

EQUAL
RIGHTS –
EQUAL
RESPONSIBILITIES

Young women in the military sector

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Abstract: the aim of the research is to understand the motivations of women to be inrolled in military education, military service, as well as to act as volunteer doctors on the frontline during the 44-day war. The study brings up the specific issues and challenges women are facing. A publication also presents the comprehensive package of recommendations which aimed at providing solutsion to address better integration of women in the military sector.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout different periods of Armenian history, Armenian women have demonstrated their courage and dedication to the homeland, be it by willingly participating in battles of self-defense, or the national liberation struggle. Celebrated examples of unbreakable will and spirit are present within such historical women as Mother Sose and Aguline Khanchyan-Tatulyan, among others.

Women also strongly invested in both the first and second Artsakh Wars: some as soldiers, some as medical workers, and some who fought on the front lines and at the rear to protect lives and ensure a peaceful future. Women fought side by side with their husbands, brothers and sons and the loved ones to defend their right to live in their own country. In addition to being the mothers and wives of families, they proved that, in dire situations, they strongly stand for peace, freedom and protection of their own country if necessary, overshadowing the view that they are weak.

In recent years, women have demonstrated exceptional interest and desire to be involved in the defense sector. “Equal Rights, Equal Responsibilities” was carried out in order to understand women’s motivations, the experiences they gained, the challenges they faced within the defense sector and formulate recommendations based on these results.

This study was conducted in 2022 with the aim of studying what motivated women to serve in the armed forces (AF) and evaluate how prepared the system is to accept women. This research also seeks to understand the challenges women face in the army, how these challenges are addressed, and the attitudes of their families, communities, and fellow army colleagues towards women’s involvement in the army.

Analyses of the legal status of army women in the Republic of Armenia (RA) legislation, international law, and international best practices were also studied and are presented herein.

Women feel equally responsible for the defense of the state, and it is this sense of equality that helps them to continue serving the state with confidence and dedication; they serve as a model for the other women. As a result, societal attitudes towards women's involvement in the armed forces pass through a process of a gradual change.

Unlike, for example, in Sweden and Norway, where women and men both undergo mandatory military service, in the Republic of Armenia, women's military service is on a voluntary, contractual basis. This circumstance makes their approach even more unique.

It is impressive and encouraging to see that women are willing to take responsibility for defending the state. At the same time, men's appreciation of women's roles in the armed forces is also important to take into consideration. While opening the sphere of defense to women's participation, the Ministry of Defense of Armenia must take important steps to address the special complex sensitivities on women in army and build policies centered at the protection of women's rights. While many important steps have been already taken, there is still a long way to create gender sensitive and protected for women's environment in the Armed Forces in Armenia. The research looks into the situation in the field and attempts to present the recommendations for the further improvement.

We sincerely hope that the constructive spirit of the recommendations presented within this research will contribute to the strengthened protection of women in the defense system.

Democracy Today NGO would like to give a special thanks to the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Armenia for their assistance in conducting interviews with women in the armed forces. This cooperation proves that the state is ready to take measures to improve the conditions created for women in the armed forces.

We express our gratitude to the students of military educational institutions who willingly took part in the research; the doctors working in the military system, the young women undergoing military training, and the medical workers who provided support during the 2020 Artsakh War.

The Democracy Today team that conducted this research would like to thank Women's Fund Armenia for their support.

METHODOLOGY

The research “Equal Rights, Equal Responsibilities” was conducted through qualitative research methodologies, such as focus groups and individual interviews.

The following groups took part in the surveys:

- Cadets of military educational institutions;
- Young women undergoing military training;
- Women serving in the armed forces;
- Military doctors, medical workers, psychologists, and social workers who provided support on the front lines and at the rear during the 2020 Artsakh War.

In total, 49 people took part in this research throughout 6 focus groups, and 5 individual interviews. The information provided by the women who participated in the surveys constitutes the basis of this study.

As previously mentioned in the introduction, the primary goal of this research is to highlight the challenges faced by all of the women who participated in the research. Women-specific problems and challenges were identified and described during the individual interviews and focus group discussions, and a comprehensive set of recommendations aimed at solving women’s issues in the military sector will be presented.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study addressed the difficulties faced by women receiving military educations, serving in the armed forces, taking private military trainings, as well as those who provided frontline or rear support during the 44-Day War. The main purpose of this research is to study the interests of women in the armed forces and those with military careers, as well as to evaluate how prepared the armed forces are to accept these women and create appropriate conditions for them.

The information collected from different groups who took part in the research and its analysis made it possible to gain a comprehensive understanding of the enrollment of women in the Armed Forces. The research demonstrated that, in choosing military education or service, women are guided by their own decisions and initiatives, with an equal sense of responsibility for their country.

The research shows that the women's choices were an expression of free will. Moreover, it emphasizes the women's courage in making this choice and opposing the stereotypes and discrimination of the society.

Among the most important issues raised by the research are:

Reasons for Choosing the Military Sector

Participants mostly chose to involve themselves in the military sector based on a sense of equal obligation and responsibility towards their own country.

Some women who took part in the survey still chose the military sector as their obvious wish or childhood dream despite being from a military family. Many participants mentioned that they only imagined themselves working in the military sector.

Prohibiting Discrimination

Survey participants addressed discrimination, stereotypes, and challenges. Despite many positive changes, participants noted that neither society nor the military sector has fully adapted to the presence of women in the army at this time. For this reason, women serving in the armed forces face stereotypes and skepticism surrounding their capabilities, which in turn leads to discriminatory attitudes.

Irrespective of the changes in society, women have to overcome many obstacles along their way since they are facing stereotypes both within their families and society. They face strong societal prejudice related towards women considered “weak” and the women who chose army have to do much work to work against that “myth”.

Armenian legislation defines and regulates the protection of servicemen and citizens who receive military education and absence of discrimination.¹

Personal Changes

The women participating in the survey also reflected on the changes they passed through, reflecting how the military sector has changed their attitudes towards many issues, and as a result bought to completely rethink and revalue many situations and aspects of their lives.

