

Our guest today Harshini Kanhekar is India's first woman firefighter. She began shattering stereotypes by becoming the first woman in 46 years to graduate from the National Fire Service College (NFSC) in Nagpur.

Then, from time on the frontline in the fire services Harshini moved to the Oil and National Gas Corporation to be the first woman to handle offshore drilling services.

For Harshini this is all in a day's work, after all she believes no field of work belongs to any gender and that applies especially to alternative careers in the fields of science and engineering which address issues of safety and security.

Through Word to the W.I.S.E, we will continue to build on our legacy: driving transformative change in pursuit of a safer and more resilient society by inspiring more young women to envision a career in the field of STEM.

Remember, you too can nominate more remarkable women to be part of the show. Or just send in your questions for future guests on the Word to the WISE podcast.

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You can also **read** along as you **listen** to the Word to the WISE host *Shivraj Parshad* in conversation with *Harshini Kanhekar*:

Host: Harshini Kanhekar, a real pleasure to have you on the Word to the WISE podcast.

Harshini Kanhekar: I thank you very much Shivraj.

Host: Describe for us your journey. When and how did your passion for the frontline services first begin?

Harshini Kanhekar: I would say our passion can drive us to complete our dream, but terms and conditions applies. There are two types of passion. One is hobby based, where you can just do practice, practice, and practice. And second is study based. So for this, I should say two points. If your passion is study base, you should choose you your subjects wisely. And second is chance. So I would like to tell you that you will be surprised to know, becoming a firefighter or doing fire engineering was never my dream. It happened accidently. Whenever I was pursuing my Bsc. Graduation. I enrolled myself for NCC (National Cadet Corps) Air Wing, which, and I would say that was the biggest turning point of my career because when I reached to NCC unit the admissions were already over and I was helplessly standing there and requesting them to get me enrolled. Our commanding officer saw me, and he took my small interview, why I want to join NCC. So I answered him that, I really think NCC candidates are like mini soldiers. They are Staying away from their parents. They're staying in the tents, they are doing their own things. They are washing utensils and polishing their shoes and all. So I considered them a mini, soldier, and I want to live that life because I would like to join armed forces in future and serve my nation. So he was very much impressed with my answer and on the spot he gave me admission, in NCC Air Wing. And

that's why I'm here talking to you. That was the chance I got. And my entire life has been changed.

Host: And was your family supportive of all your choices and dreams?

Harshini Kanhekar: Oh, yes, of course. I should mention my father is very keen about education and he always tried new things in educations. Whenever we offer any competitive exams, he used to get us it's syllabus. He used to take us to that approach towards education is very, very systematic. And of course respective college building. And he used to tell us about the job opportunities out of it. So when I was undergraduate, I tried many exams. I gave bank clerical, bank PO exams just to get habitual of this competitive exam. One fine day, my father bought me a form of CAT (Common Admission Test) exam in which I was not at all interested. And I said, my father. Papa, this is not my field and I cannot pass this. It needs big dedication. Then my father replied, Beta (child) who asked you to pass this I just want, you should do your paper black, and you should go through this exam. You should practice this, this kind of exam, and you should know importance of time and important of negative marking. So, in such kind of atmosphere, I was in my house during my childhood. And for a small example, I can give during shopping with my father in a clothes shop the shopkeeper was showing me some dress and he was requesting me and convincing me to purchase that dress, which I was not liking much. That time my father said if she will like it, she will purchase it. So don't force us. So I got this kind of freedom to select my things beginning from the dress, through to career which is the biggest thing. So I got big support from my family.

Host: That's fabulous Harshini, but now you were the first woman ever to graduate from the National Fire Service College (NFSC). Clearly quite a male dominated institution at the time. W, what was it like first approaching the college, then going through the entire process of applying, getting over the hurdles of admission and then finally facing the whole interview process?

