
Evaluation of the Role of Female Soldiers in Building the Security of the Republic of Poland

Original article

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Abstract

Keywords:

women in the military, polish armed forces, national security, gender equality.

Objectives: The article aims to analyse changes in women's participation in the Polish Armed Forces and to identify the principal benefits and barriers associated with their service in the wider context of national security.

Results: The analysis shows a clear increase in the number of women serving and their growing presence across different corps and service branches. As of 1 March 2024, official data record 17,334 women in professional military service (approximately 13% of personnel). At the same time, organisational, cultural, and logistical barriers remain significant. The available literature also suggests that women's participation may facilitate selected operational tasks, particularly those requiring contact with civilian populations; in missions, this includes, inter alia, support for medical tasks and direct engagement with local communities.

Conclusions: Growing participation by women may strengthen the armed forces' personnel capacity and diversify the competence profile of military personnel; however, a full assessment of its impact on the state security system still requires further empirical research.

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Introduction

This article addresses the research problem of the growing presence of female soldiers in the Polish Armed Forces and its relevance to the security of the Republic of Poland. The aim of the article is to analyse changes in women's participation in the armed forces and to identify the principal benefits and barriers associated with their service.

The main hypothesis is that the increasing participation of women in the armed forces broadens the personnel base and diversifies the competence profile of military personnel.

The research methodology is based on an analysis of relevant literature, legal acts, and strategic documents concerning the security and functioning of the Polish Armed Forces, including materials related to the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda. The study also uses secondary analysis of selected statistical data on the number of women in the military and their participation in international missions, supplemented by a comparative perspective referring to NATO standards. The applied methods do not permit direct causal inference.

The analysis indicates a dynamic increase in the number of women in the armed forces and their growing participation in operational activities and foreign missions. At the same time, it identifies key barriers hindering the full integration of women into military structures. Rather than providing definitive evidence of effectiveness, the study highlights an important and still evolving area of Poland's security system.

The article is based on qualitative desk research. The first analytical layer consists of a review of Polish and international academic literature on women's military participation, gender integration, and the Women, Peace and Security agenda. The second layer comprises a legal and institutional analysis of selected constitutional, statutory, and strategic documents regulating women's service in the Polish Armed Forces.

1. Historical background

Traditionally, the military has been seen as a male domain. Throughout history, the vast majority of soldiers on the battlefield have been men. Women have appeared in military operations mainly in exceptional circumstances, usually during wars and uprisings, when there was a shortage of men to defend the country. Medieval chronicles already record instances of women's participation in combat. Gall Anonim wrote of women fighting alongside men during the popular uprising led by Masław in the 1430s.

During the era of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, women also occasionally took up arms. For example, during the Turkish invasions of the 15th–16th centuries, women took part in the defence of Polish fortresses, including Beata Dolska, who became famous for her defence of the castle in Dubno, and Anna Dorota Chrzanowska, who defended Trembowla in 1675. In the 17th century, Katarzyna Grudzińska fought alongside men against the Swedish invaders in the Podkarpacie region, demonstrating that, in the face of danger, women also took up arms.

In most cases, however, in the pre-modern era, women performed auxiliary roles as medics, nurses, camp followers, or couriers. During the Napoleonic Wars and national

uprisings, the prevailing view was that women 'should not take up arms', and they were therefore mainly engaged in medical, logistical, and intelligence services. Nevertheless, there was no shortage of heroines fighting with weapons in hand. At the Battle of Raszyn (1809), Zofia Kodrębska, Helena Kurdanówna, and Joanna Żubrowa fought alongside men; the latter was awarded the *Virtuti Militari* Cross in 1812 for her bravery.

During the November Uprising, Emilia Plater became famous for leading a unit of insurgents in Lithuania while dressed in a man's uniform and was appointed captain. In the January Uprising (1863), dozens of women served as nurses, couriers, and even soldiers in male disguise; one example is Henryka Pustowójtówna, adjutant to General Marian Langiewicz. In the second half of the 19th century, the institution of the camp follower emerged in European armies – women who followed troops, dealing with supplies, laundry, and care for the wounded, and sometimes also defending camps. Camp followers were even required to have a basic knowledge of weaponry.

