

EQUAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN AND MEN IN UNIFORMED FORMATIONS AS ASSESSED BY WOMEN STUDENTS AT MILITARY UNIVERSITIES – A PILOT STUDY

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Purpose: The aim of this article is to determine the level of equality of opportunities for professional development for women and men in uniformed formations as perceived by female students of military universities. The following research problems were formulated: in the opinion of female students of military academies, do uniformed formations provide the same career development opportunities for women as for men? What, in the opinion of female respondents, are the key barriers to career development for women entering service in uniformed formations, including the military?

Design/methodology/approach: A survey questionnaire tool was used to address these research questions. The study included 80 female students of civilian studies at military universities.

Findings: According to female students of military universities, men have more opportunities for professional development in uniformed formations compared to women. The main barriers to women's professional development are lower strength and fitness, stereotyping of women, difficulties in combining professional and family roles, especially the role of mother, discrimination and misogyny, and the domination of male culture in the services.

Research limitations/implications: Due to the unrepresentative nature of the sample, the research is treated as a pilot study and the results will be used to construct research hypotheses for further in-depth research. In the future, it would be worthwhile to conduct research among officers of uniformed formations.

Originality/value: Research on women in the military remains fragmented. There is a lack of studies on equal professional opportunities in uniformed formations.

Keywords: equal opportunities, uniformed formations, women, challenges.

1. Introduction

Governments and military leaders in many countries around the world have recognised the importance and potential of the female population in the military and are actively working to create the conditions for their successful professional development. This not only promotes gender equality, but also ensures a more effective and diverse defence force capable of

responding to contemporary challenges and threats. The number of women in each of the uniformed formations that operate in Poland is increasing. In the army, for example, they have quadrupled in the last eight years. Today, one in eight professional soldiers is already a woman, and in the so-called voluntary conscription it is almost one in three military personnel (Lasota-Krawczyk, 2024). However, despite the growing role of women in the services, there is still no shortage of challenges and stereotypes they have to face while serving (Waterman, 2023; Erwin, 2022; Reis, Menezes, 2020). Serving in a male-dominated environment with stereotypical attitudes towards women is not easy and requires exceptional mental toughness (Rybka, 2023, p. 96). Being a universal and easily identifiable characteristic, gender is particularly susceptible to stereotyping and various forms of discrimination (Willis-Frazier, 2024; Różanska, 2022; Moczyłowska, Szydło, 2017). Women in the labour market still face a lack of equal opportunities for professional development (Basińska, Wiciak, 2015; Rakowska, 2020). This phenomenon is particularly observed in hierarchical organisations, including uniformed organisations, where men have more chances for promotion, especially when it comes to command positions (Holmberg, Alvinus, 2024; Rudnicka, 2017). On the other hand, social pressures and large staff shortages in the services (Moczyłowska, 2024) are causing the formations to open up more and more to accepting women into the service. In this context, it is justifiable to investigate how equality of career opportunities is assessed by women studying at military universities, i.e. those who are a natural potential source of cadres for uniformed formations. The aim of the article is to determine the level of equality of opportunities for professional development between men and women in uniformed formations as perceived by female students of military universities. The following research problems were formulated:

- 1) In the opinion of female students of military schools, do uniformed formations offer the same career opportunities for women as for men?
- 2) what, in the opinion of female respondents, is the key barrier to career development for women entering service in uniformed formations, including the military?

In order to solve the research problems formulated in this way, the diagnostic survey method was used and the tool was a survey questionnaire. The research covered 80 female civilian students of selected military universities. Their names must be withheld due to the specificity of the functioning of these universities in the current geopolitical situation.

2. Literature review

As of 1 March 2024, there are 17 334 women serving professionally in the Polish army (Milosz, 2024). Women serve in all corps and all types of armed forces. They serve in command, technical, medical and educational positions, as well as in the capacity of regular soldiers. This is linked to a general trend in society whereby women are successfully taking up employment in professions that have been mainly associated with men since their inception.

The principle of equal opportunities focuses on the creation of conditions and opportunities for decision-making, on a change of perspective relating to the social and family life of women and men, eliminating the numerous obstacles encountered by women (Debusscher 2023; Hejdak, 2022, p. 17). Today, many organisations are introducing their own gender equality policies. Despite this, gender gaps still exist, especially in terms of salaries and promotions, and progress seems to be slow (Fauser, Mooi-Reci, 2025; Andrade, 2022, p. 158). It is still not possible to speak of equal access for women and men to managerial positions (García-Cid et al., 2025; Moczydłowska, Talaśka, 2022, p. 4) and entrepreneurial activities (Nevi et al., 2025). The reason for this is the deep-rooted stereotypes and cultural expectations that significantly affect professional opportunities and the treatment of women in the labour market in both the public sector and business entities (Hanna et al., 2025; Suresh et al., 2025; Javed, 2022, p. 27).