Societal and Familial Attitudes

Choosing the military sector were the women’s own decisions. They mentioned that, in many cases, they had to go against the wills of their parents and relatives to stand for their choice, and this decision often affected the relationships with their families and friends.

1. See Chapter - Legislation and international experience

Nevertheless, in making that decision, they contributed to changing their society's stereotypical approach.

Providing Appropriate Conditions (Housing and Sanitation)

In discussion with women the improvement of social issues and working condition for females in the armed forces have been brought up. While the legislation ensues appropriate conditions for females who serve in the military, the participants of the research highlighter that often these conditions are fully appropriate.²

Military Attire

Another important issue raised by women was related to female military clothing. These concerns were particularly emphasized by the participants of various focus groups and individual interviews. Issues were raised concerning the comfort and quality of the uniforms.

Psychological Support

Some cadets of military educational institutions also referred to the importance of psychological support, in particular, the functions of officer-psychologists. They also noted the importance of the presence of "gnderets".³

Many of the female doctors who took part in the 44-Day War, supporting armed forces on the front line or at the rear, are also stressed the need of psychological support and reintegration after the war. It was therefore mentioned that it would be of a great importance to have similar support programs for these women as well.

2. See Chapter - Legislation and international experience

3. "gnderets" - a spiritual minister serving in the armed forces.

Healthcare

Problems related to women's health were also highlighted and concerns raised on their quality and timeliness. The issues raised by the participants were mainly concerning the unavailability of medication specifically for women's health. The hospitals of the RA Ministry of Defense receive a set of fixed medications to prevent or treat various types of diseases. The medications provided to military hospitals are selected from a list of essential medications. However, in most cases, they do not include medications specifically for women's health.⁴ Special attention was also paid to the issue of age restrictions for participants of medical care and service programs related to women's health and motherhood, especially with the use of assisted reproductive technologies.⁵

Code of Internal Service

Problems have also been identified within the internal service regulations, which, in some cases, do not clarify the obligations of female cadets, as it is not clear whether female cadets should be considered "female servicemen" or "female cadets." This lack of distinction causes confusion when clarifying functions and responsibilities.⁶

4. The information is obtained as a result of the surveys.

5. See Chapter - Legislation and international experience

6. See Chapter - Legislation and international experience

MILITARY EDUCATIONAL FIELD

This next section presents the perspectives of different groups of women involved in the research. The interviews revealed numerous aspects: the reasons women have chosen the defense sector as their future career path, the challenges they face, including the attitudes of the society and families they live in as well as personal transformations. The responses vary, but maintain some clear similarities.

Young women provided an array of interesting answers to the question of their motivations behind their choices to take part in such a non-traditional women's profession. The analysis of the responses primarily falls into two areas: patriotism and a desire to protect the motherland.

“The first attraction was the military uniform that I liked since childhood, and of course, serving the homeland. I’ve been dreaming about military service since I was a child, and was happy when they announced my admission and that I was accepted.”

Many participants stated that serving in the army was a family tradition and their choices were determined by that since childhood.

There were also interesting cases when, contrary to their parents' expectations, among the children who grew up in military families, not boys, but girls, chose military service.

“I changed the tradition of our family. I followed my grandfather’s path, not my brother.”

An important factor that influenced girls' decisions to choose military service was the security challenges, as these girls were living in the border areas and regularly facing security threats.

Some participants responded that, since childhood, they saw themselves only in the army:

"I have little to say. I have always known since childhood that I should become a soldier and I did."

Many participants admitted that their desire to join the military was also conditioned by the fact that many of those around them were skeptical of both themselves and their chosen profession. Their final decision to enter the military academy was also a way to prove the seriousness of their goals and abilities.

"Those who had confidence until the end, I lived up to their expectations; and those who didn't, I showed them that I can."

Many participants mentioned that their major strength was their determination. When asked about their weaknesses, a majority of participants responded:

"Weakness? I don't know what weakness means."

Some girls admitted it was difficult for their families to accept them joining the military, and relatives even criticized their decision. It was unusual for families to accept their choice, so it was for their friends and relatives at first, but later all grew accustomed to it, and even began encouraging them most times. The girls shared instances when family members and friends would speak with pride and celebrate their success in becoming female cadets.

The survey results also brought up interesting observations: women of older generations who worked in the army explained that they

had to choose between patriotism and serving their country, while for younger cadets, especially those who were involved in informal military training, they wanted to be equal, and according to them equality in rights assumed equality in responsibility. They assumed obligation and responsibility to be ready during military clashes and armed conflicts to be able to protect the country. For them, it was particularly important. The final participant's response was influenced by the constant insecurity and impacts of the 44-Day War. It is important to mention that the democratic development that took place in Armenia after the 2018 Velvet Revolution has had a strong impact on the decisions of young women and has contributed to a change in women's mentalities.

“Each of us has a strong sense of responsibility for our homeland; we must protect it. In my opinion, it is not correct to direct this task to men and say that the task of protecting the motherland falls only on men’s shoulders, because the motherland belongs to all of us, young and old, girls and boys, and we all have to contribute to the defense of the motherland to the best of our abilities. In my case, it is that important time.”

“In my case, it is the realization that the protection of motherland is not only for boys, as the motherland is also mine, which means that I have to fight for it, protect it. If we are equal, we have to have equal responsibilities for its protection. To do that well, I needed special knowledge; therefore, it was necessary to study.”

However, there were cases where the motivations for receiving a military education and serve in army had been determined by their socio-economic conditions.

“I had to continue my studies for free and this was the only way to become a doctor.”

From the surveys, it was evident that women and girls in the military field are much more purposeful and determined because the majority of participants reached this field by overcoming a number of challenges: family contradiction and concerns, societal prejudices, stereotypes, and the conflicting opinions of people around them. Even so, they remained faithful to their decision.

The girls who chose a military education were confident with the path they have chosen, and if they had to make the decision again, would choose the same path and profession despite these difficulties.

“No, there is no problem with regret, but perceptions differ from reality.”

Even one of the girls undergoing military training added:

“We regret not coming here sooner.”