The First World War and the period of the struggle for Polish independence (1914–1921) saw greater involvement of women in military activities, though mainly in auxiliary roles. Even before 1914, Polish paramilitary organisations had formed female support units (e.g. the Rifle Squads or the women's sections of the Polish Military Organisation), where women acquired basic military training. Between 1918 and 1920, women served as medics, telephone operators, telegraph operators, and even in the air force (the Women's Auxiliary Air Service). In the Second Polish Republic, the Women's Volunteer Legion was formed, whose units took part in the Polish–Bolshevik War of 1920, carrying out communication, observation, and support tasks. Nevertheless, formal opportunities for women to serve in combat remained limited.

It was not until the Second World War that women were mobilised on a large scale for military service. A decree issued by the President of the Republic of Poland in exile in 1943 allowed women to serve in the military on an equal footing with men. Within the Polish Armed Forces in the West, auxiliary women's corps (e.g. the Women's Auxiliary Service) were formed to serve in communications, anti-aircraft defence, logistics, and medical services. In the occupied country, thousands of Polish women served in the Home Army as liaison officers, medics, intelligence agents, and often also as soldiers in partisan units. The Cichociemni couriers (e.g. Elżbieta Zawacka, codenamed 'Zo', the only woman among the Cichociemni, who was later promoted to the rank of general), as well as the heroines of the Warsaw Uprising, became symbols of Polish women's involvement in the struggle for independence.

After 1945, during the communist era, women's participation in the military was significantly reduced. The policy of the communist authorities assumed that women should fulfil themselves primarily in civilian roles. The few female officers were mainly from the wartime era (such as Brigadier General Maria Wittek, appointed as early as 1944 in the Polish Armed Forces in Exile and posthumously promoted in 1991 as the first female general in the Polish Armed Forces). In the Polish People's Army, women appeared almost exclusively in medical and administrative roles, often at non-commissioned officer ranks. It was not until the late period of the Polish People's Republic that the first changes occurred – in 1988, for the first time, women (primarily medical students) were recruited into military service as doctors,

psychologists, and pharmacists. However, this was a limited programme aimed at addressing staff shortages in the military's healthcare system.

The political transition of 1989 and Poland's opening to the international community laid the foundations for a broader discussion on women's participation in the military. However, the key impetus was Poland's accession to NATO in March 1999. Since the 1990s, the North Atlantic Alliance has promoted the principles of gender equality in the armed forces and the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda (UN Security Council Resolution 1325 of 2000). Accepting these commitments required the Polish Armed Forces to open fully to the integration of women, increase their numbers, and provide access to a wider range of military specialisations.

As early as 1999, the Ministry of National Defence established the Council for Women's Military Service as an advisory and consultative body on women's service. Although the Council's role was initially limited, over time it became an important forum for monitoring the integration process and articulating the interests of female soldiers. In the same year, women were admitted to military academies in Poland for the first time, and the first female candidates began officer training. The first female graduates completed their studies at officer training schools as early as 2004, marking the practical implementation of new career opportunities for women in the military. Nevertheless, the pace of change was initially moderate – even in the early years of the 21st century, the proportion of women in the armed forces remained below 1%.

Historically, women's participation in Polish military structures was usually incidental and auxiliary, which distinguishes it from the contemporary, institutionalised presence of women in the armed forces.

2. Legal and institutional framework

The 1997 Constitution of the Republic of Poland guarantees equal treatment of citizens regardless of gender (Article 32(1) and (2)), which constitutes a fundamental legal guarantee of equal access to public service, including military service. For many years, however, there was a lack of specific regulations governing the status of women in the armed forces. A turning point came with the Act of 11 September 2003 on the military service of professional soldiers, which opened access to professional military service for women on an equal footing with men. This Act abolished previous restrictions – from then on, women could apply for all military posts and ranks, with the exception of those where restrictions arose from international regulations or specific service requirements. In practice, this meant the full integration of women into the Polish Armed Forces, although certain roles (e.g. submarine crews) remained exclusively male-staffed for technical and regulatory reasons.