Promoting equal opportunities for women in the uniformed services should be central to these institutions (Willis-Frazier, 2024; Likhomanov et al., 2020). The integration of women in the armed forces can follow two development scenarios: either women adapt to the norms and orders that exist there, which are traditionally masculine in nature, or through their presence they change the structure and nature of the army, making it as gender-neutral as possible (Smith, Rosenstein, 2017). The career advancement of women serving in the military has become an integral part of the modern armed forces in recent years (Moore, 2020; Nuciari, 2018). As society has evolved and gender role stereotypes have changed, women have gained more opportunities to serve in the military and reach the pinnacle of military careers (Matheson, Lyle, 2017). It is worth highlighting the expansion of women's access to different military specialities: they can choose not only medical, administrative or psychological fields, but also engage in combat training, engineering work, piloting and other areas previously considered exclusively male (Soeters, 2020). This is why it is such an important achievement to create an enabling environment for the professional development of women in military structures. This includes programmes that support career advancement, access to education and training, as well as a mentoring system in which experienced female military officers help younger female colleagues to solve professional tasks (Cole, 2024; Khraban, 2024). An important aspect is the creation of equal opportunities for men and women in military service. This means excluding all forms of discrimination, providing opportunities to reconcile service with family

life and creating special programmes for mothers in service (Ellemers, 2018). It is clear from research that recognising the importance of women in the military and efforts to facilitate their professional development is a significant step towards gender equality and increased military effectiveness worldwide (Willis-Frazier, 2024; Sharma, 2022; Mihalčová, Pružinský, 2022). By actively engaging women in military roles, the military can draw on a wider talent pool, foster innovation and adaptability, and ultimately build a stronger defence force capable of meeting the challenges of the modern world (Negrão et al., 2024; Erwin, 2022; Prykhodko et al., 2020). Ultimately, achieving true gender equality in the military will not only benefit individual women, but will also strengthen military institutions and contribute to wider social progress (Ellemers, 2018). It is essential to recognise and address the unique challenges faced by women in the military and to create environments where all individuals, regardless of gender, can thrive and contribute to the defence and security of their nations. With the active involvement of women, the capacity and effectiveness of military operations is enhanced (Kusmiyati, Efendy, Utama, 2017). Women bring their unique approaches and perspectives to solving strategic tasks, contributing to more flexible and innovative work in the military environment.

3. Methods

The aim of the research presented in this article was to determine the level of equal opportunities for women's professional development in uniformed formations in the perception of women studying at military universities, i.e. potential candidates for service in the army. An additional aim was to identify the challenges that, in the perception of the respondents, are posed to women entering service in uniformed formations. Due to the unrepresentative nature of the sample, the survey is treated as a pilot study and the results will be used to construct research hypotheses for further in-depth research. The survey was conducted in February 2025 among 80 full-time female students of civilian studies at military universities. Their names have been withheld. The selection of the research sample was purposive. The following research problems were formulated:

In the opinion of female students at military universities, do uniformed formations offer the same career opportunities for women as for men?

What, in the opinion of female respondents, are the key barriers to career development for women undertaking service in uniformed formations, including the military?

In the course of conducting the research, 80 fully completed questionnaires were collected. The research was fully voluntary and anonymous. 100% of the respondents were women between the ages of 19 and 25.

4. Results

The majority, 61.25 % or 49 female students, are of the opinion that uniformed formations provide more development opportunities for men than for women. Only one out of every one respondents (33, 75 % of respondents) believes that women in uniformed formations have the same opportunities for development as men, and 5 % of respondents have no opinion on this issue. Importantly, none of the female respondents selected a response suggesting that women in uniformed formations have more opportunities for development than men.