Harshini Kanhekar: Yes. As I told you, it was never my dream. After Bsc. I took admission in MBA. I was not at all interested. During the time I was trying for armed forces, I was searching for the advertisement in the papers for Army, Navy and Air Force. That time one of my friends said you want to wear a uniform right? (hindi) Then go buy a Fire College form (hindi).. So I was like is it? Fire College has a uniform? (hindi). Only for that uniform thing. I purchased that form, and I was unaware of the fact that it's a gents college and still people doesn't know about this national college it is situated in, Nagpur. And it is only one in Southeast Asia. So as I told you about my father, I showed my form to my father. As per his habit he took me to National Fire Service College on his Bajaj (scooter). When, we were entering into the college, everybody was looking at us, like how, how this girl is coming into the college? They thought there is a general post office building, which is adjacent to National Fire Service College and this is a sister building they look alike. So they thought they might have come to drop some letter, and by mistake they have come to National Fire Service College, but they were not knowing that I was having that format in my hand.. And then went to the dias and I told the person standing over there. That sir, I want to take admission here. He looked at me up and down and he said; Madam, this is a boy's college, try elsewhere (hindi). I said, Sir, the Ad only says Bsc graduates, nothing else (hindi). So he said I teach here I should know. Try the Army, Navy or Air Force this is not for you. (hind). I was so surprised. I was so angry. How dare he say to me like that? This is not your thing because you are a girl.. And I was very upset with the fact and I went back to home. And I filled that

form and I remember the last day when I filled that form along with a friend Shilpa, we both filled the form and when to submit the form and there was some person was standing over there looking at us and laughing at us and very cruelly he talked to his friend, like, you know, girls are fighting for 33% reservation. I said, sir. I don't believe in 33, I believe in 50 50. And I folded my form and put it in the drop box and went home like a burning rocket. Now I will show these people I will come to this college and I will take admission only here (hindi), just this very college to show them (hindi). So I'm very very thankful to that man only because of him, I'm talking to you right now.

Host: And, clearly the interview process wasn't easy. So what was it like and what intrigued you about it so much that you did not mind the next challenge. How different is it for you as a woman to face that kind of opposition?

Harshini Kanhekar: Actually, it's a residential course, . The very first thing people doesn't know about this college itself, I was one of them. And when I got selected for this post the first stage was the written exam. I passed the written exam. And after that there was medical examination. Okay. So there was board of senior doctors there , and everybody was surprised looking at me, A girl has passed and come here (hindi)? They were not having medical criteria for girls, into that advertisement itself. It was a big, big thing that, a girl has passed (hindi). So they asked. Childit is such a tough course, can you handle it? (hindi)I said yes Doctor!. Don't know Why not I will definitely manage (hindi). So that time I passed my medical and the last stage was the personal interview. And up to that time, the news was being circulated. in the National Fire Service College that a girl is coming to study here! After ages and so long! (hindi) they get the news that a girl is coming to their college to study. And everybody had come just to take a look at me. I was sitting in the common room with my father and all my certificates, and everybody was coming. My seniors, my super seniors, all came to just look at me and they were bending down and looking at me and I really enjoyed that time. And when my number came, when I walked through that passage, when I walked through that staircase and went inside the director's room. To my every step, everybody was saying, you are the first girl who is walking through this passage. . You are the first girl who is climbing the staircase. You are the first girl who is entering into the Director's room. And that was a big thing for them.

Host: So clearly it was a first and a lot of things must've been going through your mind as you walked up the steps and went through that whole experience, what did it tell you about handling life experiences that continue to challenge many women. And looking back is there anything you would do differently?

Harshini Kanhekar: Yes, my interview was very much challenging for me and for them also, because first time a girl was passed that exam and came for the interview. They all were really surprised to see me. They asked me some general questions first, a study related question. And after that, they started , all mind games, questions like, you know, Harshini , you will be the Kiran Bedi of Fire services, how you're feeling, you know, there are continuing fires in the Kuwait city and other cities. And you have to fight fire for two to three, three months, so will you be able to do that? In short the, they wanted to check my psychology, my confidence level, and I will do it or not. . So all the time I used to answer them. Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Yes, I will do it, I will do it..I will do it. . Give me chance. Give me chance. Give me a chance. And lastly, I, I had to say Sir if I have to fail so let me have a chance to fail as well? (hindi). There were 5 grace marks for NCC certificate holders, as I was having it. So I had my certificates in my box and I gave it to them. They just

acknowledged it and gave it back to me. And I said, I have some more certificates to show I was having near about 70 certificates, seven zero in all extra curricular activities. Yeah, and they say that no, no, those are not required. I said, sir, I want to show you and forcefully, I showed them all my certificates. Then only they got to know about me, more about me. They said ok Harshini you play karate, you play basketball you know Kathak too, you write slogans also. Okay. You do posters also, and you can draw Rangoli also., . So I would say interview is very, very crucial time for every student who only in that stipulated timewe have to show our whole personality to the interviewer. So interview was very, very important. Yes I would say in our society in our Indian society, women's were supposed to sit at home and not to study and just look after kids and kitchen. So hats off to our constitution that we have equal opportunity and rights to take education. Yes, I would say a woman. Why only women, women, and men, everyone should follow their dreams. So we should see dream first.

