

BETWEEN UNIFORM AND STEREOTYPE: WOMEN PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER ROLES IN OPERATIONAL CONTEXTS

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Abstract: *This study explores the perceptions and experiences of gender stereotypes among women officers who have participated in military missions. Drawing on a qualitative research design, the study is based on 12 semi-structured interviews conducted with female military personnel from the Romanian Land Forces, all of whom have deployment experience in operational environments. The research aims to identify how gender stereotypes manifest in the military context, how they are perceived and internalized by women, and how these perceptions influence their professional experiences during missions. The findings reveal that gender stereotypes persist both at institutional and interpersonal levels, often shaping expectations regarding women’s physical capabilities, leadership potential, and emotional resilience. Participants reported encountering both subtle and explicit forms of bias, ranging from differential task assignments to questioning of their professional competence. At the same time, the study highlights adaptive strategies employed by women soldiers, including overperformance, resilience building, and the negotiation of gender identity within a predominantly masculine organizational culture.*

Keywords: gender stereotypes, female officers, quantitative analysis

1. Introduction

Gender-related issues, whether we talk about stereotypes, biases, or discrimination—are present in virtually every area of life, including the social, political, economic, and military spheres. In recent years, there has been increasing pressure on military institutions to take gender perspectives seriously and to integrate them into both policies and operations [1], [2]. These efforts are not just symbolic; they aim to ensure that the rights and dignity of both women and men, whether civilians or military personnel, are respected in the course of their duties [3]. In this context, the United Nations (UN) has played a key role through its Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, which emphasizes the importance of including gender considerations in all discussions within military communities. A major step in this direction was the adoption of UN

Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000 [4], which calls for the active involvement of women not only in conflict prevention and resolution, but also in post-conflict peacebuilding. As Ferbach & Reeves point out [5], this resolution has been particularly important in making women’s voices more visible in discussions about security and reconstruction after conflict. Following a similar line, NATO has incorporated these principles into its own framework, encouraging member and partner states to develop national action plans aligned with the recommendations of UNSCR 1325.

Gender stereotypes can be understood as socially constructed ideas about what men and women are like and how they are supposed to behave. They do not just describe differences—they also set expectations. Kauchak & Eggen [6] argue that these simplified views can limit

individuals, for example by restricting their academic or professional development. Other studies [7] show that stereotypes can also affect the development of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral abilities.

It is also important to remember that gender stereotypes are not fixed—they change across cultures and over time. Even though they often suggest clear differences between men and women, these assumptions are not always supported by real behavior. Rosenthal & Overstreet [8] highlight that stereotypes are learned through everyday interactions and social influences, such as family, friends, school, and broader cultural norms. Typically, masculine traits are associated with action and independence, while feminine traits are linked to relationships and care. These patterns influence many aspects of life, from emotional development and friendships to work attitudes and family roles. At the same time, traits associated with men are often viewed more positively, reflecting a broader tendency in society to value masculinity more highly than femininity.

Research shows that, even though the elimination of gender stereotypes is quite difficult, education that promotes gender equality contributes to the flexibility and modification of gender stereotypes. For example, Blackhurst & Auger [9] find that women's careers are becoming less affected by gender stereotypes, while men's career choices are still strongly influenced by gender stereotypes. Gender stereotypes in military organizations are deeply rooted beliefs about how men and women are "supposed" to behave, and they continue to shape roles, expectations, and career trajectories—even in modern, increasingly inclusive armed forces.

2. Research objectives and hypotheses

The objective of the paper is to identify how gender stereotypes affect group cohesion and operational performance in missions. And the hypothesis derived from this is the following: the presence of gender

stereotypes in the military environment negatively influences both group cohesion and mission performance.

3. Population universe and sampling

The sample consists of 12 female military personnel who have participated in external peacekeeping missions within the UN and EU, and peace enforcement missions within NATO. The 12 correspondents are divided into 10 officers, 1 non-commissioned officer and 1 military foreman, with the following military specialties: 9 infantry, 1 tank and 2 logistics. The ages range from 25 to 41 years. The sample is a non-probabilistic snowball type, because it starts from one or more people to whom we have access from the target category, who recommend other people to be included in the sample, who in turn recommend other people and so on.