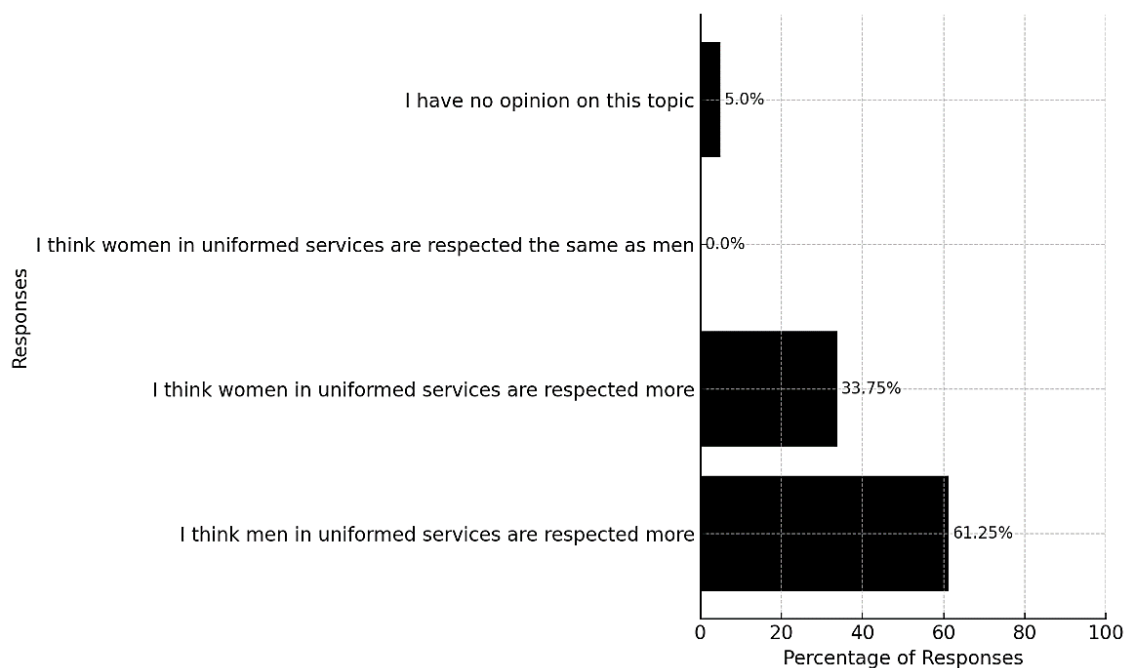


Figure 1. Opinion of female respondents on equal development opportunities for women and men in uniformed formations.

Source: Own study based on the survey.

The analysis of the responses of the female students surveyed to the open-ended questions made it possible to identify some of the most important barriers to career development for women undertaking service in uniformed formations, including the military (Table 1).

Table 1.

Barriers to career development for women entering service in uniformed formations, including the military

Key barriers to career progression for women entering service in uniformed formations, including the military	N = 80	%
Lower physical predisposition of women in relation to men	25	31,25
Difficulty of reconciling service with the role of mother	15	18,75
Stereotyping of women	11	13,75
Difficulty of fitting into a 'masculine work environment', the prevailing 'male culture' in the services	10	12,5
Discrimination against women during promotion and misogyny	8	10
The need to prove one's worth to men and gaslighting	7	8,75

Cont. table 1.

Sanitary aspects	3	3,75
Low number of women in the services	2	2,5
Exposure to an all-male management team	2	2,5
Weaker mental predisposition of women compared to men	1	1,25
Brak odpowiedzi	6	7,5

Note. Here you should explain the abbreviations used in the table and provide additional information that is important to the reader, e.g. data source, symbols, marks.

Source: own compilation based on the survey.

The barrier that was most frequently indicated (25 out of 80 respondents) is the lower physical aptitude of women compared to men. In their responses, female respondents pointed to aspects such as the differences in physical conditions between women and men, and having to perform the same duties, having to carry heavy equipment that is not suited to women's physical capabilities. As many as 15 women surveyed pointed out the difficulty of reconciling the role of mother with service. The survey shows that young women perceive uniformed formations as places that significantly limit the possibility of work-life balance. In their view, a female officer often has to choose between her career and the opportunity to fulfil social roles such as that of a mother. One interviewee pointed out that 'maternity leave causes a woman to lose her competencies, she does not participate in training, she does not get promoted, while men develop during this time'. In turn, another interviewee points out that "women often have to reconcile a demanding and unpredictable job with a caring for children, while at the same time needing to meet the same demands as men". As it turns out, combating stereotypes is also a major challenge. Female students are aware of the extent of stereotyping of women in the uniformed services. In their opinion, female officers have to 'fight against social stereotypes about the place and role of women', 'fight against the conviction that women are not fit to work in the uniformed services', 'break the stereotype that they got their position not because of their competence but because of other factors', 'prove that a woman can be just as good, even though she is physically weaker'. The qualitative analysis of the free responses to the open-ended questions made it possible to extract the dominant content depicting the barriers to professional development perceived by the female participants in the study (cf. Figure 1).



