MOTIVATION OF FEMALE MILITARY STUDENTS TO ENTER SERVICE IN UNIFORMED FORMATIONS

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Purpose: The aim of this article is to diagnose the level and determinants of motivation among women studying civilian programs at military universities to join uniformed services after graduation.

Design/methodology/approach: The study was based on a two-stage approach: the first step involved conducting a survey among female students, and the second was an expert panel with representatives of uniformed services, human resources, and labor market institutions. Based on the collected data, eleven key motivational factors were identified and subjected to structural analysis using the MICMAC method.

Findings: The results of the study allowed for the classification of motivational factors according to their strength of influence and interdependencies. Career advancement opportunities were identified as the key factor, while institutional support emerged as a determinant. The findings indicate that women's motivation to join uniformed services is shaped by complex relationships between individual and systemic factors, highlighting the need to develop a long-term and integrated system of institutional support.

Research limitations/implications: Despite the cognitive and practical value of the study, certain limitations should be acknowledged, as they may affect the interpretation and generalizability of the results. The research sample was limited to female students enrolled in civilian programs at a selected military university. While this group provides an important point of reference for analyzing potential female candidates for uniformed service, it does not cover the broader spectrum of women considering such a career path—for example, graduates of civilian universities, women with prior work experience, or those actively seeking employment in the public sector.

Practical and social implications: The results of this study provide practical guidance for institutions responsible for recruitment, personnel policy, and promotional activities related to service in uniformed formations—especially among women. These insights can serve as a foundation for developing more diverse and gender-sensitive recruitment strategies as well as institutional support systems.

Originality/value: The research conducted by the authors fills a gap in the literature. Research on women in the armed forces remains fragmented and primarily focuses on the physiological differences between men and women in service.

Keywords: motivation, uniformed services, military universities, gender, institutional support.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Since the emergence of scientific management, the effective motivation of individuals to pursue specific professions or work in particular sectors has been identified as one of the key challenges for both the theory and practice of human capital management (Chen, Hitt, 2021; Birnbaum, Somers, 2023). Numerous studies have explored the determinants of effective motivation and work engagement in the business sector (Sycheva et al., 2019; Korytko et al., 2021; Czerwińska-Lubaszczyk, Jankowiak, 2024, p. 14). More recently, researchers have increasingly turned their attention to the motivation for work in the public sector (Fernandes, Santinha, Forte, 2022; Al-Tkhayneh, Kot, Shestak, 2019; Serhan, Al Achy, Nicolas, 2018; Habánik, Martošová, Gullerová, 2018), including motivations for joining the military or other uniformed services (Evans, 2023; Rzepecka, 2022; Macovei, Argintaru, 2016).

Today, motivation to serve in uniformed formations holds strategic importance due to widespread staffing shortages across these services (Moczydłowska, 2024, p. 138). In light of the current geopolitical situation, it is crucial to effectively encourage young people—both men and women—to consider careers in uniformed services, whose fundamental mission is to ensure the safety and security of citizens and the state. While the motivation of men to join the military appears to be well-documented in the literature (Greaves, 2018), research on women's motivation remains fragmented (Bracken, 2021; Miller, 2018). Existing studies tend to focus on the physiological differences between men and women in service (Grier, 2024; O'Leary et al., 2023) or their differing responses to stress (Hourani et al., 2016).

Therefore, the aim of this article is to diagnose the level and determinants of motivation among women enrolled in civilian study programs at military universities to join uniformed services after graduation. To achieve this goal, an anonymous survey was conducted among female students at a selected military university. The next step involved an expert panel with 16 participants, including representatives of uniformed services, HR professionals, academics, and labor market institutions. The study contributes to a relatively underexplored area of public service motivation among women, with practical implications for recruitment policies and equality strategies in Poland.

