



EUROMIL Wednesday Q&A series

“How to achieve gender equality in the Armed Forces?”



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Which factors (institutional, social, cultural) determine the gender inequality and women’s under-representation in the Armed Forces?

There are multiple factors influencing the underrepresentation of women amongst armed forces personnel. Firstly, gender inequalities in society at large are the key underlying problem. Stereotypes about the roles, skills and faculties of women lead to the assumption that military service is for men, and not for women. At the same time, the institutional culture within armed forces, often implying a rather toxic masculinity, creates a hostile environment for women to work in, and hence rather scares them off such career choice. Women who dare to enter this male-dominated field need to put up with the risk of sexual and gender discrimination, harassment or even assault, in an organizational culture that prevents women from even from reporting abuse.

Women interested in a career in the armed forces need to overcome entry requirements that are tailored to men, and need to put up with the fact that policies in the armed forces do not make it a career compatible with caretaking obligations – still a role mainly expected to be handled by mothers. Even the procurement of clothing and equipment lacks consideration for different body shapes, sizes and requirements.

Also, men often decide on a career in the armed forces after their military service, which gives them a chance to try out this field of work. Yet, women have been historically excluded from military service. While most armed forces in the OSCE region now in theory allow women to occupy any position within the armed forces, in practice they remain mostly in support roles, perpetuating gender stereotypes and a male-dominated sector of work. Gender bias is inherent also in promotion processes, favouring men over women in their career progression, and so the wheel of gender discrimination keeps turning round and round.

You can find more explanations, relevant human rights standards and good practices in the ODIHR and DCAF [Compendium on the Human Rights of Armed forces personnel](#), and also in the ODIHR, DCAF and UN-Women [Gender and Security Toolkit](#).



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Gender inequality and issues in maintaining high retention rates are concrete proofs of women’s challenges during their military tenure. Thus, what are the best practices, that have already been applied, to tackle these challenges, introduce a gender mainstream perspective in the Armed Forces and enhance recruitment campaigns?

An essential step is to address what I described earlier as hostile environment for women who consider this career choice. The reluctance to report cases of sexual discrimination, harassment and abuse means that it is even more important to ensure a properly established functioning and effective complaint and reporting system, and make sure that those who report do not face retaliation. It is imperative that perpetrators are held accountable so as to create trust in the system.

At the same time, institutions need to get an understanding of their organizational culture and in which ways it perpetuates dominant norms of masculinity. This means making an effort to analyze which values and behaviours are encouraged, either formally or informally, and what role models are portrayed from the top.

Organizational gender assessments can be a useful tool to identify aspects that need to be tackled to change the organizational culture. Such exercises must not be considered a tick-box exercise, or a side job to military training. Male senior personnel should lead by example and engage in analysis of gender and masculinities as a strategy to tackle sexist behaviours.

Procuring equipment and uniforms that fit women in the armed forces, is not only an expression of respect for women personnel, but a requirement for women to not be disadvantaged in delivering military service.

Policies should be revised in order to make a career in the armed forces compatible with caregiving responsibilities.

Enabling contact between potential female applicants and women service personnel is another effective way to promote applications. To some extent, giving preference to women candidates in roles where they are underrepresented, may be a necessary measure to overcome a male-dominated institution.

The before-mentioned Compendium highlights some examples of good practices.



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The OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights is working to promote gender equality in the Armed Forces. Therefore, could you please explain the added value of ODIHR in this endeavour?

ODIHR works to assist OSCE participating States in their efforts to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms and to strengthen and protect democratic institutions. Gender equality is an integral element to all human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Improving gender equality within security sector institutions is therefore an important part of ODIHR’s mandate, both as a human rights requirement and considering that democratic institutions need to reflect the society they serve. It is common sense, isn’t it? Only if the security sector is representational of the community it serves, there is a chance that it protects the rights of everyone.

With respect to the armed forces, ODIHR has a body of work on human rights of Armed Forces Personnel, with the aim to promote the protection and promotion of the rights of both women and men service members.

The already mentioned Compendium on human rights of armed forces personnel, and the Gender and Security Tool “Defence and Gender” are part of this work. Moreover, ODIHR has developed a methodology to guide self-assessments by participating States’ armed forces of their institutional adherence to human rights obligations and commitments, including gender equality.

I would respond to the question on ODIHR’s added value on this issue with a question: Which other organization covers human rights of armed forces personnel? As the OSCE’s primary human rights institution, ODIHR is uniquely placed to highlight that armed forces personnel are both duty-bearers but also right-holders when it comes to human rights. We also approach the promotion of gender equality as an integral aspect of improving security sector institutions.

The methodology we developed for the Human Rights and gender self-assessment will be piloted in May, and published over the following months. We invite you to visit our website to stay tuned on our updates.