

**GENDER SENSITIVITY AND CAREER OPPORTUNITIES OF WOMEN IN THE
ARMED FORCES OF UKRAINE**

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Vienna, 30th of May 2025

Anna Chorna

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Abstract

This thesis research aims to investigate the obstacles to the professional development of female military personnel in the Armed Forces of Ukraine during the full-scale war by the Russian Federation. The focus is placed on analysing the interaction of official and real practices that affect the integration of female military personnel into full-fledged military service. As part of a qualitative study based on 1) expert interviews with gender experts and gender advisors, as well as 2) categorisation of key barriers based on a literature review, the thesis developed a typology of 5 levels of obstacles. Among them: political, institutional, sociocultural, individual/personal, and physical/environmental barriers. These categories do not exist separately; on the contrary, they form a system of restrictions that not only complicates the usual service of female military personnel but also jeopardises the opportunity to gain combat experience, higher ranks, military training programs, and to make strategically important decisions.

Moreover, during the empirical analysis, it was found that although the number of women in the Ukrainian army has increased, and steps have been taken to allow women to study in a military lyceums and to formally open combat positions to females – these developments remain within the framework of visible inclusion, where formal changes and quantitative presence do not transform into an indicator of real change. Thus, the problems arising from these barriers require a strategic, systematic, and careful approach to reforming the established system.

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Introduction

This thesis focuses on examining the gender sensitivity of the Armed Forces of Ukraine by analysing the barriers that arise during career growth for female military personnel. It is important to note that despite the slow, mostly symbolic creation of conditions for comfortable service in the Ukrainian army, in practice, there are still both formal and informal restrictions that women can face.

This issue requires research, especially given the context of the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. After all, from this point, women began to take an active part in protecting the national security and territorial integrity of Ukraine. However, their contribution is still often overlooked and blocked due to the presence of several barriers (Siedaia, 2024). The topic is also essential, since international research demonstrates how the involvement of women in the military, in particular combat positions, contributes to the successful peacekeeping and combat operations. (Bjarnegard et al. 2015). Thus, correctly identifying obstacles in a practical sense, responding to the existing crisis and, accordingly, improving gender equality policies will contribute not only to the integration and stimulation of career growth of female military personnel in the Armed Forces of Ukraine but also to the effectiveness of military operations.

The theoretical puzzle concerns the discrepancy between the relatively growing number of women in the Armed Forces and the constant dynamics of their stratification in the Ukrainian army. Thus, a paradox arises: even though in Ukraine there is formal inclusion, female military personnel are significantly marginalised in professional development, more precisely, they very rarely occupy higher career and combat positions.

The analytical gap lies in the fact, despite the rather widespread presence of the analysis of gender inclusion and gender concepts in the armies of the world, such as the «glass ceiling»

(Cotter et al., 2001) or the «brass ceiling» (Iskra, 2007), scientists do not offer a generalized and unified classification of barriers that affect the professional development of women during military service. In addition, studies are usually devoted to the analysis of armies in the context of stable democracies (mostly NATO countries) in peaceful conditions, when the functioning of politics and military institutions is established and predictable (Segal, 1995; Carreiras, 2006; Silva, 2008; Duncanson & Woodward, 2015). The Ukrainian context also confirms the analytical gap, as this topic is often insufficiently covered in public sources and empirical studies, which objectively complicates the identification of specific barriers faced by women in the Armed Forces.

These aspects help to outline the research question that needs to be discovered in the study: «What obstacles hinder the career progression of women serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine?». To answer this question, this thesis aims to test the existence of a glass ceiling in the army and identify groups of barriers based on the literature review of scientific studies and information obtained from expert interviews with gender specialists and advisors.

The thesis has the following structure. The first section is a literature review that outlines scientific works that focus on the service of women in the Armed Forces and the problems that limit their career growth. This section lays the foundation for further theoretical and empirical parts of the study.

The following section provides theoretical approaches that explain the reasons and dynamics of the involvement of female military personnel in the Ukrainian army over the years. Additionally, the participation of women in combat units, representation in leadership positions, professional military education, and the problems of sexual harassment in the army are considered.

The third section provides an overview of the methodological framework. The key focus is on the justification of the research approach, the classification of the main barriers faced by women, and the use of semi-structured interviews with gender experts and advisors to obtain reliable empirical data. An explanation of the research limitations is provided.

The last section is empirical and illustrates the data collection that was conducted during interviews with gender experts, who became the most meaningful source of unavailable information in open sources.

Chapter 1. Literature Review

1.1 Introduction

The following chapter will focus on a detailed review of relevant academic studies addressing the presence, role, and impact of women in the military. The analysis of specialised scientific literature will examine the issues of career development of women, structural restrictions, gender barriers, and the systemic obstacles they face during civil and military service.

1.2 Women in the Armed Forces: challenges and career obstacles.

The involvement of women in military service and their function in the Armed Forces is a topic that challenges the traditional notion of gender roles and cultural beliefs of society. Several academic papers are considering increasing the presence of women in the military sector. Segal's & Segal's (1983) research is one of the most detailed. According to the authors, the introduction of a new system in the 1970s was characterised by the establishment of military educational institutions, which, for the first time, allowed the recruitment of females (Segal & Segal, 1983). This was also accompanied by the fact that the list of proposed military specialities was increased at the legislative level. However, despite the positive changes, the equal participation of women in the military was far from ideal. Researchers emphasise that in the historical perspective, military service is a male-centred sphere with persistent patriarchal traditions. Interestingly, even during active combat operations, women were only confined to auxiliary roles. Therefore, the involvement of women in a military career and their professional development was combined with several obstacles.

Later, Segal (1995) expanded the aforementioned study and developed a framework of the main factors that influence women's integration into military service. The author

distinguished and grouped the main factors into three key groups. The first is a military factor that includes «national security situation, military technology, combat-to-support ratio, force structure, military accession policies» (Segal, 1995, p. 759). Secondly, it is a social structure that includes «demographic patterns, labour force characteristics (women's labour force participation and occupational sex segregation), economic factors, family structure» (Segal, 1995, p. 759). The last is a cultural factor containing the «social construction of gender and family, social values about gender and family, public discourse regarding gender, values regarding ascription and equity» (Segal, 1995, p. 759). The author also writes that the increase in the presence of women in the Armed Forces is observed only during the available threats to sovereignty and state security, as a replenishment of a personnel resource. Nevertheless, in situations where there is no necessity for it, there is a phenomenon of «cultural amnesia» - the humiliation of the role and neglect of the achievements of women in the army (Segal, 1995, p. 761). However, analysing these factors, Segal does not provide further analysis of the possibilities of professional growth for women in the armed forces.

King and Dinitto (2019) provided a similar analysis. They monitor changes in security and defence policy from a gender perspective from 1895 to 2015, arguing that the military sphere is an environment with masculine biases where decisions are made following the military situation. During the World War II and other armed conflicts (Iraq, Afghanistan), people joined the service, regardless of gender. Though when the fighting subsided, women were confronted with institutional barriers, namely discrimination, and restrictions in the process of promotion. In the course of the study, the authors additionally identified other factors that often interfere with women in the service, especially a combination of a military career with a private life. The data indicate that women are inclined to leave the military service after birth because of a lack of financial and institutional support.

Carreiras (2006) claims that even though women have always participated in wars, they have always been associated with peace and traditionally performed minor and supporting functions, like chefs or laundry personnel. Such long-term dynamics have determined a cultural, political, and social system for centuries. Events such as World War II contributed to mobilisation, during which women received wider access to military professions. Yet, barriers to managerial roles or higher ranks were limited. Carreiras (2006, pp. 97-137) also engages with the present by analysing the formation of a personnel army that took place in many NATO countries in the 1990s. It was this stage that led to the intensified recruiting, which influenced equal representation. Still, each country had its progress. Policies in Canada, the US, and Scandinavian states were able to promote active gender inclusion, while France and Germany delayed the process of integration of women into combat units through imperfect mechanisms. Therefore, Carreiras (2006, p. 105) emphasises that only 7% of women in the armies of NATO countries carry out combat operations. The explanation is that although official strategies can contribute to the involvement of female service members, success will depend on the structural factors that often complicate the growth in the military hierarchy.

Other researchers pay attention to physical and psychological factors that complicate the conditions for the career development. Brownson (2014) argues that the unobstructed integration of women into military service is correlated with physical training, highlighting the biological differences between men and women. She represents the idea of «equivalency», which, unlike equality, gives women the opportunity to realise their strengths, such as strategic thinking, teamwork, and endurance, instead of pursuits focused on the physical indicators designed for men (Brownson, 2014, p. 784). However, Cohn (2000) underestimates this approach, stressing that such a selective attitude only consolidates gender stereotypes, because male military personnel, who are forced to undergo heavy exercise, can use this as a basis for discrimination, underestimating women's professional abilities. Fly (2016) proposes a

psychological dimension to this discussion, indicating that female service members are stressed by the need to constantly demonstrate their physical endurance, which adversely affects the process of integration into the military environment.

Not all researchers agree that it will be enough to overcome formal barriers to introduce gender equality. According to some authors, there is a need for a full change in military culture itself. Duncanson and Woodward (2015) discuss the concept of «regendering the military», process that mean fundamental modification of military institutions. The authors explain that this includes the following aspects: 1) the destruction of previously established gender dichotomies, such as masculinity and femininity; 2) the rethinking of traditionally «female» qualities such as empathy and care, and third, the integration of female military personnel into all stages of military service without dividing into «female» or «male» roles (Duncanson & Woodward, 2015, p. 12). This process should be accompanied by not only a systematic change in institutional norms but additionally a radical revision of the principles of military service. However, the authors point out, these updates cause a rigid and critical reaction at both the bureaucratic and personal levels on the part of the military personnel. This creates other difficulties when regulating this issue.

Silva (2008) doubts the practical implementation of the change in the environment of military service and prompts a reconsideration of the optimistic idea of engaging women in the military. Moreover, she argues that the army atmosphere is structurally patriarchal, where women are forced to combine professional self-realisation with the public expectations in terms of femininity, to maintain social acceptability among servicemen. The researcher underlines that, even though formally the army of the world declares equal rights and opportunities for all, de facto military women are forced to adapt their behaviour and manner of management to established femininity standards. Summarising the insights, it should be emphasised that

military institutions not only resist innovations but also make women assimilate under masculine standards, which provokes inequality.

Moving to career opportunities, it should be underscored that in most countries, military service is increasingly considered in terms of professional employment similar to a civilian career (Segal & Segal, 1983; Segal, 1995). Therefore, it is advisable to use a similar approach to the study of prospects for promoting women in a military hierarchy, on the principle of ordinary civilian professions. This will contribute to a deeper understanding of structural constraints that affect the career growth of women in the army.

In the context of considering career access to leadership positions in the Armed Forces, the Glass Ceiling Theory should be highlighted. According to Cotter et al. (2001), a glass ceiling is an imperceptible obstacle that blocks women's career paths, including obtaining guidance positions, despite their vast expertise and competence at the same level as men. The results of the study show that although the initial stages of the career ladder are parity for women and men, higher positions are relatively closed for women. The authors provide an analysis of the main factors that traditionally identify leadership as a male character trait, including cultural stereotypes and social prejudices. In addition, structural obstacles are also noticeable due to the disproportionate distribution of access to professional contact networks and facilitating management. Findings demonstrate that men are more likely to help each other build a career, while women are less likely to get responsibilities with mentoring support. This has a low level of remuneration, which inhibits women's ability to invest in a career. Like in many further studies, Cotter et al. (2001) distinguish family responsibilities as a hindrance to women's careers, but this trend exists because of the false conviction of employers that women do not have as much capacity and resources as men, because of family affairs.