2. Literature Review

Motivation is widely recognized as a psychological state that drives individuals to pursue desired goals, while also initiating, directing, and sustaining actions toward their achievement. It can be understood as a catalyst for action or a form of energy that enables goal-oriented behavior. The term motivation originates from the word motive, which refers to something that

prompts a person to act in a certain way or at least predisposes them to do so (Ihensekien, Joel, 2023, p. 34). Motivation is the process governing an individual's choice among various possible courses of action (Letkiewicz, Ortynskiy, 2022, p. 8). It is commonly accepted to distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Sitopu, Sitinjak, Marpaung, 2021, pp. 73-74). When a person performs an activity primarily for self-satisfaction or pleasure, their motivation is considered intrinsic. Conversely, if the motivation to complete a task is driven by the desire to obtain an external reward or approval, the individual is considered to be extrinsically motivated (Zheng, 2021, p. 4).

Work plays a fundamental role in every individual's life. When choosing a future profession, people are guided by various motives that reflect both their attitude toward a given occupation and their self-assessment of the ability to perform it (Sosnowska-Bielicz, 2021, p. 70). In light of the dynamic changes in the labor market, a shift in how young people approach career development is becoming increasingly apparent (Myszka-Strychalska, 2024, p. 124). The factors motivating individuals to pursue specific career paths vary by age and gender (Bartczak, Szymanowska, 2019, p. 133). Today, employers face a major challenge: understanding what motivates people to choose particular career directions. By identifying these factors, they will be better equipped to design motivational systems that attract the largest possible number of prospective candidates.

In Poland, there are eleven uniformed services in operation: the Internal Security Agency (ABW), the Intelligence Agency (AW), the Central Anti-Corruption Bureau (CBA), the State Fire Service (PSP), the Police, the Border Guard (SG), the Prison Service (SW), the Military Intelligence Service (SWW), the Military Counterintelligence Service (SKW), the Marshal's Guard (SM), and the State Protection Service (SOP). The nature of tasks assigned to these services results in a much stricter chain of command than that typically found in civilian labor relations (Moczydłowska, 2023, p. 31). Uniformed services are organizations characterized by a high level of formalization and hierarchy (Jabłońska-Wołoszyn, 2019, p. 27). Additional features commonly associated with these services include elitism, professionalism, uniforms, command structures, discipline, prestige, and readiness for duty. Service in such formations often requires a significant sacrifice of personal privileges and lifestyle changes (Knopp, 2021, p. 67).

In the face of growing challenges to national security, uniformed services such as the Police and the Border Guard are increasingly affected by high personnel turnover. These services must compete with the civilian labor market as well as with the military, which offers more attractive salaries and a wider range of social benefits. The factors motivating individuals to join uniformed services are multidimensional (Pákozdi, Bárdos, 2020, p. 62). They stem from individual needs, age or generational affiliation, and gender. Men who choose a career in uniformed services are often driven by different motives than women who aspire to become officers.

In recent years, a clear upward trend has been observed in the number of women joining uniformed services. According to data for 2024 provided by the Ministry of the Interior and Administration, the Polish Police currently employs 19.4 thousand female officers, accounting for 20% of the entire force. The Border Guard has 4.7 thousand women in service, while the State Fire Service employs 1.3 thousand female officers (https://www.gov.pl/). Being an officer entails high levels of commitment, both physical and mental effort, and constant readiness for duty. This state of permanent availability significantly impacts certain aspects of private life (Filaszkiewicz, Majer, 2023, p. 445). For a long time, public perception did not associate women with the role of uniformed officers. However, the traditionally male-dominated personnel model of hierarchical organizations is gradually evolving. Women are increasingly being appointed to command and leadership positions at various levels (Rybka, 2023, p. 91).

The situation of women in uniformed services is steadily improving, thanks to the dismantling of "weaker sex" stereotypes, the enhancement of anti-discrimination policies, and the implementation of equal opportunity strategies (Rudnicka, 2017, p. 252). Alongside the growing interest of women in uniformed service careers, their presence is also becoming more visible in military universities and in uniformed classes at secondary schools (Fijałkowska, Bieniek, 2018, p. 178).

