



From Selection to Retirement: Breaking the Myth [Can She Wear That Uniform?, Can She Fly High?, Can She Protect My Country?]

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
Research Paper	This article provides a detailed examination of the journey of women in the Indian Armed Forces from the first induction of 25 female cadets in 1992 to landmark Supreme Court rulings in 2020, 2021, and 2026 that dismantled institutional barriers. It analyses every stage of a woman officer's career: minimum eligibility and age criteria, examination patterns (NDA, CDS, AFCAT, SSB), physical and medical standards, training, service conditions, promotion pathways, and post-retirement pension entitlements. Real examples, court orders, and data from official government sources are cited throughout. The article demonstrates that while legal frameworks have progressively expanded opportunities for women, significant challenges in implementation persist.
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1. Introduction

For most of independent India's history, the armed forces remained an exclusively male preserve. The three services the Indian Army, the Indian Navy, and the Indian Air Force were governed by a culture, infrastructure, and legal architecture that simply did not contemplate women in uniform except as nurses and doctors. That began to change in 1992, but only after a remarkable act of individual courage.

Priya Jhingan, a young law graduate, wrote a personal letter to the then Chief of Army Staff, General Sunith Francis Rodrigues, asking him to open the army to women. The General replied that induction was being planned. A year later, on 21 September 1992, Jhingan enrolled as Lady Cadet Number 001 at the Officers'

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Training Academy (OTA), Chennai, along with 24 other women. She became the first woman commissioned into the Judge Advocate General's Department. Her gold medal was won not through a separate women's category but by competing in the same cohort as male cadets a fact that speaks volumes about what women could achieve when given the opportunity.

That pioneering batch trained under identical physical and academic regimens as their male peers. No gender-specific lenience was offered and none was sought. Anjana Bhaduria of the same batch won the prestigious Gold Medal, outperforming all cadets male and female. Divya Ajith Kumar, commissioned in 2010, became the first woman to receive the Sword of Honour at OTA.

Three decades later, the landscape has transformed but unevenly. As of early 2026, a total of 158 women cadets have joined the National Defence Academy (NDA) since women were admitted in 2022. The Army has progressively enhanced its annual intake of women cadets from 80 to 144 vacancies an 80 percent increase in 2024. Yet women constitute only approximately 0.56 percent of the total armed forces strength, and the battles fought in courtrooms have often been as fierce as those anticipated on the battlefield.

2. Entry Pathways: How Women Can Join

There is no single route into the Indian Armed Forces for women. Multiple entry schemes exist, each with distinct eligibility requirements, examination patterns, and terms of service. The table below summarises the principal pathways currently available.

Table 1: Entry Pathways for Women into the Indian Armed Forces (2024–25)

Entry Scheme	Min. Age	Max. Age	Qualification	Exam / Selection
NDA (National Defence Academy)	16.5 years	19.5 years	Class 12	UPSC NDA + SSB
CDS / OTA	21 years	25 years	Graduation	UPSC CDS + SSB
SSCW (NT)	19 years	25 years	Graduation	UPSC Written + SSB
SSCW Tech	20 years	27 years	Engineering Degree	Merit-based + SSB
JAG (Legal)	21 years	27 years	LLB Degree	SSB Interview only



Entry Scheme	Min. Age	Max. Age	Qualification	Exam / Selection
NCC Special Entry	19 years	25 years	Graduation + NCC B/C	SSB Interview only
MNS (Nursing)	17 years	25 years	B.Sc. Nursing	Written + SSB
AFCAT (IAF)	20 years	26 years	Graduation	AFCAT + AFSB

3. National Defence Academy (NDA) :The Most Competitive Route

3.1 Historical Opening of NDA to Women

For decades, the NDA at Khadakwasla, Pune, was exclusively male. It was the Supreme Court that changed this. In an interim order dated 18 August 2021, the court directed that women be allowed to sit the NDA examination overriding the government's initial resistance. The Union of India argued that infrastructure at the NDA was not ready for women. The court was unimpressed, noting that institutional unreadiness could not justify perpetual exclusion. UPSC subsequently modified its notifications to include female candidates, and the first batch of women cadets graduated from NDA in May 2025 seventeen in total, followed by fifteen more in November 2025.