4. Research method

In order to achieve the objective and verify the validity of the hypothesis, we used the content analysis method through the Nvivo software (CAQDAS- Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software), performing a qualitative analysis and subsequently analyzing the correlation between the main units of analysis. This is a qualitative method used to identify, organize and interpret thematic patterns in the participants' responses, focusing on their meaning through words, expressions and recurring ideas. This entire process involves coding relevant segments and creating relationships between existing codes to facilitate the process of deeper understanding of the responses, which reflects the topics of interest of the research, thus allowing a deeper understanding of the perceptions, experiences or values expressed by the respondents. We developed a semi-structured interview guide directly connected to the theoretical approach presented in the first and second chapters of the paper, aimed at collecting data on the impact of gender stereotypes in the military environment.

The interview investigated the impact of gender stereotypes on group cohesion and operational performance in stressful situations, analyzing how gender-related social perceptions and expectations influence the dynamics of relationships between team members in demanding military contexts, such as missions carried out in theaters of operations. The questions asked aim to identify possible differences in behaviors, trust, and collaboration that arise based on gender, as well as how these stereotypes can affect group cohesion and the team's ability to act effectively under pressure. The dimension explores both individual perceptions of the presence and effects of gender stereotypes, as well as possible mechanisms for adapting to or overcoming them in order to maintain a high level of operational performance.

Starting with the research objectives, we will further analyze, using the content analysis method, the responses obtained during the interviews applied to the participants. The analysis will highlight both the similarities and the differences between the experiences reported, emphasizing how gender stereotypes influence group cohesion, operational performance and well-being in the military environment, but also what are the main factors that contributed to their emergence. Structuring on thematic dimensions, highlighted by questions, allows for a detailed and coherent interpretation of the data, capturing the impact of traditionalist perceptions and cultural factors on team dynamics, interpersonal relationships and stress management in complex operational contexts. The analysis will also follow the relationships between these dimensions, highlighting the interdependencies and how they influence each other, in order to provide a clear and integrated picture of the phenomenon studied. In addition, starting from the main idea of the dimension, presented in the form of a code, I will highlight the correlations between the main

code and the other codes identified in the analysis of the responses.

5. Data analysis

As a result, to determine the impact of gender stereotypes on group cohesion and operational performance in stressful situations, we will analyze the answers to the questions in the interview guide.

To the first question, What type of mission have you participated in so far? How would you describe your experience in theaters of operations? The participants described a considerable diversity of missions in theaters of operations, mostly in Afghanistan, Iraq, Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also in areas such as Angola, Congo, Kosovo or other regions in Africa and Europe, within operations under the aegis of NATO, the UN or KFOR. The most frequently mentioned are peacekeeping, training or logistical support missions, along with participation in combat or coordination missions.

The experiences recounted are nuanced and highlight both the professional challenges and the personal transformations experienced in these contexts. Some respondents talk about the high level of difficulty and the intensity of physical and mental demands: *"The mission in Afghanistan was a difficult mission, full of stress, tension, and fatigue, but very productive from a professional point of view"* or *"My experience was a defining one, full of both operational and human challenges, but also professional satisfactions"*.

Other participants emphasize the flexible and volatile nature of the mission, underlining the professional and personal benefits: *"Experience in theaters of operations is beneficial for any soldier, as it brings professional value to the lessons learned"*, or *"Each mission was a valuable lesson about resilience, adaptability and, above all, about the importance of team cohesion"*. The cultural and social dimension is mentioned especially in UN missions, where contact with other realities

was defining: *"The UN mission was an easier mission, not as demanding, but full of unique social, cultural and culinary experiences"* or *"The environment in Angola added unique challenges (...) different from the European one"*. Overall, the idea emerges that foreign missions are perceived as a professional and personal turning point: *"At the end of the mission, you feel like a more capable person and with greater self-confidence"* or *"It was a mission that confirmed to me that professionalism has no gender"*. These accounts reflect a strong assumption of the military role, regardless of gender, in an environment where competence and adaptability are essential for operational success and integration into multinational teams.

Regarding the second question, *did you notice any difference in your relationships with your colleagues during missions compared to the period of preparation for the mission?* Most of the participants reported clear differences between the relationships during the preparation period and during the actual mission. In general, relationships during training are described as more relaxed, formal or even protocol-based: *"During the training period, relationships were more formal, focused on standard procedures"* or *(...) relationships were more protocol-based and theoretical"*. Once in the theater of operations, team dynamics are profoundly transformed, influenced by stress, real risks and the constant pressure of the operating environment. One of the respondents observes that *"In the theater of operations, under constant pressure and the unpredictability of the environment, relationships become much more intense and dependent on mutual trust"*, and another confirms that *"under the real pressure of the mission and the hostile environment, group cohesion has become much deeper and more vital"*. Also, in some cases, the performance in the field seems to have reduced initial prejudices: *"(...) after we started the mission and the actual collaboration, the slight*

tension disappeared, the collaboration being based on trust and professionalism". However, not all experiences were positive: some participants noted tensions or even marginalization, especially when they expressed different opinions: *"the more I tried to prove a point (...) they either ignored it, or just said it didn't make any sense"*.