Women working in the military sector also stated that they could not imagine themselves in any other organization and did not regret the choices they had made, even though the difficulties and obstacles for female military personnel are many:

“It was hard at first, then you can’t do it any other way.”

The attitudes of boys involved in military training also differed, though, generally speaking, they considered a girl who receives military education as a person who sets a positive example for others by their devotion to their country and feel that others can be similarly inspired and set goals. There were also groups that had a stereotyped approach, which, in some instances, has changed over the time.

Participants also reflected on existing stereotypes and characteristics of interacting with male cadets. Many female participants mentioned that boys tried to behave differently in the presence of girls. At first,

the presence of girls was new and unusual for the boys as well; there was restraint, but gradually they became accustomed to the presence of girls.

The fact that young women are in the military sector has changed the attitudes of all those around them in two ways: one group trusts them and respects their decisions more, and even encourages them, while the other group's approach views the presence of girls with skepticism due to stereotypes;

“First year was tough. Now we are so friendly that they ask us to choose gifts for their mothers and girlfriends. Little by little, friendship was strengthening and respect growing.”

“In my group, they still do not accept the idea that we study and work with them in the same classroom, do exercises and train in the field.”

Despite some of the more positive developments, interviewees discussed existing difficulties related to residual discrimination and stereotyping still in need of address.

Many of the participants recalled men's objections or remarks that they, as women, could not survive in an institution such as the military; therefore, regardless of the transformations and improvements experienced in some attitudes, women in the army face discrimination.

“Every time when I thought about being told ‘you cannot’, it gave me strength and I overcame all the obstacles.”

When talking about discrimination in the army, female servicemen stated that there are actually many problems, but at the same time, they confirmed that there has been progress in recent years:

“I have been in the army for ten years, and for me, 2012 is

incomparable. The attitude towards the female soldier then and now has considerably changed. I hope that with time and knowledge, the negativity will be filtered out and it attitudes towards women will be improved. A female soldier is first of all a person, a specialist.”

“Now, the stereotypes are increasingly changing. The boys’ vocabularies and behaviors are changing.”

Stereotypical attitudes often cause competition between male and female cadets, but participants stated that this has only had a positive effect on both their studies and physical training;

“I like to compete. There are people in my group who show that they can do the physical exercises better than me and we compete and progress “

The presence of young women in the army have noticeably contributed to many transformations.

“Every stereotype can be eliminated. I am sure of it, and it should be done.”

Participants also noted that, despite the existence of stereotypes, the presence of both men and women in the military system contributes to the comprehensive and deeper consideration of many issues as well as provides complex and holistic approach to the issues they address;

“We help each other, we complement each other.”

“It is also important for women in the armed forces to maintain their femininity so that it is not seen as weakness. Femininity is in no way weakness; it is our strength.”

Participants added that successful integration often depends on the officers and command staff. In cases where officers willingly accepted female cadets, the integration of young women in that environment went more smoothly.

“When we were accepted, the boys were told, they are your sisters; you must take good care of them.”

A similar thought was expressed by the young women undergoing military training who were very satisfied with their educational environment, professional and at the same time warm and family atmosphere, girl-boy relationships are respectful and there is equality, which also comes from the command staff.

“If you are my child’s age, you are my daughter. If you are my age, you are my sister.”

Women’s involvement in the armed forces, especially when holding titles, contributes to the elimination of male stereotypes and strengthens gender equality.

Both young women receiving military education and those undergoing military training stated that the military sector gave them endurance, willpower, and helped develop their level of physical fitness. They have become more organized and attentive, their horizons have broadened, and they have received a multidiscipline education. They began to look at many phenomena in life from a different perspective, their values changed when they began to be guided by more noble ideas and directing their actions to be of use to the country in various fields.

The young women also mentioned that studying at the military university changed their perspectives, redefining many approaches they had to their lives.

In most cases, such a change is also related to the fact that female cadets live independently. In some cases, this is due to studies and a tight schedule, and many seldom visit relatives and friends. Additionally, female cadets stated that they have become more mature and have learned to manage their own daily lives.

“In our house, I never talk about my service. My family probably doesn’t know what kind of specialist I will become.”

There were also criticisms regarding the differing approaches in military universities. Speaking about these difficulties, female cadets of the Military Aviation University mentioned that during the coronavirus, the introduction of quarantine regimens brought drastic changes to their daily lives. If before COVID-19 they were able to leave the university in the evening and return for duty only in the morning, now they had to stay at the educational institution during the quarantine period (and this procedure is still in place today). In turn, these policies resulted in emergence of many restrictions and challenges. According to participants, although with time some regulations have undergone positive changes, they stressed the need to improve the conditions in some of the areas: for example, of the dressing rooms and shower areas. Some of the survey participants stated that they often have to buy additional hygiene items due to their dissatisfaction with the quantity and quality of the items provided.

Military doctors also addressed the issue of military clothing. Participants noted that their military clothing was particularly uncomfortable. This caused discomfort, especially for doctors who perform surgeries and other complex medical procedures.

Doctors participating in the survey emphasized the importance of the availability of women’s health medicines in the hospitals.

Women serviceman also shared very important problem: having family

or children. Many want to become mothers, but cannot start a family or have children until the age of 35-40, however, the cut-off age for state-guaranteed medical care and service programs with the use of assisted reproductive technologies is 35, which deprives many military women of the opportunity to participate in the program and become mothers. Moreover, only spouses can participate in the program, thus single women are excluded from the program.

“A woman who serves her motherland should also have the opportunity to have children.”

Despite all these aforementioned problems and complications, women’s dedication to working in the Armed Forces is strong. Nearly all of the participants mentioned that during the 44-Day Artsakh War, there were many women who served with dedication.

“We had women who came to the commander every day and said: Do they need a doctor on the frontline? Send me there.”

There are also issues specific to military training institutions. For example, the issue of granting free exit, which is regulated by the code of internal service, needs appropriate changes, because the status of female cadet is not specified in the code. This can cause confusion for female cadets in some cases, as it is not clear in which cases, they are considered a female soldier and in which cases a cadet.

