



# Career Challenges Faced By Short Service Commission (Ssc) Women Officers In India: A Policy And Judicial Review

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**Abstract :** Women officers in the Indian Armed Forces have historically served under the Short Service Commission (SSC) with restricted career mobility, limited command appointments, and a lack of long-term security compared to their male counterparts. This paper highlights the career challenges faced by SSC women officers through an analysis of existing policies, judicial interventions, government notifications, and secondary literature. The study highlights systemic barriers related to promotion pathways, training opportunities, institutional culture, and career insecurity. Judicial interventions especially the landmark 2020 Supreme Court judgement on Permanent Commission which represent a pivotal shift but challenges persist in implementation.

**Keywords—** SSC Women Officers, Permanent Commission, Gender in Armed Forces, Career Challenges, Judicial Review, Indian Military Policy

## I. INTRODUCTION

The participation of women in the Indian Armed Forces has expanded gradually since the early 1990s, reflecting broader socio-political shifts and increasing advocacy for gender inclusion within security institutions. Despite this progress, women officers were predominantly inducted through the Short Service Commission (SSC), a tenure-based mode of engagement that offered limited service duration and restricted career advancement. SSC initially provided an engagement of five years, later extendable to ten and subsequently fourteen years, without a guaranteed pathway to Permanent Commission (PC).

This structural arrangement significantly constrained women officers' long-term career planning, leadership opportunities, pension eligibility, and post-retirement security. In contrast, male officers, even when commissioned through SSC, were gradually permitted to opt for Permanent Commission, enabling lifelong service, command appointments, and hierarchical mobility. The differential treatment of women officers thus institutionalized gender-based inequality within military career structures (Ministry of Defence, 2018).

Judicial scrutiny brought this issue into national focus, culminating in the landmark Supreme Court judgment of 2020, which challenged the constitutional validity of gender-based exclusions in commissioning policies. While this judgment marked a significant shift toward formal equality, the lived experiences of SSC women officers reveal that substantial challenges persist in implementation and institutional adaptation (Supreme Court of India, 2020).

Against this backdrop, the present paper critically highlights the career challenges faced by SSC women officers in India through a policy and judicial review. Drawing upon secondary literature, official policy documents, and judicial rulings, the study aims to highlight not only formal barriers but also structural, cultural, and psychosocial constraints shaping women officers' career trajectories.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing scholarship on women in the military consistently highlights the persistence of structural and cultural barriers within traditionally male-dominated defence institutions. International studies identify restricted access to combat roles, occupational segregation, gender stereotyping, and continuous identity negotiation as recurring challenges faced by women officers (Goldstein, 2001; Segal, 1995). These studies argue that formal inclusion does not necessarily result in substantive equality, as institutional cultures often remain resistant to transformation.

In the Indian context, available research emphasizes limited branch allocation, lack of command exposure, and institutional biases affecting appraisal and promotion outcomes for women officers (Dandeker, 2003). Scholars have also examined the psychological dimensions of military service, highlighting role conflict, heightened performance pressure, and work–family strain arising from frequent transfers and rigid service structures (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

However, there remains a significant gap in focused academic inquiry specifically examining SSC women officers as a distinct group. Much of the existing literature either addresses women officers broadly or analyses policy developments without adequately exploring how SSC structures uniquely shape career insecurity, identity disruption, and mid-career exit experiences. This paper seeks to address this gap by centring SSC women officers within a combined policy-judicial and psychosocial framework.

## III. POLICY FRAMEWORK GOVERNING SSC WOMEN OFFICERS

### A. *Evolution of SSC Policies*

The Short Service Commission was introduced primarily to meet manpower requirements while preserving organizational flexibility. Initially structured as a five-year engagement with possible extension, SSC was later revised to allow ten and fourteen years of service. While male SSC officers were progressively granted the option of Permanent Commission, women officers remained excluded from this pathway for decades.

Official justifications for this exclusion were often framed around operational readiness, maternity responsibilities, and perceived limitations in combat effectiveness. Over time, these arguments faced increasing criticism for reinforcing gender stereotypes and lacking empirical evidence (Ministry of Defence, 2019).

### ***B. Restrictions in Branch Allocation***

Women officers under SSC were largely confined to support and technical branches such as logistics, education, legal services, and signals. Limited access to combat and command-oriented roles significantly constrained professional exposure and leadership development. Since command experience constitutes a prerequisite for higher ranks, branch segregation had long-term implications for promotion eligibility.

### ***C. Promotion Structure***

Promotion within the Armed Forces relies heavily on command tenures, field postings, and performance appraisals. SSC women officers, due to restricted role allocation and shorter service tenures, often failed to meet these criteria, resulting in stagnated career progression. The absence of a permanent career pathway further discouraged institutional investment in their long-term training and leadership development.