Others mention that gender stereotypes become visible precisely in extreme situations: *"in moments of stress, certain gender expectations became more visible"* or *"there was a difference in relationships, given by the environment and by stress and fatigue accumulated over time"*. However, overall, team dynamics seem to evolve with real contact with the missions, depending on the level of professionalism of colleagues, the distribution of functions and the degree of pressure specific to the mission. In some cases, the experience strengthened mutual trust: *"(...) collaboration became closer and more oriented towards common objectives"*, while in others, it generated a *"lack of communication"* or cooling of relations once they arrived in operations.

Next question: *Are you familiar with the concept of gender stereotypes? If so: How do you think they affect team performance? If not: Why do you think gender stereotypes do not have a significant impact on team performance?*

Most respondents acknowledge that gender stereotypes have a negative impact on team performance, highlighting various effects and providing concrete examples. Some emphasize that they *"negatively affect team performance by limiting diversity, underutilizing talents, decreasing cohesion and perpetuating inequalities"*, or *"team members can be automatically assigned to certain tasks based on gender, not actual skills"*. Others describe more personal and direct situations, stating *"at the time of activities you are no longer seen as a soldier but only as a woman. It doesn't matter what you know and what you can do. At that moment you are just a burden"*. Experiences from theaters of operations are also

mentioned: *"for example, in a multicultural environment such as a NATO mission in Angola, stereotypes related to women's physical strength or the traditional roles attributed to them can lead to unfair assignment of tasks or underestimation of the contribution of some members"*.

Other participants highlight more subtle but persistent effects, saying that stereotypes *"can lead to underestimating the capabilities of certain team members, to unequal allocation of responsibilities or to poor communication, based on assumptions rather than facts"*, or that they *"affect quite a lot because of people who come from traditionalist backgrounds and who were not used to mixed collaboration"*. There are also opinions that do not perceive a significant impact: *"I do not think that this concept was reflected to a significant extent within the structure I was part of"*. Other points of view draw attention to the impact on leadership: *"stereotypes can erode a leader's authority if they are not confronted in time. If some subordinates perceive that a woman could not effectively lead a platoon in a conflict zone, this can initially affect discipline and obedience to orders. However, concrete results change these perceptions"*. It is also shown that stereotypes are more visible *"in educational institutions, because the reality in the units on the territory makes you realize that the traditional role of women is not exactly the one that the person in question knows so well as to judge their actions"*, that they *"can limit the development of natural talents and capabilities of girls and boys/women and men"*, *"can affect the performance of teams through the unbalanced level of trust given to team members, but also by assigning specific tasks based on the concept of gender"*. Overall, the responses show that gender stereotypes can undermine the potential of military teams through unfair allocations, demotivation, reduced trust and the emergence of communication barriers, requiring conscious efforts to be combated

and to make the most of available human resources.

Do gender stereotypes affect trust between team members during missions? If yes: How do you think this lack of trust influences operational success? If no: Do you think team members can overcome these stereotypes without affecting collaboration? Most respondents acknowledged that gender stereotypes affect trust between team members during missions, and this lack of trust negatively influences operational success. Thus, it is emphasized that stereotypes can compromise communication, cohesion and delay decision-making: *"Gender stereotypes that generate a lack of trust compromise operational success by affecting communication and decreasing cohesion, delaying decisions, reducing initiative and increasing the risk of errors"*. In the absence of trust, stress, overload and conflicts between members occur: *"If there is no trust, stress, overload with tasks and arguments occur."*

Moreover, prejudices related to women's ability to handle situations under pressure or make quick decisions generate hesitations and doubts in the team: *"If a colleague has prejudices that a woman would be less able to handle a situation under pressure or make quick decisions, it leads to an implicit lack of trust."* These cracks in trust can lead to operational delays, errors and even endanger the security of the mission: *"In a high-risk environment, where each team member depends on the other, any crack in trust can have disastrous consequences"*. In some situations, stereotypes determine the marginalization of women, who are limited to administrative tasks, being excluded from operational missions: *"Women are left to do the administrative part, without being effectively involved in the mission."* Consequently, low trust generates tensions, hesitations in executing orders and can lead to conflicts in the team: *"Lack of trust based on gender prejudices can lead to hesitations*

in executing orders and unnecessary tensions."

