

# Employment Of Women In The Indian Army

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*Abstract: The induction of Women Officers (WOs) was approved in 1992 by the the Parliament as Short Service Cadre. The initial terms of engagement was five years, which has been extended to 10 years with option of extension by another four years (10+4). Today there are nearly 1400 WOs in the IA (approx 3 % of the total authorised strength of officers).. With focus of war fighting shifting from contact to more technologically advanced battles, proliferated with sophisticated platforms and non-contact standoff operations, adequate avenues exist for employment of women in Army across the spectrum, keeping the exigencies of Service in perspective*

The induction of Women Officers (WOs) was approved in 1992 by the Cabinet Committee on Parliamentary Affairs as Short Service Cadre. The first batch of 25 WOs were commissioned into Army Service Corps (ASC), Army Ordnance Corps (AOC), Army Education Corps (AEC) and Judge Advocate General (JAG) Department in March 1993. The initial terms of engagement was five years, which over the period was extended and presently is 10 years with option of extension by another four years (10+4). In 2008, permanent commission was granted to women in AEC and JAG Dept. Additionally, the number of vacancies for WOs has been enhanced to around 80\100. Today there are nearly 1400 WOs in the IA (approx 3 % of the total authorised strength of officers).

In the past few years, it has been rather unfortunate that the Armed forces have been dogged by controversies regarding grant of permanent commission to WOs and permitting them to command certain units. While surely as enshrined in the constitution, women enjoy right to equal employment opportunities, however the exigencies of military Service restrain their employment across the spectrum. Notwithstanding, in a graduated manner with improvement in infrastructure and better communication facilities, additional appointments in both combat and non-combat units can be tenanted by WOs.

## Employment of Women in Foreign Armies

Women in **all ranks** have been serving in modern armies over a period. Initially, they were all confronted with numerous gender bias, social, professional and psychological issues, which took some time to resolve.

- **United States.** In the US Army women make up about 15.7 per cent of the Active Army strength and serve in 95 per cent of all Army assignments. They have been participating in various operations, albeit in support functions, however, on voluntary basis few have also being assigned certain 'combat support' duties.
- **Israel.** Israel is one of the only few countries in the world (along with Norway and Eritrea) with a mandatory military service requirement for women. As of now, 88% to 92% of all operational roles in the IDF are open to female candidates.
- **Britain.** Women are able to apply for most jobs in the Army except those whose "primary duty is to close in with and kill the enemy": Infantry, Cavalry, Armoured Corps are currently not open to women. Women constitute 9.1% of the total strength, 11.2% of the officer cadre and 8.7% of the other ranks.
- **China.** Chinese women comprise about 4.5 per cent of PLA. Nearly all women soldiers serve in military support positions and are concentrated in headquarters, hospitals, research institutions, and communication facilities. There are no women in ground combat role.
- **Pakistan.** Pakistan Army's women cadre are performing duties both in administrative and combat support operations as short service cadre. On 14 July 2013, 24 female officers in the Pakistan Army mostly doctors and software engineers successfully completed a paratroopers' course at the Parachute Training School, becoming the first group of women to do so in the Pakistan military's history. There are approx 4000 women serving in the Pakistan Armed Forces and the number is rising.

## Major Challenges : Employment of Women in the Indian Army

The induction of women officers in Indian Army commenced in 1993. Being short Service

commissioned officer's (SSCO), the Indian experience of long term employment and management of WOs has been limited and role definition at senior appointments ambiguous. Currently, the employment of women in the Army is restricted to only officer rank in Services and few Combat Support Arms. Though equally competent to tenant any assigned responsibility, arguments that have restricted the employment of WOs in combat arms, ranging from administrative to social issues, are as follows-