Host: Ah! Now your challenges didn't end at the interview or admission process, as you entered the gates of NFSC, how did you meet the demands of the course? Give us a sense of the day in the life of early training in a firefighters career?

Harshini Kanhekar: Yes. The very first day I would like to share when I got my uniform, my pride. I went to the college. That person who met me on the first day, he was there at the gate. I went to him, I saluted him and said Jai hind! remember what you said to me? and in a very embarrassed way he said welcome madam. (hindi)And he was the person in the next batches who used to guide girls to how to fill the form and put it, put it in the right place. This was the revolution. But for that I had to work hard. I have to show my strength. . So taking admission.. Up to taking admission. It was Harshini Kanhekar, but when I enter into it, I was the first girl! And till date I'm the first girl. So I was always been Guinea pig. Everybody was looking at me that she going for any mistake, she do any mistake and many of them were wanted that I should do any mistake and they should point out finger or. But I didn't give any chance in entire this my tenure in the college. I didn't go late. I didn't take any leaves and I didn't get any personal punishment. And for this, I work really hard And the course is very vast, very beautiful and it is a kind of 70% practical and 30% theory. So we have to go to college thrice a day. It's not like other general colleges. Like you are taking your bag and going to college and coming back in the evening. No, we have to attend this college thrice a , Day. Morning, 6.30 dungaree, gumboot helmet. And we used to do firefighting drills mock drills. Again, 9 o'clock our squad uniform and other classes and again, 3.30 in the afternoon, again, dungaree, gumboot and helmet and the firefighting drills.

Host: And what was the experience during the practical attachment test?

Harshini Kanhekar: See this was three and half year course during my time. Now, the criteria has been changed. So my seventh semester was a practical attachment. so we have to go to any two Metro cities and serve there. So we went to Kolkata Behala Fire station for three months and Delhi fire station for three months. So during our Kolkata practical attachment we did mainly industrial visits and during my Delhi practical attachment uh, we actually fought with fire, real fires. So uh, during my 3 months stay there, attended more than 40 fire and emergency calls there. I learned many things. We were getting posted. Daily we were getting deployed on different types of vehicles, fire tender, foam tender, water browser, rescue responder , different kinds of vehicles. And we have to attend the related calls. And I used to go for night calls and day-night calls. And we really were waiting for this practical attachment because during our college practical, we used to fight mock drills only, and we were waiting for the real fire. So we used to say to our one station officer, sir. we want to see

big fires! (hindi) he used to laugh - what kind of firefighters are you? (hindi). So, because we wanted to learn and learn and not only firefighting, we did the rescue calls. We did animal rescue calls, drowning rescues. And so, many.

Host: So it must have been quite demanding. So how can young women who want to enter the space today, be better prepared?

Harshini Kanhekar: See, I would say you should be passionate towards your goals. You don't have to prepare much your passion will take you to that level. Because before joining NFSC, I was preparing for SSB interview, Service Selection Board. So I used to go for some classes. For that we have to prepare for some psychological tests. So that time I used to mug up about some common questions. If you are going for any, SSB interview and if interview is asking you questions that tell me 10 things, important things about your city. That time I used to mug up the things like there's biggest medical college in Asia in Nagpur. There is only one Fire Services College in Nagpur, National fire service college, which is only one in entire Southeast Asia. So I used to mug up the things, but I never thought that I will take admission in that college only. So these kinds of preparation SSB preparation or psychological tests, my NCC tenure made me really strong enough to sustain on the ground duties and the firefighting for the longer time. So I would say only passion can sustain you to do your dream work.

