

Women's Access to Professional Military Education: Gender Equality Implementation in the Armed Forces of Ukraine

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Establishing the policy of equal rights and opportunities in the military sector requires women to have better access to professional military education (PME); it also means developing PME to incorporate awareness of gender issues in the armed forces. Ukraine's implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, "Women, Peace, and Security," provides women and men equal access to educational institutions at all levels in the security and defense sector and the inclusion of a gender component in education. Solving the issue of protecting military personnel from sexual harassment is another step on the path to creating a professional army. Education is an important factor as well, as it can raise the awareness in both men and women soldiers of the importance of gender equality and improve their ability to recognize sexual harassment, counteract it, and deal with its consequences. This study addresses the intersection of two sectors: education and the military. It is based on the results of a representative public opinion survey on women's access to military education, an anonymous online survey, and secondary data analysis. It underlines the importance of a gender-sensitive approach to women's access to PME, which itself plays an important role in the implementation of gender equality in the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU), helping to break down stereotypes and biases that have historically limited women's roles in the military.

Keywords: Russo-Ukrainian War; professional military education (PME); gender equality; gender sensitivity; education; Ukraine; Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU)

Introduction

Since the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2014, the number of women working in the security and defense sector has grown significantly, and increasing women's access to the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) has become part of the current political agenda (Hrytsenko 2022; Martsenyuk 2023a). Several dynamics are driving these developments: a “top-down” approach regarding the regulation of gender equality via policies on the official level and a “bottom-up” approach driven by NGOs, grassroots activism, and women themselves (Martsenyuk 2023a). Throughout the war, women have participated in military and non-military forms of resistance (Bros 2024; Phillips and Martsenyuk 2023), including supporting the armed forces through gendered activities, such as weaving camouflage nets that help to conceal military equipment in the field (Mathers 2024). There is also a historical legacy of women's participation in the military resistance. For example, women participated in the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, which fought for an independent Ukrainian state during the 1940s and 1950s, and stories about these and other women who contributed to Ukraine's military history have become popular in gender-focused historical narratives (Kis 2012).

Over the past decade, a range of positive changes within the security and defense sector have taken place that are improving the working conditions and opportunities for women in the AFU, while public perception of women defenders is also changing for the better. A major, long-term collaborative sociological research program and advocacy campaign focusing on gender equality in the AFU, Invisible Battalion,¹ which began in 2015, has played an important role in providing evidence for policy changes, advocating for equal rights and opportunities for women in the military, raising public awareness of women defenders, and providing practical support for Ukraine's women veterans (Martysenyuk et al. 2015; Invisible Battalion 5.0 2023). The author of this article is one of the researchers leading this project and the empirical material that forms the basis of the article draws on some of the work done for Invisible Battalion. But even while the number of Ukrainian servicewomen continues to grow and many indicators of gender equality are improving, Ukraine's women defenders face a long

1. For more information, see the Invisible Battalion project website: <https://invisiblebattalion.org/en/home-2>.

battle in their fight for equal treatment (Darden 2023). The process of implementing gender equality in the Ukrainian Armed Forces is intricate and multifaceted. This article argues that professional military education (PME) plays a crucial role, by ensuring women have equal access to PME and incorporating gender perspectives into the PME curriculum. Access to PME can boost women's confidence and competence, enabling them to excel in their military careers and challenge gender discrimination (Erwin et al 2025). By providing women with the same educational opportunities as men, the Armed Forces can demonstrate its commitment to gender equality. Both the presence of women in PME alongside their male colleagues and a curriculum that is informed by gender perspectives (can contribute to breaking down stereotypes and biases that have historically limited women's roles in the military (Brown 2021). Moreover, by raising the educational standards of women soldiers and improving the gender awareness of both men and women soldiers, PME can improve the operational effectiveness of the Armed Forces and enable civil-military relations to develop in a more harmonious direction (Libel 2021). However, while the gendered dimension of PME is acknowledged by research and policy communities in other parts of the world, this aspect of women's integration into the Ukrainian military is rather ignored by policymakers and scholars.