Some of the contemporary authors are critical of previous theories and offer similar but updated metaphors. Eagly & Carli (2007), while criticising the concept of the glass ceiling, offer the labyrinth system. The renewed concept is a more relevant explanation, since obstacles that occur at all stages of professional development have a complex trajectory, as well as a labyrinth. The main difficulties that happen to women in the labyrinth are mostly stereotypical thinking and social prejudice, which identify leaders with a characteristic feature of men. The authors also consider the resistance to women's leadership, which is manifested in the preference for men in guidance because of the features of rigidity, dominance, and determination, while women are associated with gentleness and sensitivity (Eagly & Carli, 2007, pp. 3-4). Moreover, a large barrier is family life, as domestic affairs often slow down the career mobility of women who work part-time or are on leave for childcare. It is accompanied by stereotypical thinking from employers who believe that women do not cope with multitasking. The last factor they consider concerns the social capital of women. It is a lack of informal relationships and socialisation with colleagues and leaders; as a consequence, women's progression within the hierarchy is hindered (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 5-6).

Although previous studies provide a detailed description of the barriers that women face during professional growth, they do not systematise them. Yet, there are more structured approaches. For example, Swanson & Tokar (1991) offer vision, giving the method of mapping all possible obstacles that you have to fight while advancing with career ladders. This approach helps to form a complete understanding of career barriers. They distinguish 3 types: social/interpersonal, attitudinal, and interactional obstacles (Swanson & Tokar, 1991, p. 101). Social/interpersonal barriers cover a factor of a dilemma between career development and family, especially for children's care, as well as gender stereotypes in society. The second type is correlated with individual principles, self-esteem, and ambitions. In particular, people tend to doubt their capabilities, which is also accompanied by a lack of information about the work

environment, and stress that blocks further development. Finally, interaction barriers relate to external factors such as age, gender, or lack of experience, which can complicate career advancement. Nevertheless, as academics point out, special attention should also be paid to the stage at which a person faces career barriers. This is crucial because, according to the research, at every stage of a person's career, they face one type of obstacle or another.

A preliminary analysis is similar to Cachón (2018), who offers a detailed classification of barriers in the civilian sector. The author produces her typology based on 50 articles on a similar subject and concludes that all obstacles can be divided into three types: personal, organisational, and social factors (Cachón, 2018, p. 295). Personal factors include «family responsibility, training and development, and internal factors, such as low self-esteem or fear of success» (Cachón, 2018, p. 295). Concerning organisational factors, it is about «leadership aspects, organisational culture, organisational support, contact, and work networks» (Cachón, 2018, p. 295). Social factors include «gender stereotypes, as well as public policies and reconciliation of work and personal/family life» (Cachón, 2018, p. 295). The scholar emphasises that all these aspects are interdependent. For example, established gender prejudices affect self-esteem. Although the article provides a large-scale analysis, it has limitations. According to Cachón herself, this typology cannot be applied to all contexts because it is influenced by various social, economic, and cultural aspects.

Iskra (2007) complements the above research by presenting a new concept – «Brass Ceiling» (symbolizes higher military ranks) that reveals unnoticed but significant restrictions that hinder the career success of women when reaching general or admiral ranks (Iskra, 2007, p. 216). The author explores this aspect in military structures. Comparing this concept with the «Glass Ceiling» or a «Labyrinth system» used in civilian professions, the «Brass Ceiling» focuses on the meaning of military culture, subordination, and male standards when creating

obstacles to the career development of women military personnel. Research provides the results that women officers have received reputable positions by demonstrating commitment and building strong connections, including mentoring by officers of higher rank. The military sphere has its peculiarities at different stages and in the units. Thus, during service in combat units, women face more intense resistance. The researcher also highlights the disproportions between the career prospects of women in regular troops and the reserve, those who have more freedom. However, this analysis contains some restrictions. Unfortunately, the study is concentrated only on successful cases and does not focus on those who have stopped serving due to discriminatory conditions and a lack of proper support, which distorts the actual conditions of military service.

Based on the analytical review of each article, the obstacles that women in the military environment face were studied. Every detected barrier was classified according to specific categories. This allows the classification of the key challenges, which affect women in military service. Each segment covers the specific barriers that were listed in the scientific literature. This method has not only managed to organise available data but also to identify the patterns and specifics of the impact of these barriers. The detailed classification is presented in [the Appendix 1](#).

1.3. Conclusion

This chapter considers the basic approaches to the gradual growth of the female presence in the army structure. In addition, the classification of career development restrictions in civilian spheres and key obstacles that women face in their professional growth in the military environment were analysed. Moreover, based on the study, it was found that the issues of barriers that women experience in the military structure are not sufficiently systematised in scientific discourse. Despite the extensive number of studies that focus on specific elements of

this topic, there is no unified typology that could classify and describe all factors that influence the role and career of women in the military field. Hence, this study will develop a typology that will be designed to structure existing knowledge and present a modernised approach to the systematisation of barriers in military activity.

Chapter 2. What do we know about Ukraine?

2.1 Introduction

The issue of gender policy in the Defence Sector of Ukraine is one of the most relevant topics on the agenda (Martsenyuk, 2023). Facing the realities of the war since 2014, ensuring the effective integration of gender equality in the Ukrainian context is strategically important for the successful protection of national security. It should be noted that in recent years, Ukraine has demonstrated slow progress in its implementation (Nalyvaiko, 2021). Military service is becoming a more open sphere in which women have begun to play a role in protecting national interests.

However, there are still obstacles that remain on the way to the career development of women. Females in the army are quite often met with a biased attitude towards their physical training and management skills, which significantly hinders the possibilities of access to leadership positions and combat units (Berlinska et al., 2021). Furthermore, traditional cultural masculinity in the army environment has a significant impact on the division of responsibilities, the prospects for gaining rank, and participation in the development of strategic planning. It is also essential to indicate the inappropriate arrangement of the conditions of service and social guarantees for women in the Armed Forces. Primarily focused on providing appropriate uniforms, access to medical services, and conditions for combining military service with motherhood. In addition, cases of sexual abuse remain a serious problem. As of today, information about such cases is limited for public consideration for many reasons. First, this is due to the inability to protect the privacy of the victims. Secondly, the military structures themselves ignore and offset these problems, which complicates not only the solution but also the study of this issue. These aspects are only separate manifestations of more in-depth system barriers that persist to complicate the service of women in the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

2.2 Women in the Armed Forces: growing numbers, expanding roles

Women have served in the armed forces for all these years since the formation of Ukraine's independence, but their number and role have changed significantly over time. According to the online media of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine – Army Inform (2021), in 2005, there were 19.366 thousand women in the Armed Forces, but most of them held civilian positions related to administrative, technical, and medical tasks.

The turning point was the end of 2014 and the beginning of 2015 (Nalyvaiko, 2021). Then the presence of women in the Armed Forces began to grow rapidly, which was due to many factors.

First, it is the military aspect. The occupation of the Crimea, the beginning of the war in eastern Ukraine in 2014, and full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 not only caused the need for the mobilization of resources but proved that women's participation in national security protection began to transform traditional ideas about military service as «male-dominated field». The demand for a professional military has grown, and many women have begun to join the armed forces voluntarily.

Secondly, the increase in the number was driven by political and legal factors. On the one hand, this is accompanied by a political vector of Ukraine in the context of European and Euro-Atlantic integration, as well as the implementation of NATO standards. In addition, such dynamics are supported by the assistance of international partners who provide technical guidance and an examination to eliminate barriers that impede military women's career growth in defence. On the other hand, there is a legal factor in the form of military reforms and the modernisation of outdated legal and regulatory frameworks that have affected the level of opportunities for women in education and career advancement.

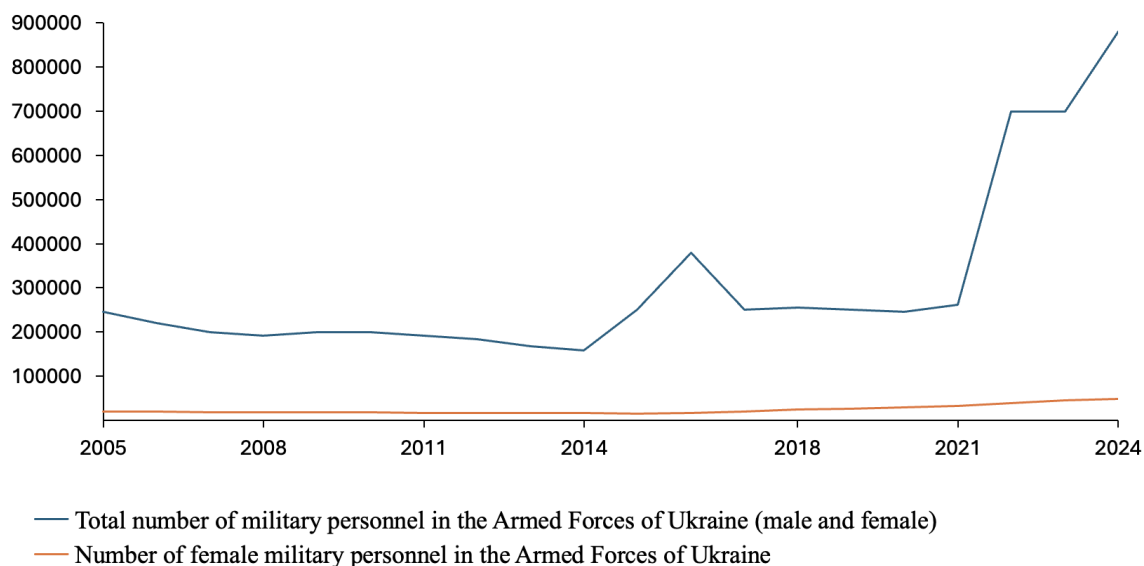
The third factor is social transformations. It is primarily about changes in the public perception of women in the military. This includes increased social and political activity in expanding women's rights, in the security and defence sector. Accordingly, this had an impact on the gradual expansion of civic discourse on gender equality and shifting away from obsolete stereotypes. Special attention should be paid to the role of public initiatives with a focus on gender equality in the military sphere. Thus, the Women's Veteran Movement, the Ukrainian Women's Fund, the Invisible Battalion, La Strada Ukraine, and etc. actively support the struggle for expanding the rights and opportunities of female military personnel, as well as the promotion of inclusive policy in the army.

Finally, economic characteristics played a significant role. The service in the Armed Forces of Ukraine guarantees stable employment, unlike other options in the labour market. In addition, the military career makes it possible to obtain reliable financial support and a developed social protection system, which is influential in the conditions of long-lasting hostilities and during the economic crisis. Raising wages, policy of additional material incentives in the form of bonuses, social benefits, and in the future, guaranteed pension provision, becomes a decisive argument in favour of professional military service.

Moving to the actual indicators, as of 2014, the total number of women in the Armed Forces was over 49.000, of whom only 16.557 were female military personnel (Army Inform, 2021). However, at the end of September 2024, according to the latest official data of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine (2024), the total number of women in the Armed Forces increased to 68.000 people, of which more than 48.000 are female combatants. This indicates a significant increase in the comparative perspective since 2005, the number of women in the army has increased by almost 2.5 times or by 147.8% (Army Inform, 2021). For comparison, during peacetime in European countries with advanced gender policy, the growth of women in

the army is more even: for example, in Sweden's Armed Forces, the proportion of women among permanent staff increased from 17% in 2014 to 23% in 2022. (Statista, 2022).

Graph 1: Growth of female in the Armed Forces of Ukraine compared to total personnel (2005–2024), (Army Inform, 2021; Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, 2025).



