



The Big Picture - Army: Women in Commanding Role

Recently, in a landmark judgment, the [Supreme Court \(SC\)](#) has upheld a Delhi High Court order of 2010 that seeks to grant permanent commission to women officers at par with their male counterparts. Along with [granting a role to women in combat arms](#), the judgment essentially highlights the denial of equal opportunity in their existing roles for promotion to higher commands. With immediate effect, in addition to permanent commissions in ten arms and services of the Indian Army, women officers will also be eligible for 'command positions' in their respective units, as applicable to their male counterparts.

Government's Perspective

- **Societal Issues:**
 - Centre had told the SC that composition of male officers, predominantly drawn from a rural background, with prevailing societal norms, troops are not yet mentally schooled to accept women officers in command of units.
 - Society has low acceptance for the women officer who had been caught as a prisoner of war by an enemy country.
- **Physiological Challenges:** The Centre has informed the apex court that motherhood, child care, psychological limitations are vital factors, which have a bearing on the employment of women officers in the Army. It is a challenge for women to meet these hazards of service owing to prolonged absence during pregnancy, motherhood and domestic obligations towards their children and families especially when both husband and wife happen to be service officers.
- **Family Issues:** The Centre also said that the armed forces require sacrifices and commitment beyond the call of duty by the entire family of service personnel involving separation and frequent transfers, affecting the education of children and career prospects of the spouse.

Note:

- **Combat Role:** Combat roles are those that involve engaging and fighting the enemy either in person or by using specialized equipment.
 - There are more than 3,500 women in the military, but front-line combat roles were off-limits to them until 2015 when they were inducted into the fighter stream in **Indian Air Force (IAF)**. **Navy** has women as pilots and observers onboard its maritime reconnaissance aircraft, which is a combat role. However, warships, tanks and combat positions in the **infantry** are still no-go zones for women.
 - The SC judgment was also silent on women's role in combat roles and held that the engagement of women in the Combat Arms is a policy matter of Government.
- **Commanding Position:** A position held by an officer to head a battalion or substantive command delegated to carry out independent tasks. It is generally done by an officer at the rank of Colonel in the Army.
 - The army, air force and navy began inducting women as Short Service Commission (SSC) officers in 1992. This was the first time women were allowed to join the military outside the medical stream. Initially, they could serve for five years but in 2006, they were allowed to serve for a maximum of 14 years as SSC officers.
 - In the duration of 14 years of service, they were unable to get to the rank of a Colonel. Hence, women were indirectly kept away from the commanding role.
 - After this judgment, women can now be inducted into permanent commissions, therefore,

they are now eligible to take the Commanding position in these branches- Signals, Engineers, Army Aviation, Army Air Defence, Electronics and Mechanical Engineers, Army Service Corps, Army Ordnance Corps, and Intelligence.

Issues with the Government's Decision

- **No Consultation with Women Officers:** The government took the decision without consulting the women officers in the Army.
- **Lack of Data:** No data or survey has been presented by the government which can substantiate their arguments that male troops will not accept women officers.
- **Right to Choose:** The government should let the women decide whether she wants to enrol in the commanding role, then it is the matter of the training and the conditioning that can be achieved.
- **Against the Constitution:** According to the Supreme Court, absolute exclusion of women from command appointments in the Indian Army is against Article 14 and unjustified.

Why it is Needed?

- **Women Empowerment:** Earlier women were not allowed in the Permanent Commission, which had created a glass ceiling. That ceiling has now been shattered with a Supreme Court ruling allowing permanent commission for women.
- **Equality of Opportunity:** Without giving the command role to women, we can not analyze that they are not competent. It is a denial of an opportunity.
- **Changes in Nature of War:** With changes in technologies, the nature of conventional war has also changed. Consequently, issues related to Prisoners of Wars has decreased a lot. The doors must be kept open for the women, and if they are suitable on the basis of objective criteria, they should be enrolled.
- **Stronger Armed Force:** The verdict will ensure that regardless of gender, the potential of the best of India's youth will be utilized in its Armed Forces.

Way Forward

- **Data:** Collection of data on the ground to analyze the sentiments of male troops regarding women's role in commanding position.
- While the Commanding position in the combat role is controversial, women should be given a commanding role in the ten streams where they have been working since 1992 and have been provided with the permanent commission.
- **Similar Training:** Along with the commanding role, women should also be provided with the same level of training which male officers get. A woman should be equally equipped to handle the extraneous psychological and physical process which a male officer goes through.
- **Infrastructure:** Induction of more women in command force will require updating infrastructure especially in the case of Navy and Army. In naval ship space is limited and currently, Indian Naval Ships are designed to accommodate male personnel only.

The decision will encourage more women to think of a career in the military. This may begin a process of correcting the gender imbalance in India's forces. The judgment needs to be complemented by a change in mindsets internally as well as at the societal level, as male officers continue to see women as best suited for adjunct roles and not as equals.