3.2 Eligibility Criteria for the NDA Examination

- Age: 16.5 to 19.5 years at the time of commencement of the course.
- Educational Qualification: Must have passed or be appearing in Class 12 (10+2) from any recognised board.
- Marital Status: Unmarried (mandatory).
- Nationality: Indian citizen (limited exceptions for Nepali/Bhutanese nationals).
- Physical and Medical Standards: Must meet the standards prescribed by the Armed Forces Medical Services, examined by a Board of Service Medical Officers. Female candidates are examined by a Lady Medical Officer or a Lady Gynaecologist.

3.3 NDA Examination Pattern

The UPSC conducts the NDA examination twice a year, typically in April and September. The written examination consists of two papers.

**Table 2: NDA Written Examination Paper Pattern**

Paper	Subject	Max. Marks	Questions	Duration
Paper I	Mathematics	300	120	2.5 hours
Paper II	General Ability Test (English + GK)	600	150	2.5 hours
SSB Interview	Personality + Intelligence	900	5 Days	5 days
TOTAL		1800		

There is negative marking of one-third of the marks for each wrong answer. The written papers test Mathematics (Paper I) and General Ability the latter covering English language proficiency, Physics, Chemistry, General Science, History, Geography, and current affairs. Candidates who clear the written cut-off are called for the five-day SSB Interview, which carries 900 marks equal in weight to the entire written examination combined. The final merit list is therefore heavily weighted toward personality, leadership potential, and psychological resilience.

3.4 NDA Vacancies for Women (2025–2026)

Under the institutionalised scheme that runs up to 2027, each NDA course includes six vacancies for the Air Force women cadets alone: two for Flying Branch, two for Ground Duty (Technical), and two for Ground Duty (Non-Technical). Army and Naval Academy vacancies are allocated separately per notification.

4. Other Major Entry Schemes Detailed Analysis

4.1 CDS / OTA Route (Combined Defence Services Examination)

The CDS examination, conducted by UPSC twice a year, is the principal graduate-level entry for women into the Army's officer cadre (via Officers Training Academy, Chennai) and into the Air Force and Navy. For OTA entry, the written examination consists of two papers: English (100 marks) and General Knowledge (100 marks), each of two hours' duration. There is no Mathematics paper for OTA candidates. After clearing the written stage, candidates appear before the SSB at one of the selection centres (Allahabad, Bhopal, Bangalore, or Kapurthala).

- Minimum age: 21 years. Maximum age: 25 years.



- Qualification: Any degree from a recognised university (minimum graduation).
- Marital status: Unmarried (though NCC Special Entry allows married women).

4.2 Short Service Commission Women (Non-Technical) [SSCW NT]

This route offers a direct graduate-level entry into the Army without the CDS written examination route. UPSC selects candidates based on merit in the UPSC written examination and subsequent SSB. Officers are initially commissioned for a 10-year term, extensible by 4 years, giving a potential total of 14 years of short service.

4.3 SSCW Technical Entry

Female engineering graduates between 20 and 27 years of age are eligible for the SSC Tech Women route. There is no written examination; shortlisting is on the basis of engineering degree marks, and final selection is through SSB alone. Selected candidates join OTA Chennai for a 49-week training programme. The 34th SSC Tech Women course (2024) offered 29 vacancies.

4.4 Judge Advocate General (JAG) Legal Branch

Women with a Bachelor of Laws (LLB) degree, aged 21 to 27, may apply for the JAG Branch. Selection is through SSB interview only there is no written examination. This entry is distinctive in that both married and unmarried women are eligible under specific conditions.

4.5 NCC Special Entry

NCC cadets who have obtained NCC 'B' or 'C' certificates with at least 50 percent marks in graduation are eligible for direct SSB consideration without any written examination. Both married and unmarried women between 19 and 25 years may apply. This scheme rewards demonstrated leadership through the NCC programme.

4.6 Military Nursing Service (MNS)

MNS is one of the oldest routes for women into the armed forces, predating 1992. Candidates must hold a B.Sc. Nursing degree from a recognised institution (having studied Physics, Chemistry, and Biology at Class 12 level), be unmarried, and be between 17 and 25 years of age. Selection involves a written examination followed by interview. MNS officers serve under the Army Medical Corps but have their own rank structure, from Lieutenant to Major General (Matron-in-Chief).



