

UNPACKING THE PERCEPTION OF GENDER ROLES IN THE MILITARY

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ABSTRACT:

The paper presents the main results of an exploratory research conducted in 2022 within an Erasmus⁺ international project, entitled “Military Gender Studies”. The aim of the investigation was to identify military students’ perceptions, thoughts, behaviors, and expectations concerning several peculiarities of gender issues in the daily life of the military organization: gender balance, gender differences, equality, equity, and discrimination. The respondents – Land Forces Academy students – were also asked about the opportunity/necessity to insert aspects related to gender perspectives into the academic curriculum. The structured interview method was used for data collection, which subsequently informed the qualitative data analysis. The findings presented synthetically could guide a future gender education approach, addressed to both male and female cadets and aimed at providing important tools for promoting the gender perspective in the military.

KEYWORDS:

Gender perception, equality, discrimination, military

1. Introduction

Gender topic is an important part of social, political, economic and also of military life, be it about stereotypes, biases, discrimination, equality or other such concepts. Nowadays, military institutions are experiencing growing pressure to integrate the gender perspective in all professional approaches (OECD, 2011; IEEE, 2012; Kuehnast, de Jonge Oodrat &

Hernes, 2011; Egnell, 2016; Verveer, 2019). This international effort to support the gender perspective aims at increasing awareness and at ensuring that the rights and dignity of women and men, be they civilian or military, are respected in the performance of their professional duties (Egnell, Hojem & Berts, 2014).

Educational communities, in general, and the military academic community, in

particular, are well-aware of the fact that it takes time and effort to transfer legal principles and provisions into people's daily life and professional behavior. In this sense, effective ways are sought to change the mentalities of military professionals in what concerns the topic of gender, in order to stimulate their receptivity and to promote fairness. A logical first step for this educational approach is to identify the existing situation in the field, in order to better understand the current attitude and behavior of military students and to identify what inputs would be necessary in the teaching and training of gender perspectives.

2. Conceptual framework

Despite the fact that the feminist movement has existed for more than a century, largely manifested in campaigns for non-discrimination and equal rights for men and women, there is still a misconception at the level of the society, according to which the topic of gender only refers to women and women's issues. In fact, the term *gender* encompasses both meanings, as well as the social-cultural norms attached or prescribed to the sexes in certain particular social systems. Gender therefore implies the socio-cultural identity, comprising qualities, tastes, aptitudes, expectations, roles, and responsibilities associated with women and men in a given society (Butler, 1999).

Biases related to gender refer to the tendency to favor, support, or prefer one gender over the other. Gender bias is *"the often unintentional and implicit differentiation between men and women by placing one gender in a hierarchical position relative to the other in a certain context, as a result of stereotypical images of masculinity and femininity"* (European Commission, Toolkit Gender in EU-Funded Research, 2011, part 1.2.). Although sometimes unintentional, it may often generate harmful discrimination if not duly recognized and properly addressed. For example, gender bias can be translated as a

type of preference in the recruitment process for certain jobs, the distribution of work tasks, or staff promotion.

The concept of *gender discrimination* refers to *"any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of a perceived gender identity, which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on the basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field"* (UN, 1979, article 1).

Gender equality is presently recognized as a fundamental human right and a common value of the European Union. Gender equality is achieved if no discrimination based on a person's gender occurs. It is defined as *"the equal distribution of opportunities and the allocation of resources or benefits, or access to services regardless of gender"* (European Commission, Strategy for Equality between Women and Men 2010-2015, 2011). The term addresses *"the situation where all individuals are free to develop their personal abilities and make choices without the limitations imposed by strict gender roles. The different behaviors, aspirations, and needs of women and men are considered, valued, and favored equally"* (European Commission, Gender in EU funded research. Toolkit, 2011). Equality does not mean erasing the differences between genders, or ignoring the different interests, needs, or priorities of women and men. The concept is clarified by NATO (2017), which states that equality rather means that *"women's and men's rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female"*.