Currently, young people in Poland who wish to develop skills in preparation for service to the state can choose from several universities and training centers. The Ministry of National Defense offers the most comprehensive education system, comprising five military universities: the Polish Naval Academy in Gdynia, the War Studies University in Warsaw, the Land Forces Military Academy in Wrocław, the Polish Air Force University in Dęblin, and the Military University of Technology in Warsaw. Each of these institutions offers both military and civilian study programs. These universities prepare students to perform tasks aligned with the mission of the armed forces, tailored to both current and potential future threats. Additionally, they serve as research and analytical centers supporting the processes of planning and programming the development of the Polish Armed Forces, including the implementation of state-of-the-art and technologically advanced equipment (Liberacki, 2018, p. 103).

Other uniformed services—including the Police, the State Fire Service, the Prison Service, and the Border Guard—also maintain their own higher education institutions and training centers (see Table 1).

Table 1.
Higher Education Institutions and Training Centers of Polish Uniformed Services

Service	Police	State Fire Service	Border Guard	Prison Service
Name of University	Police Academy in Szczytno	Fire Service Academy in Warsaw	Border Guard Higher School in Koszalin	Academy of Justice in Warsaw
Training Centers	Police Training Center in Legionowo	Central School of the State Fire Service in Częstochowa	Border Guard Training Center in Kętrzyn	
			Specialist Training Center of the Border Guard in Lubań	

Source: own elaboration.

Today, young people who wish to pursue a future career in uniformed services have a wide range of universities to choose from that can prepare them for such roles. However, it is common for a young person just beginning higher education to remain undecided about their future career path. Choosing a military study program means that the student simultaneously becomes an active-duty soldier. This entails completing two parallel curricula: a technical (engineering) program and a military training program. In addition, outside of academic classes, the student is subject to military discipline and regulations. Upon graduation, the student is guaranteed employment as a professional soldier with the rank of second lieutenant.

Military studies require a firm commitment to a specific career path—service in the Polish Armed Forces. An alternative for those who are not prepared to commit to military service but are interested in areas such as national security, broadly understood military logistics, computer science, mechanics, or mechanical engineering—or who wish to serve in one of the uniformed formations—is to pursue civilian studies at a military university. Civilian students follow only the technical curriculum and have no obligations to the Ministry of National Defense.

3. Methods

The aim of the study was to diagnose the level and determinants of motivation among female students enrolled in civilian programs at military universities to join uniformed services after graduation. The following research questions were formulated:

1. What proportion of female civilian students at military universities plan to enter uniformed service? How do they evaluate the attractiveness of uniformed services as potential employers?

2. What factors most strongly motivate female civilian students at military universities to join uniformed services?

3. What are the key challenges faced by women serving in uniformed formations? How do they perceive gender differences within these services?

4. What, in the opinion of the respondents, should be changed to increase women's motivation to join uniformed services?

The research process provided answers to the above questions. The study consisted of two stages and was conducted in the fourth quarter of 2024. The first stage involved quantitative research using the PAPI (Paper and Pencil Interview) technique among 80 female students from a selected military university. The sample was selected purposively. A proprietary questionnaire was used, which included both closed- and open-ended questions. Based on the results obtained, eleven factors influencing women's decisions to enter uniformed services were identified.

In the next stage, an expert panel was conducted with the participation of 16 individuals, including representatives of uniformed services, HR departments, academia, and labor market institutions. The panellists included uniformed services officers, soldiers, military academy staff, and authors of publications on management in the uniformed services. The factors identified in the quantitative stage were evaluated using a four-point scale:

0 – no influence,

1 – weak influence,

2 – moderate influence,

3 – strong influence.

The primary criterion for selecting factors was the frequency of their appearance in respondents' answers. The identification of relationships between the factors influencing the research area was made possible by having each expert complete an electronic version of the direct influence matrix (using the CAWI technique). A resulting matrix of mutual influences was created based on the individual matrices filled out by the experts. The values in the final matrix were determined based on the modal value (dominant score) of influence strength assessments assigned by the experts.

Subsequently, a structural analysis was conducted using the ISM (Interpretive Structural Modeling) method, which enables the identification of dependencies between individual factors. Structural analysis is a tool used to organize and analyze sets of elements with numerous interdependencies. Its application allows for determining mutual influences and relationships between factors, ultimately identifying the key variables (Nazarko, Wnorowski, Kononiuk, 2011, p. 15). The MICMAC software was used in the analytical process.