Adding to this point, it should be noted that, women stressed the stark differences between the two educational institutions (Military Aviation University named after marshal Armenak Khanperyants and Vazgen Sargsyan Military University).

In the Military Aviation University, named after Khanperyants women mentioned necessity of additional improvements , including, the provision of an adequate number of professional library books, the implementation of cadet training courses, and additional professional

development and extra-curricular courses (such as swimming or other sports, driving lessons, music, etc.) and the timely provision of psychological services, as well as ensuring the holistic development and efficiency of cadets, and the provision of all types of uniforms, including sports uniforms. Participants from Military Aviation University also highlighted the distribution gap of nominal scholarships.

WOMEN IN THE WARTIME

This part of the study presents the stories of medical professionals, medical university students, and social workers many of whom, from the very first days of the 44-Day War in 2020, left for the front line to provide professional care on the frontline. They had only one mission leaving to the front line as professionals; to save lives and give a new chance for life, to stand side-by-side with other volunteers and do everything possible to provide emergency care to wounded soldiers and civilians, and to give them a new chance of live. They left for the war to fight for lives and save them. This idea brought together the doctors and volunteers from across Armenia, Artsakh and the Armenian diaspora, who made it possible to save thousands of lives and support their fellow compatriots in need during the war in Artsakh.

In their hard days of fighting for lives and standing strong against the war, the desire to be useful to other gave the young women strength along their difficult paths.

“It’s my homeland, I have to go so that I don’t feel useless. I can be useful for something. If I didn’t go, I would blame myself later and the guilt wouldn’t leave me alone.”

Some of them did not even inform their family members about their decision and told their families on their way to Artsakh, if at all.

“Moms are a bit emotional. Mama was more accepting, and Papa encouraged me and said, ‘It’s your profession, you should go. If you don’t go, then who should?’”

That is how a new turning point occurred for some of these women

in their professional lives. Neither fear, nor emotions, nor fatigue prevented them from fulfilling their professional duties.

“I don’t think fear should stop a person from doing their job, especially when you see people much younger than you, with a lot more to lose, doing an impeccable job, with or without fear.”

Every woman joined the struggle without hesitation and the female doctors fought side by side with the men, becoming strong and a part of one big family to overcome the difficulties they faced.

“Honestly speaking, war does not differ between men and women, and in that difficult period of the war, no one noticed whether the other person was a woman or a man... It doesn’t matter that you are a woman; at that moment, you should serve those people with your knowledge and be an example of strength to the others, it doesn’t matter if you are a man or a woman.”

“Some of the boys were surprised, and some were proud that there were girls next to them... They appreciated it a lot when they saw us next to them, it gave them strength.”

“If there is danger for the homeland and there is a need for protection, then we should all serve it equally. Naturally, they didn’t allow us to do any difficult physical labor, but then they realized that dividing tasks by gender hurts women more, so we started working equally.”

While performing their professional duties, women encountered many difficult and tragic cases. In these difficult situations, they found strength within themselves and did everything possible (and even impossible) to save human lives and bring them back to life. They accomplished all of this with great care and love, curtailing their

own emotions, never allowing themselves to get discouraged or too tired; they were unbreakable, and as they mentioned during the conversation:

“At that moment, some supernatural power came. Really, at that moment, no one was thinking about bad things, getting hurt, bad outcomes. At that moment, you only think that you have a task in front of you and you have to do it. If there was fear, the fear was not for yourself, it was for your family, friends and those we loved.”

“There is a problem that needs to be solved. I didn’t think about emotions at that time, I thought about maximum involvement in the work.”

They did not allow their emotions to show; there was no time to think about feelings at that difficult moment, or even later. It was only the time to help the wounded:

“I just mentally prepared myself from the beginning in such a way that no tears, no emotions would interfere with my work... I went, and among the wounded I saw my relative, my friend, my classmate, but I considered them all as patients. If I allowed myself more emotion than that it would challenge my work.”

“The difficult moment was the very first meeting with the soldiers. When they brought the wounded, we went down to meet them. If you told someone, ‘Hey, you can’t go back,’ they would say, ‘What about my friends? They are there, but how can I stay?’ It was really amazing to see the courage our guys showed.”

The participants mentioned that it was sad to see that the majority of the injured and other victims were of the younger generation, mainly

mandatory servicemen, (18-20 years old), which meant that almost an entire generation was lost...

"I saw many things: fainting from tension, screaming from anxiety. I have seen all the manifestations of anxiety and stress. I thank God that I was able to manage myself under those conditions," said one of the young doctors, remembering the lives they had saved with a smile.

"We did cardio-pulmonary resuscitation for more than an hour. We thought that he is 18 years old; he has a young body, we have to fight. We fought and achieved results. Such moments were moments of hope."

Continuing to reminisce about the unimaginable contribution of her compatriots during the war, with great warmth and a smile, the young doctor also recalled a driver who had died in the war after saving the lives of many wounded boys.

"He was able to bring everybody, and he himself was killed, but I will not forget what he did, how he worked. He lost his friend in the first days; after that, he only worked - didn't sleep, didn't eat, even refused to have coffee."

Democracy Today feels that it is of great importance to incorporate the story of the driver who saved lives into this book. We should always be grateful to all those who fought for the lives of their compatriots.

One thing was made certain from these women's stories: that life is the first thing that matters, and that many other issues have become insignificant and secondary in comparison.

"My father always said: 'People who participated in the war

are always different - they are different and their psychology is different.' Now I understand him."

Yes, they are different. Within their memories keep the faces of all those whose lives could not be saved, but at the same time, there is light and consolation because of all those who managed to be brought back to life;

"There are former soldiers who still call and say thank you - even their parents. I don't know them at all, but they know me."

"Every night, when I close my eyes, I see all our poor children - brilliant youth who came injured, and how they resisted; how they acted so that we don't suddenly get emotional, we don't suddenly cry."

In this tragic wartime reality, love was also born, and it was that love that helped two of our doctors overcome her emotions. According to them, those emotions helped her significantly in overcoming psychological difficulties.