Host: Now you joined the large Oil and Natural Gas Corporation or ONGC in the onshore fire services. And then they deputed you to the offshore, drilling. Something quite off limits to women until I think 2013. So how did that make you feel about the job you were asked to do?

Harshini Kanhekar: Oh, yes. When I passed my BFire, I got selected by ONGC Oil and Natural Gas Corporation. I got posted, I got posted at Mehsana asset, , which is in Gujarat. That time people used to say that, you know, womans cannot work in off shore. This is not a woman's world. This is only a man's world and blah, blah, blah. Okay. So that time. I was thinking What is that? I asked my boss, I want to visit offshore too. So he says, see, I cannot post it there, but I can for your visit there. So during our induction training , those people who were posted at onshore they asked to go to off shore to just see how the offshore world is. And I'm talking about year, 2006. When I joined ONGC in year 2006, I went to Pawan Hans our heli- base at Juhu, Mumbai. I went there in my jeans and shoes, safety shoes. Everybody was looking at me? How has this girl come, only men go there (hindi) Oh! She must be from HR must have come with someone's form (hindi) kind of thing. So I said I'm a fire officer. I'm going to offshore to this. ICP platform .They all were looking at me This girl is going offshore? (hindi)that was a big thing. They prepared my manifest. I got into the chopper . And when I landed there, everybody was looking at me. A girl has come here! (hindi) I have kept that manifesto still with me, it is very precious for me. So I went there and I told my boss , I just don't want to go and come back. I want to stay there.. So I did some fire audit. I stayed there and I've seen everything there. What fire systems are there and why girls cannot be part of offshore services? And I came back and in 2010 my management, I'm very much thankful to my management. Our Head Fire Services called me up one fine day and said Harshini you are a fire engineer and your, other batchmates are also fire engineers. And they are getting exposure of offshore services. Only because of girl, if you're not getting exposure of offshore services, then what is the meaning of your education? So we are planning to post you to offshore drilling services. We are creating a. post you there. Are you interested to go? I said sir (hindi) I'm dying for it. And they created a post for me there, just to get exposure of off

shore and very, very thankful day. I'm talking about year 2010 and that time my boss was there and he used to send me for fire enquiry committee. Once he sent me with the enquiry committee, I went with 2 people. And I did. their fire inquiry and then came back. From next time he sent me alone, . Now you are experiencing right? And now you should go alone. That time. I didn't bother for other facilities. Like I should get a separate room. I should get separate facilities. There was no facility, no infrastructure at all. I used to get uh, electrical engineers's room or mechanical engineers's room. And they used to come and take their dungaree and gumboot and say madam use our space (hindi). I didn't make any tantrums that time that I should get some separate, otherwise I wouldn't have done it. So I used to go there alone and staying without any infrastructure there. I did my work. And in 2013, one policy declared in ONGC that women can be posted at offshore services. And it started in a regular basis of 14 days on of duties. So it was a big, big, big thing.

Host: And was it important to show that you could do it better, especially since at the time you also got married and the general view is that women face the biggest dilemma of balancing it all - a career and a family.

Harshini Kanhekar: Oh, yes. I would say uh, yes. People used to say such things after the marriage, if the schedule rule changes. But most importantly I would share when I got pregnant and I used to join my services. At that time. That was really very crucial time because. At that time only people can make loose comments about you that if you're pregnant and you're taking rest or you're going for some medical checkups and you're coming late, that ,time people get a fine chance to make loose comments. And that time I was very cautious that I don't want to give any chance to anyone to figure me out. So I, I worked doubly hard during that time, and I didn't give any chance to anyone. So , yes, we have to prove in such scenarios, doubly hard.

Host: And what's really fantastic is that you're also an experienced biker you've traveled to world's highest motorable road, the Leh Ladakh's Khardung-la pass and to Kargil? Is it important to also pursue your passion and scale new heights in that area as well as pursue your career?