A few examples can help to illustrate the polarization of the situation relating to women's access to PME in Ukraine. In 2018, Lieutenant General Anatolii Petrenko, Deputy Minister of Defense of Ukraine for European Integration, noted that "military universities and colleges have conditions for women to enroll, study, receive primary officer ranks, and start their officer careers. More than 160 girls have already expressed their desire to enter such institutions. Soon they will be officers" (Karpiuk 2018). However, in the same year, Polina Kravchenko, press officer of the Motorized Infantry Brigade, was denied admission to the officer training program at the Hetman Petro Sahaidachnyi National Army Academy because of her gender (Verbovska 2018).² Kravchenko only managed to enter the military academy on her fifth attempt (Semeniaka 2021). Since 2019, the Hetman Petro Sahaidachnyi National Army Academy's website provides information about

2. One of the leading educational institutions in the military education system of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine. The Academy's website is available at <https://www.asv.mil.gov.ua>.

its gender policy, including the statement that the Academy “has ensured equal access for women and men to enroll in all specialties and specializations of training, integrated a gender component into the curriculum of the educational process, provided equal opportunities for career development, and women servicemen, on an equal footing with men.”³ Moreover, the head of the Academy now has an advisor on gender issues, a position that is held by Lieutenant Colonel Larysa Herasymenko. This case shows that it is possible to challenge patriarchal gendered norms, at least at the formal (institutional) level.

This article examines the gender equality implementation process in PME and its results in Ukraine during ten years of the Russo-Ukrainian War (2014–2024) and helps to address the double marginalization that women face during the research and policy-making processes; discussions of gender equality in Ukraine rarely include PME, either in the context of the armed forces or in the education sector more generally. The article begins with some historical background on Ukrainian women’s involvement in the military to provide context to the time period that is the focus of the article: Russia’s war against Ukraine since 2014. Then the successes and challenges of gender equality implementation in the educational sphere of Ukrainian society over the last ten years are analyzed. Finally, the article presents the results of some of the research carried out for the Invisible Battalion project that relate to gender and PME.

Women’s Involvement in the Military Resistance in Ukraine: Historical Legacy

The rise in female participation in the AFU since 2014 suggests that women are becoming more interested in the security and military industries (CEDAW 2021; Hrytsenko 2022; Martsenyuk 2023a; Mathers 2024; Phillips and Martsenyuk 2023). According to Ministry of Defense data (Invisible Battalion 5.0 2023, 12), the proportion of women serving in the AFU nearly doubled between 2013 and 2022, growing from 16,000 to 31,000. In addition, there was more than a threefold increase in the number of female officers during that period: 5,112 female officers in 2022 compared to 1,633 in 2013. Between 2013 and 2022, the number of female NCOs (noncommissioned officers)

3. For more information about the gender policy of the Hetman Petro Sahaidachnyi National Army Academy, see <https://www.asv.mil.gov.ua/?q=en/academy/gender-policy>.

also increased substantially, nearly tripling to 13,747. By the beginning of January 2024, the number of women in the AFU had reached almost 70,000 (Ministry of Defense Ukraine 2024). More women are also reaching higher military ranks, which reduces vertical gender segregation (the concentration of men in higher ranks and women in lower ranks) in the military.

Following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, women declared their intention to defend their nation on an equal footing with men. According to an all-Ukrainian nationally representative poll conducted by Info Sapiens for the British Research Agency ORB on March 3–4, 2022, 59 percent of women said they were ready to participate in the armed resistance to end the Russian occupation of Ukraine (Phillips and Martsenyuk 2023, 5). Moreover, according to the Ministry of Defense, in August 2024 “the number of Ukrainian women interested in military service has increased significantly: about 20% of all applications to recruiting centers come from women” (Mosorko 2024).