4.7 Indian Air Force AFCAT and NCC Special Entry

Women may join the IAF through the Air Force Common Admission Test (AFCAT), which is conducted twice a year. AFCAT offers both Flying Branch and Ground Duty (Technical and Non-Technical) streams. The IAF was in fact the pioneer in inducting women in combat support roles fighter pilot induction in the experimental phase began in 2015, was made permanent in 2022, and women now fly combat-capable aircraft. The AFCAT written test covers Verbal Ability, Numerical Ability, Reasoning, Military Aptitude, and General Awareness. Flying Branch candidates additionally sit the Pilot Aptitude Battery Test (PABT).

5. The Services Selection Board (SSB) Interview the True Test

5.1 Structure of the SSB

The SSB is a five-day process conducted at selection centres across India. It is identical for male and female candidates a point that underscores the armed forces' formal commitment to gender-neutral assessment standards. Three assessors independently evaluate each candidate: the Interviewing Officer (IO), the Group Testing Officer (GTO), and the Psychologist.

5.2 Stage I Screening (Day 1)

Stage I consists of two tests. The Officer Intelligence Rating (OIR) tests verbal and non-verbal intelligence. The Picture Perception and Description Test (PPDT) requires candidates to observe an unclear picture for 30 seconds, write a brief story about it, and then narrate and discuss that story in a group. Stage I is eliminatory: typically 30 to 40 percent of candidates are screened out on Day 1 and are required to leave the selection centre.

5.3 Stage II The Four-Day Core Assessment

- Psychological Tests (Day 2): Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) 12 pictures, one blank; Word Association Test (WAT) 60 words in 30 minutes; Situation Reaction Test (SRT) 60 situations in 30 minutes; Self-Description Test (SDT) candidate describes perceptions held of them by five relationships (parents, teachers, friends, themselves, and their ideal self).
- Group Testing (Day 3): Group Discussion (GD), Group Planning Exercise (GPE), Progressive Group Task (PGT), Half Group Task (HGT), Individual Obstacles, Command Task, Final Group Task (FGT), and a Lecturette (3-minute speech on a given topic from four options).



- Personal Interview (Day 4): A 45-to-60-minute structured interview by the IO, assessing Officer-Like Qualities (OLQs) across 15 parameters including effective intelligence, courage, initiative, organizing ability, social adaptability, and self-confidence.
- Conference (Day 5): A final board conference at which the three assessors collectively decide the candidate's fate. Recommended or Not Recommended is the binary outcome.

Example Real SSB Task: The Command Task

In the Command Task, a recommended (provisionally) candidate is asked to choose two subordinates from the batch and complete a task using available materials (wooden logs, ropes, planks) within set rules and a time limit. The GTO observes how the candidate briefs subordinates, handles failure, motivates the group, and adapts. For female candidates, there is no modification of the task the same obstacles, materials, and rules apply.

6. Physical and Medical Standards The Hardest Filter

Physical and medical standards represent the most uncompromising filter in the selection process. There is no gender-based relaxation in most standards for officer candidates. The following parameters apply.

6.1 Height and Weight

Female candidates must meet minimum height requirements that vary by service: approximately 152 cm for Army and Navy roles, and 162 cm for Flying Branch (IAF). Weight must be proportionate to height as per age-adjusted charts maintained by the Armed Forces Medical Services.

6.2 Vision Standards

- For ground duty roles: Distant vision corrected or uncorrected must meet prescribed standards (typically 6/6 with or without correction for most roles).
- For flying roles: Uncorrected visual acuity is 6/6 in each eye. No myopia or hypermetropia beyond defined limits. Colour vision must be normal (CP-1 standard for pilots).

6.3 Physical Fitness Training Perspective

Unlike some entry schemes where a formal Physical Efficiency Test (PET) is conducted before or during SSB (e.g., the Battle Physical Efficiency Test for Army officers), the NDA route relies on the medical board for physical assessment. However, post-selection training at NDA, OTA, or the respective service



academies demands high physical fitness. NDA training lasts three years; OTA training lasts 49 weeks. Both include combat obstacle courses, cross-country runs, swimming, and weapons training identical for male and female cadets.