For many of the women, their attitudes towards life have changed and many things have been revalued:

"Life is becoming more valuable; you understand what kind of young people we have lost and now we look at each young person in a different way, we cherish them. My son and I used to fight on every issue, but after the war we do not fight at all. I want him do whatever makes him happy, since he is a man who has gone through the war," said the social worker who participated in the survey.

"I have always loved life, but after the war, I began to love it one hundred times more. I began to appreciate the most basic

things; going out to buy bread, peacefully walking in the yard and not being afraid that something will fall on your head, knowing that your relatives and friends are alive and are at home living in peace. When you wake up and are not afraid that many people, young people, will die today. There is much more love in me now – towards everything, towards people, several times over.”

**THANK YOU TO ALL OF THE HEALTHCARE WORKERS WHO
SAVED LIVES.**

**THANK YOU TO ALL THOSE WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES TO
PROTECT THE LIVES OF OTHERS. AS A RESULT OF YOUR
SELFLESS WORK THERE ARE PEOPLE WALKING, SMILING
AND RETURNING TO LIFE IN THE STREETS OF ARMENIA AND
ARTSAKH.**

LEGISLATION AND INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

The rights of women involved in the RA military sector are protected by both domestic and international legislation, including: the National Strategy for Human Rights Protection and Deriving Action Plan For 2020-2022,⁷ Guidelines for The Protection of Women's Rights and Ensuring Equal Opportunities in RA Defense System,⁸ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW),⁹ United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325,¹⁰ the first¹¹ and second¹² National Action Plans (NAPs) on UNSC Resolution 1325 of The Republic of Armenia.

Unlike men, women's military service in the Republic of Armenia is on a voluntary and contractual basis. Those women who prefer military service have the opportunity to choose one of two ways to fulfill their goals: either serve on a contractual basis (choosing military service over civil jobs), or enter military educational institutions and choose the military as their profession. The Military Aviation University of

7. Government of The Republic of Armenia. 2020-2022. National Strategy For Human Rights Protection And Deriving Action Plan For 2020-2022. <https://www.moj.am/en/page/575>.

8. Ministry of Defence. n.d. Guidelines for the protection of women's rights and ensuring equal opportunities in RA Defense System. <https://mil.am/hy/libraries/39>.

9. United Nations. 1979. "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women." United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. December 18. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cedaw.aspx>

10. United Nations. 2000. "Resolution 1325." United Nations Security Council. October 31. [http://undocs.org/en/S/RES/1325\(2000\)](http://undocs.org/en/S/RES/1325(2000)).

11. The Republic of Armenia. n.d. "2019-2021 National Action Plan of the Republic of Armenia." www.peacewomen.org. [https://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/Armenia%20NAP%20\(2019-2021\).pdf](https://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/Armenia%20NAP%20(2019-2021).pdf).

12. Government of the Republic of Armenia . 2022-2024. The Decision of the Government of the Republic of Armenia on Approval of the Second National Action Plan of The Republic of Armenia For 2022-2024 of Unscr 1325 on Women, Peace And Security and its implementation schedule. https://gnwp.org/wp-content/uploads/Armenia-1325-NAP_EnglishFinal.pdf.

the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Armenia (named after A. Khanperiyants) and the Military University of the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Armenia (named after V. Sargsyan) opened its doors to female servicemen in 2013¹³ and 2014¹⁴ respectively.

In a video released by the RA Armed Forces, the RA Ministry of Defense attempted to further encourage women who wanted to join the military. The video clip urged girls to break stereotypes and join the ranks of the Armenian Army, if they wished.¹⁵

According to official data, the presence of women in the armed forces has been increasing year by year. This significant increase was first registered in 2013-2014 after women were given the opportunity to receive military educations. According to data from 2012, the total number of female servicemen in the RA Armed Forces was approximately 1,400, but most of them held clerical positions. In 2017, this number had already exceeded 2000.¹⁶

In 2017, both the Pilot Programme and Action Schedule for the Formation of Female Platoons were launched in three military units. Within the framework of this program, a female peacekeeping platoon was formed within the Peacekeeping Forces of the Ministry of Defense in 2017.

Currently, the military servicemen of the female peacekeeping platoon, within the composition of the Armenian peacekeeping contingent, are involved in the peacekeeping missions of KFOR¹⁷ and

13. Military Aviation University named after Armenak Khanperiyants. 2013. Արմենակ խանփերյանցի անվան ռազմական ավիացիոն համալսարանի պատմություն [History of Armenak Khanperiyants Military Aviation University]. <https://mil.am/hy/pages/28>.

14. Military University named after V. Sargsyan of the RA Ministry of Defense. 2014. ՀՀ ՊՆ Վ.Սարգսյանի անվան ռազմական համալսարանի պատմություն [History of the Military University named after V. Sargsyan of the RA Ministry of Defense]. <https://mil.am/hy/pages/25>.

15. RA Ministry of Defence. 2014. Բանակը կանանց է կանչում. [The Army Calls for Women], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tb_u6NcPm5s.

16. Azatutyun radio. 2013. Հայկական ռազմական ակադեմիա ընդունված առաջին կանայք [The first women admitted to the Armenian Military Academy]. <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/25074605.html#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20Defense%20Ministry,detachments%20and%20other%20military%20structures>.

17. NATO's Kosovo Force (Kosovo, KFOR)

“Resolute Support,”¹⁸ as well as in the UNIFIL.¹⁹ Armenia shares the United Nations vision to enhance the participation of women in uniform in peacekeeping missions and is prepared to increase the number of women in Armenian contingents involved in peacekeeping missions carried out under the auspices of the United Nations.