On the other hand, *gender equity* refers to the process of being fair to both women and men. Equity leads to equality, meaning that men and women have access to opportunities and life changes that are neither dependent on nor constrained by their sex.

3. Methodology

This exploratory study was conducted as part of the Erasmus⁺ international project “Military Gender Studies” and its aim was to identify peculiarities of gender-related attitudes in the Romanian cadets’ daily life. In addition, the research team investigated the opportunity/necessity of introducing subjects related to gender perspective in the academic curriculum of the future military leaders. Data was collected between February and March 2022, using a structured interview. Students of “Nicolae Bălcescu” Land Forces Academy of Sibiu

(who previously participated in a quantitative survey on the same topic) were asked to voluntarily answer a few open-ended questions meant to determine the understanding of their perceptions, behaviors and expectations concerning gender balance, gender equality, gender equity, and gender discrimination in the military academy.

The simple random sample of interview consisted of 14 subjects. The distribution of the sample by sex and year of study was the following:

Table no. 1
Sample distribution

	1st year of study	2nd year of study	3rd year of study	N
Female	2	3	2	7
Male	3	1	3	7
N	5	4	5	14

The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed. The respondents’ identity was kept anonymous, a code-number being associated with every person.

Both the descriptive data (“what has happened”) and the prescriptive data, suggesting various actions for the future (“what should happen”) were collected and coded. Excell MS was used for data visualization, content analysis, and creating reports.

In the next section, we will present the main findings resulting from the cadets’ answers and we will illustrate some of them with relevant quotes.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Impact of unbalanced gender representation

In the army there is an unbalanced representation of gender, women representing a minority. After analyzing the impact of the gender unbalance on group dynamics, cadets found only few positive effects; for example, the fact that a cohesive

minority subgroup of females in a platoon contributes to establishing a good relationship with the male majority group and even to the increase of the cohesion of the group as a whole. Cadets mainly focused on the negative aspects of the disproportionate representation of gender within the military groups, as follows:

–when the minority gender is too small in number, those people are excluded or cannot be integrated into the general atmosphere: *“We have only one female in the group ... we get along very well with her, but there is a certain discrepancy between the 19 men and her, here I am referring to the fact that she is many times left out of the group or she doesn’t understand certain habits or jokes of men”*.

–certain qualities of one gender are missing within the unbalanced groups and cannot be compensated by the opposite gender. People belonging to the majority gender are aware of the lack of benefits that certain characteristics of the minority gender could bring to the group;

–everyone suffers and pays for the mistakes (deviations) of the majority, which creates frustration for the minority gender. More specifically, minority women are exhausted and frustrated by the punishments received by the whole group for the men’ mistakes: *“It often happens that we take collective punishments because of them, which affect women more. We don’t have the same physical condition as men, and it is a bit difficult”*.

The cadets behave differently or adjust their behavior in a group that is mainly composed of opposite gender cadets. One female explained that she, like other females, has changed her concerns and topics of discussion since she joined the army: *“In the army, there are no ladies who talk nicely about what shopping they did, about what makeup they bought”*. Likewise, both men and women mentioned behaviors related to the desire to positively impress people of the opposite sex. However, most of the respondents do not feel the need to behave differently when they are in a group of the opposite sex because *“the differences in the army are mitigated and everyone considers themselves equal”*.

4.2. Equality, differences, and discrimination

Gender equality is for some students a topic resolved once and for all in the moment of the admission to the academy, when the distribution of available places does not hinge on gender differences. Men do not consider there is a need for further efforts to integrate gender issues equitably into all aspects of life. The problems that appear later in the groups are treated superficially, being perceived as girls’ whims, which are considered favored: *“From the boys’ point of view, gender mainstreaming is nonsense. I mean, after we get into the academy and we have equal seats, what else do we want? But girls go for the idea, they think it is needed”*; *“Boys always make jokes on this subject,*

well ... some of them, and the girls think that they are somewhat affected by the issue of gender acceptance in the army”. Among many students there is no broader, overall perception of gender equality issues; they cannot see beyond what displeases them at some point in their platoon. Most of them remain anchored in the particular situations they encounter and tend to generalize them.

