

Here's what SCI CMD thinks about gender equality at work

SCI CMD HK Joshi spoke to PSU Watch on a range of issues pertaining to women, the gender disparity at work, and her own journey to the top as SCI's first woman CMD



New Delhi: A day after women seafarers at state-run Shipping Corporation of India (SCI) set a record as a product tanker vessel, MT Swarna Krishna, manned by an all-women crew, set sail, SCI CMD HK Joshi spoke to PSU Watch on a range of issues pertaining to women, the gender disparity that exists at work, and her own journey to the top as SCI's first woman CMD. The SCI CMD said that there's no dearth of capability in women but they don't get enough opportunities to shine and prove themselves. While asserting that women need to be the change they want to see around themselves, she stressed that the society and the familial system need to change in tandem with work spaces to give women an equal platform. Here are the excerpts:

Q. It is rare to find women rising to the ranks of the CMD in any PSU. We can count the number of female CMDs in the sector on the fingertips. Tell us about your journey.

A. My case is rarer because of the fact that I hadn't been with the Shipping Corporation of India (SCI) since the beginning of my career. When you are part of a company and you ascend the hierarchy through the normal course of promotions, the acceptability level as "one of our own" is natural. In my

case, however, I was an outsider, having come from ONGC where I had been working for 31 years. I joined SCI as Director (Finance) in February 2015 which made the position very challenging and difficult due to a certain resistance to change that I came across, which is a normal human tendency. It is thus natural that there shall be difficulty in getting internal support. What I mean to say is that it wasn't a cakewalk. It was an extremely challenging elevation to this level. But I express my heartfelt gratitude to the government and the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways who had the faith in my capability and who believed in me.

Consequent to my assumption of charge of the CMD's post in September 2019, the company has done very well and we have broken records of a decade in very many ways which is evident in the performance, financials and otherwise.

Q. SCI also just created history when an all-women crew set sail onboard a vessel on March 7. Tell us more about it?

A. SCI has set a new benchmark, created history both in India as well as in the global maritime sector when our tanker, a product carrier, manned for the first time by 'all-women officers' sailed from Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust (JNPT) to Vadinar in Gujarat. The vessel loaded 50,000 MT of Mumbai High Crude Oil and set sail on the eve of International Women's Day, a momentous celebration for all of us to achieve this historic feat.



I don't think the 'All-Women Officers' Sailing' has happened anywhere in the maritime history of the world – a 'national' carrier being commanded and manned entirely by a team of Women Officers.

After having executed it, I asked myself why wasn't this done earlier?

It could have been, perhaps, because people are apprehensive about the outcome, that if all didn't go well on a vessel with only women on board. The attached responsibility inhibits one from taking the risk. So, it's not like the capability did not exist within the organisation. SCl has the highest number of women seafarers. If you see the global average of 2 percent, SCl almost has double that percentage of women seafarers. But the idea of an all-women officers' team sailing was never conceptualised due to the risks associated and the lack of courage to do something different and shoulder that responsibility.

I felt that the time had come to demonstrate and showcase the capability of women who in any case had been doing it. Just that, as an all-women team, they needed the visibility that they deserved and also needed to know our confidence in them to be able to execute. Women can do it. All they need are opportunities. Drawing a parallel to my career, I knew I would be able to lead a company before I was given the opportunity, but it took time for general acceptance and realisation. And that is the story of every capable woman. So, we should not deny women an equal opportunity and an equal platform. If women's capabilities are doubted, then, inclusivity and diversity can never be promoted in a workspace.

Q. How was this received by the women officers who were told that they will have to man an entire vessel by themselves?

A. Oh, they were exuberant!!! That's how it is. Women know that they have the capability to execute something, but they do not get the opportunity to shine. On our part, it took a lot of planning to execute it. But we did it.

I think whenever something is being done for the first time, it is always difficult because there is no precedent. But I hope now that a precedent has now been set, it will open the floodgates of opportunities for women. And this is what I wanted to accomplish — to pave the way for more opportunities for women in the future.



When a woman is in a leadership position, the responsibility on her is so immense that if she fails, she may end up blocking the path for those who are following suit, because, unfortunately, the perception is of a 'negative' role model. So, I am really glad that we executed it so well and this shall improve everyone's confidence levels.

Q. You straddle two key positions at SCI currently — CMD and Director (Finance). What are the challenges that you face here?

A. I am actually in possession of three, not two, key positions currently — CMD and Director (Finance) of SCI and the Managing Director of India Ports Global Ltd (since September 2020). And I am still able to scale new heights and break performance records for the company. It might do well if people acknowledge that handling one position itself is a big task, and three are being handled by me with panache, despite the challenging times of the last year, both the pandemic and the disinvestment. The company is doing well. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown, the company did not shut down for even an hour. The crude oil movement continued along the coasts and our vessels plied – COVID-free. That was a huge achievement. And it is important because the situation was very fluid, uncertain and unprecedented and there was no set path for us to follow. You had to use your own creativity and ingenuity to decide how to sail through this. And I think we did it successfully.



Q. What do you think has taken so long for women to be recognised as able leaders within the sector? And what else needs to change to make the workspace more egalitarian and ensure that women are not overlooked when it comes to choosing leaders?

A. I think, for creating a more equal platform for women, the responsibility should be borne by both the system and the individual. Organisations alone cannot give women an equal footing if there's no support from home. We need to change how our homes and the society functions. We need to change the mechanism through which responsibilities are shared at home. And at the same time, individuals should also take on the responsibility of excelling at work and making no compromises when it comes to discharging their professional duties.

We often hear how girls have outperformed boys at school-level exams or for the Civil Services and other kinds of exams. So, then why is it that as we ascend the system, we find fewer and fewer women at the top? Because somewhere in the middle, they drop out or stay behind, unable to cope with the dual role/pressures. An enabling environment both at home and in office shall go a long way in increasing the numbers. I do not advocate giving concessions to women to bring them at par because that works against creating an egalitarian work-space. But I feel that support needs to come from within homes and families first. There's no dearth of capability. There's a need for a change in our perceptions and mindset.

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