6.4 Medical Examination

The medical examination is conducted by a Board of Service Medical Officers. For female candidates, a Lady Medical Officer or a Lady Gynaecologist must be present. The board examines orthopaedics, ENT, ophthalmology, cardiology, neurology, and general medicine. Gynaecological examination is mandatory and includes ultrasonography. Conditions that can lead to rejection include: scoliosis beyond prescribed degree, flat feet (pes planus, graded), uncorrected vision, hearing defects, cardiovascular anomalies, and certain gynaecological conditions.

7. Landmark Court Orders Legal Milestones

No account of women in the Indian Armed Forces is complete without examining the judicial battles that proved as decisive as any strategic operation. The table below summarises the key cases.

Table 3: Key Supreme Court Judgments on Women in Armed Forces

Case Name	Year	Court	Key Ruling
Secretary MoD v. Babita Puniya & Ors.	2020	Supreme Court of India	Women entitled to Permanent Commission; gender exclusion unconstitutional under Art. 14
Lt. Col. Nitisha & Ors. v. Union of India	2021	Supreme Court of India	Medical fitness test at 10-14 yrs service; past delays cannot disadvantage women officers
Kumari v. Union of India (NDA Admission)	2021	Supreme Court (Interim Order)	Interim order on 18 Aug. 2021 allowing women to sit NDA exam; formalised subsequently
Women Officers Pension Case (CJI Surya Kant)	2026	Supreme Court of India	Systemic bias found; 20-yr qualifying pension granted; full arrears from Jan. 2025



7.1 Secretary, Ministry of Defence v. Babita Puniya (2020)

In a watershed moment for justice and gender equality, the Indian judiciary delivered a historic ruling that forever transformed the landscape of the nation's armed forces. For decades, dedicated women officers served under the tight constraints of Short Service Commissions, capping their careers at 10 or 14 years and completely locking them out of Permanent Commissions, full career progression, higher pensions, and prestigious command positions. The institutional defense presented before the court relied heavily on archaic and patronizing stereotypes, arguing that physiological differences, motherhood, and domestic duties rendered women unsuited for long-term leadership, and claiming that male troops would reject women commanders.

The Supreme Court comprehensively dismantled these outdated notions with resounding clarity. Striking down these arguments as products of systemic "sex stereotyping," the court firmly established that such regressive ideas have zero place in a modern constitutional republic governed by the promise of equality under Article 14. In a monumental triumph of merit over prejudice, the court mandated that all eligible Short Service Commission women officers be considered for Permanent Commission, ensuring that arbitrary tenure limitations would no longer block professional excellence.

The ripple effects of this decision have been deeply inspiring. Following the implementation of this landmark order, hundreds of exceptional women officers have been proudly granted Permanent Commissions, cementing their rightful places in the upper echelons of military strategy and command. This transformation is far more than a legal victory; it is a profound cultural awakening for the entire nation. It sends an unyielding message to every young girl dreaming of donning the uniform that her capability, intellect, and courage will be honoured with absolute parity. By casting aside systemic barriers, India's armed forces have emerged stronger, more dynamic, and deeply reflective of a progressive society where true professional readiness is defined solely by competence and devotion to the motherland.

7.2 Lt. Col. Nitisha & Ors. v. Union of India (2021)

In a landmark stride toward absolute equality, the Indian judicial system has firmly championed the rights of women in uniform. Historic milestones like the Babita Puniya case, reinforced by the groundbreaking Nitisha judgment, have successfully dismantled systemic hurdles that once impeded dedicated careers. By striking down unfair retroactive hurdles, such as late-stage physical evaluations for seasoned officers with over two decades of service, the Supreme Court decisively rejected indirect discrimination. The court mandated fair evaluations at the critical 10-to-14-year service mark and directed that Annual Confidential



Reports (ACRs) be assessed with an understanding of past institutional disadvantages. This ensures a truly level playing field where merit shines without prejudice. This progressive legal evolution transforms historical hurdles into inspiring triumphs. It honours the resilience, sacrifice, and exceptional competence of women officers who carry the nation's flag with profound distinction. By clearing the path for permanent commissions free of systemic bias, the armed forces are embracing a more inclusive, just, and forward-looking era where true capability always prevails.