Despite this small progress, women still make up only 7.73% of the total composition of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which, according to the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, has 880.000 people as of 2024 (Office of the President of Ukraine, 2024). For instance, the European armies generally demonstrate a positive trend in gender proportions. For example: 1) in the German Armed Forces, men make up 87% of personnel, while women constitute approximately 13%; 2) the Slovak army consist of 86.4% men and 13.6% women; 3) a good example is also the Greek army, where men account for 83.2% and women for 16.8% (Euromil, 2023). This dynamic reflects the gradual destruction of stereotypes and the growing role of women in the military sphere but also underlines the need for further work to achieve actual gender equality.

All the above data are important indicators for demonstrating the progress of gender parity in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. But only the nominal involvement of women in the military

sector is not a sufficient condition for evidence of the equality of the rights and opportunities of men and women service members (Carreiras, 2006). The actual presence of women does not guarantee equal participation in decision-making, access to management and combat positions, or the same conditions for career growth.

2.3 From soldiers to commanders: women in the army

Concerning the more detailed distribution within the Armed Forces, it should be emphasised that the army consists of 1) combat units that perform defence and protection tasks, as well as 2) security units, including civilian staff. The foundation of combat units is the land forces, naval forces, air forces, air assault forces, forces of unmanned systems, forces of special operations, and territorial defence forces. These structures are responsible for the tasks of operational and combat nature, guaranteeing the defence capability of the state and the protection of national interests. In turn, the support forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which provide communications, logistics, medical, and engineering support, contribute to the effective work of the entire structure of the army.

In addition, it is also worth mentioning the structure of ranks in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which is vital for understanding the military hierarchy, as it plays a significant role in the career development of service members. The ranks must establish the limits of responsibility, duties, and the number of opportunities available to female military personnel. It is this vertical subordination that provides new prospects for women in the army, facilitating them with different official positions, from tactical to strategic levels.

The rank in the Armed Forces has 2 types: army and maritime rank, along with three categories: enlisted personnel, non-commissioned officers and warrant officers, and officer

corps, as well as a separate category of cadets (Law of Ukraine No. 2232-XII, 1992). For complete understanding, each group should be considered separately.

Therefore, enlisted personnel include the military who carry out operational tasks in the battle zone or provide logistics and tactical support in combat. As for the ranks, these are soldiers and sailors in the Navy.

Non-commissioned officers and warrant officers play a key role in coordinating small units and providing military discipline. This category includes junior sergeants, sergeants, senior sergeants, and master sergeants. (In the Naval forces, these ranks include petty officer second class, petty officer first class, chief petty officer, and senior chief petty officer). The military with these ranks is responsible for the effective execution of orders and the organisation of work at the tactical level.

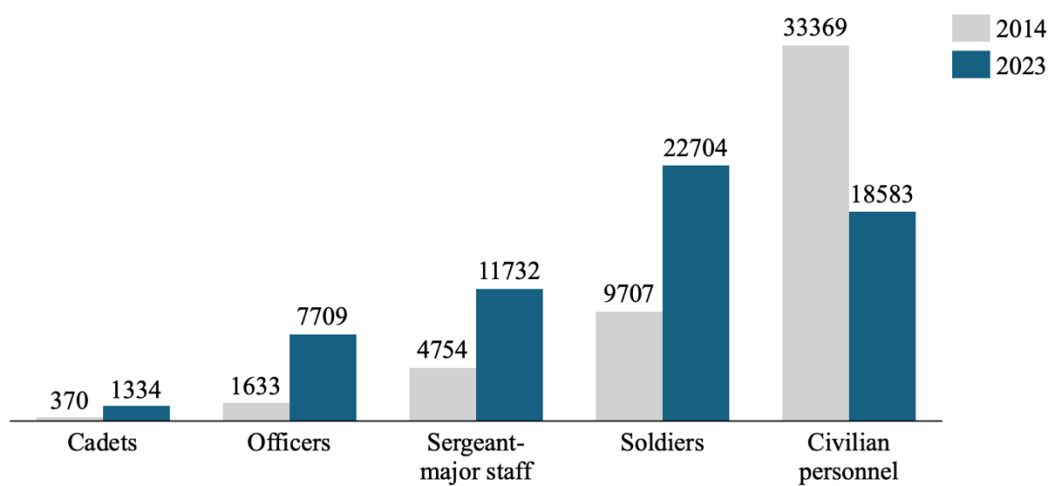
The officer corps is a unit of the organisational structure of the Ukrainian army, which coordinates the development and decision-making at strategic and operational levels. The officer corps includes the following ranks in its structure: the junior officers include junior lieutenant, lieutenant, senior lieutenant, and captain (in the Naval forces – captain-lieutenant). The senior officers include a major, lieutenant colonel, and colonel (in the Navy – captains of the 3rd, 2nd, and 1st ranks). The highest-ranking officers include the major general, lieutenant general, and colonel general (in the Naval forces – rear admiral, vice admiral, and admiral). Representatives of this command structure have the functions of unit management, guarantees of successful performance of combat missions, and decision-making that has a decisive impact on the success of the tasks.

A separate category - cadets. These are the kinds of students who have been educated in military academies to become officers.

Turning to specific data, the number of women in all the above positions in the Armed Forces of Ukraine demonstrates gradual changes. Again, the growing trend in the number of women in different positions began to be observed only after 2014. It is worth mentioning the discussion during a round table: «War. Women in the army: are there weaknesses in the strong?». During the event, Liubov Humeniuk, a Specialist of the Gender Issues and Religious Organisations Liaison Division of the Department of Humanitarian Support of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, announced the data on the structure of the official warehouse. For 2014, the distribution was as follows: 1.633 officers, 4.754 representatives of the sergeant-old warehouse, 9.707 soldiers, 370 cadets, as well as 33.369 civilian staff of women service members (Ukrinform, 2023). However, as of 2023, according to the latest data available, the number of officers increased to 7.709, which is almost 7 times more than in 2014 (Ukrinform, 2023). Non-commissioned officers and warrant officers were 11.732 women, the soldiers 22.704, and the cadets – 1.334. The number of civilian staff has decreased to 18.583 people, which signals the redistribution of women's roles in favour of active military service.

This reduction of women in civilian positions in the Armed Forces can be associated with the overall increase in their involvement in active service in the army. In other words, the process describes the result of a gradual but persistent redistribution of roles, when women have become more likely to occupy positions related to direct military service, moving from civilian functions to combat and command roles. In addition, this shift is also associated with increasing demand for military personnel with active involvement in connection with 1) the Russian invasion in 2014 and 2) a full-scale war since 2022: the army adapts to new challenges and attracts more women to combat units.

Graph 2: Comparison of female personnel distribution in the Armed Forces of Ukraine: 2014 vs. 2023, (Ukrinform, 2023).



The graph illustrates a significant increase in the number of women in the Ukrainian army. This was made possible by the Verkhovna Rada's adoption of the law that consolidated the equal rights of women and men in military service in 2018 (Law of Ukraine No. 2523-VIII, 2018). Such a step changed the configuration of the Armed Forces structure. According to this regulatory act, women service members have acquired equal rights and opportunities for signing a contract, access to all military specialities, and military service on an equal basis with men. In addition, it officially established the position according to which women can receive military ranks as men. Despite the gradual, though positive transformations, there are aspects that indicate insufficient progress in overcoming obstacles to the highest positions.

According to the Head of the Department of Humanitarian Support of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, Diana Koponytsia, the number of women occupying management positions in the army is only 7000 (Army Inform, 2024). All of them have different roles in a wide range of directions - from medicine, communication, logistics, unit management, and strategic planning. Officers make key decisions, participate in the preparation of combat operations and are responsible for the combat readiness of their units. Even though a significant

part of them holds management or specialised positions, about 5.000 women are currently directly involved in combat units. More about this is in the next section.

According to Kateryna Prymak, Ukrainian veteran, a paramedic, and one of the leaders of the public organisation «Women's Veteran Movement»: «The phenomenon of the «glass ceiling» still exists, but it is not solely about the wage gap. Simply put, salaries in the military can be the same for both men and women. Yet, becoming a female colonel is significantly more challenging, as leadership may favour the career advancement of men. If commanders were shaped by Soviet-era standards, they have largely retained them» (Radchenko, 2022).

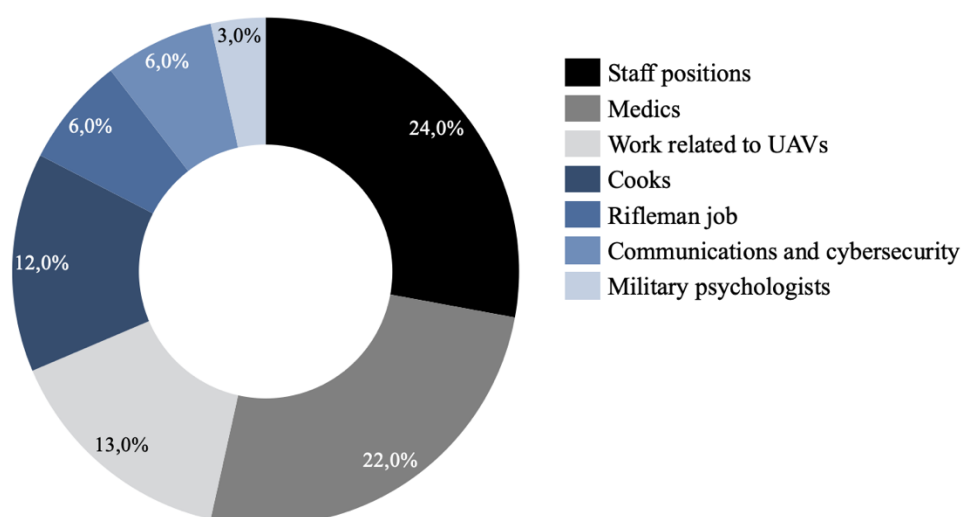
To confirm this statement, it should be noted that as of 2025, there is only one woman general in Ukraine. Tetiana Osnashchenko - commander of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, who was assigned to the position of brigadier general of the Medical Service in 2021 (President of Ukraine, 2021). Such data indicate existing barriers to promotions.

2.4 Women in Combat Units: representation and dynamics.

Despite the incremental progress in the military sector, women have faced with multiple obstacles access to combat positions for a long time. De facto women could serve, but their role was limited to auxiliary or rear-area activity. For a lengthy period, there was a stereotypical stigma that only military men could perform combat missions. This caused an institutional limitation of opportunities for women in direct participation in combat missions. However, as of 2024, there are about 5.000 female military personnel in the war zone (Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, 2024). This amount is moderately small, but it became possible due to the adoption of the law already mentioned above, which contributed to the opening of 63 combat positions for women (Law of Ukraine No. 2523-VIII, 2018).

Today, the latest statistics on the distribution of specialties among women who have joined the ranks of the Armed Forces through recruitment centres, emphasizes the variety of their activities: 24% of women occupy staff positions, 22% work for combat doctors and nurses, 13% conduct tasks related to UAVs, 12% work as chefs, 6% engage in shooting operations, 6% are involved in communication and cybersecurity, and 3% are military psychologists (Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, 2025).

Graph 3: Distribution of female military personnel by specialty in the Armed Forces (Recruitment Centre data), 2025.



Simultaneously, women are still confronted with restrictions. According to the results of the interview by the Ukrainian NGOs, female combatants are often restricted in access to work with explosive materials, conducting diving operations, extinguishing fires, and serving on submarines and ships. The blocking of women before combat trips is also often traced and the lack of positions in special units. According to Andriana Arecht, the leader of the «Women's Veteran Movement», assault trooper: «I was discriminated against by the Ministry of Defence, which did not allow me to take a combat position. In my military ID, I was registered as the head

of the sewing workshop for repair and tailoring of clothing equipment, meaning a seamstress» (Vygovska, 2023).