On the other hand, there are also opinions according to which stereotypes can be overcome without impacting collaboration, through professionalism and involvement: *"Team members can overcome gender stereotypes without having major effects on the outcome of the mission."* However, the general consensus is that trust is the foundation for a team's success, and discrimination can lead to conflicts and even failure to complete missions: *"Distrust between team members can negatively affect operational success, especially in contexts where collaboration and rapid response are essential"*. In critical situations, lack of trust can delay reactions and affect operational efficiency: *"Low trust can slow down the reaction in critical situations and affect the transmission of essential information."* Furthermore, stereotypes can generate overcontrol or hesitation at decisive moments, jeopardizing the team's rapid response: *"If a colleague does not trust you just because you are a woman, hesitation or overcontrol may occur, which affects rapid response and operational efficiency"*.

As can be seen in the diagram (Figure 1), created in the Lucidchart application, starting with the coding of the answers

provided to the four key research questions. Subsequently, we established relationships between the codes to highlight interdependencies and facilitate a deeper understanding of the analyzed context. Thus, the scheme functions as a visual tool that synthesizes and explains the dynamics of these factors in a logical and coherent way. Gender stereotypes are presented in the diagram as a complex phenomenon, fueled and supported by a series of interdependent factors. The media reinforces traditional perceptions, promoting limiting images and roles that affect the way women are perceived in the military environment. The collective mentality directly influences these perceptions, perpetuating gender expectations that generate pressure on the targeted individuals. Pressure, in turn, leads to underestimation of skills and the emergence of marginalization, reinforcing barriers to real and equitable integration. Barriers and differential treatment are concrete effects of these processes, affecting access to opportunities and effective participation in missions. Traditionalism and institutional inertia fuel these stereotypes, making change more difficult and slower.

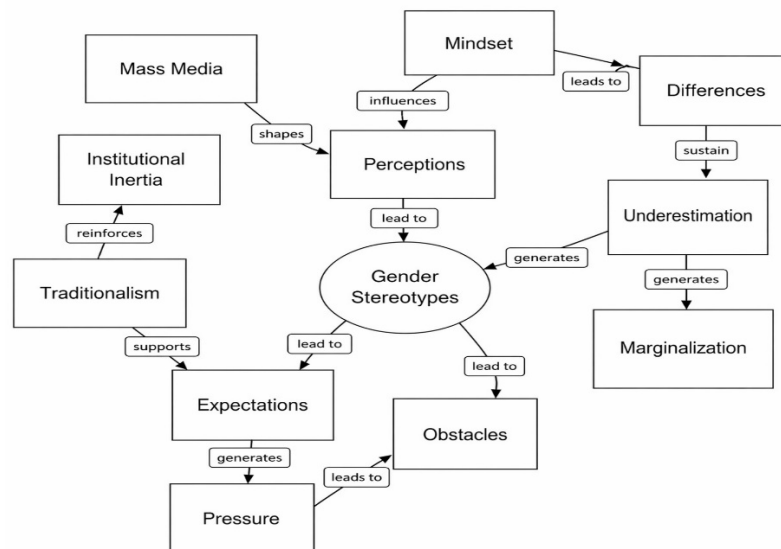


Figure 1: A conceptual model of the interrelationships among factors both influencing and influenced by gender stereotypes (core construct)

In this context, social and organizational expectations contribute to generating pressure, creating a vicious circle in which stereotypes are perpetuated and reinforced by structures and norms resistant to transformation.

Based on the research results, we conclude that gender stereotypes can represent obstacles to the professional development of soldiers and to the consolidation of an organizational culture based on respect and collaboration. They can prevent teams from functioning as a unit, reducing operational efficiency and affecting personnel morale. I believe that the results of this work are useful not only at a personal level for a clearer understanding of the existing problems, but also for leaders and commanders within military structures, who can better direct their attention to the relationships between subordinates, identifying and preventing stereotypes or prejudices that generate communication

barriers, lack of trust and difficulties in achieving common goals. By recognizing these realities and assuming appropriate measures, the military institution can become more inclusive, more efficient and better prepared to respond to the complex challenges of the contemporary world.

Organizational and socio-cultural factors shape gender stereotypes within military structures. These stereotypes function as a core construct influencing individual experiences through mediating mechanisms such as perceived discrimination, stereotype threat, and role conflict. These mechanisms, in turn, contribute to perceived stress levels. The relationship between gender stereotypes and stress is moderated by resilience-related factors, including individual coping resources, unit cohesion, and leadership climate. Importantly, stress outcomes feed back into the system, either reinforcing or weakening existing gender stereotypes.

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