4. Results

The respondents answered questions regarding their motivation for choosing their field of study, career plans, perceptions of uniformed service, and the challenges women face within such formations.

One of the main reasons participants chose to study at a military university was the desire to link their future with the armed forces. Many also cited inspiration from family traditions. Pragmatic motivations were also present, such as acquiring professional competencies, job stability, and encouragement from peers.

When asked about their plans after graduation: 30% of the students declared an intention to join a uniformed service, 25% were undecided, 45% did not plan to pursue a career in such formations.

Among those intending to serve, the most frequently cited motivators were: the possibility of early retirement, job security, attractive salaries, and the prestige associated with uniformed service. Some respondents also emphasized the importance of additional social benefits.

Responses to the question regarding the attractiveness of uniformed service from the perspective of a young person entering the labor market were varied. Some students considered it highly attractive, while others were more reserved, indicating difficulty in making a clear assessment or viewing it rather negatively.

A key theme explored in the study was equal opportunity. The vast majority of participants believed that women have fewer career advancement opportunities compared to men in uniformed services. Respondents pointed to barriers related to promotions, trust from superiors, and entrenched stereotypes.

When asked how women could be better encouraged to join uniformed services, the most common suggestions included: organizing information campaigns showcasing positive examples of women in service, simplifying recruitment procedures, and adjusting physical and medical requirements to reflect realistic capabilities.

Finally, participants were asked to identify what they perceived as the greatest challenges for women entering uniformed service. The most frequently mentioned issues were: the need to constantly combat stereotypes, and the pressure to prove their worth in a male-dominated environment. Additional concerns included the physical demands of the job and difficult working conditions.

Based on the open-ended responses, 11 motivational factors influencing young women's decisions to join uniformed services were identified:

1. Promotion opportunities – PO.
2. Development opportunities – DO.
3. Service prestige – SP.
4. Employment stability – ES.
5. Self-fulfillment – SF.
6. Institutional support – IS.
7. Degree of gender stereotyping – GS.
8. Accessibility of recruitment processes – ARP.
9. Financial security – FS.
10. Physical and psychological demands – PPD.
11. Effectiveness of informational and promotional activities – EIPA.

These factors were evaluated by 16 experts. The resulting matrix was 11×11, meaning that experts were asked to assess 121 relationships between variables. In 37 cases, the dominant value was zero, indicating no relationship. In 35 cases, a weak relationship was found. In 34 cases, a moderate influence was identified. Strong relationships were observed in 15 cases.