2.5 Professional military education

Education issues have traditionally played a critical role in guaranteeing equal access to opportunities for personal and professional development. The Armed Forces of Ukraine is not an exception, as the training of qualified military personnel has a direct link to career growth. However, for 28 years since independence in Ukraine, access to military education for women has been accompanied by several barriers. Only in 2019 the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine eventually allow women to join military lyceums. At the same time, according to Liubov Humeniuk, the total number of women in the military in higher education institutions was only 8% of the total number of students enrolled in study (ZMINA, 2019). Up to then, military lyceum provisions contained the thesis of increased physical training and «fostering readiness for military service among young men» (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 1999).

As of 2024, this figure has increased enormously. The number of women among all entrants enrolled in higher military education institutions, military units of military education in higher education institutions, as well as educational institutions of higher military training of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine was 31.5% (Army Inform, 2024). Indicators show high growth rates, for comparison - in 2023, the number of women who studied in military institutions was 28.5% (Army Inform, 2024). Among the specialisations that are most popular with participants, women are in mechanised units, air assault forces units, and special operations forces.

2.6 Harassment and discrimination.

Sexual violence in the Ukrainian military environment is a systemic barrier that not only affects safety but also threatens the professional development of female service members. One of the most comprehensive studies on sexual harassment in the Armed Forces is the analytics from the organisation «Invisible Battalion 3.0». According to their survey, 76% of respondents noted unwanted touches, 51% of women emphasised forced kisses, and 31% of sexual coercion (Berlinska et al., 2021). Only 8% of the respondents who have experienced sexual harassment were supported and lodged official complaints.

These statistics are also disappointing in many other countries. Similarly, in the USA, according to the Department of Defence, in 2021, approximately 29.000 American service members were sexually assaulted, of whom fewer than one in five reported the incident (Greenburg, 2024, p. 2). Research by the Costs of War Project at Brown University's Watson Institute indicates that the entire scale is 2-4 times higher, and military officials themselves admit that «the military has failed to address this crisis» (Greenburg, 2024, p. 5).

This indicates that such aspects are hidden and are not disseminated because of the risks to women's careers, as well as being supported by institutional inability and unwillingness to provide an operational response. As one of the respondents said during the study: «I called the hotline, but they didn't answer any of my questions and said: What can I tell you? Nothing.» (Berlinska et al., 2021).

2.7 Conclusion

Consequently, it can be argued that even though the integration of women into the military sphere in Ukraine reflects the rising trend, barriers that hinder professional development are insufficiently researched, non-systematic, and artificially invisible. In other words, the

discussion on this issue is bypassed because of the existing suppression and inconvenience of the topic as of today. There should also be an emphasis on open data. This is predominantly explained by the excessive volume of work of both military personnel and gender advisers, as well as information secrecy due to a full-scale invasion. Moreover, often the issue of gender parity is considered by the Armed Forces Command as secondary in the context of other military-strategic priorities of the state. Therefore, the theme of career barriers is diminished and remains unaddressed in military policy. To summarise, the requirement for comprehensive analysis and classification of obstacles is necessary for understanding the problem and its further solution for more effective integration and career promotion of women in the military.

Chapter 3: Methodological Framework

3.1 Introduction

This section defines the methodological foundation, including the hypothesis and variables of the study, and groups the categories of barriers based on the scientific literature and previous research in this area. Based on the previous analysis, five main categories were identified that cover different levels of career barriers to the professional growth of women in the Armed Forces of Ukraine: political, institutional, sociocultural, individual/personal circumstances, and physical conditions/environmental factors. To identify and analyse the manifestations of these barriers in a real context, a series of semi-structured interviews will be conducted with gender experts and gender advisors.

3.2 Data collection and operationalization

As of today, the research framework does not contain a unified typology of barriers that identify obstacles to women's career growth in the army, especially in the context of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Therefore, there is a need to systematise the factors that determine the participation of female military personnel in career advancement in military service. The proposed classification system was formed based on a preliminary analysis during a literature review of studies. The categorisation aims to outline the main obstacles that women face in the Ukrainian army environment.

The first category is political aspects. International studies analysed in the literature review have shown that government decisions related to changes in the legal sphere, in particular the opening of senior leadership positions in the US Army, were the main factors in opening up new career opportunities for women in military service (Iskra, 2007). Therefore, state decisions, policies, and the current political situation have a significant impact on female

military personnel. After all, the laws and other legal acts directly affect the integration of women into the armed forces.

The second obstacle that has been identified is institutional. The thesis shows that because the army is closed in model and hierarchical structure, it has its own specific internal processes and procedures that, in practice, have a lower level of gender inclusiveness and, accordingly, can both support and limit female military personnel in the professional spectrum (Carreiras, 2006). Among them: the lack of special initiatives to support women, structural inequality, the exclusion of women from particular roles, and the clear consolidation of male functions in military units.

The third barrier concerns sociocultural factors, which will characterise stereotypes that are historically rooted in society, cultural norms, and other traditional ideas. Duncanson and Woodward (2015) show a correlation between existing stereotypes of masculinity and obstacles to women's career growth. They are arguing that the socially ingrained understanding of the military as an association with an emotionally stable and physically strong man significantly reduces career chances for women, who, according to stereotypical thinking, do not correspond to these characteristics. These aspects are crucial, as they shape the role of women in society, and correspondingly in the army, plus impose exact responsibilities and expectations on women within the framework of their gender role. In addition, this barrier will also include interaction in the armed forces, that is, how other military personnel and leaders influence career opportunities.

The next obstacle concerns individual/personal factors. It will include barriers that are directly related to the female military. It is about own perception (such as confidence or self-esteem), psychological state (anxiety, nervousness, indecision, stress), identity, behavioural aspects, and professional ambitions. In particular, many military studies confirm that lack of

confidence in one's abilities, psychological pressure from command or fellow soldiers, and fear of being unacceptable due to the constant need to demonstrate one's military capabilities in the army form personal barriers to women's career opportunities (Silva, 2008).

The last barrier is physical conditions and environmental factors. This includes physical exertions (that are mandatory and generally accepted in the military environment), which can sometimes be difficult for women and may limit decisions regarding promotion in the future. For example, research shows that female soldiers face persistent prejudices regarding their physical fitness and ability during their service in the US Armed Forces (Fly, 2016). It is also necessary to emphasise the real conditions (infrastructure and equipment) and resources in the army, because in the armed forces, these aspects often do not meet the needs of women, which serves as a barrier for females in the military environment.

Table 1. Key barriers to women's participation in military life

Barrier	Explanation
Political	Influence of governmental decisions and policies on women`s participation in military life
Institutional	The organisational structure and management within the army
Sociocultural	Societal stereotypes, traditions, interaction with the people
Individual/personal	Identity, psychological, sexual, relational and professional factors
Physical and environmental conditions	Physical aspects of service, work conditions, infrastructure and workload

Given the above classification formed based on the review of international research, this master's thesis aims to test the following **hypotheses** in the Ukrainian context:

Hypothesis 1: The absence of systematic strategic reforms and insufficient political will for the implementation of gender reforms in the Armed Forces hinders women's access to leadership and combat roles.

Hypothesis 2: The institutional structure of the Ukrainian army facilitates internal resistance from military leadership, constraining female career advancement.

Hypothesis 3: The sociocultural stereotypes and the stigmatisation of female military personnel lead to a discriminatory attitude that limits their professional growth.

Hypothesis 4: Psychological challenges, lack of support from leadership, fear of sexual harassment, low self-esteem, and conflict between military service and personal life, obstruct

Hypothesis 5: Insufficient service conditions, inadequate access to hygiene facilities, and excessive physical demands hinder female military service.

To test hypotheses, the study identifies the main variables. The dependent variable is the career opportunities of female military personnel in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which will be operationalised through the analysis of access to combat positions, promotion in ranks, as well as the availability of mentoring and training for professional development. In turn, the following obstacles in the form of 5 groups are the independent variables:

- Political
- Institutional
- Sociocultural
- Individual
- Physical and environmental

3.3 Semi-structured expert interviews

To find confirmation or refute these hypotheses in the Ukrainian context during the professional development of female military personnel in the army, a more in-depth analysis of the current situation in the Armed Forces should be conducted. Accordingly, this will be possible by conducting semi-structured expert interviews with gender advisors of the Armed Forces, as well as with independent experts on gender equality. Thus, the first category of

respondents is directly involved in the implementation of equality policies and support for women in the army. While the second category, who also have experience in this area, can assess the effectiveness and efficiency of existing initiatives, and even more so, identify potential barriers that limit the opportunities of women in the army.

The method of semi-structured expert interviews is considered one of the most effective in social and political sciences methods of obtaining thorough and diverse information, as it allows interviewers to flexibly adjust questions depending on the direction of the conversation, and respondents to openly share their opinions. (Kallio et al., 2016). Moreover, this method contributes to obtaining more detailed data that cannot be obtained by other methods (Wood, 1997). The chosen method is also suitable for studying complex and ambiguous phenomena, such as the career opportunities of female military personnel in the Ukrainian army, as it provides for the collection of factual information and the personal judgments of respondents, which is especially valuable. (Kallio et al., 2016).

Finally, it is exceptionally useful because a significant part of the information is not publicly accessible under martial law. Therefore, it is possible to obtain access to this type of data only by organising direct communication with specialists who have a comprehensive understanding of the situation in the Armed Forces of Ukraine and can provide wide-ranging assessments of specific aspects of policies and practices. It is important to note that in this thesis, due to ethical considerations and the protection of respondents' privacy, full transcripts of interviews will not be made publicly available. However, for academic validation or to expand the empirical base of further research, access to anonymised materials may be provided upon reasonable request and following research ethics.

3.4 Limitations

Studying the career opportunities of women in the army is a rather important topic that reveals the gender policy curtain in wartime. Still, it faces limitations. First of all, it should be emphasised that ongoing full-scale war affects access to sources and data. Therefore, martial law limits the ability to get the most accurate and latest information in public reports due to security and confidentiality concerns. Secondly, restrictions are also related to rapid changes in the management structures and personnel of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Constant adjustments to domestic politicians and strategies may also be closed or vary depending on the current situation. In addition, although data acquisition from expert interviews with gender advisers and researchers is significant, they cannot be representative. To enhance the results of the interview, it would be valuable to use a survey that would enable a wider audience and obtain representative data. Nevertheless, in wartime, this is not possible because women, especially those in the frontline and combat positions, have no time and opportunity to participate in surveys due to a lack of Internet and permanent employment. Consequently, further analysis in peacetime can supplement the research by conducting surveys among female personnel.

Chapter 4. Career barriers

4.1 Introduction

Based on the above-mentioned research methodology, as well as considering the insights and conclusions obtained during interviews with gender experts, this part of the work will focus on an in-depth analysis of each of the identified barriers to career growth for women in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Every barrier will be presented separately, considering both the existing theoretical base formed during the desktop research and practical examples that reflect the factual experience of female military personnel in the army.

4.1 Political barriers

One of the main obstacles faced by women in the Armed Forces of Ukraine stems from political factors. It should be noted that this section defines these aspects as the impact of decisions and policies adopted by state bodies on issues of participants in military life and building a military career. In other words, these primarily refer to policies, legislative initiatives, and regulatory documents, both international and national, aimed at establishing equal rights and opportunities for men and women are present in legislative activity, and what is more important, how they are implemented.

At first glance, the current legislative framework of Ukraine on the regulation of gender policy does not contain discriminatory provisions regarding the rights and opportunities of male and female military personnel. Since gaining independence, Ukraine has signed and ratified several international documents that are important for the formation of gender-sensitive policies in the country today (Ministry of Justice of Ukraine, 2021). Among the latest examples of ratified documents are Ukraine's accession to the Biarritz International Partnership for Gender

Equality in 2020 (Gender Equality Index in Ukraine, 2025, p. 46), as well as the ratification of the International Coalition for Equal Pay (Gender Equality in Ukraine, 2025, p. 47).