Figure 2. Qualitative content analysis - barriers to career progression for women in the uniformed services.

Source: own elaboration.

The results of the survey show that one of the challenges faced by women serving in uniformed formations is the difficulty of fitting into the ‘male work environment’, the prevailing ‘male culture’ in the services. Respondents are aware that despite cultural changes over the past 20 years, the number of women in the uniformed services is still low (2 respondents indicate that the low number of women is in itself a barrier to women's professional development).

5. Discussion

The findings presented are consistent with the results of the study other authors, who emphasise that the numerical predominance of men, especially their predominance in command positions, means that the uniformed services are characterised by a masculine culture based on power, as well as a traditional, rigid and hierarchical structure in which the key role is played by armament, service hierarchy, the obligation to wear uniforms, service discipline and absolute subordination to the orders of superiors (Chronowska, 2021). According to the respondents, finding oneself and proving one's competence in such an environment is a major challenge for women. The respondents' opinions suggest that women in the military face the challenge of “fitting in with the leading group and the style of being, speech, which often involves crossing certain cultural patterns in order for women to be taken seriously”. Discrimination against women during promotion and misogyny is a challenge that the female military students surveyed mentioned just as often. In their view, women in uniformed

formations have a 'difficult path to promotion'. Discrimination is a serious problem, according to female participants in the survey. Due to the preponderance of men in the services, discrimination most often affects women.

Discrimination, as well as the previously mentioned stereotyping, is linked to another challenge pointed out by the interviewees, namely the need for women to prove their professional worth to men. Women in the uniformed services can be victims of gaslighting. Gaslighting is a form of bullying and manipulation whereby the victim is deliberately given false information to the extent that she is unable to rely on her memory and distinguish the truth (Khan, Tariq, Majeed, 2024, p. 110). Female respondents (3.75%) perceive sanitary aspects as a barrier. The lack of specification of this type of response allows the author to conjecture that the study had in mind the conditions of the training ground activities, the need to interact with people who may raise sanitary concerns. For the respondents, a significant barrier is also the fact that 'the superiors, men with very long experience in the services, prejudiced against women, especially young ones, have views from the last century'. The last group of challenges identified from the survey results are the weaker mental aptitude of women, which was pointed out by only one respondent. The respondent pointed out that stressful situations (strongly service-related) affect women more than men.

6. Conclusions

Achieving full gender equality in uniformed formations, including the military, requires constant, intensive work on eliminating barriers that may hinder women's career development. Women's career development is hindered mainly by the influence of gender stereotypes. The literature analysis presented and our own research confirmed that gender has a significant impact on women's career building. Prejudice and stereotypes hinder women's career development by limiting their access to professional information and military education, while command misogyny makes it difficult for women to obtain and remain in leadership positions. According to the respondents, women choosing to pursue a career in the uniformed services face a number of challenges. One of them is the need to prove their competence and gain acceptance from colleagues who perceive women as the weaker sex. Women are less likely to be promoted than their male colleagues and have to wait longer to realise their career aspirations. Female officers have to fight stereotypes while on duty, often very hurtful and firmly rooted in a male-dominated environment. The masculine culture of the service and the need to fit in is a major challenge. There is no denying that women are inherently less physically predisposed than men. With this in mind, in the uniformed services, fitness test standards are different for both genders. However, in addition to lowering the fitness requirements, the number of positions designated for women has been reduced at the same time (Kuśmirek,

2017, p. 111). The research presented by the author of this article also confirms that a barrier to professional development in the military is still the role conflict resulting from combining the role of mother with service. Similar results were obtained by A. Judzińska (2021), whose research confirmed the thesis that motherhood in the uniformed services environment often also becomes a cause of exclusion and stereotyping by men.

The research was conducted among female students who are just planning to start a career in the uniformed services or other organisations related to state security in the broadest sense. Their opinions on the challenges posed to women entering the uniformed services or on equal opportunities for career development are therefore not based on personal experience. They may, however, have a significant impact on their decision to apply for service. In the author's opinion, it is worth conducting research in this area among female officers of the Polish uniformed services who, through their experience, could confirm or negate the predictions of the surveyed female students, and provide those managing human capital in uniformed formations with valuable information that could be used in the process of improving the management of relations in the services.

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