In what regards situations when the cadets felt discriminated against, or treated differently (either better or worse) because of their gender, only one respondent never felt discriminated against. Positive discrimination was identified in the form of lighter requirements for women at sports exams and the protection of women in contexts when tasks requiring physical strength or improper working conditions are assigned. Differentiating the scales for physical tests between females and males (both at the admission exams to the institution and later during schooling) is a topic that arouses animosity in the military students’ community, being mentioned by many cadets as an example of gender discrimination in the institution. On the other hand, negative discrimination was mentioned by the majority of the respondents, both female and male. In particular, male students consider themselves negatively discriminated when assigned tasks that require physical force or improper working conditions (females not being involved in activities such as the transport of heavy weapons, snow removal, furniture moving, etc.).

In turn, some females also identified situations in which they felt negatively discriminated against, as follows:

–male cadets are preferred for certain activities: *“In the training camps, when a girl offers to take command of the platoon /to be in charge of an activity, the answer is often no, and it is suggested that a boy should do it. In any situation a boy has to be included, girls are not considered capable enough to do something by themselves”*;

–males carry out exclusive activities, from which they intentionally exclude females;

–malicious statements are made against women, their mistakes are frequently associated with being female;

–in academic activities, teachers have higher expectations from women, just as in military activities there are higher expectations from men.

Many of the examples of gender discrimination mentioned the division of administrative tasks according to the gender. This practice is perceived as discriminatory. Male students sometimes perceive discrimination to a greater extent than females, noting the preferential treatment given to female cadets by the higher ranks.

There are no official complaints regarding episodes of gender discrimination involving a cadet/staff/other. Even when feeling discriminated against at some moment, cadets reconsider their attitude after a while: *“It was like a nervous impulse or a momentary frustration”*; *“I think it was just a spur of the moment, generated by stress or hot temper; probably after receiving a punishment, thought related to discrimination crossed my mind”*. Reasons invoked for not making a formal complaint were prejudices and compliance with the hierarchical superior: *“I wanted to report the discrimination, I thought at one point, only I knew that the superior is always right and the subordinate is not”*. An additional reason was the distrust in the desire of superiors to listen and act accordingly: *“I gave up because I would not have been taken seriously”*.

In what concerns the differences between physical capabilities and the manner in which the academy should address these differences, the current existence of separate scales for the physical tests for men and women raised controversies, ranging from approving separate standards (which reflect the natural situation of the population) to the need to

reduce differences between standards (in order to remove, as much as possible, the frustrations and the feeling of discrimination) or even to have a single scale for both genders (because no one should have advantages: *“As there are stronger women, there are weaker men”*). The intellectual differences are seen only in terms of attitudes, and not related to mental capacities: *“Girls are more attentive and learn more than the boys, not in the idea that boys could not, but that they have other concerns, one of them being seen in the differences in grades. Boys are much more interested in sports”*; *“Men seem to be able to make decisions much faster, to think much faster, women take more time to consider all the possibilities”*.

4.3. Career opportunities and biases

The general opinion of cadets is that equal treatment is offered to both women and men. In this context, respondents referred to equal rights in the campus (scholarships, access to the facilities, etc.) and equal tasks in the academic activities. Some differences are noticed in how cadets obtain certain advantages in the relations with superiors or colleagues: men use their charisma and communication skills, while women sometimes take advantage of the feminine charms. The only example of differentiated treatment was the distribution of administrative tasks by the direct commanders: for girls, especially indoor office-work, and for boys, outdoor physical work.