Thus, according to the data obtained during the interview with Kateryna Levchenko:

«These processes [implementation of international documents] are moving forward the development of gender policy. The National Action Plan 1325 was adopted; the Istanbul Convention was ratified – all this influenced the Armed Forces.»

Therefore, although changes in gender policy regarding women in the Armed Forces of Ukraine are long overdue, they are taking place, they are unsystematic, and often meet with serious resistance, especially since this was popular before 2014. For example, by chance, where Ukraine became one of the authors of international documents, practical implementation was hampered by the authorities, just as the ratification of the Istanbul Convention was postponed, despite the fact that Ukraine was signed with the author countries and signed the document in 2011 (Council of Europe, 2022). Consequently, a significant part of the initiative was declarative, or worked in a spot-by-spot manner.

For example, as one of the respondents' states:

«Despite the formal existence of political initiatives, their implementation in practice always depends on the initiative of commanders» (Interviewee 4, 2025).

Meanwhile, relying on national Ukrainian legislation, de jure, it is also developing very slowly; however, it similarly contains provisions on promoting gender equality, including in the Armed Forces. For example, gender policy is officially enshrined in the Constitution, in Article 24 (Constitution of Ukraine, 1996). Since the beginning of independence, the gradual implementation of various regulatory legal acts has also begun, in particular, the «Law on Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men» (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2005), the 2012 Law of Ukraine «On the Principles of Preventing and Combating Discrimination in Ukraine», «On Amendments to Certain Laws of Ukraine on Ensuring Equal

Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men During Military Service in the Armed Forces of Ukraine and Other Military Formations» (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2018), «On Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of Ukraine on Improving Certain Issues of Military Duty and Military Record Keeping» (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2021).

Respondents also add to the above:

«In 2017, the order of the Ministry of Health was cancelled, which prohibited women from working in 450 military professions, and in 2019, the Ministry of Defence issued an order that allowed girls to study in military lyceums. Previously, this was nonsense - you could study in universities, but not in lyceums. The first recruitment was in 2020» (Kateryna Levchenko).

Among the regulatory frameworks, Ukraine also began to implement strategic programs and policies that became important for the implementation of gender policy in the Ukrainian army. For example, on February 24, 2016, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine approved the National Action Plan, developed based on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 «Women, Peace, Security» (National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, 2016). As a result, the involvement of women in military service, in particular from operational planning to peacekeeping missions and reintegration processes, was formally recognised. Immediately after the expiration of the plan, a new one was approved, valid until the end of 2025 (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2020). Also important was the approval of the «State Strategy for Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities of Women and Men for the Period until 2030» (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2022).

The next wave of expanding women's rights in the Armed Forces from a political perspective was the full-scale invasion of Russia. This momentum of change actualised the demand for developing an even more inclusive approach to military legislation. Several amendments to existing regulatory documents were adopted in 2022. Such as the 2022 law on conscripts and reservists (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2022) and the expansion of military positions for women on military registration (Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, 2021).

But, according to the results of the interviews, as of today, even under current laws, the path to professional growth in the military for female servicemen is still not easy. First, it is worth highlighting that the practical implementation of changes to expand women's career growth is not systematic and often has only a symbolic character, that is, it exists in theory but is absent in practice. As Viktoriya Arnautova, Advisor to the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine on Gender Issues for 2020-2022, recalls:

«There were several political things done. We changed a lot of things; we managed to do it. It's still holding up somehow. But we have to understand, the Armed Forces are a very large and powerful organism, which, unfortunately, is very difficult to reform, in particular because there is a lack of political will».

Delving into the complexity of political work on creating career opportunities in the army for female military personnel, gender advisors noted that this is a slow process. According to one of the respondents:

«Ukraine lacks policies, procedures, a responsible unit, and personnel capable of implementing gender policy. Therefore, if some events do occur under the pretext of gender policy, they do not have a systemic nature» (Viktoriya Arnautova).

As Interviewee 4 points out, the gender component is not always a priority in strategic planning. Kateryna Levchenko adds, even despite the existing regulatory changes:

«...in order for something to become systemic, certain models must first be worked out, their effectiveness proven, these effective approaches formed, and then will appear some general methodological recommendations, implementation. The trend from the tactical and operational levels should move to the strategic level. »

Secondly, a huge barrier is the uneven implementation of legislative norms in practice and the declarative nature of legislative initiatives in the political context. According to Olena Suslova, a Ukrainian human rights activist and gender expert:

«The existing regulatory and legal acts are not implemented on time. For example, the part of the National Action Plan 1325, which concerns the equal participation of women and men, especially the infrastructure features that must be in place so that women and men can serve. This is what concerns ammunition, the ability for women and men to perform their basic professional duties on an equal footing. It is not implemented. Especially, there is a very big problem with this in cities».

Moreover, the barrier is also reinforced by the fact that lobbying for national initiatives comes mostly from civil society. As a gender expert notes:

«Although international obligations and standards, such as document 1325, certainly accelerate the adoption of new modern laws, which, in fact, have been happening since 2014. But it is important to understand that the initiative often came not from the state, but from civil society. For example, in 2016, we began to lift the ban on combat positions for women - this became possible thanks to the persistent work of public organisations» (Viktoriya Arnautova).

Analysing political barriers, attention should also be paid to information policy. After all, the adoption of gender equality strategies must necessarily be accompanied by information support for reforms. In the context of Ukraine, effective state communication is often still lacking. This complicates not only the career growth of women, but also their perception in the Armed Forces in general. Therefore, according to Olena Suslova:

«Our information policy is very weak. There is no information strategy that would help those in the rear to be perceived with full respect».

In addition, as the expert says, against the backdrop of a full-scale war, issues of career aspects for female military personnel «are not always heard in the wider society». At the same time, without their implementation, it is impossible to achieve true equality in military service.

Overall, although the political sphere contains several legislative initiatives and changes that only formally give women access to career growth during military service (there are no restrictions on training, obtaining ranks, or working in combat units), their implementation is slow and unsystematic. Based on interview data, it is possible to confirm the hypothesis that there are political obstacles that block actual progress. Often, high-quality ideas are ignored or even blocked by the authorities. Furthermore, a clear systematic strategy and insufficient political will complicate access to leadership positions and inhibit women's career growth. Therefore, despite formal changes, real opportunities for female military personnel in the Armed Forces are absent in practice.

4.2 Institutional barriers

The next barrier that blocks the career growth of women in the Armed Forces is institutional. In the above section, it was clear that Ukrainian legislation has a regulatory framework for the implementation of gender equality, which is slowly being implemented, but equality must be maintained at the internal level, that is, within the army structure. Therefore, this section will focus on the internal processes of the army as an institution.

Institutional obstacles for female military personnel arise due to the internal architecture, multi-level subordination, and personnel policy within the army. In particular, compared to other gender-sensitive armies in the world, the Armed Forces of Ukraine is a relatively new institution that still bears the imprint of the Soviet legacy. According to one of the respondents:

«The Ukrainian army has adopted certain aspects from the Soviet army: it has never considered comfortable, or even ordinary, equal conditions for female servicemen to be an important component. And yet the thinking is not focused on comfort, which obviously blocks career growth» (Viktorina Arnautova).

Among other things, a significant institutional barrier is the lack of resources and tools to support gender policy in the middle of the structure. The Armed Forces do not provide for responsible, sustainable units and specialists who are incorporated into management structures and performing the functions of training, monitoring, and analysis of gender aspects at the internal level, which is one of the important components of professional growth. As the respondents noted, programs that were about to start in 2022 were not institutionalised:

«There are no internal mechanisms. They do not work, they are not controlled, they are not trained personnel precisely at those moments where gender policy is needed. If there was training, then what we introduced was implemented in a spot-by-spot manner; we did not have time to institutionalise anything before the war. In turn, this acts as a catalyst for the fact that senior management, which coordinates the work of personnel processes, is not involved in specialized training and is generally not familiar with the principles of non-discriminatory approaches and, accordingly, makes decisions that block female military personnel from obtaining higher positions in the army» (Viktoriya Arnautova).

However, despite resistance within the institution, small steps towards combating career barriers are being made, and, for example, in 2024, the Central Department for the Protection of the Rights of Servicemen was established in Ukraine (Army Inform, 2024). This institution is currently one of the most anticipated reforms to improve the legal protection of servicemen serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. This initiative was formed due to the request of civil society and servicemen who needed an effective and independent tool for responding to violations of rights. The main tasks of the department are not limited to analysing complaints and internal investigations, they include monitoring compliance with the principles of gender equality. Although the body is a fairly new mechanism, according to information from respondents, it has proven itself as an effective means of combating sexual harassment in the army and gender discrimination based on gender.

Another marker of existing institutional barriers within the army is the limited access of female military personnel to opportunities for advanced training, which will depend on the subjectivity of the leader. According to information from several respondents, even if women do find the opportunity to study at special courses to improve their professional qualifications, they often cannot implement the acquired skills, because in the Armed Forces the factor of insufficient support from the command plays a rather large role, when women are simply not allowed to take career courses due to the lack of a replacement in their current position:

«Women are often not allowed to take officer courses, because then there will be no one to replace a female soldier. The command does not want to lose a professional in the position, because she already knows all the processes in the unit, and her departure will cause discomfort. This is not due to distrust, but because she is a cool specialist, so they let her go, because she will not return to her position» (Kateryna Levchenko).

This statement is also confirmed by Interviewee 4:

«Even though nothing is formally prohibited, in practice, there is always a bias when selecting for training. Women are simply less likely to participate in training that is important for advancement».

In addition, there is currently virtually no opportunity to send women abroad for training on new international weapons systems:

«It was quite indicative for me, the low percentage of women among those whom Ukraine sent to other countries for training on the latest weapons. These were mostly men. » (Olena Suslova).

Therefore, the results of this approach became more visible at the beginning of the full-scale war. In particular, in February 2022, many women were dismissed from military units or removed from performing tasks without proper justification. According to gender experts, they were considered «unnecessary» in combat conditions, namely:

«After the start of the full-scale war, many women were automatically dismissed with the wording: I don't need you here, go with the child. Of course, now the situation has changed, since it became obvious that the Armed Forces of Ukraine cannot function without the participation of women» (Olena Suslova).

Yet, such circumstances stimulated female military personnel to seek alternative solutions for service in the Armed Forces. The most common was recruitment to Territorial Defence units (a separate branch of the Armed Forces of Ukraine), where restrictions on service differed from those in other army units:

«At the beginning of the war, there were cases when women who wanted to join the Armed Forces were simply refused. However, in the Territorial Defence, there were no such restrictions - that is why a significant number of women joined the Armed Forces» (Olena Suslova).

Such orders were made not based on service experience or work efficiency, but due to personal biases of senior management regarding the «appropriate» role of a female soldier. Therefore, we can conclude that personnel decisions are often subjective.

In summary, the hypothesis regarding the existence of institutional barriers for female military personnel in the Armed Forces of Ukraine is clearly supported by practical evidence from respondents. In particular, among the key indicators, the lack of effective internal mechanisms for expanding women's opportunities during service, and the lack of control and training courses for the development of professional skills were identified. All this is accompanied by the fact that, first of all, the military leadership does not know non-

discriminatory approaches, which obviously complicates women's career paths. In addition, the organisational processes themselves serve as a significant obstacle; in most cases, women are not allowed to complete officer courses or study abroad, which actually makes it impossible to advance up the career ladder. Thus, the internal culture of the Ukrainian army does not provide equal opportunities for female military personnel, which hinders professional development.

4.3 Sociocultural barriers

Despite the rather rapid growth of the number of women in the Armed Forces, sociocultural obstacles still exist in the army. These barriers are produced and fuelled by stereotypical ideas about the role of women, which are deeply rooted in society and the institution itself. To fully integrate women into various positions, it is necessary to change cultural perceptions of what a woman should be like during service (Reis & Menezes, 2020).