7.3 The 2026 Pension Judgment (CJI Surya Kant)

In a ruling delivered in March 2026 the most recent at the time of writing the Supreme Court (bench led by Chief Justice Surya Kant) found systemic bias in career progression and pension entitlements across all three services. The court ruled that women Army officers released from service during the litigation period would be deemed to have completed 20 years of qualifying service and would receive full pension with arrears dating from 1 January 2025. Women officers still in service who met a 60 percent cut-off were directed to be granted PC, subject to security clearances.

8. Training From Induction to Commissioning

8.1 Officers Training Academy (OTA), Chennai

OTA Chennai is the primary commissioning academy for women officers entering through CDS/OTA, SSCW, JAG, and NCC Special Entry. The 49-week training programme is demanding and gender-integrated. Women cadets train on the same obstacle courses, in the same weapons-handling sessions, and in the same leadership exercises as male cadets. The Passing Out Parade at OTA has become a celebrated national event. Notably, the first-ever batch's Anjana Bhaduria won the Gold Medal over all male cadets in 1993.

8.2 National Defence Academy (NDA), Pune

NDA is a tri-service academy. Women cadets who enter via the NDA examination undergo a three-year programme combining academics (leading to a B.Sc. or B.Tech degree from Jawaharlal Nehru University), military training, and leadership development. The first female NDA graduates passed out in May 2025 seventeen cadets who had endured the same rigours as their male counterparts.



8.3 Service-Specific Academies

- Indian Military Academy (IMA), Dehradun: Army PC entry through TGC (Technical Graduate Course) and other routes.
- Air Force Academy (AFA), Hyderabad: IAF officer training, including for women fighter pilots.
- Indian Naval Academy (INA), Ezhimala: Naval officer training, open to women cadets since the 10+2 B.Tech entry scheme from January 2024.

9. Service Conditions From Commission to Command

9.1 Short Service Commission vs. Permanent Commission

Historically, all women entered through SSC a limited tenure of 10 years, extendable by 4 years. Post Babita Puniya (2020), women may now opt for PC at the end of their SSC tenure, subject to qualifying in the PC Selection Board. PC confers the right to serve until the retirement age of the rank, compete for higher command, and earn a full pension.

9.2 Roles and Postings

- Army: Corps of Signals, Engineers, Army Educational Corps, Judge Advocate General's Dept., Army Service Corps, Army Ordnance Corps, Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, Army Medical Corps, Corps of Military Police (since 2021 first batch of 83 women soldiers, the first non-officer women in army history).
- Air Force: Flying Branch (fighter, transport, helicopter), Ground Duty Technical and Non-Technical. Women are now flying Sukhoi Su-30MKI missions.
- Navy: All branches including Operations, Logistics, IT, Legal, Education, and Naval Armament Inspection. First woman maritime reconnaissance pilot inducted in 2023. Ships with facilities for women in crew are under development.

9.3 Wing Commander Anjali Singh First Woman Defence Attache

A further milestone was achieved in September 2019 when Wing Commander Anjali Singh became the first woman in Indian military history to be posted abroad as a Deputy Air Attaché, to Moscow. An aeronautical engineer with 17 years of service and experience with fighter squadrons, her posting marked the beginning of women's participation in diplomatic-military roles.



10. Retirement Age, Pension, and Post-Service Benefits

10.1 Retirement Ages by Rank

Table 4: Retirement Ages in the Indian Armed Forces (By Rank)

Rank	Army Retirement Age	Air Force/Navy Retirement Age
Lieutenant / Flying Officer	~52 years (PC)	~52 years
Colonel / Group Captain	54 years	57 years
Brigadier / Air Commodore	56 years	58 years
Major General / Air Vice Marshal	58 years	59 years
Lieutenant General / Air Marshal	60 years	60 years
General / Air Chief Marshal / Admiral	62 years	62 years

Women officers on PC retire at the same ages as their male counterparts. Under SSC, officers are released at the end of their commissioned term (10 or 14 years). Post Babita Puniya, those with 20+ years of service qualify for pension even if not granted PC.