The involvement of women in various units of the army is increasing year by year. If before 2012-2013 women mainly served in medical and communication services of the RA Ministry of Defence, nowadays, they are also involved in special purpose units. However, most of them are still non-commissioned officers and are mainly engaged in administrative work.²⁰

There are also institutional mechanisms dealing with basic issues of women in the armed forces. Additionally, in order to strengthen the policy of gender equality and women’s integration, within the framework of the Council of Europe program, the Ministry of Defense conducts trainings for these departments.²¹

The RA government has begun to pay more attention to the involvement of women in various fields, and one of these fields is the RA armed forces. On August 24, 2021, RA Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan emphasized the importance of using women’s potential and their involvement in civil political life of the country, as well as in military during his speech in the National Assembly:

“Women are most of the population of the Republic of Armenia, and the under-representation and involvement of their resources in any field, from defense to the economy, means the development of our country’s development potential is undermined. This does

18. The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, “Resolute Support”

19. United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon carried out under the auspices of the UN in Lebanon

20. Ophelia Simonyan, 2022. Women In Armenian And Foreign Armies: Numbers And Statistics. 18 April. <https://media.am/en/verified/2022/04/18/32498/>.

21. Council of Europe. National projects (Human rights and women in the Armed Forces in Armenia – Phase II). <https://www.coe.int/hy/web/yerevan/human-rights-and-women-in-the-armed-forces-in-armenia-phase-ii>.

not mean that women should be as involved in the military as men. It is about using the potential as fully as possible, and this potential has yet to be discovered.”²²

In order to increase the involvement of women in the armed forces, in September 2021, a rifle company staffed with female servicemen was formed in the Armed Forces according to the corresponding order of the Minister of Defense. This was mentioned in the report of MoD on the progress and results of the programs implemented in 2021 by the ministry.²³

Despite the various programs and activities that have been carried out to increase the involvement of women in the RA armed forces, it should also be noted that, in most cases, the Armenian legislation is gender neutral. This issue has also been addressed in the report of Human Rights Defender of RA of 2022.²⁴ The report also notes that the lack of legal protections and safeguards can often lead to inappropriate attention to gender in the armed forces.

Referring to the gender insensitivity of the legislation, it is worth to note that the Law of RA Military Service stipulates that a female soldier is accepted for military service on the basis of a contract if there is a vacant position that can be filled with a female soldier.²⁵ At the same time, the head of the relevant state authorized body

22. RA Prime Minister. 2021. Վարչապետ Նիկոլ Փաշինյանի ելույթն Ազգային ժողովում ՀՀ կառավարության ծրագիրը ներկայացնելիս [Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s speech while presenting the program of the RA government in the National Assembly]. օգոստոսի 24. <https://www.primeminister.am/hy/statements-and-messages/item/2021/08/24/Nikol-Pashinyan-Speech/>.

23. MoD. 2022. “Ներկայացվել է պաշտպանության ոլորտում 2021 թ. իրականացված ծրագրերի կատարման ընթացքի եւ արդյունքների վերաբերյալ զեկույցը.” [The report on the progress and results of the implemented programs in the defense sector in 2021] RA National Assembly. March 15. http://www.parliament.am/news.php?do=view&cat_id=2&day=15&month=03&year=2022&NewsID=162656&lang=arm.

24. Human Rights Defender. 2022. Կին զինծառայողներն ունեն առաջխաղացման խոչընդոտներ, չկան երաշխիքներ ամուսնացած կամ հղի կանանց համար և այլն. այսօր նոր առաջարկներ կուղարկվեն ԱԺ պաշտպանության հանձնաժողով և ՊՆ [Female servicemen have barriers for their promotion, there are no guarantees for married or pregnant women, etc. today proposals will be sent to the National Defense Committee and the Ministry of Defense]. February 1. <https://ombuds.am/am/site/ViewNews/2109/>.

25. Republic of Armenia. 2002. ՀՀ օրենքը զինվորական ծառայություն անցնելու մասին [RA law on military service]. 3 July . <https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docID=110610>

decides the issue of a female soldier occupying the given position.

It should also be noted that almost all high-ranking military personnel in the RA Armed Forces are men. This is also due to the fact that women were given the right to receive a military education in the Republic of Armenia only since 2013-2014. With this change, women got the opportunity to choose the pathway of professional soldier and receive ranks corresponding to years of service.

Alongside with many reforms and programs implemented by the state for integrating women in the Armed Forces, there are still certain obstacles, among which are stereotyped attitudes and discrimination. This situation takes place although the Law of the Republic of Armenia “On Military Service and the Status of Servicemen” establishes as a principle *“respect for the honor and dignity of military servicemen and prohibition of discrimination”*.²⁶

With the growth of women’s involvement in the military sector of course some additional adjustments may also be required in the domestic legislation. The Armenian legislation defines and regulates the protection of servicemen and citizens who receive military education. The law, as a principle, establishes respect for the honor and dignity of servicemen, and excludes any form of discrimination.²⁷

Alongside with the integration of women some changes were introduced to the RA legislation to include housing, sanitation and hygiene conditions, as well as, clothing for women who chose the military career. The law ensures the provision of separate accommodations for female servicemen, which include separate bedrooms, showers, toilets, washrooms and maintenance rooms, as well as rooms for training preparation, consultations and

26. RA National Assembly. 2017 . ՀՀ օրենքը զինվորական ծառայության եվ զինծառայողի կարգավիճակի մասին [RA Law on military service and status of servicemen]. Լոյսմբեր 15. <https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docid=117633>.

27. RA National Assembly. 2017. ՀՀ օրենքը զինվորական ծառայության եվ զինծառայողի կարգավիճակի մասին [RA law on military service and status of servicemen]. November 15. <https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docid=117633>.

entertainment.²⁸ The state also ensures the sanitary and hygienic conditions of servicemen, providing them certain amount of soap and/or shampoo for washing and bathing purposes, which is equal for male and female militaries.²⁹ Like any person serving in the RA Armed Forces, female servicemen receive military uniforms from the state. Women of different RA Armed Forces units receive corresponding clothing. Women's skirts and high-heeled shoes are part of the military uniform.^{30, 31}

Together with the upper mentioned changes, female servicemen also became a target group for the state-funded medical programs, which in many cases ensure the provision of essential medication and healthcare for the servicemen free of charge. The list of essential medicines is approved by order of the RA Minister of Health. According to the Minister's report³², it is obligatory that the list of free medicines is updated every two years.³³ From this list, the Ministry of Defense's military hospitals select a list of drugs that are purchased for military personnel who use the hospital. The list provided to the hospitals is based on the list of essential drugs and data detailing the medications used during the previous years. However, they often do

28. RA. 1996. Օրենք Հայաստանի Հանրապետության Չինվան Ուժերի Ներքին ծառայության կանոնադիրը հաստատելու մասին [Law on Approving the Code of Internal Service of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Armenia]. December 3. <http://www.irtek.am/views/act.aspx?aid=150112>.