This situation has gradual but positive dynamics. For the most part, the evolution of consciousness can be traced back to the beginning of active hostilities in 2014. A recent study conducted by the Rating sociological group in cooperation with the SDA of the UK demonstrates that, compared to previous years, changes in assessments of inequality between women and men in Ukraine are gradually becoming less pronounced. If in 2021, 35% of respondents believed that inequality between women and men in the army was widespread, now this indicator has decreased to 22% (Rating Sociological Group, 2023, p. 5).

This statistic is confirmed former gender advisor in the Armed Forces noted:

«Currently, the war shows the whole world that women in the Armed Forces occupy a worthy place, including in combat positions. If previously, women in the army were stereotypically perceived only as accountants, financiers, cooks, nurses, psychologists, today, female soldiers are mostly those who work with drones. And of course, medical personnel remain unchanged» (Viktoriya Arnautova).

Nevertheless, the Rating study illustrates that more than 50% of respondents believe that women shouldn't participate in combat missions, since they are seen as more effective in support rather than executors (Rating Sociological Group, 2023, p. 7). Faced with these discriminatory beliefs, women are forced to accept the role of «technical personnel» limited to non-combat tasks. Olena Suslova adds that despite everything:

«Now, women are increasingly operating UAV drones. Although we see how, over time, new «stereotypical» positions for women appear, to which they are more often assigned, in general, there is a shift, which means an increase in trust in female soldiers. However, there is still a situation where women are not assigned to command and deputy positions».

This trend has been present since professional growth is initially considered an option for military men, while women are required to work several times more, so that the leadership begins to perceive and notice them.

According to statistics, the attitude to the argument that male military personnel are better leaders than women from other military personnel of various ranks and positions is only 24% (Rating Sociological Group, 2023, p. 6). The argumentation of this stereotype is supported by statements that serving in the Armed Forces is a purely male affair and there is a need for physical and psychological stability, strength, and less emotionality, which is «typical» for women. Interviewee 4 adds that there is also a common stereotype that «women cannot withstand combat conditions». Among other things, the perception of women in the army is still influenced by the understanding of the role of motherhood and the place of women in the family. Thus, more than 40% of the study participants support the thesis that the main task of women is to create a family and give birth to children, and separately, respondents noted that in families where there is a female military personnel member, there will be much more problems than in families with women who obtain regular professions (Rating Sociological Group, 2023, p. 5).

Analysing discrimination based on stereotypes, it is also worth mentioning positive discrimination. This category is common among male military personnel. According to the Government Commissioner for Gender Equality Policy:

«Men see this as their purpose. They seek to protect women in army. They are sure that in this way, they are trying to protect female from physical and moral stress, which can affect their health or psychological balance. From their perspective, this is a manifestation of care. We call it positive sexism» (Kateryna Levchenko).

Although this type of discrimination is aimed at making the service of female military personnel more comfortable, such «good intentions» can increase the risks of additional stereotypes, within which female military personnel «cannot do without the help of men». This, in turn, will lead to the levelling of women's experience and achievements as insignificant, undeserved.

Stereotypes also affect wages, although indirectly. Thus, in the army structure, there is a general salary, which will depend on years of service and official military rank (Army Info, 2025). And since men had more opportunities to begin military education from the beginning, they will receive higher salaries.

Thus, it can be confirmed that the influence of sociocultural barriers is present in the professional growth of women in the Ukrainian army. It is obvious that deep-rooted stereotypes about the role of women in the army were formed a long time ago and are still noticeable in personnel decisions by the leadership. An example of cultural amnesia is clearly visible because, despite combat experience, women can often not be considered full-fledged participants in military service. All this, in turn, is sometimes even unconsciously (positive sexism) accompanied by established traditional roles in families and the actual difficulty of combining household chores with service.

4.4. Individual (personal) barriers

Ukrainian context still faces barriers that are often not regulated by directives or formal policies, although, on the contrary, are unexpectedly formed or promoted by female military personnel in the army themselves. Their existence often depends on personal beliefs, surroundings, internal psychological state, and personal circumstances.

According to Interviewee 4, one of the most common internal barriers is the low level of self-esteem of female military personnel:

«Women often underestimate their capabilities or do not believe that they can compete with men in leadership positions in the Armed Forces, which creates additional pressure and forces them to abandon ambitious plans».

Government Commissioner for Gender Policy in Ukraine, Kateryna Levchenko, claims that this manifests itself as follows:

«We have two opposite tendencies. When men have overestimated self-esteem, and women have underestimated self-esteem. And they do not equalise in any way. Therefore, when women are offered a professional promotion, they often refuse - they say, I am not yet mature or unworthy. And a man with lesser qualities will go there without a doubt. These are internal barriers that are very difficult to overcome».

In addition to these aspects, personal barriers also include the fact that military women in the Armed Forces are forced to devote time to family responsibilities despite their heavy workload. Subsequently, according to Kateryna Levchenko, currently among the «popular» individual barriers is the inability to leave a child for the duration of their studies (which is an important step for obtaining a promotion) or service due to lack of support, in particular:

«There is no one to leave family affairs to, or the husband is against it. The problem is not even that the quality of education is poor, but that the woman simply has nowhere to put the child, or she does not receive support at home».

The situation is also common in families where both parents are in military service:

«The lack of kindergartens in military areas. A female military personnel member cannot physically leave her child under supervision during her service, especially if it is a 24-hour duty or a combat mission. In practice, there are no solutions for caring for the child» (Kateryna Levchenko).

Furthermore, gender experts also emphasized that professional self-blocking often occurs due to tension arising from the fear of not meeting the expectations of society, according to which a woman in the army must constantly demonstrate her strength and unemotionality, which provokes the formation of a personal conflict within, which serves as a barrier to military service. Moreover, according to gender advisors, female military personnel believe that they have to work twice as hard to achieve equal treatment from management. Thus, female military personnel must feel that they have to earn respect and career prospects. Such conditions create additional stress that women choose not to face.

A separate problem is the fear of female military personnel to report cases of sexual violence, as this may harm their career advancement. What is more, despite the gradual introduction of punishment mechanisms, gender experts stress that:

«Sexual harassment and other discriminatory situations still have negative tendencies in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, as they are afraid of losing their reputation» (Olena Suslova).

Consequently, solving such a problem is very complicated, in particular, as the former gender advisor of the Armed Forces of Ukraine states:

«I was investigating a case in Chernihiv and just then we dismissed a military officer for the first time for sexual harassment. But it was hard to register that he was dismissed for this» (Viktorina Arnautova).

Thus, the desire of military women to resolve this issue on their own or to remain silent for fear of losing trust and a good career will not only be ineffective but may also harm the women themselves.

Considering the above, the hypothesis about the presence of personal barriers to women's career advancement is confirmed. This is because female soldiers have certain personal challenges, such as the difficulties of combining work and military service, the fear of women regarding responsibility in responsible positions and higher ranks, as well as the fear of sexual

harassment, which are widespread. In addition, there are factors of insecurity and low self-esteem, which demotivate and complicate the career growth of female soldiers.

4.5 Physical conditions and environmental barriers

Moving on to the last category of barriers that complicate the career growth process for women in the Armed Forces, it should be underscored that it has several explanations. First, physical conditions and environmental factors are directly correlated with funding. The Ukrainian army had problems with transparency and insufficient accountability of financial resources within the structure even before the start of hostilities in 2014, but the war only exacerbated these factors. For example, the government's National Agency for Corruption Prevention conducted a comprehensive study of corruption risks in the Armed Forces in 2024. It was found that the centralised procurement process, which is carried out to improve physical conditions in the army, is fraught with many corruption risks (National Agency on Corruption Prevention, 2024). This clearly has an impact on transparency, efficiency, development, and trust in the Armed Forces. In addition, according to Olena Suslova:

«State funding for projects related to supporting women in the Armed Forces is minimal, and for a long time it was zero».

Therefore, most initiatives are developed and implemented in partnership with international organisations. However, this has its risks because projects are usually short-term in nature. They are limited in time, budget, or can be unexpectedly curtailed due to changes in political priorities. Separately, experts emphasised:

«In Western society, such initiatives are often perceived not as financial support for the implementation of gender policy in the army, but as support for militarisation — even when we are talking about the rights and opportunities of female servicemen» (Viktoriya Arnautova).

In such cases, there is a need to create all possible conditions for self-sufficiency, without relying on international support. Nevertheless, this process is currently complicated because, according to the former advisor to the Armed Forces on gender issues, Viktoriya Arnautova,

before the full-scale invasion, the issue of gender budgeting in the army was only beginning to gain popularity. Accordingly, the scale of the institution, the ongoing war, and the lack of political will among the army leadership caused additional challenges to reform. As a result, the introduction of gender criteria into the budget processes was postponed due to resistance within the structure. Hence, the low level of financial support caused the process of self-financing, experts note. Consequently, the costs are covered by the personal funds of the military, who seek to provide comfortable and safe conditions in their service on their own.

Among the financing that affect the proper infrastructure, the physical environment in which women serve in the Armed Forces of Ukraine plays a particularly important role. Based on the results of the interviews, this aspect is largely not adapted to the needs of female military personnel. As one of the respondents mentioned:

«It is incredibly terrible. It is terrible for the military personnel who are in the rear and for those who are on the frontline» (Kateryna Levchenko).

According to the information received during the focus groups, it is observed that although there is minimal improvement in the rear, in the combat zone, the needs of not only women, but also men are not considered (Rating Sociological Group, 2023, p. 10). This is an indicator not only of obstacles to professional growth, but also of basic, comfortable service. Thus, ignoring basic physiological needs, such as the lack of women's showers and toilets, not providing separate sleeping quarters, is a signal of insensitivity and discriminatory indifference, which exhausts female soldiers physically and psychologically, and also effectively marginalises them on the path to career advancement.

The issue of equipment requires special attention. In particular, locally produced helmets and bulletproof vests were first announced only in 2023. The fact that such an option appeared only in recent years indicates a long-term institutional insensitivity to the basic needs of female servicemen. However, even as of 2025: «within the framework of all purchases for such number

of women who are currently serving in the army, it is not possible to do this. An order is needed», said the current gender advisor of the Armed Forces, Oksana Grygoryeva, during the interview for a Ukrainian publication. (Hromadske, 2025).

Supplementing the previous view, it should be emphasised that the women's military uniform, adapted to the shape of the female body, until 2024 also served as a latent barrier to the career growth of women in the army. Basically, there were unsuitable clothing, such as men's trousers, shoes or underwear and thermal underwear that did not consider the anatomical features of women, forcing the military to spend efforts and as noted, financial resources on distraction from key duties, searching for alternatives and independently modifying military uniforms instead of focusing on combat missions. According to Kateryna Levchenko:

«To date, only the summer uniform for women has been presented. For now, I am waiting for the winter one».

This problem is explained by Oksana Grygoryeva, accenting that the uniform was absent because women had not served in the army for a long time. (Hromadske, 2025). Now, a gradual transformation of physical conditions is being traced due to the visibility of women as a large group in the Ukrainian army and the change of «Soviet commanders» to Ukrainian ones.

Still, despite positive changes in the issue of uniforms, discomfort caused by poor physical conditions and environmental factors for women in the Armed Forces is not reduced to a question of inconvenient tailoring. There are also problems with infrastructure and sanitary conditions, which as a barrier have a direct impact on the effectiveness of combat missions and the professional growth prospects of women in the army structure (Thapa, 2024). Therefore, the absence of women's toilets and shower rooms for women, the lack of hygiene products, all of this affects the development of infections, chronic diseases, and disruption of processes in the female body. In one of the interviews for the NV media (2022), respondents mention that focusing on finding an opportunity to take a shower or go to the toilet distracts from the

performance of combat duties. Such circumstances make it extremely difficult to continue service, not to mention the ambitions to occupy managerial or specialised positions (NV, 2022).

