for various reasons**.

#### Women officers in new streams:

- In 2019, the Navy announced the induction of a woman officer as **pilot of Dornier aircraft**, which are fixed wing aircraft operating from ashore establishments.
- Recently, the Navy announced **induction of two women officers as observers for the helicopter stream**.
- Observers are airborne tacticians who fly on board helicopters or fixed-wing aircraft operated by the Navy.
- **Till now women were inducted as observers for fixed wing aircraft** which take off and land ashore.
- Entry in the helicopter stream means that **women officers can now be deployed on frontline warships from which helicopters can operate**.

#### India and the world:

- India has limited **experience as regards induction of women in the armed forces**. On the other hand, **women have been serving in the militaries of developed countries for a long time**. These countries have acquired a deep understanding of all the issues involved.

#### The United States

- The United States is considered a pioneer and a trend-setter as regards induction of women in the services. There are approximately **200,000 American women on active duty in the US armed forces**. They constitute nearly **20 percent of its strength**.

#### Britain

- A major enlargement of women's role in the British armed forces took place in early 1990s. A number of new duties were assigned to them.
- Today, **71% of all jobs in the Navy, 67% in the Army and 96% in the Air Force are tenable by women**. Women are primarily excluded from the duties which require battling enemy at close quarters.

## Canada

- For Canadian women it has been a long and slow struggle to be part of the armed forces. For over a hundred years, **women were considered suitable only for nursing duties**.

### Major Issues:

Women in all militaries are **confronted with social, behavioural and psychological problems at all levels**. Some of the major issues concerning women in all defence forces are discussed below.

### Sexual Harassment:

- This is one single concern that has defied solution so far- how **to ensure safety and protect dignity of women in the forces**.
- What hurts women most is the attitude of military officials who dismiss complaints as frivolous and due to over-sensitivities of women involved.
- Even serious accusations of sexual assault are many times treated in a perfunctory manner.

### Low Acceptance:

- Acceptance of women in the military has not been smooth in any country. **Every country has to contend with sceptics who consider it to be a counterproductive programme**.
- They tend to view it as a political gimmick to flaunt sexual equality, or, at best, a necessary liability.
- Additionally, every country has to mould the attitude of its society at large and male soldiers in particular to enhance acceptability of women in the military.

### Lack of Job Satisfaction:

- Most women feel that their competence is not given due recognition. Seniors tend to be over-indulgent without valuing their views. They are generally marginalized and not involved in any major decision-making. They **have to work twice as hard as men to prove their worth**.

### Poor Comfort Level:

- Most women **accepted the fact that their presence amongst males tends to make the environment formal and stiff**. Mutual comfort level between men and women colleagues is low.

### Permanent Commission:

- The recent decisions of the Supreme Court regarding **grant of permanent commission to women officers are seen as a landmark step towards women empowerment** and corrective

change to prevent perceived gender bias against women.

- The Supreme Court recently **upheld the right of serving women officers from the Short Service Commission** in the Navy to be eligible for the getting permanent commission (PC).
- Short service Commission tenures in the Armed forces are of 10 years, extendable by four years after which officers can be eligible for permanent commission.
- The disadvantages of difference in service conditions were unequal growth opportunity to women officers, **need for permanent commission and inadequate incentive**.

### Union of India & Others Vs Annie Nagaraja & Others:

- In the case **Union of India & Others Vs Annie Nagaraja & Others**, Apex Court have said that the battle for gender equality is about confronting the battles of the mind:
- **History is replete with examples** where women have been denied their just entitlements under law and the right to fair and equal treatment in the workplace.
- In the context of the Armed Forces, specious reasons have been advanced by decision makers and administrators. They range from **physiology, motherhood and physical attributes to the male dominated hierarchies**.
- A level playing field ensures that **women have the opportunity to overcome their histories of discrimination** with the surest of responses based on their competence, ability and performance.

### Suggestions and challenges:

- In terms of various challenges towards deployment of women onboard warships, **the logistics part is not as challenging as one would imagine**, especially as most of the large warships of the Navy do have **basic living arrangements that can be allocated for women**.
- The **question of mindset and gender sensitization** is something many believe would require concerted efforts, and **concrete steps are being taken in that direction**.
- The developments will have to actually result in **more women coming into operational streams** and new streams being opened for women in coming days.
- Some are also concerned that **too much media and public attention** on these new entrants can put unwanted pressure on them.
- No one can deny that women officers have **concessions in physical standards during recruitment**, in battle physical efficiency tests and are generally given **softer appointments with due considerations to hygiene, sensitivities and privacy issues** while accommodating them.
- While women officers appreciate the support of many **male military leaders** in these processes, they also **highlight the resistance from the system as a whole**.
- Service in the armed forces **requires commitment and sacrifice**, in which women officers would be handicapped 'owing to prolonged **absence during pregnancy, motherhood and domestic obligations towards their children**.

### Conclusion:

It is imprudent to consider it as an issue of equality of sexes or gender bias or even women's liberation. Armed forces have been constituted with the **sole purpose of ensuring defence of the country**. All matters concerning defence of the country have **to be considered in a dispassionate manner**. **Concern for equality of sexes or political expediency should not influence defence policies**.