Subsequent legislation supplemented this framework. The Act of 3 December 2010 on the implementation of certain EU provisions regarding equal treatment strengthened prohibitions on gender-based discrimination in employment, including in the uniformed services. Internal regulations were introduced within the armed forces to combat harassment and bullying, in response to the challenges associated with the increasing number of women. Furthermore, the code of honour for professional soldiers and associated ethical procedures were updated to include provisions regarding respect for personal dignity regardless of gender.

Another significant step was the amendment of regulations concerning conscript service and the reserve. Since 2004, women have been eligible for admission to officer and non-commissioned officer training schools on an equal footing with men, which has gradually increased the inflow of qualified female personnel into the armed forces. In 2014, the rules for recruitment to the National Reserve Forces were liberalised, opening them more widely to women. Current policy discussions concerning military qualification from 2026 refer not to all women, but to selected groups of women with qualifications considered useful for the armed forces, especially in medical and technical fields.

The full integration of women into the military required not only legal changes but also the creation of appropriate institutional structures. The Council for Women's Military Service, formally established in November 1999, has become a key body monitoring the situation of female soldiers. The Council brings together representatives from all branches of the armed forces and advises the Minister of National Defence on matters relating to women's service. Its remit includes identifying barriers hindering women's service, initiating measures promoting equal opportunities, and providing opinions on draft legislation and programmes concerning women's service. In 2024, the Council celebrated its 25th anniversary, highlighting two decades of progress in the Ministry of Defence's equality policy. Nevertheless, the literature indicates that, despite the Council's formally broad remit, its actual influence on personnel decisions is often limited due to the hierarchical nature of military culture.

Positions of representatives for women's military service have also been introduced within the Polish Armed Forces at the level of branch commands and in larger units. Their role is to address, on an ongoing basis, issues raised by women within a given structure, such as service conditions, maternity, and infrastructure. Such a network of representatives facilitates the implementation of equal treatment policies at the local level. According to NATO reports, similar support networks for women in the armed forces operate in 72% of member states, which indicates the adoption of comparable standards.

Adapting military infrastructure and equipment to the needs of women has also become an important institutional issue. Reports and official communications indicate gradual improvements in uniforms, protective equipment, and accommodation arrangements, although the scale and pace of such changes may vary between units.

The Ministry of National Defence has for years pursued a policy of gender mainstreaming, integrating a gender-equality perspective into various areas of military activity. These measures include training on non-discrimination, anti-harassment procedures, and initiatives aimed at widening women's access to military careers. Nevertheless, women's participation in the highest command positions remains limited.

A key element of equality policy is the fulfilment of international commitments, primarily UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. Poland adopted a National Action Plan for 2018–2021, while later editions of the plan are referred to in the literature and policy debate; however, the precise time frame of subsequent editions is not equally clear in publicly available sources. The broader direction of policy is nevertheless evident: increasing women's participation in security institutions and integrating a gender perspective into military planning.

The legal and institutional framework for women's service in the Polish Armed Forces can therefore be summarised as formally inclusive, although the practical implementation of these principles may differ across units and levels of command.

3. Women in overseas missions and national security

Since the 1990s, the Polish Armed Forces have participated in numerous international missions, ranging from the Balkans through UN operations to combat missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Female soldiers have taken part in all these operations, although their numbers were initially small. The first Polish military contingents (PKW) deployed abroad consisted almost exclusively of men, but over time women began to be included, particularly in medical, logistical, and administrative roles.

Dr Barbara Drapikowska's research provides a detailed analysis of the participation of women in missions in Iraq (PKW Iraq 2003–2008) and Afghanistan (PKW Afghanistan 2002–2014). The findings show that 193 women served in the Iraqi mission, accounting for 1.33% of the total number of deployed soldiers. After excluding those who participated in multiple missions, this corresponded to 138 individual women.

In the Afghan mission, the proportion of women was slightly higher: 366 women, or approximately 2.2% of the entire contingent, which translated into 159 unique individuals participating in successive mission rotations.

