



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?

Gender inequality and women’s under-representation in the Armed Forces can be influenced by various factors such as Institutional Barriers, Social Stereotypes and Cultural Attitudes. As far as institutional barriers are concerned, in the Greek Army there are policies and regulations which protect women rights. In the early days of women in the Army, the female personnel was like outcasts, since the army was a traditionally male domain. Women were unwanted and they have to work twice as hard to prove their qualities and capabilities and that they were worth being in this profession. For this reason, they were treated like the weak link and bad attitudes towards them were frequent. They were supposed to be dressed and look like men with no right to dye their hair or use make up so as not to provoke the male personnel. But this was all wrong. Hopefully as the years passed it became clear that the role of the Army was not to “change the gender” of women and make them something else, but to assimilate them in this profession. Nowadays, there are policies which protect the female personnel and provides them benefits to facilitate their lives and protect their rights. Of course, there is a dress code, but they don’t have to hide their femininity anymore. They can use make – up, dye their hair, their nails, they can wear a skirt or a trouser and they can participate in any kind of service. They can become pilots, captains, generals, be in the special forces. They can speak up for themselves by respecting of course the hierarchy codes. There is also an office in the General Staff in which they can place a complain, if there is any kind of mistreatment that has to do with gender, like sexual harassment, bullying or whatever they thing that can harm them.

Social Norms and Stereotypes about the role of women, were used in the past to discourage them from pursuing a career in the Armed Forces. They were supposed to be mothers, who raise their children and stay at home and do a certain type of work, according to some male military personnel. But actually, it was proven that women are persons who were capable to do more that one thing at the same time and had a more structure way of doing things. This was a very valuable skill.



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They were peacemakers, since they had more patience and they were thinking twice before taking any action, in opposition to men who are usually more impatient and ready to “attack” in any case. Today, concerning the role of women as mothers, this right in motherhood, is protected in the Armed Forces and it is not used as a flaw. The maternity leave includes 14 months out of work. The female personnel can take the leave in the fourth month of the pregnancy and can return to her duties when the baby will be nine (9) months old, so that the infant could be accepted in the nursery school. According to the Greek army regulations, for the next 2 years this woman will not be deployed or transferred, because she is a young mother and she can stay in the desired region according to her application in the staff office.

Most Armed Forces were male-dominated institutions and the majority of them still are creating cultural attitudes towards women’s role in the military and affecting their access to training, and to pursuit leadership positions. That represents practices that men were using to marginalize or exclude women for certain positions. As I’ve mentioned above this is not the case anymore, since we also have women in position of a General and in any position, but still women are not that many. The first 220 women joined the army in 1979, but not as officers. The year 1991 the first 3 women joined the Greek Officers Military School and so they are not that many who have reached the age to become General yet...

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 gender inequality and improving retention rates of women in the military is an ongoing challenge, but measures have been implemented to tackle these issues and promote diversity and inclusion within the Armed Forces. Here are some strategies that have been used to address these challenges:

- **Strong Leadership** is essential in promoting Gender Equality and diversity in the Armed Forces. Leaders must support and promote initiatives that give equal opportunities for all the staff members. No tolerance policies for sexual harassment and discrimination. There were made great some steps towards this direction here in the Greek Armed Forces, but there are still more to be done.
- **Promoting Women into Leadership positions** is one practice that can help create a more inclusive environment and inspire more women to join the Armed Forces.
- **Family support programs** by creating nursery schools and kindergartens inside military facilities is an effective program that we have started to use in our country and that helps women balancing their careers with their family responsibilities especially at the young age of a child when more care is needed.



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- **Gender policies** must be applied that address the needs and challenges women are facing in the military, such as violence, sexual harassment, flexible working hours, maternity leaves etc. That is why Gender Equality offices must be placed in every military unit with specialized and trained personnel in these matters. Mentorship programs can also help women confront challenges in this demanding profession and support services for victims.
- **Training and Education Programs** are essential on gender equality issues to eliminate the phenomena of mistreatment towards women in the Armed Forces and to help develop respect among the personnel whether male or female. This kind of training should be a subject in any military school.
- **Recruitment Campaigns** can inform women about the opportunities given in the Armed Forces to grow a career by referring to role models who have already established a career in this domain and are well known for their service.

The Greek Ministry Defence contributes to the integration of gender equality perspectives in the Greek Armed Forces. Could you please explain to what extent the proposals of the Ministry of Defence in the National Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2021-2025 are concretely applied?

In the above mentioned questions I've already presented some of the initiatives that the Ministry of Defence is using to promote Gender Equality such as: the Gender Equality office which helps women with the challenges that they are facing in the military, training programs such as seminars in the military schools, units and in the General Staff from a well educated personnel with often the cooperation of external organizations. Besides, policies have been applied to facilitate the female personnel who is carrying babies or who are single mothers so as not to participate during that period in the military exercises or working long hours. Family support programs with nursery schools in the military facilities so as to help female personnel balance their career with motherhood.

Every now and then reports are made from the Gender Offices of Army, Navy and Air Force General Staffs to address the Gender Office of the Armed Forces General Staff about the progress made in this domain. Usually when there is a National Plan of Action for Gender Equality, the Armed Forces support the implementation of it, but I am not familiar if there is something new to be made for the years 2024-2025. The only thing that always makes a difference in the Armed Forces are the Leaders. Leaders are those who play a key role in the agenda of the Armed Forces and those who can cultivate a culture of Equality in the Armed Forces. We have recently changed leadership in the Greek Armed Forces and we are still in the middle of completing this change, so it is early to see if there is going to be a change and if so, what will it be...