

Women Officers and Work Environment: Indian Perspective

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"Intuition is wisdom in retrospect"

Laurie Beth Jones

Introduction

In recorded human history, no force of soldiery ever travelled far without its detachment of women camp followers, who cheerfully shouldered the responsibility of ammunition carriers, picking up a weapon of a fallen soldier to fight, washing, mending, cooking and generally pandering to the creature comforts. World War II, Vietnam War and technological revolution affected intake of male recruits in Europe, Asian armies and USA that led to induction of women soldiers to fill the vacancies. The USA has the highest representation of 14 percent women soldiers; many participated in Gulf Wars of 1990s and 'Iraqi Freedom'. Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Netherlands, and Norway allow women soldiers in direct combat positions. China integrated women into the military over the last 50 years. The pioneers of the integration of women in South Asia, both officers and ratings, was the Sri Lankan Armed Forces in the year 1984, followed by India, in officers ranks, in 1991 and Nepal in 2003. India's decision to induct women officers was based on populist considerations than military necessities. Pakistan, Bangladesh and Bhutan employ women in medical jobs alone. Initiatives of expanding women's military roles in several nations is an ongoing process. Global, cultural and media revolution of democratic values, rights and equal opportunity for women gained importance and influence on work environment in the developed countries in 20th Century.

Women Officers and Work Place in the Indian Army

A sample survey of 600 seniors, juniors, peers, subordinates, academicians, women officers and parents to ascertain problem areas of both genders working together at work place was undertaken by the author as research work between 2001 to 2003. Clash of views and values was noticed between both genders with

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deviant perceptions. To majority of troops the presence of women in the forces, meant lowering of physical standards, adjustments of work culture norms suitable to women, restrictions on a soldier's ego and freedom, tensions, courtships, jealousies, favouritism, disintegration of hierarchies, unenforceable codes of conduct leading to resentment and sex scandals.

Are Women Officers Willing to Lead the Male Troops on a Patrol or Ambush Duties?

The response was mixed. Women officers with lower age and in the service group of one to four years felt thrilled considering it an adventure activity. Married women officers with higher age and in service group of five to eight years considered this out of context, felt nervous and bewildered at the thought of a single woman amongst male soldiers. Family, children and husband remained their major concern. Young soldiers felt their responsibility will increase in such a situation – given a choice they will not prefer such a situation. Some senior officers were evasive and non-committal while majority were not in favour of sending women officers on night duty or on missions of patrols, ambush and convoy protection duties in counter insurgency areas. Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs) regarded the idea of a woman officer leading a patrol in counter terrorism operations a dangerous situation and gave a firm "no" to the proposal.

A study of women officers as convoy protection officers between Jammu and Srinagar was carried out. All ranks were asked if they felt secure under the protection of a woman officer as convoy commander. The response was mixed. Women officers took the job seriously. Some troops felt that in case of an eventuality it is they who will come to the forefront rather than asking a woman to do the job and were generally not in favour of such assignment for women. They felt that women soldiers must be able to protect themselves. Some soldiers felt that it did not matter whether if their commander was a woman. Young male officers who carry out similar duties felt that women officers show enthusiasm initially, however, realising that getting up at three o'clock in the morning and having a strenuous travel schedule for 12 hours as routine, throughout week, is inhuman. Problems are further complicated for married women with small children. Commanding officers have trouble in employment of women officers in operational duties,

although they are posted in appointments to be occupied by male officers. Commanding officers wanted to have a free hand to treat women officers in field areas as equal to other officers. The view is shared by women officers who want professional equality and do not want to be treated with kid gloves. In some cases women officers in outdoor training tended to overdo to prove that they are physically fit and can undertake stress like men.

Uncomfortable Situations

Some of the uncomfortable incidents experienced by women officers are men looking at them in shorts during physical training and sports sessions with penetrating and leering looks, peeping toms, appearance of other ranks at odd hours as messengers. Jokes after drinks by some officers and cases of unwarranted attention towards women in service or related to service figured occasionally. The study found that women officers including women medical officers find themselves in an awkward situation while visiting unit lines and toilets or when they have to conduct lectures on acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) and sex education as part of routine job. On a question as to why the incidents of sexual harrassment (SH) and sexual violence (SV) are non existent in Army Medical Corps, where women work in night shifts, the study noticed that it is the perception, respect and gratitude for a person who cares for a person during sickness – they are compared to a mother, sister or daughter. Overall, women officers find the troops in the Indian Army very respectful.