Most women on these missions served in medical teams (doctors, nurses, paramedics) or in general staff and logistical roles. Women were present, among other roles, as liaison officers, interpreters, CIMIC (civil-military cooperation) specialists, and even as drivers or gunners (e.g. in security teams). As a rule, Polish women were not deployed directly to combat operations outside the base, especially in the early phase of the mission. Drapikowska notes that in the first contingents, an informal practice of 'protecting' women was applied by assigning them mainly to rear-area staff duties, limiting their access to tasks requiring direct confrontation with the enemy.

In the Polish Contingent in Iraq, it was common practice to assign women to administrative sections, whereas in the later Polish Contingent in Afghanistan this paternalistic approach was partially abandoned. Polish female soldiers more frequently performed tasks in combat teams, for example patrolling areas around bases as medics or participating in briefings with the local population.

The literature indicates that women's participation may facilitate tasks requiring contact with civilian populations, especially in socio-cultural contexts where interaction between male soldiers and local women is restricted. In this sense, the inclusion of women may expand the operational repertoire of a contingent rather than simply reproduce the same functions within a different demographic composition.

Secondly, the presence of women in patrols and search teams enhances operational security. Women can search female civilians during body checks (which is culturally acceptable, whereas searches conducted by foreign male soldiers may provoke opposition). Thirdly, analyses of the experiences of many armed forces (e.g. the United States, Canada, and Norway) show that mixed-gender teams are perceived by local populations as less aggressive,

which helps build trust in stabilisation forces. Polish female soldiers therefore played an informal role as ‘ambassadors’ for their contingents, facilitating relations with local communities and supporting the acquisition of intelligence of strategic importance.

At the national level, the participation of women in the Polish Armed Forces translates into several benefits for the country’s defence and security system. Firstly, it increases personnel reserves. In the face of geopolitical challenges (such as the Russia–Ukraine war since 2022), Poland is seeking to significantly expand its armed forces. Including women in military service increases the pool of available and trained personnel, which is crucial for force expansion. As noted, over 34,000 women currently wear the Polish uniform, representing a substantial contribution to the state’s defence potential.

Personnel diversity may also broaden the range of competences available within military organisations. In the literature, this is most often discussed in relation to communication, civil-military interaction, and the ability to operate effectively in socially complex mission environments. Such arguments should be treated cautiously; however, they remain a recurring theme in research on gender integration in the armed forces.

Thirdly, the presence of women in the armed forces enhances the military’s image in society. The military becomes a more open institution, representative of the entire nation, which increases public support and trust. Female soldiers also serve as an inspiration to younger generations of women, demonstrating that service to the country is not limited by gender. In an era of disinformation and hybrid warfare, a positive image of the Armed Forces as modern and inclusive constitutes an important element of societal resilience.

From an operational perspective, Polish women serve not only in combat units but also in strategic and international structures, contributing to national security through military diplomacy. Female officers represent Poland at NATO Headquarters, in OSCE observation missions, and within EU structures. Their expertise contributes to strengthening Poland’s position on the international stage. Furthermore, research indicates that the involvement of women in the security sector promotes greater consideration of civilian issues (e.g. civil protection and humanitarian affairs) in defence planning, thereby enhancing the comprehensiveness and resilience of the security system.

Taken together, these observations suggest that women’s participation is significant both in operational deployments abroad and in the broader architecture of national security, although the scale and mechanisms of this contribution still require further empirical verification..

4. Problems, barriers and institutional limits

Despite significant progress in the integration of women, barriers and challenges remain that limit the full realisation of their potential in the military. One of the fundamental problems is the persistence of cultural stereotypes. In Polish society (and consequently among military personnel), the belief that military service for women is ‘unmanly’ has long persisted.

As recently as 2009, a survey showed that 22% of male soldiers openly opposed women serving in the military, and 46% declared reluctance to serve under a female commander. Although attitudes have improved since then, with younger generations of military personnel being more open-minded, women still more often have to prove their competence by

overcoming persistent prejudices. Stereotypical thinking can influence personnel decisions; for example, women are less likely to be selected for officer training courses or combat roles, particularly when decision-makers believe that such roles are ‘not suitable for women’.

