



## EUROMIL Wednesday Q&A series

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



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

It is good to recall that while historically women have engaged in war and combat as fighters across various cultures and societies, it is only recently that many countries started formally integrating women into their armed forces in diverse roles, including combat positions. This has directly influenced not only the culture and institutional practices in the Armed Forces, but also whether or not women have yet advanced to senior leadership ranks.

The absence of women in senior leadership positions compounds the public's already limited comprehension of the multifaceted nature of military roles. Portrayals of the military in popular culture, accentuating masculinity and combat prowess, further adds to this. Consequently, many women may not even consider pursuing a service in their respective armed forces, despite their potential to excel in such a profession.

Furthermore, entrenched gender norms and stereotypes for both men and women, reinforced by the reality of the military as a historically male-dominated institution, and despite best efforts the discriminatory policies and practices that ensue, both dissuade and obstruct women from pursuing service within military. Conscious and unconscious biases that result in limited opportunities for recruitment and advancement further exacerbate the issue. In some countries, conscription policies also contribute to women's severe underrepresentation in the armed forces.

In summary, gender inequality and women’s underrepresentation in the armed forces stems from a complex interplay of institutional, social, cultural, and historical factors.



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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?**

Addressing these factors necessitates comprehensive reforms, including policy changes to eliminate barriers, efforts to challenge societal perceptions, and initiatives to promote gender equality within the military. This may include revising outdated regulations, ensuring parental leave for men and women, providing equipment that fits different body types and sizes, and putting in place mechanisms to address discrimination or harassment. Efforts to challenge societal perceptions and gender norms inside and outside the military are also essential aspects of this process.

However, it is important to recognize that such reforms may face resistance, as is common with institutional change. One of the best mechanisms to address this is through leadership, and recognizing that addressing gender inequality in any organisation, work place or institution is ultimately a leadership responsibility.

Lastly, challenging the misconception that gender equality or gender mainstreaming solely revolves around women's service and promotion within the military is crucial. Gender mainstreaming entails recognizing and addressing in all military analysis, planning and decision-making processes the socially constructed roles, norms, behaviours, activities, and attributes that any given society considers appropriate for women and men. This approach enables armed forces to understand gender dynamics and their impact on operations, such as psychological operations, and to design more effective strategies accordingly. By embracing gender mainstreaming, the military can enhance its effectiveness, efficiency, and ethical integrity, ultimately contributing to mission readiness and overall operational success; while ensuring a more inclusive and respectful environment for all service members.



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**The EU is already dealing with gender inequality in the European Armed Forces. Could you please explain to what extent the Strategic Compass and the EU Strategic Approach to WPS and its Action Plan (2019-2024) are concretely applied regarding this issue?**

Promoting gender equality is a fundamental objective of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, including the Common Security and Defense Policy. The EU has a notable policy framework to deliver on this commitment. This includes the EU’s strategic approach to Women, Peace, and Security (WPS), the Council Conclusions from December 2018, as well as the 2022 Strategic Compass on Security and Defense and the WPS Council Conclusions from November 2022. Recently the EU has been translating these commitments to more targeted guidance for the EU Military Staff and the Military CSDP. These include, among others:

- a) The Operational Guidance on Gender Mainstreaming in the Military CSDP
- b) The EU Military Staff Standard Operating Procedure on Gender Expertise and Coordination
- c) The EU Military Staff Gender Action Plan

While establishing robust policies and guidelines is essential, their effective implementation is equally vital. In recent years, the EU has intensified its efforts to promote gender-responsive leadership throughout its structures. This entails driving organizational change through leadership and recognizing that integrating a gender perspective into all aspects of peace and security is a skill and a (military) capability.