10.2 Pension Entitlements

Pension is governed by the Pension Regulations for the Army, 2008 (and equivalent regulations for the Navy and IAF). The minimum qualifying service for pension for commissioned officers is 20 years. The pension is computed at 50 percent of either the last drawn reckonable emoluments or the average of the preceding 10 months whichever is more favourable.

- Service Pension: 50% of last drawn pay (after 20 years qualifying service).
- Disability Pension: Service element + disability element (30% of pay for 100% disability; proportionately reduced for lesser disability).
- Family Pension: 30% of last drawn emoluments (minimum ₹9,000 per month).



- One Rank One Pension (OROP): Applicable to women officers since implementation in 2014; revised effective 1 July 2024 to recalibrate on 2023 retirement data averages.

10.3 Post-Retirement Benefits

Retired women officers are entitled to: Canteen Stores Department (CSD) facilities; Ex-Servicemen Contributory Health Scheme (ECHS) medical coverage; travel concessions on Indian Railways and air travel under Air India schemes; priority in government housing allotment schemes; Ex-Servicemen status for employment preferences; and preferential consideration for children in Sainik Schools and Kendriya Vidyalayas.

10.4 The Pension Struggle A Case Study

Despite the 2020 Supreme Court order, as late as February 2022, approximately 15 women Army officers who had retired had still not received their pension. The Defence Accounts Department (DAD) was compelled to write to the Principal Controller of Defence Accounts (Pensions) in Allahabad to disburse the benefit urgently. The delay was attributed partly to teething problems with the new SPARSH online pension disbursement system. This episode illustrates that legal victories do not automatically translate into administrative compliance.

11. Combat Role Exclusion in the Army

Unlike the Air Force (where women fly fighter aircraft) and the Navy (where women serve in operational roles aboard vessels in development), the Indian Army continues to restrict women from Infantry, Armoured Corps, Artillery, and Special Forces. The official rationale cites physiological differences and operational realities of ground combat. Military historian Srinath Raghavan has described such arguments as "extraordinary and regressive" reminiscent, he notes, of colonial-era arguments that Indian soldiers would not accept Indian commanders. Challenging archaic assumptions, the reality of modern military engagement is increasingly defined by competence rather than gender. A powerful testament to this shift unfolded during Operation Sindoor. Amidst high-stakes tactical operations, women officers stepped seamlessly into prominent commanding roles. Notably, Colonel Sofiya Qureshi of the Indian Army and Wing Commander Vyomika Singh of the Indian Air Force took center stage as the architects and faces of the nation's strategic briefings and operational execution. Their leadership in handling complex intelligence, high-altitude logistics, and precision frameworks dismantled the persistent myth that physical and operational environments preclude women from high-intensity combat domains. By steering a critical national security campaign with stellar composure and tactical brilliance, these officers proved that grit, intellect, and



strategic vision belong to no single gender. Operation Sindoor stands as a historic milestone, demonstrating that true operational readiness relies entirely on professional excellence, permanently reshaping the path for women in uniform.

12. Conclusion

Structural reforms always outpace cultural ones. The road ahead demands rigorous administrative compliance and deep-seated cultural transformation. True parity requires an institutional mindset that views women not as tokens of progress, but as indispensable pillars of operational readiness. This involves streamlining career progression pathways, eliminating subtle biases in evaluations, and upgrading infrastructure to seamlessly accommodate a mixed-gender force.

Furthermore, the progressive expansion of combat roles remains the ultimate test of integration. As women step into frontline combat units across infantry, armor, artillery, and special operations, they challenge the final vestiges of exclusion based on outdated assumptions. The core metric of a soldier has never been gender; it is grit, tactical acumen, and unyielding loyalty to the flag.

The women cadets who have marched through the National Defence Academy since 2022 embody this historic transition. They wear the uniform as a hard-earned birthright secured by those who fought before them, carrying forward Priya Jhingan's letter written in ink, now rewritten in steel and shared resolve. As they take their places in the regiments and squadrons of the Indian Armed Forces, they serve as the vanguard of a modern military one where valor knows no gender and the defense of the nation is shared by all its most capable citizens.

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