Finally, it is worth mentioning the last factor that limits professional growth - this is the aspect of physical endurance. According to Advisor to the Commander of the Land Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the level of physical fitness of a female soldier is often a barrier to performing combat duties and, accordingly, affects the decision to advance in rank (NV, 2022). Interestingly, the advisor notes that physical difficulties are a more significant obstacle compared to a woman's internal motivation. However, as Interviewee 4 stated:

«There have been selective attempts to introduce an individual approach, taking into account physiological differences, but this has not caught on».

Oksana Grygoryeva, confirming Cohn's theory (2000), mentions that in countries with developed gender equality, armies around the world have the same physical loads during military service, as this sets equal conditions for progress and development (NV, 2022). However, even if we turn to sports training in regular Ukrainian schools, it will be clear that the gap in loads is established by gender (NV, 2022). Therefore, creating a unified principle will stimulate equality of opportunities and the ability of female soldiers to participate in complex combat operations, to more easily receive career advancement and access to management positions.

In conclusion, the hypothesis regarding the presence of physical difficulties and other external factors in the career growth of women can be confirmed. In some interviews, it was made that even talking about normal conditions during the service of women in the Armed Forces in those conditions is a big challenge. Thus, the longtime of issuing summer military uniforms and equipment is an obstacle that directly correlates with the effectiveness of the work of female soldiers. The requirement of a high level of physical fitness also improves career

growth, as the army, and, in particular, combat and leadership positions, require physically strong military personnel.

4.6 Conclusion

This section is devoted to the examination of career obstacles that women in the Armed Forces of Ukraine face during military service. The main attention was dedicated to the analysis and testing of the hypotheses regarding 5 types of barriers that complicate access to promotion in ranks, access to combat positions, and the decision-making process, among them: political, institutional, sociocultural, individual, and physical. They were identified and grouped during the literature review. Also, hypotheses were adapted to the Ukrainian context thanks to the information that was received from the gender experts and advisors during semi-structured expert interviews, providing a deeper understanding of real problems that would not be possible to obtain from open sources.

Thus, one of the most powerful constraining factors for the professional development of women in the military is political obstacles. As has been shown in many international studies, the low level of implementation of provisions in practical terms signals stagnation in the process of ensuring equal access of women to positions (Carreiras, 2006; Iskra, 2007; Duncanson and Rachel Woodward, 2015; King and Dinitto, 2019). Scientists argue that the «brass ceiling» cannot be destroyed without active political support from the authorities (Iskra, 2007). In other words, if the leadership at the state level does not have the political will and motivation to transform the current situation, the barriers will be static. The Ukrainian experience during the study confirmed the above narratives, as it was clear that even the gradual integration of principles for expanding career opportunities for women, the implementation itself is rather spotty, unsystematic, inconsistent, and accompanied by the absence of permanent development strategies. Additionally, even in the presence of an anti-discrimination initiative, there is no

transformation in practice. More importantly, the study adds novelty to Iskra's insights by demonstrating that the «brass ceiling» theory is not only a structural phenomenon, but also a dynamic one – as the political context in the country, in particular the conduct of a full-scale war, correspondingly influences the practical implementation of provisions on women's empowerment. As respondents argued, gender policy in the army is currently on the periphery of attention due to military operations due to the complicated security situation. However, despite the importance of this barrier, changes in the political paradigm alone are not a sufficient condition for combating discrimination (Carreiras, 2006).

Therefore, the next barrier is the institutional factor. Literature analysis has shown that often it is organisational support within the army that is crucial for women's equal participation in military service (Cotter et al., 2001; Carreiras, 2006; Duncanson and Woodward, 2015; Cachón, 2018). In particular, it is quite popular that even in countries with formally developed opportunities for women in the army, the military still faces obstacles characterised as non-transparent personnel practices or traditional representations of the Armed Forces within (Cotter et al., 2001). Moreover, internal resistance from the leadership is important, which artificially creates obstacles that are very difficult to overcome (Cachón, 2018). Research about the Ukrainian context signals the same problem, demonstrating that the army also contains internal norms and patterns that support the discriminatory status quo, thereby limiting the professional development of women. Besides, the study expands on the information obtained from the literature and explains how decisions by senior military leadership regulate women's professional development. Thus, the interview results confirmed that in the field, actual access to combat positions, training programs, or promotions in military rank is correlated with the reluctance of the command to implement these changes for fear of «losing» a female soldier in a convenient position for management.

The third set of barriers that prevent women from achieving professional development in the military are sociocultural obstacles. They are difficult to eradicate, since the initial perception of the military environment in society is conservative and masculine (Segal, 1995; Carreiras, 2006; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Silva, 2008; Duncanson & Woodward, 2015; King & Dinitto, 2019). All authors unanimously note that society does not correlate the role of women with the traditional idea of military service. This hypothesis was also confirmed in the Ukrainian study. Furthermore, it was possible to reveal what is overlooked in the literature. In particular, the Armed Forces currently have a fairly widespread aspect of “positive sexism”, that is, masking restrictions under the pretext of caring. Among other things, scholars have highlighted that due to stereotypical thinking, women were mostly given access to support roles, such as medicine or cooking (Carreiras, 2006). This was also confirmed in this study, while the Ukrainian army has somewhat adapted to modernity and is creating accessible «stereotypically female» positions in combat units, such as UAV system leaders.

The fourth category is individual barriers that arise internally in female soldiers themselves during their service. The scientific literature highlights a fairly wide range of psychological and identity aspects that influence the desire for career growth. The authors (Cachón, 2018; Cohn, 2000; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Swanson & Tokar, 1991) focus on factors such as motivation, self-esteem, fear, the need to prove their effectiveness, and compliance with military characteristics. In fact, in the Ukrainian context, female soldiers similarly face problems of self-identification, doubts about their own abilities, and the inability to accept a higher position due to the complexity of combining the roles of mother and soldier. This, in turn, can lead to burnout, as women suffering from «imposter syndrome» not only experience psychological stress, but also physical exhaustion, as they are forced to work longer hours due to the prove-it again bias (Crawford, 2020). However, more importantly, another factor was identified that falls under the category of individual barriers and is not analysed in international

studies focused on NATO and other armies – the fear of sexual violence and harassment. In particular, in the Ukrainian context, this problem is widespread on the front lines, where there are no mechanisms for protecting and supporting victims.

The last barrier was physical conditions and environmental factors. The research thesis demonstrated that, unlike international studies, the Ukrainian context is characterised by a catastrophically low level of data, which not only limits women professionally but also make it impossible to comfortably complete military service. Accordingly, if (Segal, 1995; Carreiras, 2006; Duncanson & Woodward, 2016) determined that sometimes in armies, there are problems that the working military environment is mostly designed for men, and women, in turn, try to adapt, or physical standards ignore the physiology and strength of women. Then, in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, there are problems not only with infrastructural support, but there are terrible hygiene conditions, a lack of special equipment, and, currently, women's military winter uniforms. Therefore, when entering combat positions, women must independently cover what the state should provide. Thus, this barrier is one of the greatest dangers for female soldiers.

In summary, the study illustrated that the obstacles faced by female soldiers in the Armed Forces are the result of a complex interaction of all 5 factors. That is why, to overcome these problems, it is necessary to introduce a systemic approach to work at all levels (Carreiras, 2006; Iskra, 2007; Silva, 2008). The interviews proved that there is an urgent need to develop a state gender policy, transform the Armed Forces of Ukraine organizationally and infrastructurally, support the personal development of women, and also change public perception by conducting high-quality training, information campaigns, and implementing monitoring and protection. Until then, career opportunities for women in the Armed Forces will be at a low level. As of today, the building of a stable and unhindered career path for most women in the Ukrainian army is close to zero.

However, by making conclusion, it is also necessary to underscore an extremely important aspect that was revealed during the interviews and the literature review. As of today, there are not many armies in the world that are engaged in active combat operations every day, but the Ukrainian Armed Forces are one of the few. It partly explains the current situation with the low level of ensuring the professional growth of women in the Armed Forces. Military actions by Russia definitely have a contradictory impact on the career development of female military personnel. According to many studies, warfare and militarisation often reverse achievements in the field of gender equality (Cockburn, 2013). Although during the military actions in Ukraine, there is a gradual increase in the presence of women in the army, the war serves as a point of setback for gender policy which has only just begun to develop, within the structure itself. Experts claim that the planned reform, which was supposed to begin after the change of power in 2014, was paralysed due to military actions and the occupation of territories, as all resources and attention were focused on the urgent needs of defence capability. In particular, this is due to the necessary restructuring of the budget and other resources that were originally earmarked for gender programs (Elveren & Moghadam, 2022). Moreover, gender advisors emphasised that mentoring and training programs for military personnel were stopped, and the senior military leadership was focused on operational and security tasks. Separately, the war served as a drain on resources through large-scale physical, financial and psychological loads. Such elements served as a critical moment for the supply of logistical support, which significantly complicated the situation of women in the Armed Forces. Consequently, the political instability caused by the current state of hostilities illustrates how, in times of crisis, the gender sensitivity of structures recedes into the background, which causes long-term negative results.

Chapter 5. Conclusions

This MA thesis managed to prove that the obstacles that hinder the access of female military personnel to career growth in the Armed Forces of Ukraine are systemic. It explores the interconnected structure of types of restrictions that obstruct the full integration of women into military service. These types of obstacles were identified and classified based on a literature review. Among them political, institutional, sociocultural, individual, and physical. Their presence was empirically verified through expert interviews.

Precisely this approach made it possible to demonstrate that despite to the declared commitment to gender equality in the Ukrainian army, the actual situation indicates a low level of its implementation. This is primarily evident in the conditions of the eleven-year war of the Russian Federation, when there is a critical need to increase the representation of women at all levels and in all positions of the military structure, but this is not supported by a real systemic transformation. Among them, the Ukrainian context is currently an example of a phenomenon that is called visible inclusion (Brownson, 2014; Carreiras, 2006). The idea is on the number of women in the military has positive dynamics but does not provide a real opportunity to participate in strategic planning and decision-making, career promotions, and access to combat positions and training programs. In other words, the quantity, as well as inclusion, does not guarantee both quality and full integration of women.

As in most examples of international research (Carreiras, 2006; Silva, 2008; Duncanson & Woodward, 2015), in Ukraine, despite serving, women remain excluded from military leadership. Therefore, the concept of the «Glass Ceiling» (Cotter et al., 2001) or «Brass Ceiling» (Iskra, 2007) is still relevant, even takes on broader forms. In the Armed Forces, this is reflected through hidden mechanisms of marginalisation and prejudice against women's command or combat potential. Therefore, even in conditions of critical need for development,

the internal system continues to support established patterns of restriction, discrimination, and perception of women as secondary military personnel.

This is highlighted by scholars who associate the army with the dominant masculinity that shapes the military organisation (Duncanson & Woodward, 2015). Still, fuelled by ingrained stereotypes, the characteristics of the military are built on an understanding of strength, endurance, courage, bravery, and resilience, which excludes the «traditional feminine» features. Thus, even in cases where female military personnel participate in combat operations on an equal footing with men, they remain exceptions, and according to the concept of cultural amnesia, they are at risk of being forgotten and ignored when promoted (Segal, 1995). This imbalance has been confirmed by Ukrainian gender experts and advisors, and available statistical data: there is only one woman with the rank of general for over 880.000 military personnel in the Armed Forces. (Office of the President of Ukraine, 2024).

Given the problems and gaps in the policy of equal career opportunities in the army that were identified during the research, in particular during interviews with experts in gender policy, the Armed Forces of Ukraine require comprehensive and systemic changes. Below are *key recommendations* that can facilitate effective transformations.