29. RA government. 2021. ՀՀ զինծառայողների իրային ապահովություն [Material security of RA military personnel]. February 25. http://www.e-gov.am/u_files/file/decrees/kar/2021/02/254_1.pdf.

(According to the law, it is allocated 65 grams of soap out of which 40 grams are provided for washing, and 25 grams to bathe and wash personal items. It is also allowed to provide liquid soap for washing purposes, and shampoo for bathing purposes instead of the same amount of bar soap.)

30. RA government. 2021. ՀՀ զինծառայողների իրային ապահովություն [Material security of RA military personnel]. February 25. http://www.e-gov.am/u_files/file/decrees/kar/2021/02/254_1.pdf.

31. RA. 1996. Օրենք Հայաստանի Հանրապետության Չինվան Ուժերի Ներքին ծառայության կանոնադիրը հաստատելու մասին [Law on Approving the Code of Internal Service of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Armenia]. December 3. <http://www.irtek.am/views/act.aspx?aid=150112>.

32. RA National Assembly. 2022. Երկու տարին մեկ թարմացվում է անվճար տրամադրվող դեղերի ցանկը. Առողջապահության նախարար [The list of free drugs is updated every two years. Minister of Health]. April 13. http://www.parliament.am/news.php?cat_id=2&NewsID=16480&year=2022&month=4&day=13.

33. RA Minister of health. 2021. Հրաման հիմնական դեղերի ցանկը սահմանելու և Հայաստանի Հանրապետության առողջապահության նախարարի 2018 թվականի մարտի 17-ի N 07-ն հրամանն ուժը կորցրած ճանաչելու մասին [Order on establishing the list of basic drugs and repealing Order No. 07 of March 17, 2018 of the Minister of Health of the Republic of Armenia]. July 28. <https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docid=154804>.

not include essential medications for women’s health.³⁴

Adding to this issue, according to the law, only couples can participate in the program when: “one of the spouses is a serviceman” defined by parts 1 and 2 of Article 72 of the Law of the Republic of Armenia, “On Military Service and the Status of Servicemen,” or a person equal to servicemen. This is a discriminatory approach due to its exclusion of single women.³⁵

The Republic of Armenia has a state-guaranteed medical care and service program that uses assisted reproductive technologies. The target groups of the program include RA military contingents. According to the terms of the program, the age limit for female participants is 35 years; moreover, in cases of program enrollment to use assisted reproductive technologies at age 35, a woman can maintain their beneficiary status until the age of 38. Additionally, according to the legislation, only spouses where one partner is a serviceman or a person equal to that of a serviceman, may take part in the program.³⁶

Alongside with the physical health issues, starting from 2013 Armenia started to pay more attention on the psychological support of its servicemen. In 2013, after the amendments to the domestic service code of the RA Armed Forces, the presence and functions of psychologist-officers in the armed forces were guaranteed by law.

Psychologists are generally stationed in regiments. The psychologist-officers of the regiment are responsible for the psychological wellbeing of personnel, as well as psychological work with the military

34. The information is obtained as a result of the surveys.

35. Decision of the Government of RA. 2015. Անվճար կամ արտոնյալ պայմաններով վերարտադրողականության օժանդակ տեխնոլոգիաների կիրառմամբ բժշկական օգնության եվ սպասարկման կարգն ու շահառուների ներկայացվող պահանջները սահմանելու մասին [Order on defining the procedure and requirements for the beneficiaries of medical care programs and service using assisted reproductive technologies under free or preferential conditions]. Մայիսի 27. <https://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?docID=150363>.

36. Ibid

personnel. They work to maintain the mental stability of servicemen.³⁷ Moreover, apart from the psychologist-officers, there are also “gnderets” who are spiritual ministers serving in the armed forces.

Of course, despite of many changes and gradual integration of women in military with the parallel improvement of the legislation, there are still some legal inconsistencies: Problems have been identified within the internal service regulations, which, in some cases, do not clarify the obligations of female cadets, as it is not clear whether female cadets should be considered “female servicemen” or “female cadets.” This lack of distinction causes confusion when clarifying functions and responsibilities.³⁸

To assess Armenian experience with its pros and cons, it is also worth to refer to the international promising and well-known practices of integration of females in the armed forces. In this regard, it is also useful to study the international experience in order to understand what motivated the increase in the number of women and their involvement in various prominent positions in the armed forces of other countries.

The inclusion of women in the armed forces is not just an approach, but a sustainable solid policy that is being applied more widely in the armed forces of various countries and military alliances. Female involvement in the military has undergone major changes in recent decades. According to NATO data, the number of women in the armed forces has increased significantly since the 1960s, when it was about 30,000. Currently, this number has already reached 288,000. Nevertheless, it is also worth to highlight that the degree to which women are involved is also influenced by the culture and traditions of each country, which also naturally affects the degree of female integration. Although women have served in the armed forces for

37. RA. 1996. Օրենք Հայաստանի Հանրապետության Չինվան Ուժերի Ներքին ծառայության կանոնադիրը հաստատելու մասին [Law on Approving the Code of Internal Service of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Armenia]. December 3. <http://www.irtek.am/views/act.aspx?aid=150112>.

38. Ibid

many years, the debate about increasing their number in the military continues even in the countries that have made significant progress in integrating women into the armed forces compared to others. In particular, questions of how and where women should serve and study, to what extent women should be involved, and even whether the involvement of women has not gone too far are constantly discussed.³⁹

Referring to the international experience, we singled out three countries that are considered progressive in terms of development and protection of human and women's rights.