Figure 1 illustrates the direct influence relationships among the motivational factors for women considering service in uniformed formations. Arrows represent the direction of influence, with their color and thickness indicating intensity. Red arrows denote the strongest direct influences. Notably, strong relationships were observed among promotion opportunities, development opportunities, and service prestige, highlighting their central role in the motivational structure.
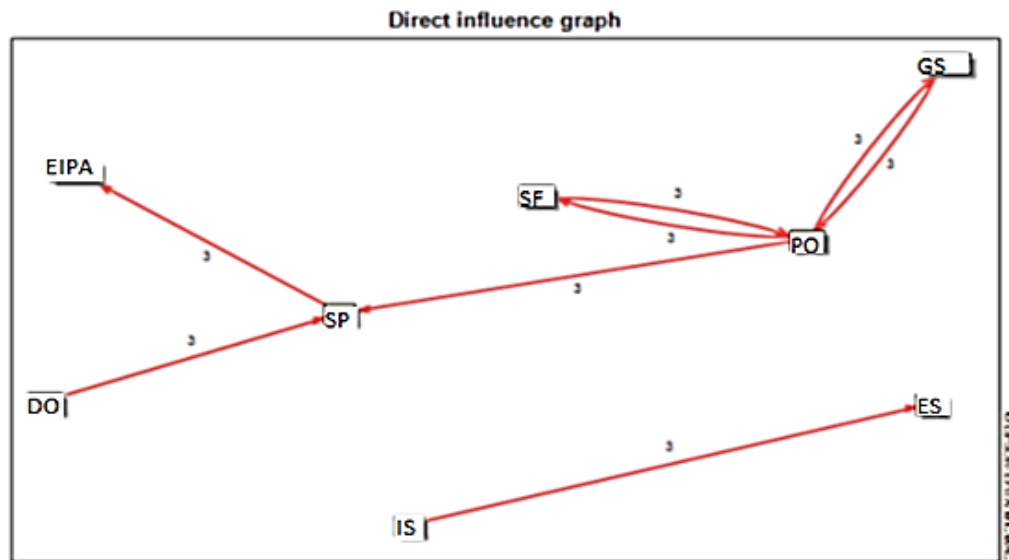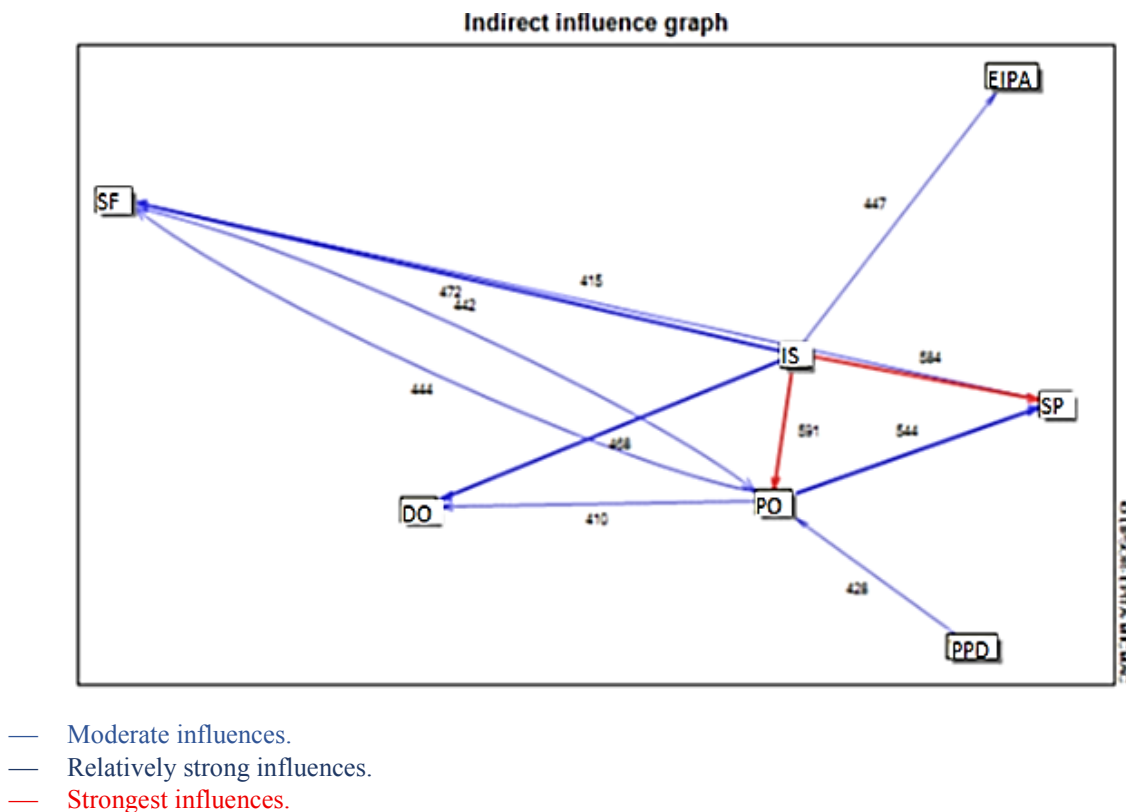

— Strongest influences

Figure 1. Direct influence graph.

Source: own elaboration using the MICMAC software.

Figure 2 illustrates the indirect influences between the analyzed factors. It highlights which variables act as intermediaries in transmitting influence among others. For example, institutional support (IS) plays the role of an initiating factor that, through other variables— such as development opportunities or financial security—indirectly affects service prestige or the motivation for self-fulfillment. The figure reveals deeper layers of interdependencies within the system.