Senior officers demonstrate a very high concern for security of women officers' accommodation and tendency to be over protective, perceiving woman officers as small and with an innocent girl syndrome. Women officers detest such behaviour. Expert opinion on psychology and human behaviour indicates that paternalistic behaviour is not characteristic of any particular age group, even people in younger age group behave in a similar manner. The basic reasons for such behaviour are concern for security and well being, inbuilt insecurity amongst senior persons who tend to hide or overcome by behaving as big brothers. Personality distortions, complexes in personality that persons in senior positions develop due to an insecure past, lack of competence and confidence, hidden motive may not manifest in overt behaviour (Table 1 and 2).

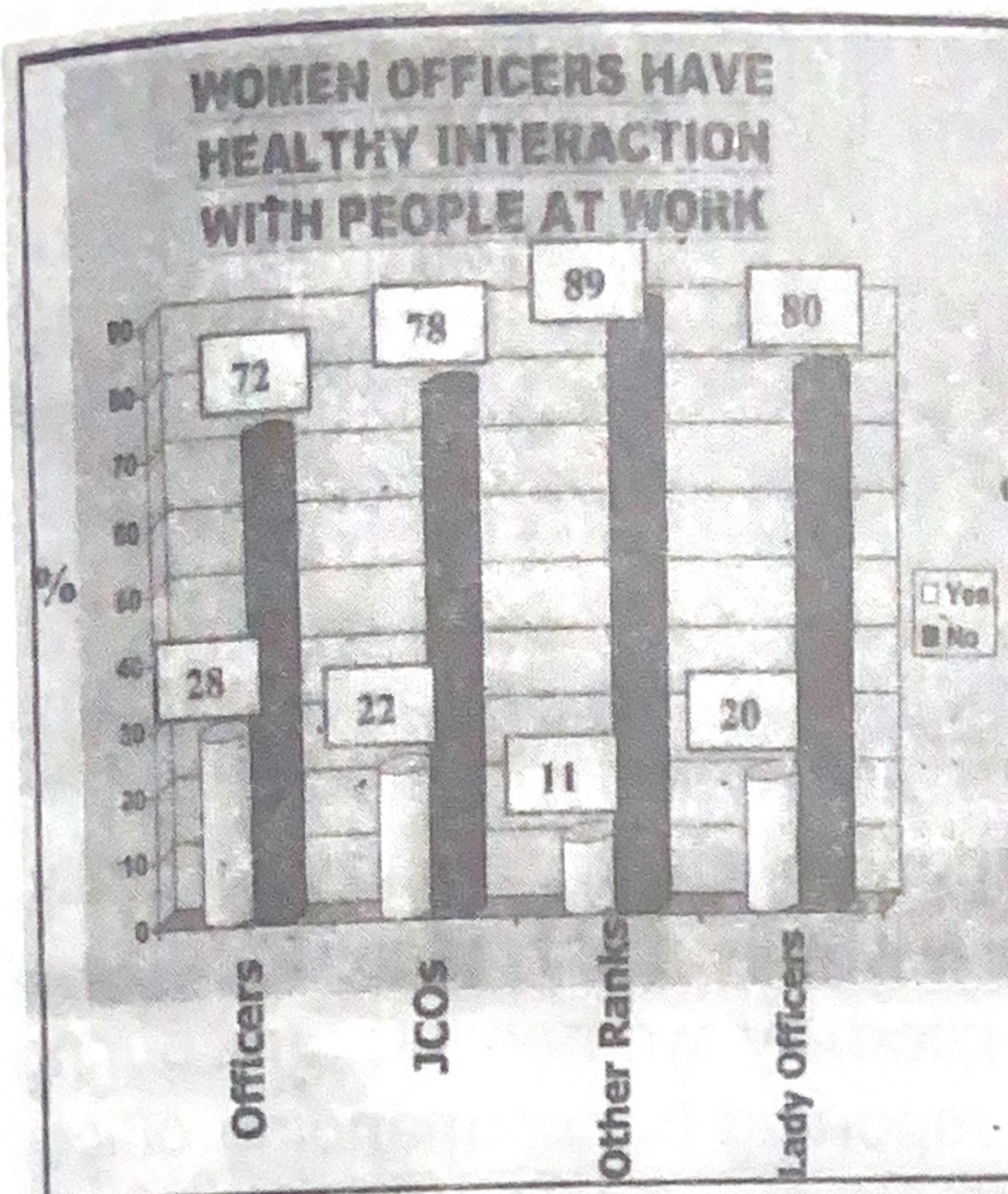


Table 1

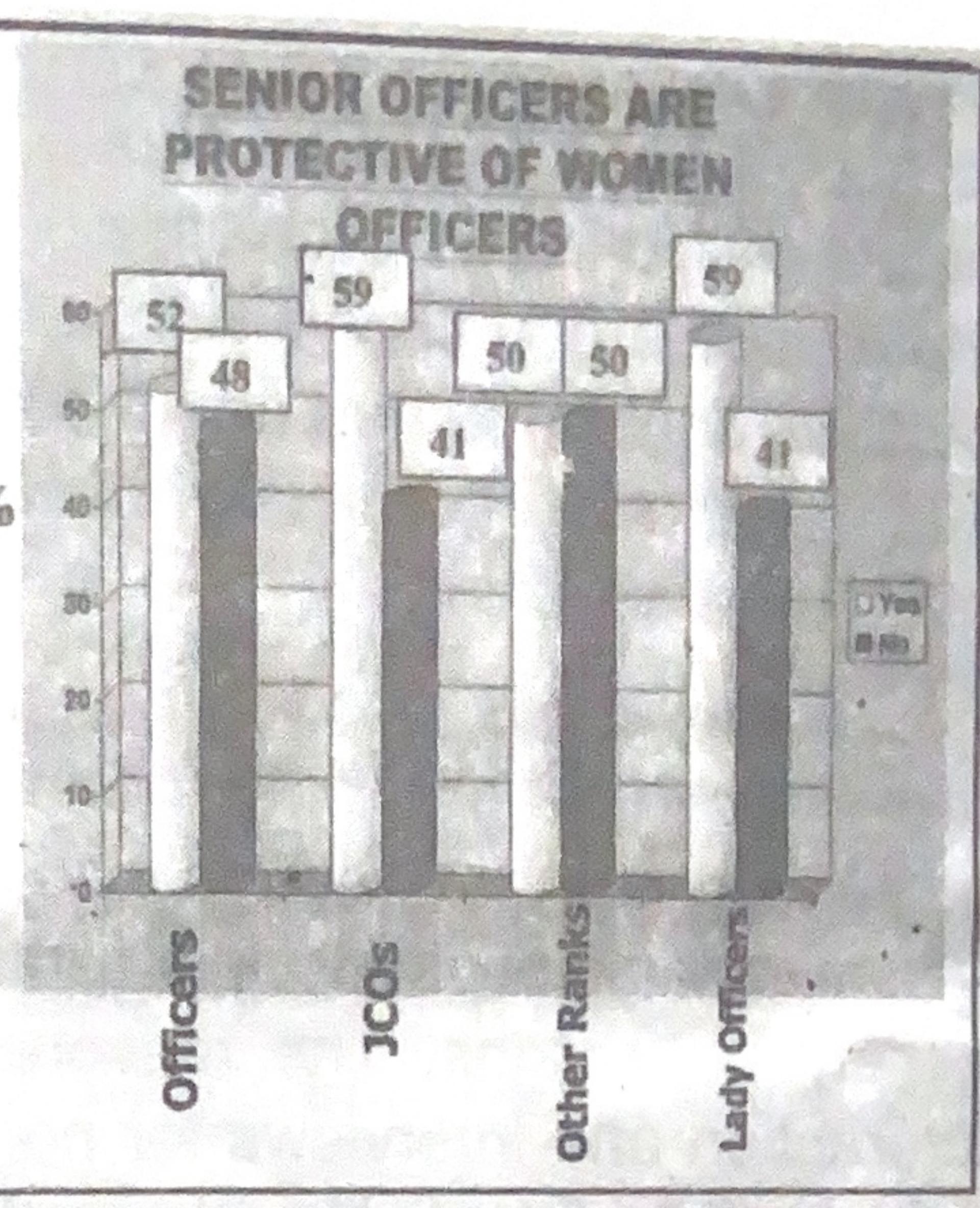


Table 2

Sexual Harassment Issues

The study found that majority of troops hold conflicting set of views on SH. Some individuals point out that there is nothing wrong in doing what comes naturally or a bit of socialising to have some fun. It is not possible for everyone to behave like a saint on seeing a woman and control the animal instinct. Do women really care for minority of men? Women object to male behaviour and still want to work with men, then why should women work in such places where they feel unequal and uncomfortable? Opponents point out that society knows their culture better and still wants women to work in military in the name of democracy and equality. If the situation is so grave that without women army is unable to function then let the jobs be assigned according to ability, aptitude, competence and not equality.

Women also harass men in various forms. In India if a woman raises alarm against a man in public, the first reaction of passers by will be to slap the man assuming that he must be at fault. The young male officers feel that proximity on whatever count, women officers use their charm that causes friction between those who are not in similar position. At times, it is scandalised and viewed with suspicion. Crying of women is disliked by the man and feeling of emotional blackmail chills their thoughts. Each person has a right to defend his view; there can be false accusations by either sex. Another area of worry for male officers is that women can misuse the new legislation being introduced in the parliament. The

nature has created men and women opposite and complementary to each other and not as equals. Any attempt to overcome or alter nature will bring in problems. Women officers are of the opinion that males are secretive and devious about their private lives, but perfectly loud mouthed about other people's lives. Women officers feel that thought process of Indian male is fantasy ridden because of cultural conditioning.