In many of the aspects, Norway and Denmark are the most progressive countries when it comes to women being involved in the military. Norway was the first NATO country to allow women to serve on submarines. Moreover, since 1985, women have been allowed to participate in all combat operations. This country is the first member of the NATO military-political alliance, where in 2015, the military service became mandatory for both men and women.

In Norway, every citizen, as a general rule, is obliged to serve in the armed forces of the country for a certain period of time. This results in the fact that the number of conscripted women is increasing year by year. At the same time, even after such a change, the involvement of women in the higher military positions of the armed forces, is still relatively low. According to the data of 2021, women made up 19% of the total military staff while men were at 81%.⁴⁰

Sweden has a long history of fighting for women's equality, and the issue of women's military conscription was raised for the first time in that country back in 1965. Since 2018, Sweden has implemented integration so-called "gender-neutral" conscription. For the first time in the country's history, both women and men were equally drafted

39. NATO. "Women in uniform." 2001. <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2001/06/01/women-in-uniform/index.html>.

40. Ibid

into compulsory military service. According to data from 2019, women made up about 17% of the Swedish military. In the Swedish Armed Forces, one of the most discussed issues among female conscripts was the term “female officer” and the issue of whether gender is important for the identification of servicemen. There has been discussion among female military personnel to replace the term “female officer” with simply “officer”, making the position gender neutral. The ongoing discussions of 1970-90s. emphasized the fact that women and men are different and, if their differences are properly taken into account, it can affect everyone positively.⁴¹

Both Norway and Sweden there is a procedure for the selection of potential conscripts, and their term of service can range from 7 to 15 months.

However, even in these democracies, which have almost the greatest experience in the world of women’s involvement in the armed forces, there are still issues related to the women’s low participation and holding high-ranking positions by females. In many cases, this can be explained by motherhood, as many female officers switch from operational work to administrative after maternity leave. Few women have also reached the highest ranks in the Danish armed forces, where the integration of female soldiers also has its issues.

NATO countries where women have served in the military for many years can also learn from each other. For example, as part of the Ministry of Defense’s gender equality strategy, Norway recently launched large-scale mentoring programs to encourage women to stay and compete for senior positions in the armed forces.

However, already today the international experience shows that the process of women’s involvement as well as the implemented changes reflect the modern developments of social and international security.

41. Taylor & Francis online. 2019. Conscripting women: gender, soldiering, and military service in Sweden 1965–2018. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09612025.2019.1596542>.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Taking into account the many reforms implemented by the government of The Republic of Armenia in regards to the involvement of women in the Armed Forces, we present some recommendations and proposals which have been formed as a result of the research in order to make the positive changes more gender-sensitive, inclusive and long-lasting.

- The policies should be reviewed and updated to ensure they are gender neutral and nondiscriminatory. The outdated policies that do not meet the needs of women in the military should be revised as well. Women should be held to the same physical and performance standards as men in order to ensure that they are not discriminated based on gender. Efforts should be increased to speak on the conditions of women in the army, to change perceptions in the society and recruit more women to the military. Provide incentives for students in the academies, such as an increase in scholarships, improvement of social-economic conditions and housing.
- Equal approach and monitoring mechanisms should be applied to ensure similar standards between two military universities (RA MoD Military University named after Vazgen Sargsyan of the RA MoD Military Aviation University named after A. Khanperiyants) to provide opportunities for additional educational programs, provision of an appropriate number of professional literature, distribution of nominal scholarships, provision of psychologist services, accessibility to of all types of uniforms.
- Gender-based discrimination should be vigorously addressed: women in the military often face discrimination and harassment.

This issue must be addressed by implementing policies and training programs that promote respect and equality among all members of military personnel.

- Opportunities for women's leadership should be increased. Women should be provided with more opportunities to lead in the military, including in combat roles and in high-ranking positions. Provide women in the military with mentorship and leadership programs to help them develop their skills and advance in their careers. Ensure equal opportunities for advancement, so that women in the military could have the same opportunities for the career advancement as their male counterparts. This includes access to leadership positions and promotion boards that are free from gender bias.
- Programs addressing education and training should be increased. The military should provide more education and training on gender issues, including unconscious bias and gender stereotypes, to help create a more inclusive culture. The equal quality of training programs should be ensured in both academies.
- Sexual harassment and assault should be addressed. The military must take steps to address and prevent sexual harassment and assault in order to create a safe and supportive environment for women. Take a zero-tolerance approach to sexual harassment and assault in the military. Ensure that victims of sexual harassment and assault are supported and provided with the resources they need to recover. Support for survivors of sexual assault must be increased. Women in the military are at a higher risk of sexual assault than their male counterparts. It is important to provide support and resources for survivors of sexual assault, including counseling services and legal assistance.
- A supportive environment for women should be ensured. The supportive environment for women in the military by providing resources such as support groups and counseling services, and

promoting a culture of respect and inclusivity, must be created. Continuous consultation of a psychologist should be provided. Family-friendly policies should be offered. The military should offer policies that support work-life balance for all service members, including flexible scheduling, affordable childcare, maternity and paternity leave.

- Healthcare services must be improved. Provide healthcare services that are designed to meet the unique needs of women, including reproductive health and mental health services. Improve special conditions for women such as dressing rooms, showers, necessary clothing. Increase the quantity and ensure the quality of sanitary and hygiene items prescribed by law for female servicemen living in barracks, as well as improve the mechanisms for monitoring the provision of sanitary and hygiene items. Appropriate hygiene items, clothes and shoes, considering the special needs of women, should be provided.
- The age limit for the participation in the medical care and service programs using assisted reproductive technologies should be raised up to 40 years (inclusive) for women serving in the military sector. In case enrollment in the project at the age of 40 and presence of indications for the use of assisted reproductive technologies, maintaining the status of a beneficiary of the program until reaching the age of 42. Moreover, including single women serving in the Armed Forces as a beneficiary group of the program.
- Appropriate changes in internal service regulations should be introduced, clarifying the obligations and functions of female cadets and female servicemen.
- Regular open dialogue between defense sector officials and women serving in the AF should be established.

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