Figure 2. Indirect influence graph.

Source: own elaboration using the MICMAC software.

The graph analysis indicates that the most influential factors—those that exert strong influence on others while also being strongly influenced themselves—include:

- Promotion Opportunities (PO).
- Development Opportunities (DO).
- Service Prestige (SP).
- Self-Fulfillment (SF).
- Gender Stereotyping (GS).

A factor that exerts influence but is not influenced by others:

- Institutional Support (IS).

The most dependent factors are:

- Service Prestige (SP).
- Effectiveness of Informational and Promotional Activities (EIPA).

The distribution of structural analysis factors on the influence–dependence plane is presented in Figure 3.

——————	Key factors	— — — Regulatory and auxiliary factors
– – –	Goal factors	—————— Autonomous factors
··········	Determinants	—————— Result factors

Figure 3. Classification of structural analysis factors based on direct influences, including potential influences.

Source: own elaboration using the MICMAC software.

As part of the structural analysis, the factors were distributed on the influence–dependence plane using the MICMAC software. In the upper-right quadrant (high influence and high dependence), the key factor – promotion opportunities – is located. The upper-left quadrant represents determinants, which exert influence on the system but are relatively independent themselves, such as institutional support. The central and lower-right sections are dominated by goals and result factors, such as service prestige, self-fulfillment, or employment stability. The lower-left corner indicates autonomous factors, e.g., physical and psychological demands, which have limited systemic significance. As a result, six groups of factors were identified:

1. Key factors – combining high influence with high dependence:

Promotion Opportunities (PO)

2. Determinants – exerting strong influence on the system, i.e., driving or inhibiting factors:

Institutional Support – IS

3. Regulatory and auxiliary factors – with medium or low influence, but potentially helpful in achieving strategic goals:

Gender Stereotyping – GS,
Financial Security – FS,
Accessibility of Recruitment Processes – ARP

4. Goal factors – more subject to the influence of other factors than exerting influence themselves; they represent potential goals of the analyzed system:

Self-Fulfillment – SF
Development Opportunities – DO
Employment Stability – ES

5. Dependent/result factors – characterized by low influence and high dependence on other factors. They are particularly susceptible to changes in key and determinant factors:

Service Prestige – SP
Effectiveness of Informational and Promotional Activities – EIPA

6. Autonomous factors – having the least impact on changes occurring in the system as a whole:

Physical and Psychological Demands – PPD

The conducted analysis made it possible to identify the key determinants of motivation among women studying civilian programs at military universities to join uniformed services. The application of the MICMAC method allowed for the systematization of factors and the determination of their interrelations in terms of influence and dependence.

The factor with the greatest strategic significance is Promotion Opportunities (PO). It combines high influence with high dependence, meaning it not only affects other motivators but is also shaped by the systemic environment. Development Opportunities (DO) and Self-Fulfillment (SF) also play an important role in the motivational structure; however, they are more susceptible to the influence of external factors. Therefore, they are more likely to be considered system goals rather than drivers. Institutional Support (IS) was classified as the main determinant. It exerts a very strong influence while showing relatively low dependence, indicating its potential as a steering mechanism for the entire motivational system. Financial Security (FS), Accessibility of Recruitment Processes (ARP), and Gender Stereotyping (GS) were categorized as auxiliary factors, which do not determine the decision to enter service on their own but may facilitate or hinder it. Service Prestige (SP) and the Effectiveness of Informational and Promotional Activities (EIPA) are considered result factors, which are more of an outcome of how the system functions than a direct cause. However, they may influence recruitment decisions indirectly by shaping societal attitudes. Finally, Physical and Psychological Demands (PPD) were identified as an autonomous factor. Its role in the motivational model is marginal, which may indicate that it is more strongly related to individual physical predispositions than to systemic mechanisms.