Harshini Kanhekar: Yes, of course Shivraj. Because I don't want to die as only fire officer yaar!. I want to pursue my hobbies and enjoy my hobbies. One experience I would like to share. I went , for some training in our training centre.ONGC's own recognized training center. And after the training, I was catching the bus and one girl came running to me and , she came running to me and asked, are you Harshini? I said, yes, next thought came in my mind that, oh, now she would say you are the first lady fire engineer. But no, what she said are you a biker? I felt so good that there is one more identity than being a fire officer. And I said yes, I'm a hardcore biker and I'm very thankful to my husband. He inspired me. He's my inspiration. We met in a Biker Club and got married. . And he always inspired me for the solo rides. I did my solo rides in Arunachal, Meghalaya on the rented bike only because of him. And the one more thing ,when I was pregnant, I was not able to ride bike. So that time My husband also did not take any ride, because I was not able to ride. . So this is the combination I got in my life. And I'm very thankful to him.

Host: And you also conferred with the NITI Aayog's Women Transforming India award . How did that award make you feel and what did it mean to you?

Harshini Kanhekar: This means a lot to me Shivraj. because I, I would say this is the kind of receipt I got for all the hard work I gone through during my tenure in that college. And till date I'm going through. Even in 2018, I received First Lady Award by hand of the honorable President of India at Rashtrapati Bhawan and I met many first ladies in all the fields. I met the first Mines Officer, I met the first Marine engineer. I've met many firsts, and I can understand what the first girl goes through and so hats off to all the first ladies , who did hard work and open the door to other girls to enter in that particular fields. .

Host: That is really, truly fantastic. So how critical has the role of women become in addressing and advancing public safety challenges in India?

Harshini Kanhekar: See as I told you, I meet with many first girls.. There are first in army, Navy, Air Force, Fire, Marine, and many things where we can relate with public safety. So! Hats off to the first ladies in all the fields who has opened the field for other womans. And yes, now we can see, there are many girls in all the fields. Now women's are fighting , women's are flying fighter planes. So these are a kind of new policies are coming in. We cannot describe any area on gender basis. Okay. So this question is kind of not relevant, I would say because safety is not any genders general scene. Okay. Not any book can say that this can be read by men only, or women only, or not any bike say this can be rode by male or a female. Okay. So no any field is a gender based. So I think all fields are neutral and for everyone.

Host: And finally, Harshini for women listening to this interview from your experience as a continuing frontline engineer and a firefighter, what would you tell them about preparing for a career in this field of science and engineering? Most importantly, what are the opportunities out there now?

Harshini Kanhekar: See, I would say parents plays a very important role in that where your child is inclined to, which subject. Okay. So I'm thankful to my parents that they got to know my passion. Where is my passion is so we should dream first. We have to follow our dreams. When I. got my firefighters dress . I'm so fortunate that I'm the first woman in India who donned that dress and went to the college and everybody was looking at me. By wearing this dungaree, gumboot and helmet is she going to a (hindi) , fancy dress competition. But they were not knowing where I was actually going (hindi) and they got to know afterwards. When , all media came to me and they got to know about this college and about this school. So there is no gender bias for any field. And we should dream for our hobbies, we should follow our dreams and all now I think there are no any field left which are not open for women. So we, women can try for all the fields where they pursue.

Host: And what are the skills or aptitude they should have.

Harshini Kanhekar: See at the beginning, when I told you about, there are two types of passion, one is hobby based and one is study based. Okay. So if it is study base, we should choose our subjects very wisely because when I did my 10th class. I was not liking maths very well. So I was not going to take a math subject further, but my sister told me. You should go for the general science. You should take all the subjects because your mind might change afterwards after some time. If you say after 12 that yeah, I want to become engineer but you will be not having maths, a maths subject with you, then you will not be able to become engineer. So that turning point, you know, a subject selection is very important. So we should be very thoughtful during our subjects selection. And this is called this, I would

say , skill. Whatever subject as I wanted to pursue my Armed Forces, because when I joined this National Fire Service College, my father took extra efforts to make me perfect. Make me perfect as a fire officer Driving truck, driving heavy vehicle is compulsory for us. So I used to learn a truck. I learned driving trucks. I used to park the truck beside my house, and everybody was looking at our place. And they are mad doing all this they said (hindi) And my father used to say 'My daughter must be perfect' (hindi) I was not knowing swimming. He trained me to swim. He trained me to drive a heavy vehicles and he made me perfect. This kind of skill, you have to be ready enough to choose our career or in which career you are inclined with.

Host: Harshini, thank you so much for sharing your inspiring story on the Word to the WISE podcast.

Harshini Kanhekar: Thank you so much. It was entirely my pleasure.