This is linked to the phenomenon of the ‘glass ceiling’, i.e. invisible barriers to promotion. Despite formal equality, relatively few women attain the highest ranks and command positions in the Polish Armed Forces. During the first two decades of integration, only a handful of women became commanders at battalion or brigade level. The lack of female role models at the top of the hierarchy may discourage younger female soldiers from aspiring to such roles. Furthermore, as Lt. Dr Iwona Szkudlarek points out in her monograph (2024), female officers often experience a dissonance of aspirations: they have high professional ambitions, yet encounter fewer opportunities for development than their male counterparts. The barriers identified by Szkudlarek include, among others, rigid staffing structures (limited vacancies in senior positions), a lack of flexibility in career paths, prejudice on the part of superiors, and the reluctance of decision-makers to entrust women with responsibility for combat units.

Logistical and equipment-related barriers remain an important group of challenges, although they have been gradually reduced in recent years. In the past, female soldiers reported problems related to ill-fitting uniforms, heavy equipment, and inadequate sanitary arrangements, both in domestic units and in deployed settings. Although the situation has improved, such issues continue to illustrate how organisational systems historically designed around a male norm may generate practical inequalities.

Another challenge is balancing military service with motherhood and family responsibilities. Professional service requires mobility, availability, and participation in training cycles, which can be difficult to reconcile with care obligations. Although formal labour-law protections exist, the experience of returning from parental leave may still influence career trajectories in ways that require further study.

The issue of harassment and abuse cannot be overlooked. Available reports and qualitative accounts indicate that some female soldiers have experienced sexual harassment, bullying, or stigmatisation, and that underreporting remains a significant challenge. From an analytical perspective, this area requires careful empirical examination and reliable institutional monitoring.

In summary, the most significant barriers to the full integration of women in the Polish military are cultural and organisational in nature. Some of the problems discussed above are based primarily on qualitative evidence and therefore require further empirical research.

5. Poland in the NATO context

Women’s participation in the armed forces has become an important issue across NATO member states. Although the Women, Peace and Security agenda provides a common normative framework, the degree of institutional adaptation varies considerably between countries.

Poland is often presented as a state where the level of female participation has grown rapidly in recent years, yet still remains below that of the most advanced cases within the Alliance.

Comparative literature and NATO reports indicate that countries such as the United States, Canada, and Norway have developed more mature models of gender integration, including broader female representation and longer institutional experience. By contrast, many Central and Eastern European armed forces continue to combine formal openness with structural underrepresentation at senior ranks.

Against this background, Poland can be described as a case of accelerated but incomplete integration. Women have access to a wide range of military specialisations, and institutional mechanisms supporting gender equality are increasingly visible. At the same time, the persistent underrepresentation of women in top command positions suggests that career progression remains more constrained than formal legal equality alone would imply.

From the perspective of NATO debates, the Polish case is significant not because it offers a fully resolved model, but because it illustrates the coexistence of rapid recruitment growth, institutional reform, and persistent cultural barriers.

The comparative perspective also supports a more cautious interpretation of national achievements. An increase in numbers is important, but it should not be equated automatically with full organisational inclusion or with a measurable increase in military effectiveness.

Conclusions

Over the past two decades, women have become an important part of the Polish Armed Forces, and their participation in the security system of the Republic of Poland has clearly expanded. The historical trajectory presented in this article shows a transition from episodic and auxiliary forms of involvement to institutionalised service under contemporary legal and organisational frameworks.

The analysis suggests that women's increasing participation broadens the personnel base of the armed forces and may diversify the competence profile available to military institutions, particularly in areas related to civil-military interaction, selected operational tasks, and organisational adaptability. At the same time, the analysis demonstrates that this potential remains constrained by structural barriers, including persistent stereotypes, uneven promotion opportunities, and logistical or family-related limitations.

The Polish case should therefore be interpreted as one of ongoing integration rather than a completed transformation. Formal legal equality and increasing recruitment are important developments, but they do not eliminate the need for continued institutional adjustment, more systematic empirical research, and critical evaluation of actual career outcomes.

In conclusion, the article highlights the growing significance of women in the structures of the Polish Armed Forces, while emphasising that a full assessment of their impact on the state security system requires further empirical research.

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