Scholars have labeled the Russo-Ukrainian War “a war on the gender order,” referring specifically to Russia’s hostility toward the progress towards greater gender equality in Ukrainian society (Kratochvíl and O’Sullivan 2023). For example, scholar of international politics Jenny Mathers points out: “While Russia’s emphasis on the masculine character of its armed forces and the marked absence of women soldiers are important demonstrations of Moscow’s commitment to a traditional social order, the presence of growing numbers of women in Ukraine’s military demonstrates Kyiv’s commitment to a very different type of state and society” (Mathers 2023).

Why are Ukrainian women ready, and even eager, to participate in the military resistance of the country? The participation of Ukrainian women in wars has a long history and a tradition of more than 100 years (Baidak and Bezruk 2017; Grinchenko et al. 2015; Khromeychuk 2018; Kis 2012). During the First World War, a female detachment of the Ukrainian Sich riflemen fought as part of the Austro-Hungarian Army. Their commander, Olena Stepaniv, is celebrated as the first woman who joined the empire’s military service (Bohachevsky 1993). Stepaniv later wrote about her military experience and published her memoirs in 1934 in the Lviv magazine, *Nazystrich (Towards)*.⁴ Historian Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak noted: “Women in Galicia were

4. They are available at: <https://edu.lvivcenter.org/en/documents/olena-stepaniv-memories-about-world-war-i-1934>.

not such pacifists as a significant number of Ukrainian intelligentsia in the territory of Ukraine, which was under Russian rule. On the contrary, when the First World War began, Ukrainians in Galicia believed that only with weapons in hand could they win their rights. Therefore, proportionately more women from the western lands joined the army compared to women from the eastern lands of Ukraine” (Bohachevsky 1993, 60).

Ukraine’s women actively participated in the Second World War in a wide range of military roles. (Grinchenko et al. 2015; Khromeychuk 2018). But, despite their many contributions, Svetlana Alexievich demonstrates in her book *The Unwomanly Face of War* (1985) that women veterans faced many problems when they returned to civilian life in peacetime after the Second World War. Based on the interviews that she conducted with women veterans, society did not heroize women who fought at the front but condemned them instead. The former combatants had difficulties being accepted by their communities, including challenges in getting a job and building a family life, and were faced with a lack of recognition of their contribution to the victory (Alexievich 2018). In addition to serving in the Soviet Armed Forces during the Second World War, in the 1940s and 1950s, thousands of Ukrainian women joined the underground nationalist movement on western Ukrainian lands as members of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) (Kis 2015).

When Ukraine became independent in 1991, women actively participated in the state-building and democratization of the country. This included the civil society protests in 2004 (the “Orange Revolution”) and the mass mobilizations in 2013–14, centered on and around Kyiv’s Maidan Nezalezhnosti, or Independence Square. Women played a full role in all aspects of the protest movements, despite efforts by some of the male protesters to restrict women’s contributions to the domestic spaces and tasks, such as providing food and cleaning up the protest site (Channell-Justice 2017). Women have emerged as more visible actors in the Ukrainian public sphere and have been eager to raise issues of inequality and claim gender justice. Ukrainian women have challenged traditional gender roles relegating women to the domestic sphere and have increasingly claimed visibility, recognition, and respect as revolutionaries and volunteers.

When the Russo-Ukrainian War started in 2014, women joined the front lines as volunteers, journalists, medical staff, and soldiers (Martsenyuk 2023a). Women were actively involved in volunteer work

and resistance when Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Moreover, Ukrainian women continue fighting for their rights and against gender discrimination in the military (Invisible Battalion 3.0. 2021; Invisible Battalion 5.0. 2023; Martsenyuk, Grytsenko and Kvit 2015). During the past ten years of the war, women have made considerable progress in breaking through the “glass ceiling” in the military sphere as a labor market, having the opportunity to work in combat specialties, and becoming more visible in the media as fighters and military specialists. At the same time, the military infrastructure lacks attention to the issue of gender sensitivity—understanding the needs of women, including the seriousness of gender-based violence in the AFU. The media’s coverage of gender-based violence in the armed forces is also limited, while more and better-informed publicity around this issue could raise awareness in society as well as put pressure on the military to do more to solve this problem. An important means of addressing the gaps in the military’s awareness of women serving in the armed forces is by improving women’s access to PME. Women’s access to education, particularly to professional education in the military, is an important aspect of the gender equality implementation process. Education is a gatekeeper to the labor market, and it is important to study the situation with equal rights and opportunities in this sphere of Ukrainian society.