## **IV. JUDICIAL INTERVENTIONS: A CRITICAL SHIFT**

Prior to Supreme Court intervention, several High Courts, including the Delhi and Bombay High Courts, ruled in favour of granting Permanent Commission to women officers. These judgments emphasized constitutional principles of equality and non-discrimination, challenging the legality of gender-based exclusions.

In its landmark 2020 judgment, the Supreme Court of India unequivocally held that denying Permanent Commission to women officers constituted discrimination based solely on sex. The Court rejected arguments grounded in physiological differences and social roles, asserting that such reasoning perpetuated patriarchal norms incompatible with constitutional morality (Supreme Court of India, 2020). The judgment mandated equal treatment of women officers in matters of commission, promotion, and command eligibility.

Despite the progressive intent of the ruling, implementation has been uneven. Women officers continue to face challenges related to retrospective application of criteria, limited availability of command appointments, and structural inertia, highlighting the gap between judicial intent and institutional practice.

## **V. CAREER CHALLENGES FACED BY SSC WOMEN OFFICERS**

The career challenges faced by SSC women officers are multidimensional, extending beyond formal policy constraints to encompass structural, cultural, psychological, and life-course related factors. While explicit discrimination has been judicially addressed, informal organizational norms continue to shape unequal outcomes (Acker, 1990).

### ***A. Restricted Career Mobility and Professional Uncertainty***

The absence of long-term career security remains one of the most significant challenges faced by SSC women officers. Tenure-limited service restricts sustained career planning, professional specialization, and leadership grooming. Career development theory suggests that prolonged uncertainty negatively affects occupational commitment and identity formation (Super, 1990; Savickas, 2005).

For women officers, this uncertainty intersects with social expectations regarding marriage, caregiving, and age-related transitions, compounding professional insecurity (Acker, 2006). Limited assurance of continuity also reduces institutional investment in SSC women officers, reinforcing their marginal status within the organization.

### ***B. Structural and Organizational Barriers***

Military organizational structures are historically aligned with uninterrupted male career trajectories. Such structures implicitly privilege masculine norms even when policies appear gender-neutral (Segal, 1995). SSC women officers frequently encounter limited mentoring, exclusion from informal networks, and appraisal systems that fail to account for historically restricted role access (Dandeker, 2003).

### ***C. Denial and Delay of Command Opportunities***

Command roles serve as central markers of leadership legitimacy and promotion eligibility. The systematic exclusion of SSC women officers from command appointments deprived them of professional credibility and long-term advancement opportunities. Even post-judgment, delayed access to command roles produces cumulative career disadvantages that cannot be easily reversed (Kanter, 1977).

### ***D. Identity Negotiation and Psychological Strain***

SSC women officers often navigate heightened performance pressure while countering persistent gender stereotypes. Leadership research indicates that such environments contribute to emotional labour, role strain, and burnout, particularly when institutional recognition does not align with effort (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

### ***E. Work–Family Conflict and Life-Course Transitions***

Frequent transfers, rigid service demands, and uncertain tenure exacerbate work–family conflict, particularly during mid-career stages (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). For many SSC women officers, forced exit from service coincides with mid-life transitions, leading to identity disruption and challenges in civilian reintegration (Ibarra, 2003).

## **VI. DISCUSSION**

The challenges faced by SSC women officers emerge from the interaction of policy design, institutional culture, and gendered expectations. While judicial reforms have addressed formal inequality, they have not fully transformed organizational norms that shape daily professional experiences (Acker, 1990).

Research on institutional change suggests that organizations often comply formally with equality mandates while informally preserving existing power structures (Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006). In the military context, this is evident in continued disparities in command access, appraisal outcomes, and leadership visibility.

From a psychosocial perspective, prolonged exposure to uncertainty and marginalization affects identity development, self-efficacy, and post-service adjustment (Bandura, 1997). The involuntary transition out of military service experienced by many SSC women officers constitutes a non-normative career disruption associated with heightened stress and identity loss (Schlossberg, 1981).

## **VII. CONCLUSION**

The evolving role of women in the Indian Armed Forces reflects an important commitment to constitutional equality. However, the experiences of Short Service Commission women officers demonstrate that substantive equality remains constrained by structural, cultural, and psychological barriers. While the extension of

Permanent Commission eligibility represents a landmark achievement, its impact is limited by delayed implementation and entrenched institutional practices (Supreme Court of India, 2020).

Addressing the career challenges faced by SSC women officers requires a holistic approach integrating policy reform, organizational restructuring, and cultural change. Transparent promotion criteria, equitable command opportunities, structured mentorship, and formal transition support mechanisms are essential for meaningful inclusion (Kanter, 1977; Dandeker, 2003).

Recognizing and addressing the unique challenges of SSC women officers is not merely a matter of gender justice but a prerequisite for building a modern, effective, and resilient Armed Forces.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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## REFERENCES

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