More important aspects came up when discussing the lack of equal opportunities for the military career. The general opinion was that females do not have access to high ranks and leadership positions because they do not perform in combat branches, and do not go on international missions as much as men do. Furthermore, the preconception that women are not as good as men in leadership positions is quite widespread. The conclusion that women do not advance in

the military career in the same way and at the same pace as men was reinforced by the fact that there are only two women with the rank of general in the Romanian Army. Women cadets expressed some personal fears/concerns about the impact of gender on their careers, even if they officially have the same opportunities as men: *"I thought a lot about what I will do when I am posted, how subordinates will see me... For example, I'm short, young and unexperienced...I believe that a male lieutenant will impose more respect doing the same thing I would do"*.

The respondents were provoked to reveal their opinion (and maybe their bias) through the question "Would you feel comfortable or not being commanded by a person belonging to the opposite sex?" Whilst the majority stated that they had no problem with this, some cadets revealed their unfortunate experiences with the opposite sex: *"Women cannot be leaders, my female commander is not a good leader. I've met very few women who can lead"; "My female commander cannot do what her male subordinates can do, so a woman cannot lead by example"; "I don't feel comfortable going to talk to a commander who is a man, if I had a certain issue that I would like to discuss with a woman"*. When asked if they felt comfortable leading subordinates of the opposite sex, all females gave a positive answer, while some men were reserved, expecting female subordinates to face problems maintaining the same standards within the platoon: *"I would be reluctant to give certain orders or apply certain sanctions to those women"*.

4.4. Education on gender topic

Being asked about the necessity or opportunity to include in certain forms gender perspectives in the curricular offer, most of the respondents agreed. The pro arguments were the following:

- formal education on this matter would have positive effects on the cadets

- and would reach "normality" due to the disappearance of discriminatory attitudes: *"It is important to increase the level of education, so that all students in the academy become aware of these issues"; "If we are educated about it, it would be a step forward"; "Gender issues in the army are not well placed in context, the ideas of some students do not keep up with the times, so education is needed";*

- formal education could counteract the inappropriate influences of informal education which has impacted some respondents in terms of gender issues: *"Many young people do not have a foundation, they do not have an education in this regard. Each of us probably has an opinion that we probably formed as we were raised, after hearing about it in our families. I think that these activities should exist precisely in order to avoid these situations of discrimination later. Education can eliminate some misunderstandings";*

- students would understand each other better, would change their attitude, the situation of discrimination would change: *"I am not saying that there is no misogyny in this academy, because there is, we are misogynists, but girls are misandrists, too. And it would be okay for us all to get back to normal";*

- they would openly and publicly discuss certain issues that concern them, but which are currently being discussed "secretly", they would learn practical things about how they could solve their relationship problems in mixed groups: *"I think they need to be resolved as soon as possible. When they have a problem, people tend to back off, to talk from behind, that's why many problems remain unresolved";*

The arguments against the need to include gender issues in the academic curriculum were the following:

- there are no discrimination problems, so it would not be necessary;

—for some students this topic is almost non-existent: “*Most of my colleagues do not care about this subject, only very little*”.

5. Final remarks

Students interviewed do not notice very clearly the conceptual differences between the concepts “gender differences”, “gender equality” or “gender discrimination”, which is illustrated by the ideas expressed and the examples offered in the interview, where they tend to mix up these concepts. This may be an indication of the lack of formal education in this field, which could better clarify and structure their knowledge, experiences, attitudes, and interpretations. In fact, many students consider that the inclusion of gender issues in the academic curriculum, in various forms, would prove beneficial.

Gender issues are perceived in a rather narrow context, and students’ attitudes are often based on the unjustified generalization of particular situations, usually associated with the frustrations of military life. There is no awareness of the need to pay attention to such aspects and of the necessity of a collective effort over a longer period to address these issues. Regarding the future of gender equality, women cadets are more optimistic than men.

All these findings could constitute pertinent landmarks for an informed gender education approach, which, while addressing both male and female cadets, also equips educators with important tools for promoting gender perspective, equality, equity and opportunities for all military personnel.

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