



## The Big Picture - Women in Combat Role

Army Chief General Bipin Rawat has recently said there are women officers engaged in exercises like mining and demining operations and also manning the air defense system but cited difficulties in assigning them in frontline combat roles. He said that in frontline combat there are risks of officers getting killed. According to Army Chief, India has not put women in frontline combat because of changing nature of warlike proxy war in Kashmir. He also cited logistical reasons behind not posting women on frontlines.

### Women in the Indian Armed Forces

- In 1992, the Indian Army began inducting women officers in non-medical roles.
- In 2007, the United Nations first all-female peacekeeping force made up of 105 Indian policewomen was deployed to Liberia.
- All wings of the Indian Armed Forces allow women in combat roles (junior ranks) and combat supervisory roles (officers), except Indian Army (inducted for support roles only) and Special Forces of India (trainer role only).
- **Females are not allowed to serve in combat units like the Infantry, the Armoured Corps and Mechanized infantry.**
- Under the Short Service Commission (SSC) scheme, women are allowed to enter Army Service Corps, Ordnance, Education Corps, Judge Advocate General (JAG), Engineers, Signals, Intelligence and Electronics & Mechanical Engineering branches of the Army.
- **Only in certain streams like the Judge Advocate General, Army Education Corps (AEC) and the Military Police, women are given permanent commission at par with male officers.**
- Unlike male officers who could have joined under the SSC scheme and could have opted for a permanent scheme at the end of ten years, women SSC officers did not have the same option.
- However, Prime Minister has announced on Independence Day in 2018, **that permanent commission would be granted to serving women officers of the armed forces. It will change the career paths of more than 3,700 women officers in the three services.**

### Issues with Women in Combat Role

- **Physical issues**
  - The natural physical differences in stature, strength, and body composition between the sexes make women more vulnerable to certain types of injuries and medical problems. This is particularly so during vigorous and intensive training.
  - Pre-entry physical fitness levels tend to be lower in most women recruits compared with men, and hence, when standards of training remain same for the two genders, there is a higher probability of injuries among the women.
- **Physiological issues**
  - The natural processes of menstruation and pregnancy make women particularly vulnerable in combat situations. Lack of privacy and sanitation can result in an increased incidence of genitourinary infections.
  - The effect of prolonged deployment in difficult terrains and grueling physical activity on the reproductive health of women is still unknown.
- **Social and psychological issues**
  - Women tend to be more attached to their families, particularly their children. This translates into greater mental stress and requirement of social support to sustain

themselves during prolonged separations from family.

- Another social aspect leading to mental stress in women in the military is that of isolation. This is due to the fact that men far outnumber women in the military, particularly in combat zones.
- The issue of military sexual trauma (MST) and its effect on the physical and mental well-being of women combatants is grave.
- MST may lead to grave, long-term psychological problems, including posttraumatic stress disorders (PTSDs), depression, and substance abuse.

#### ▪ **Conventional Barriers**

- Cultural barriers in society may be the biggest impediment to induction of women in combat.
- The consequences of inserting a few women in an almost entirely male preserve, in cramped quarters, in inhospitable terrain, isolated from civilization, might raise conservative eyebrows of the society.
- Another major question that needs to be studied is the acceptance of orders of the women officers by the jawans.

## Way Forward

- **Creating history, the Indian Air Force, last year, had inducted three women as fighter pilots.**
- A decision on having women as fighter pilots will be taken after evaluating the performance of the three women — Avani Chaturvedi, Bhawana Kanth and Mohana Singh who are now part of IAF's fighter squadron. On similar lines, a women combat squadron can be designed and studied extensively before any further development.
- Before inducting women in combat roles, first they can be trained as military police jawans, and gradually, they can be trained for combats.
- As for the concern of preserving female jawans modesty and dignity, there should be elaborate codes of conducts to ensure no untoward incident occurs.
- Administrative issues should not be cited as barriers to women entry. It is the responsibility of the government to create both administrative and social infrastructure for easy induction of women.
- **Most importantly, a policy should be drawn wherein the framework for women's induction in the combat role is laid. Lack of a definite framework has delayed the decision-making process.**
- **The society has to be ready to accept that women too can play the crucial role of confronting the enemies. Arguments such as that Indian society is not ready to see women in body bags are misleading and should not be encouraged as an argument to stall women entry in combat roles.**