

VICTORY IN A LONG BATTLE FOR EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights & Welfare of Women - Schemes & their Performance, Mechanisms, Laws Institutions and Bodies

This year shall be remembered as a landmark in Indian military history for years to come. The Supreme Court of India, on February 17, delivered a much-anticipated ruling that [allows women to serve as permanently commissioned \(PC\) officers](#) in 10 combat support arms and services of the Indian Army. The Supreme Court also directed the central Government to rescind the embargo on command appointments for women officers.

This July, the government issued [formal sanction offering PC to women officers](#) of the Indian Army. This is the culmination of a struggle for equal opportunity that began almost 27 years ago when the Army inducted the first batches of women as officers in non-medical corps .

Parley | [Should women be given command posts in the Army?](#)

I call the judgment iconic not only because it allowed women officers equal opportunities to serve in the Indian Army but also because the judgment addressed the issue of regressive mindsets. The onus of implementing this change rests with the leadership, but the direction has been shown.

The Indian armed forces began inducting women in the non-medical branches in the year 1992, as short service commission (SSC) officers. The scheme initially allowed for a five-year service period, which was revised to 14 years. In the armed forces, both men and women opt for the Short Service Commission. However, upon completion of 14 years of service, male officers could get a permanent commission. Women officers who had put in the same number of years of service, were denied this privilege.

In a quest for equality, many officers of Indian Army and Indian Air Force (Lieutenant Colonel Seema Singh was one of the first from the Army) filed cases in the Delhi High Court seeking to remove discrimination between genders. I was one of the petitioners from the Indian Air Force, fighting for Permanent commission (*Jasmine Kaur vs. Union of India WP (C) 8492/2009*). In 2010, the case was adjudicated in favour of granting PC to women officers, thus paving the way forward.

Also read | [Supreme Court allows permanent commission for women in Navy](#)

The Indian Air Force was first among the three services to grant PC to SSC women officers. The Indian Army chose to appeal in the Supreme Court, citing reasons of peculiar service conditions and operational requirements. A notification by the Government of India in 2019, suggested PC to women officers with less than 14 years of service, practically leaving a sizeable set of senior women officers out of the gambit. Now with this judgment, women who don 'The Olives', have finally obtained parity with their male counterparts.

The Supreme Court also issued a directive to ensure that women are not restricted to staff duties. Approximately 30% of women officers in the Indian Army are deployed in combat zones (Civil appeal Nos 9367-9369 of 2011 *Secretary, Ministry Of Defence vs Babita Puniya & Ors.*) performing similar duties like other officers. The policy issued by the government of India in 2019, was discriminatory to exclude them from command positions.

With the grant of PC, women officers will now be entitled to serving till the age of retirement and not forced to look for alternative careers after 14 years. This will provide clarity on their career paths and place women officers on an equal footing with men for promotions, professional growth, and provide job security.

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Despite forming a relatively minuscule 3.29% of the total strength of the Indian Army, women in all branches of the army have served shoulder to shoulder with male officers in operational field areas (The Indian Air Force has almost 13% women in the officer cadre). Selection for command appointments in the Indian Army eluded women officers earlier. Now, women officers can be considered for command roles, career postings and many other opportunities to distinguish themselves professionally.

A grant of PC will accrue many other employee benefits, as, 'In service career courses' (such as the National Defence College, College of Defence Management, the Army War College, etc), the Defence Services Staff College, options in higher studies (such as a Master of Business Administration or a Master of Technology), pension, ex-servicemen status and consequent benefits to name a few.

In addition, allowing a motivated set of experienced women officers in permanent cadre would be a small way to mitigate the shortage of officers (estimated at 18% of the authorised strength (Civil appeal Nos 9367-9369 of 2011, Secretary, *Ministry Of Defence vs Babita Puniya & Ors.*) in the Indian Army.

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With women already in combat support arms and Services, is the entry of women in combat arms the logical next step? Is the patriarchal mindset in India the only hurdle in allowing the entry of women into combat arms? Are there social issues in exposing our women to hazardous combat situations or capture by enemy forces? Given the evolving nature of warfare supported by technology, many of us do not consider this a question of gender ability but of performance, opportunity, and a fighting chance. However, each of these questions merits separate discussions, determined by the maturity and mindset of the system.

Countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States have been conservative about women in their respective combat arms, while others like the Israeli Defense Forces have achieved widespread integration of women. I am sure we are on the correct path to further integration in future.

Also read | [Supreme Court verdict on permanent commission to women officers: A blow to stereotypical mindset, says lawyer](#)

Before we hail this step, another question needs to be addressed. Will women get the opportunity to directly join the services as permanently commissioned officers? I ask this with knowledge on the rationale behind the introduction of the SSC cadre. The terms of employment of short service commission are subject to change and conversions into PC are based on force requirements. It is possible that based on cadre forecast, an SSC officer may not ever get a chance of converting to PC if there are no vacancies. This policy fairly applies to all SSC officers irrespective of gender. However, it must be noted that for women, the SSC is the only inroad into the armed forces (except the Medical Corps). There is no provision for women to choose defence as a long-term career right at the outset as a PC officer. When parity of allowing entry of

women as permanent cadre is attained, it would truly be a level-playing field in terms of equal opportunity and career advancement.

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