

## Women in Uniform

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**India is an interesting case study when it comes to the role of women in society & the workplace. While legally, we have been granted and assured of the same rights as our male counterparts; socially and culturally, equality has been slow in coming. As a woman in a uniformed service, I would like to touch upon my observations and experiences in a Central Armed Police Force these past two decades and the changing profile of women in police organisations across the length and breadth of our country.**

**W**omen have faced and continue to face problems such as mental and sexual harassment in the workplace. Instances of gender bias and gender insensitive behaviour abound. Workplace problems like paucity of women bathrooms, etc. are common in Police stations and offices all over the country. Gender discrimination in awarding of plum assignments and lack of adequate family support deter many women from pursuing careers to their full potential. Roadblocks, intended or incidental; both impede and make the promise of equality difficult to achieve.

Speaking of myself, I admit I was lucky to be born into an enlightened family. My sense of self-worth was groomed & cultivated from infancy. I never had to fight for opportunity or equality. Since my reality is rose-tinted, therefore, I can never speak for the multitudes of women who have had to fight for equality. I have never had to withstand the pressure of a disapproving or unsupportive family. However, it is regrettably true that the path has not been as free from obstacles for many women.

As women enter the workplace in larger numbers, the workplace environment is evolving to accommodate

them. This can easily be seen if we compare and contrast the mental attitudes, social mores and workplace environments of three consecutive generations; the Baby Boomers, The Gen Xers, and The Millennials.

The “Baby Boomers” were born in the 1940s and 1950s. The women of the generation were socialised and brought up to believe that their best career option was marriage and motherhood. Indeed, entering the workforce was even frowned upon and considered less than ideal and very few brave souls of this generation ventured to devote themselves to a career.

In contrast, the Gen Xers, who were born in the 1960s and 1970s, grew up as a transitional generation. They strove

for both successful marriages and sterling careers. As a transitional generation, they faced sobering challenges. Expanding on the Feminist Movement started by the baby boomers, they knocked on the doors of traditional male bastions and entered the workforce in male-dominated careers.

They attempted to win at both career and tradition and succeeded in two very important aspects.

First, they opened doors, making it easier for other



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women to follow and enter non-traditional jobs, and registered their presence in many male-dominated careers.

Their second and equally important contribution was in raising the next generation, the Millennials, to be well-adjusted individuals; largely devoid of the gender prejudices of the previous generation.

Born in the 1980s and 1990s, Millennial males are much more open-minded and reject the rigid, traditional gender roles and pigeonholing of gender-based choice of careers. The Millennial males are more welcoming of women in the workforce and respectfully interact with their female colleagues as equals.

Millennial females have been raised to believe that it is not only their right to aspire to careers but understand that they must contribute and participate in Nation building.

In the short span of 40-50 years, there has been a sea-change in attitudes. It has not been without turbulence and turmoil, but the juggernaut has generated enough momentum to move inexorably towards gender parity.

As more and more woman claim their place under the sun, a quiet revolution is taking place. The general confidence of women in themselves, their abilities and their capabilities is steadily rising. They are no longer satisfied with being mute spectators in their lives and are increasingly making important life decisions for themselves. These changes are bound to increase the pace at which women emancipate themselves.

It is in this capacity I see a role for women such as myself, who have already invested decades within the system. It is the moral duty of women who are already in the workforce to act as mentors and guides to the new entrants.

It is equally important that women understand that they are bucking the system and it is human nature to resist change. Hence, they must take the resistance they face in their stride, stand their ground and carve a place for themselves through diligence and application to their chosen careers. Crucial to this effort is the understanding that not all resistance is rooted in gender bias.

Integrity and intelligence, hard work and perseverance, commitment and competence are pre-requisites to success in any career.

There will always be challenges the workplace. There will always be tough days. There will always be opposition and reverses. There will always be setbacks that need to be overcome. The name of the game is doggedness. It does not matter if you

fall. What matters is what you do after you fall. What matters is that you pick yourself up and recommit yourself to the effort. In the words of author Ryan Holliday, "What impedes us can also empower us." It is equally imperative that we understand that hard work, perseverance and commitment are the chosen tools of successful individuals, irrespective of gender. The same rules apply to men and women alike.

At this juncture, I would like to touch upon two life-changing experiences, early in my career, which have moulded me into the kind of officer I have become. Both experiences taught me that my gender was essentially irrelevant to the nature and scope of work I was doing. Similarly, the gender of my colleagues had little to do with our official interactions and the synergies which resulted from these interactions.

Const Nautyal (name changed) served under my command. I joined the unit when he was already serving in it. I was briefed when I joined the unit that Const Nautyal was an alcoholic who was known to be quarrelsome, intractable, and undisciplined. He was not amenable to counselling or punitive action. Very soon I got reports of his being drunk on duty. Not one to brook indiscipline, I issued Charge-Sheet to him and cut a full week's salary. Two days later, he got into a fight while under the influence of alcohol. This infraction was also met with swift and merciless discipline. Another seven days' pay was docked. The 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> incidents followed with similar punitive reactions. There was no change in Const Nautyal. My subordinates recommended that I start the paperwork for having him dismissed from service.