5. Discussion

The results confirm that the motivation of women to pursue service in uniformed formations is multidimensional and dynamic. Its structure depends both on internal factors—such as the need for development or self-fulfillment—and on external ones, including institutional support and promotion policies. It is worth noting that soft factors, such as gender stereotypes or informational-promotional activities, although not key drivers, play a significant supporting role. Improving them may enhance the effectiveness of more decisive mechanisms.

A relatively surprising finding is the low significance of the Physical and Psychological Demands (PPD) factor. This may suggest that women considering service do not perceive physical limitations as a major barrier when choosing a professional path.

The results of this study are strongly supported by existing literature, which increases their credibility and allows for broader comparative conclusions. The identified key factor, Promotion Opportunities (PO), aligns with the findings of Mankowski et al. (2015), who, in a study on women's decisions to join the U.S. military, demonstrated that professional motivation—including qualification acquisition and promotion prospects—is one of the main determinants of enlistment. Similar conclusions were drawn by Judzińska (2023), who analyzed the careers of female officers in Poland. She emphasized that status-related motivators play a significant role in their engagement and in overcoming organizational barriers.

The factor of Institutional Support (IS) as the most influential determinant in the system is also reflected in the research by Pack (2023), who examined women's motivation in the Territorial Defence Forces. He observed that clear career paths, onboarding programs, and a supportive organizational environment are crucial for recruiting and retaining women in hierarchical structures.

Employment Stability (ES) and Self-Fulfillment (SF), as goal-related factors, also confirm findings from broader research on motivation in the public sector. These studies indicate that women often perceive public service as a way to realize personal values such as meaningful work, social responsibility, or life stability (Judzińska, 2023; Mankowski et al., 2015). These findings are further supported by Khraban (2024), who noted that women in uniformed services must reconcile professional identity with gender identity, and that systemic support helps them manage this balance. She also highlighted that hidden stereotypes toward women in uniformed structures still persist, which may hinder the full transition from formal equality to genuine professional acceptance.

In conclusion, the results of the study align with broader scientific trends showing that an effective equality policy in uniformed services cannot be limited to slogans and promotional campaigns. What is crucial is genuine institutional support, transparent promotion mechanisms, and opportunities for competence development. These elements form the foundation for sustainable female engagement in service and the development of modern, inclusive security structures.

6. Conclusions

The aim of the conducted study was to diagnose the level and conditions of motivation among women studying in civilian programs at military universities to join uniformed services after graduation. The use of the MICMAC program made it possible not only to identify key factors but also to analyze their mutual relationships and systemic importance. The results clearly indicate that motivation for service is the result of complex interactions between personal and institutional factors. Promotion opportunities, professional development, and structural support from the organization play a crucial role. In contrast, factors such as gender stereotypes or promotional activities, while important, are more supportive and secondary in nature.

Ultimately, the study confirms the need for a strategic approach to motivating women to serve in uniformed formations. Institutions should focus on building a long-term support system, realistic promotion pathways, and professional development opportunities, while simultaneously eliminating cultural and structural barriers. Only such an approach can

contribute to increasing the number of women entering service and ensuring their lasting engagement in the life of uniformed formations.

Despite the cognitive and practical value of the study, it is important to acknowledge its limitations, which may affect the interpretation and generalizability of the findings. First and foremost, the research sample was limited to female students in civilian programs at a selected military university. While this group constitutes a relevant reference point for analyzing potential candidates for uniformed service, it does not cover the wider spectrum of women considering such a career path—such as graduates of civilian universities, women with professional experience, or those actively seeking employment in the public sector.

Another limitation is the absence of a comparative analysis with the motivations of men in a similar context, which prevents the exploration of gender differences in the perception of uniformed service and its motivating factors.

Given the above, future research should involve a more diverse sample. It would also be valuable to introduce a comparative component, both between women and men, and between female candidates and women already serving. This would allow for the identification of variables related to professional experience and perceptual differences.

Longitudinal studies also seem justified, as they would allow tracking of changes in motivation and its structural determinants over time—from recruitment, through training, to the early years of service. Additional cognitive value could be provided by comparative international analyses that highlight the impact of cultural and institutional contexts on women's career decisions regarding service in uniformed formations.

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