- **Hazardous Battlefield.** Vulnerability of women operating in close contact battles looms heavily on mind of all field commanders. This is one prime concern that has prevented entry of women in combat arms and certain support arms.
- **Deployment Restrictions.** Bulk of the Indian Army (IA) is deployed majorly in difficult and rugged areas. The posts are isolated, sans any basic facilities, cut-off for months and the operational tasking warrant working in close proximity with men. Protracted and solitary deployment of WOs under such circumstances has attendant issues and restricts their employment.
- **Special Requirements.** Due to certain social & domestic obligations and physical constraint, service in Army pose a greater challenge for WOs vis-a-vis their male counterparts. Their role as wife, mother, need for spouse postings etc adversely affect their continuous availability to the organisation, more so at sub unit level, where the deficiency of officers is maximum. Maternity leave of 180 days, 60 days each of Annual Leave and furlough deny a unit of an officer for 10 months with no relief forthcoming.
- **Lack of Job Satisfaction.** Most WO's feel that they are generally relegated to undertake frivolous non-military assignments and deprived from contributing meaningfully towards any operational responsibilities and important decision making process. Despite their professional specialisations and expertise, they are assigned perceived women-like jobs or duties related to social trivia.
- **Command Assignments.** Though most developed countries have WOs commanding certain non-combat units, however, there women are also enrolled in '**All Ranks**'. In the Indian context, the prevailing service conditions, socio-cultural mindset, limited command experience and employed of women only as officers has precluded assignment of command responsibilities to WOs.

### Employment of Women in the IA

- **Enhance Authorised Strength of Women in the IA .** With women forming nearly half of the Indian population, there is a mandated requirement to ensure their proportionate representation in the Services in a graduated manner, keeping the exigencies of Service in perspective. With focus of war fighting shifting from contact to more technologically advanced battles, proliferated with sophisticated platforms and non-contact standoff operations in the realm of cyber, space, intelligence and perception management, adequate avenues exist for employment of women in Army.
- **Women in All Ranks .** To optimally exploit various niche skills available in the environment and create a large pool for recruitment, there is a need to open recruitment for women in '**All Ranks**'. The women may be employed across the spectrum, provided desired Service specific parameters are met. The terms of engagement of women Other Ranks to be same as their male counterparts.
- **Grant of Permanent Commission.** The WOs since their induction have proved their mettle and gallantly shouldered all assigned responsibilities. There is a case that as hitherto fore, the WOs be commissioned as SSCO and be granted permanent commission as per terms and conditions of Service as applicable to male SSC officers. The posts to be tenanted by WOs be identified by MS Branch.
- **Induction of Women in Combat Arms .** There are roughly a dozen nations that have opened "close combat roles" to women; however, it has taken them three to ten years to go through the process, of integration. In the Indian context, induction of women in combat arms can be considered in a graduated manner, provided they meet the desired physical and professional standards. In the training academy, Lady Cadets volunteering to join the combat arms should pass the same tests as are applicable to Gentlemen Cadets and thereafter based on merit be directly posted to the combat arms as Young Officers.
- **Assignment of Command Responsibilities.** To meet the career aspirations of WOs and ensure adequate motivation, permanent cadre WOs may be assigned command

responsibility of units. The selection criteria to be as applicable to male officers. The WOs to have adequate staff, command (minor units) and field exposure and be qualified in all professional courses as applicable. Additionally, as an organisation there is a need to mould and change the mind set of male soldiers to enhance acceptability of women as commanders.

## **Conclusion**

It is worth remembering the important contribution of Captain Lakshmi Sehgal, commander of first all-women combat unit – the Rani Jhansi Regiment of the Azad Hind Fauj, which was raised in July 1943 to fight the British. Recently in a first, the Army, Navy and the Air Force were represented by all-women marching contingents at the Republic Day Parade. Wing Commander Pooja Thakur earned the distinction of being the only woman officer to command the tri-service guard of honour for a visiting head of state when Mr Barack Obama visited Rashtrapati Bhawan.

On 27 January 15, General Dalbir Singh hosted a reception in honour of WOs and commended them of their immense contribution to the India Army. With future war fighting becoming more sophisticated and technologically advanced, there is a need to exploit the large skilled women recruitment pool available and enhance their induction in '**All Ranks**'. Based on competencies and qualifications, in a phased manner, selected women may be granted permanent commission and employed across complete spectrum of Army.

*The author is Senior Fellow at CLAWS. Views expressed are personal.*

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