Before taking the last step, I went to Const Nautyal at his Duty Post to talk with him. There were no accusations or recriminations. No allegations or charges were levelled. I just wanted to know why he was on this path of self-destruction.

After half an hour of stony silence, while I sat with him and probed and withdrew alternatively, to give him space to think, he finally opened up. He told me that he had lost three sons to Muscular Dystrophy. Each of his sons had been diagnosed between the ages of 7-9 and had finally succumbed to the disease between the ages of 14-17.

I then called his wife from her native village along with other concerned relatives. With Const Nautyal's approval and involvement, he was admitted into a de-addiction programme and also a counselling programme for him and his wife.

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A radically transformed Const Nautyal rejoined the unit in a few months. Ct. Nautyal was one of my most disciplined, devoted constables. He could always be relied upon to deliver. Understanding that the road to successful de-addiction is often painful and relapses are often possible, I made it a point to monitor him and keep in touch. His commitment to sobriety was heartening.

Several months later, I had to take an extended leave of absence, for almost a month due to personal exigencies. Those were the days before mobile phones and I remained completely cut-off from my office and work.

I returned to work to learn that Const Nautyal had relapsed. He had gotten drunk and had entered into an argument with unknown elements far from the place of work and had been beaten to death. His body was found abandoned by the roadside the following day.

My office orderly informed me that Const Nautyal had tried to meet me for three days consecutively before his demise. I later learnt that his fourth and youngest son too had been diagnosed with Muscular Dystrophy aged eight.

Const Rawat was a young constable who was serving under my charge in his first unit posting. He was part of the Quick Reaction Team and I was conducting a mock drill at 0100 hours, in the morning to assess the alertness of the team. As the team members poured out of their vehicles in the dark, unlighted deserted corner of the facility and navigate the uneven ground to take their positions, I saw Const Rawat stumble and fall. Like a true soldier, his instinct to protect his weapon kicked in and he landed awkwardly on his elbow. Standing around 10 feet away, I heard the loud sound of snapping bone.

When I walked up to him with my torch on, I saw his eyes swimming with pain. I picked up his weapon, relieving the fractured arm of the added weight, and ordered him to stand up. Without uttering a whimper of protest, the young man followed the orders. His eyes were locked onto my face.

He stood in silence while I checked and stabilised his fractured arm. I put him into the ambulance and sent him to the nearest tertiary-care trauma and orthopaedic hospital with the doctor and an attendant. The entire time, Const Rawat's eyes were fixed on me. He neither vocalised regarding his pain or discomfort nor did he ask me any question while I decided on the hospital or treatment options for him.

I was relieved from my shift, which had run to over 30 sleepless hours at 0900 hrs. Mentally and physically exhausted I longed for my bed. I had to be back on my shift by 1700 hrs.

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But, the memory of the previous night and Const Rawat's behaviour and the lingering memory of Const Nautyal made me drive to the hospital instead. When I entered his room, Const Rawat, who had maintained his composure at the time of the accident and soon after, now looked at me and wept unashamedly. He was physically comfortable and pain-free but was so touched by my visit to the hospital, that he was moved to tears. Wiping his eyes, he told me that the kindness hurt more than the broken bone.

I was humbled and awestruck by the simplicity and open-heartedness of that young man.

Today, over 20 years later, I take stock of these two life-changing experiences. Had I brought something new to the table? Had I displayed any characteristic or response beyond the capacity of any male officer? Was there anything uniquely feminine in my responses? My honest assessment is NO.

I had only shown the same normal decencies that one human would show another in his/her hour of need and Const Nautyal and Const Rawat had responded positively to the decencies of a genderless authority figure whose moral duty it was to look out for them.

The current National data puts female representation in various state police organisations and CAPFs at a dismal 5.7%. This despite positive, protective discrimination of women and the passing of Womens' Reservation Bill, assuring 33% recruitment for women in various services.

However, women have not found representation in countless careers. Who then is the culprit? Is it our social mores that ignore the law of the land and conspire to hold women back? Or have women themselves been slow to exploit the opportunities the country has made available to them? As a country, we need to recognise that we cannot thrive and succeed if half of us are held in shackles.

Interestingly, the first woman IPS officer, Ms Kiran Bedi broke the glass ceiling in 1972. Now, routinely, women join the IPS every year. Similarly, countless women have entered into Central Armed Police Organisations for the past several decades. Yet, policing is still considered a non-traditional career choice for women.

The ultimate truth is that to achieve true gender parity, we must condemn chauvinism and feminism alike. It is not a war of the sexes that we seek. Rather, the need of the hour is for all men and women to come together in unity, assuring equality and justice to all. □