

ARMS AND THE WOMEN: ON GENDER BARRIER IN INDIAN ARMY

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A glass ceiling was shattered on Thursday when the [Ministry of Defence issued a formal letter granting permanent commission to women officers](#) in the Indian Army. The uphill battle to break a gender stereotype and provide equal opportunities for women in the Army had to be fought right up to the highest level, in the Supreme Court. Even so, the MoD's Government Sanction Letter specifying the grant of permanent commission to Short Service Commission (SSC) women officers in all the 10 streams in which they presently serve is a cause for celebration. It will go a long way in ending a prejudice associated with the Army. True, the fight was far from easy. It was long and protracted, as the government initially glossed over a Delhi High Court ruling in the litigants' favour 10 years ago. Then in the Supreme Court, just what the litigants were up against became clear from the views of the government. A written note to the Court pointed at "physiological limitations" of women officers, saying that these were great challenges for women officers to meet the exigencies of service. In February, the Supreme Court read the government the riot act, asking it to abide by its own policy on granting permanent commission to women in the SSC and giving them command postings in all services other than combat.

The misogyny was called out in a 54-page judgment. The Supreme Court noted that women officers of the Indian Army had brought laurels to the force. "The time has come for a realisation that women officers in the Army are not adjuncts to a male dominated establishment whose presence must be 'tolerated' within narrow confines," it said. The Army is often seen as the preserve of men, but enough women have fought heroic battles to bust that myth, from Rani of Jhansi in the past to Squadron Leader Minty Agarwal of the Indian Air Force, who last year "was part of the team that guided Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman during the Balakot airstrike carried out by the IAF". The irony is that of the 40,825 officers serving in the Army, a mere 1,653 are women, as the top court noted. The overall percentage of women at all levels of the armed forces needs to be increased. To usher in a change in a regressive mindset, which mirrors society, a lot more must be done on gender sensitisation. Elsewhere in the world, in countries such as the United States and Israel, women are allowed in active combat. Here, the Supreme Court had to forcefully nudge the government to make women's role in the Army more inclusive. A gender barrier may have fallen, but the war against inequity is far from over.

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