First, gender policy should take an important place on the agenda not only among gender experts in academic circles, but also at the state level. This aspect should be supported by systematic changes, strategies, and strong political will. It is necessary to implement legislative changes, ensuring transparent mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating performance. Moreover, these legislative initiatives should be also sensitive to hidden forms of discrimination in order to effectively address the causes of discrimination. (Fineman, 2020). It is also recommended to fully integrate career opportunities into annual strategic planning systematically.

Secondly, changes should be present at the level of the Armed Forces itself. It would be quite relevant to establish a gender advisor in each military unit for more effective monitoring. Such changes would be important in the context of combating sexual violence, which serves as a critical barrier to women's professional growth. It is important to institutionalise protection mechanisms, in particular, safe filing of complaints against discrimination and misogyny, as well as mentoring and coaching from senior military personnel. Such elements will help improve women's access to the necessary training to improve their skills, to combat their psychological obstacles (low self-esteem, fear, etc.).

Thirdly, experts also emphasised that since stereotypical thinking still serves as a critical barrier in the Ukrainian army, systematic information campaigns should be introduced. It will normalise the presence of women not only in stereotypically female positions, but also in senior leadership and combat positions in the eyes of society. A crucial recommendation is also the introduction of systematic gender sensitivity training among all military personnel, and not just gender advisors themselves.

Finally, one of the most vital recommendations is to ensure comfortable and accessible physical conditions of service for women, it concerns uniforms, shoes, equipment and access to high-quality sanitary and hygienic conditions not only in the rear, but also in front-line positions.

Therefore, all the barriers that were identified form several *priority changes for further national scientific research*. This study emphasises the need to consider the military context, as this radically changes previous approaches to implementing reforms regarding the integration of women into combat and leadership positions during service. Separately, this thesis highlights the importance of conducting empirical research with military women themselves, who are holding different positions. It is significant to use various interdisciplinary approaches, for

example, gender and military studies, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods. Among other things, comparative research between years will also be relevant for determining the transformation or overcoming of barriers. All these aspects will help to form a framework of academic Ukrainian research, which are currently critically limited.

For the *international dimension*, the identification of 5 types of barriers has a separate analytical weight. First, despite growing relevance of gender studies in politics, a gender perspective is often ignored in mainstream conflict analysis. Thus, the Ukrainian experience stimulates a review of standardised international approaches to integrating gender policy in the army. After all, unlike the armies of NATO countries, which implemented their gender policy in peacetime and conditions of internal stability, the Armed Forces are an institution that was built against the backdrop of the Soviet legacy and is changing under the influence of a long war (Nalyvaiko, 2021; Martsenyuk, 2023). In addition, this thesis can serve as a tool for creating more effective recommendations from international partners and conducting comparative analyses to study obstacles in military institutions in conditions of conflict, war, or armies that have features of the post-Soviet model.

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Appendix 1 – Literature-based classification of barriers to women's military personnel in armies.

Author, year	Barrier	Short description	Empirical evidence
Swanson & Tokar, 1991	Social/interpersonal factors	Family responsibilities, limited support from colleagues.	Lack of time for family, lack of support from partner, family. Expectation of traditional roles.
	Attitudinal factors	Low self-confidence, and career indecision. Concerns about balancing work and family.	Career restriction occurs due to low self-esteem, doubt about abilities, uncertainty about career choice.
	Interactional factors	Discrimination and gender biases in hiring. Limited career advancement opportunities.	Career restriction also occurs due to lack of experience, discrimination by sex or age.
Segal, 1995	Military factors	Restrictions on women in combat roles	Women during WWII in the UK were allowed to load but not fire anti-aircraft weapons to maintain the label of non-combatants.
	Social factors	Family roles, delayed marriage, childcaring	Later age at first marriage and childbirth increased women's ability to serve.
	Cultural factors	Gender stereotypes reinforcing traditional family roles.	Women are excluded from combat due to the association of femininity with caregiving and masculinity with warfare.
Cohn, 2000	Cultural factors	Masculinity, women seen as physically weaker.	Men formulate the resistance of gender equality through the rhetoric of honest game: if women do not have the same physical standards, they are less worth.
	Social factors	Male soldiers resist gender integration.	The resistance of the female presence is increased in the conditions of collective perception of threat of male identity.
	Institutional factors	Different fitness standards for men and women, resistance to policy changes.	Lack of institutional mechanisms to overcome resistance. There are no internal mechanisms to combat humiliation, isolation or discrediting women based on dishonest superiority.
	Psychological factors	Women feel pressure to prove themselves, fear of reinforcing negative stereotypes.	Threat of loss of status: women identify their value with physical force.

Cotter et al., 2001	Structural factors	Access to leadership roles, unequal promotion opportunities.	Women face a sharp decrease in the likelihood of advancement to the highest positions, even when they have the same experience and education as men.
	Cultural factors	Gender norms favour male leadership. Bias against women in top positions.	Gender norms and expectations cause a glass ceiling.
	Institutional factors	Lack of mentorship for women. Disparities in pay and job assignments.	Work structures and politicians do not always contribute to equality: selection processes, informal networks, lack of mentoring for women limit advancement.
	Social factors	Work-life balance challenges, family responsibilities.	The social environment enhances barriers to leadership.
Carreiras, 2006	Political factors	Policies and governance limit gender integration. Civil-military relations shape women`s roles.	Liberal government ideology and the level of political participation of women in general correlate with a higher level of female integration in the army.
	Cultural factors	Traditional gender norms, masculinity.	Military masculinity limits the acceptance of women even after formal integration.
	Economic factors	Low female labour participation reduces military entry. Economic downturns impact recruitment.	In countries with higher employment, military integration is deeper. The economic need stimulates the recruitment of women.
	Institutional factors	Leadership and training prioritise men. Career growth is limited for women.	Type of military organisation (professional vs. conscription) influences the level of integration: in armies with low conscription rates, the level of female recruitment is higher.
	Historical factors	Lack of female presence in past conflicts. Resistance to changing traditional structures.	Women`s history in wars in states influences current policy – that is, previous historical experience creates a base or obstacle to integration.
	International factors	Slow adoption of global gender norms. NATO policies vary across member states.	Poland has adapted gender inclusion after joining NATO.
Iskra, 2007	Structural factors	Leadership, career progression.	Women were excluded from combat roles that blocked career growth.
	Cultural factors	Masculinity, women face gendered expectations.	Women constantly felt social isolation, among many men.

	Social factors	Work-family conflicts, women struggle with support networks.	Women had to prove their ability to combine their motherhood and overcome the stigma of «unfitness».
	Policy factors	Slow integration into combat roles. Resistance to gender-inclusive policies.	Until the 1990s there were formal legislative restrictions that did not allow women to serve in the fighting roles
Eagly & Carli, 2007	Cultural factors	Gender biases favour male leadership. Women face the «double bind» dilemma.	Gender stereotypes associate leadership with male (agentic) features - dominance, perseverance. Women are associated with - compassion, softness that does not consider the idea of «leadership behaviour»
	Social factors	Women struggle with work-life balance, social norms.	Less access to informal networks and less social capital because of their workload. Examples include dinner on Hooters that exclude women.
	Institutional factors	Promotion pathways favour men. Lack of female mentors in top positions.	Up-or-out career models punish women for temporary breaks due to motherhood.
	Psychological factors	Women must prove themselves repeatedly. Stereotypes shape leadership expectations.	Women avoid self -assignment because it is a seizure with the cultural expectations of modesty.
Silva, 2008	Cultural factors	Masculinity, femininity seen as a weakness.	Women feel that they have to «rethink» their femininity to be perceived seriously
	Social factors	Gender stereotypes, societal norms.	Women face social expectations and constant assessment
	Institutional factors	Leadership favours men. Fitness standards reinforce gaps.	Despite the official «gender-neutral» rhetoric ROTC, the institutional structure reproduces the gender hierarchy.
	Identity factors	Balancing femininity is hard, double standards.	Women build their identity around the tension between femininity and military
Brownson, 2014	Physical factors	Physical inequality between men and women, including differences in endurance and strength. Challenges in meeting physical standards and training requirements due to physiological differences.	Comparison of physical capabilities of women with men. Differentiated physical standards are perceived as discreditable because men consider women lenient.

	Professional factors	Women often avoid male dominated roles due to stigma. Underrepresentation of women in leadership roles.	Women face limited access to reputable specialities. Even if officially admitted, there is a gatekeeping system.
	Cultural factors	Gender stereotypes, influence of societal expectations and cultural norms.	Women are forced to prove their legitimacy as a part of community due to the stereotypes.
	Sexual and relational factors	Sexual harassment and discrimination – the impact of sexual stereotypes.	The participation of women in a mixed team is accompanied by rumours about intimate relationships.
Duncanson & Woodward, 2015	Cultural factors	Masculinity, gender norms.	Women can be accepted to the army but remain «others» because of deep cultural ideas
	Institutional factors	Leadership favours traditional male hierarchies, limited career progression for women.	Even with the implementation of gender maintenance strategies (UNSCR 1325), military institutions often reproduce a gender hierarchy.
	Social factors	Public perception, stereotypes.	The social settings as the ideal of the «heroic man» are obstacles to equal recognition of women in military groups
	Policy factors	Gender mainstreaming efforts face resistance. Military structures slow to adapt.	Policies often lose transformation potential through resistance to quotas/formalities or «depoliticization» of gender.
Fly, 2017	Physical factors	Higher injury rates. Weaker physical capacity.	Women have to prove that they can trough participation in exercise.
	Psychological and social factors	Gender stereotypes, fear of discrimination	The fear of discrimination and stigmatization by colleagues has become a constant source of stress, affecting mental health.
	Cultural factors	Masculinity	Women are respected only after confirming the «exclusive force» that supports gender stereotypes.
	Institutional factors	Unequal standards between men and women. Limited access to leadership roles.	Restricted access to women's hygienic agents, unequal attitude to «lost time» (comparison with pregnancy and alcoholism) and lack of mechanisms for maintaining mental health.
Cachón, 2018	Personal factors	Family responsibility, training and development, internal aspects	Low self-esteem, lack of competitiveness among women and fear of failure were empirically linked to limited access to leadership. Marital status and number of children influence career outcomes.

	Organisational factors	Leadership, organisational culture, organisational support, contact and networks	Organisational structures and lack of inclusive culture pose main obstacles.
	Social factors	Gender stereotypes, public policies and reconciliation of work and personal/family life	Lack of inclusive leadership styles and poor support harm women`s career progression.
King & DiNitto, 2019	Policy factors	Historical policies restricting women`s participation in military roles. Access to combat and leadership positions.	Policies restricted women`s participation in combat roles and limited their ability to have children. Executive Order 10240 authorised the discharge of pregnant servicewomen.
	Cultural factors	Predominant societal perceptions of women`s roles. Unequal distribution of family responsibilities between men and women.	During the Korean War the recruitment of women failed through a popular cultural that promoted the ideal of the housewife.
	Institutional factors	Gender stereotypes, expectations of traditional family roles for women, challenges in balancing military service and motherhood.	The service operated as separate institutions with their own rules: by the 1970s, military treated marriage and motherhood differently.

Appendix 2 – List of interviews.

- **12 May 2025:** Kateryna Levchenko, Ukrainian Government Commissioner for Gender Equality Policy and a member of the Council of Europe’s Gender Equality Commission (conducted via Zoom)
- **15 May 2025:** Viktoriya Arnautova, Advisor to the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine on Gender Issues 2020-2022 (conducted via Zoom)
- **19 May 2025:** Olena Suslova, Human rights and gender activist and researcher, chairwoman of the Board of the Information and Advisory Women's Centre (conducted via Zoom)
- **20 May 2025:** Interviewee 4, A major in the Ukrainian Armed Forces serving as a gender advisor in cooperation with NATO (conducted via Zoom)