A few cases of adultery, stealing affection and illicit relations are noticed where both genders are equal partners. Written complaints are rare. Victims who report SH always do so reluctantly. Victimisation keeps complainants away in most cases due to a variety of reasons. The reasons cited by women officers during interaction and interviews for non reporting to commanding officer is lack of confidentiality, blame the victim mentality, fear of career progression due to charge of adultery, women being stuck with icons of purity in patriarchal society or conduct unbecoming of an officer. Any women filing a case or speaking out, the public castrates her while the person responsible for the act may face nominal penalties and stay in service. According to rough estimate, only two percent of the cases are reported and most of them are settled outside court with culprit apologising for his behaviour. Harassment inquiry is considered cumbersome and embarrassing by women.

On Being Prisoner of War (POW)

Women officers had no idea of being taken hostage by terrorists as in Iraq or becoming POW in enemy country and how to escape and save themselves. The troops were surprised when asked about a woman officer being taken as a prisoner; most of them recalled mutilation of bodies of Indian soldiers in Kargil War, rape and molestation of women in East Pakistan in 1971 by the Pakistan Army and treatment of US women POWs by Iraqi troops in the Gulf Wars. Some soldiers refreshed the memories of Border Security Force (BSF) personnel cut into pieces by Bangladesh Rifles few years back. As regards treatment of women hostages and prisoners by terrorists, the troops felt that worst could be expected from fundamentalists.

Work Place and Stress

Sources of stress for women soldiers are society, organisations and women themselves. Perception, attitude and belief

of male soldiers that women soldiers do not possess the essential attributes of soldiering add to the stress. Women officers react emotionally to work problems, due to which they are unable to cope, perform and compete well in conflict situations. Women were of the opinion that revealing of the fears, secrets and doubts to another person at the workplace, or otherwise in competitive arena can lead to exploitation and unhealthy competition between genders. Some of them were highly critical of each other. Working women are likely to be prone to heart attacks, blood pressure, paralysis and high cholesterol and kidney problems due to dual stress of working at home and office, which affect the quality of life. Stress has led to consumption of alcohol and tobacco in some cases. In nuclear families, women hide or delay the treatment and live with the problems of stress.

Non-acceptance of women as soldiers by men is due to physical, physiological, psychological, biological, masculine, social and logistical reasons specific to women. Women officers share good communications with younger age group of officers and maintain a work oriented relationship with others. Some cases of tomboyish behaviour noticed amongst women officers were to the dislike of troops. Some women officers contest that they should be free to mix with male friends in off parade hours as in the civil society, being equal, independent and responsible in all respects. Women officers feel that Army requires time to understand women's competence and professional skills. Women officers are of the view that Army is a one-way road, very traditional and follows formal work culture. Women officers want opportunities to prove their competence in the colliding ideals and attitudes between genders. Majority of women officers agree that work atmosphere in the Indian Armed Forces is safer and conducive for women as compared to foreign armies and civil organisations except for some teething problems of adjustment.

Conflict Management

An instance of harassment or maltreatment of women in military attracts more attention and sends a wrong message to youth and society that Army is an unsafe place to work in. All ranks are unanimous that media sensationalise, advertise and humiliate victims and the organisation for its benefit. An aspirant for commission who refused to undergo medical examination by male surgeons

caused enough embarrassment to the organisation due to wide media coverage given to this matter. Media is of the view that these incidents cannot be dealt behind closed doors in a democratic set up and hence media acts as an indicator of happenings in society.

Future Trends

Indian experience of integration of women officers is a decade old and general guidelines are of Western culture. With the induction of women in greater numbers in ranks, the situation will change. The independent women battalions commanded by women officers in operational areas on lines of Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) will change the atmosphere. 185 nations participate in United Nations Peacekeeping operations including India, out of which 1.7 per cent are female soldiers.

There is a need to work out a new set of directives, instructions and ground rules for women soldiers to pursue a creditable and honourable career in the Armed Forces free from myths and fears. What appears today to be a minuscule minority will be a demanding majority tomorrow. The Indian Armed Forces need to study institutional concerns of gender revolution to formulate future strategies for gender integration in the Indian social system. Awareness of change in the working environment needs a positive campaign amongst Army personnel. Military needs to accept the fact that women officers are here to stay, more will come, and gender equality will occupy centre stage in 21st Century.

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