Gender (In)equality and Education in Ukraine

On one hand, there are significant indications that Ukraine is overcoming the gender gap in education in comparison to other countries (World Economic Forum 2023). Almost 100 percent of women and men in Ukraine are literate, and the level of participation of women and men in various levels of education in general is high and balanced. According to official Ukrainian government data, in 2021 primary education covered 92.7 percent of girls and 90.7 percent of boys, secondary education 86.1 percent of girls and 85.3 percent of boys, and higher education 88.8 percent of women and 76.8 percent of men (Karazin University 2021). On the other hand, there are still important issues to overcome. The State Strategy on Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities of Women and Men Until 2030 refers to problems, such as the difficulty in accessing education for different vulnerable groups among women and men (e.g., people from rural areas, people with disabilities), as well as insufficient attention to gender aspects when

designing educational policy, a low level of gender sensitivity among educators, and the absence of a comprehensive system of gender education and special programs to train specialists in gender issues (Karazin University 2021). In general, the education sector exhibits the following indicators of gender inequality: vertical (the higher the status and prestige, the fewer women involved) and horizontal (division into the so-called traditional “female” and “male” areas of education) gender segregation; a gender pay gap for personnel employed in education; and widespread gender stereotypes and cases of gender-based violence, in particular, sexual harassment (Martsenyuk 2023b).

The state’s obligation to ensure equal conditions for accessing education is stipulated in two main laws on education: “On Education” and “On Higher Education.” Article 3 of the Law “On Education” requires the state to provide equal conditions to access education. The right to education, including higher education, is guaranteed regardless of age; sex; race; health; disability; citizenship; nationality; political, religious, or other beliefs; skin color; place of residence; language of communication; origin; social and property status; criminal record; and other personal circumstances and characteristics (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine 2017). Therefore, under the basic laws, women and men are guaranteed equal access to education, including in the military sector. Moreover, since 2018 there has been a Governmental Ombudsperson for Education who is responsible for ensuring that all aspects of the right to education are protected (CEDAW 2021).

Ukraine confirmed its commitment to gender equality by joining the Global Partnership for the Promotion of Gender Equality. This is also known as the Biarritz Partnership, an initiative by the G7 countries with the participation of UN Women. Another step was developing an action plan to implement the government’s commitments as part of this international initiative. Ukraine’s obligations within the Biarritz Partnership imply comprehensive integration of the gender component in education (President of Ukraine 2020). This includes a commitment to developing a legal framework that introduces a mandatory antidiscrimination analysis of all educational content, along with methodologies and criteria for a nondiscriminatory approach, and ensuring a gender audit of educational institutions (CEDAW 2021, 25).

One of the recommendations is to conduct a gender audit in higher education institutions to better understand how equal rights and opportunities in that sector can be ensured (Halvorsen 2019); Ukraine’s Ministry of Education and Science has responded by introducing an

initiative to carry out gender audits in educational institutions (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine 2021b). Moreover, in higher education, it is important to implement intra-university policies to promote gender equality and nondiscrimination and counteract sexual harassment (Martsenyuk 2023b). This process began at the end of 2018 at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (Martsenyuk 2021), and over the past few years, several other higher education institutions have introduced policies and mechanisms to address these issues.

On December 20, 2022, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine approved the Strategy for the Implementation of Gender Equality in Education until 2030 and the operational plan for its implementation for 2022–2024 (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine 2022). The main goal of the Strategy is to comprehensively implement the principles of equal rights and opportunities for women and men and nondiscrimination on any grounds in the education system, as well as to identify ways to introduce gender mainstreaming at all levels and areas of education (Governmental Portal 2022).

Thus, at the official level, Ukraine pays attention to ensuring gender equality in the field of education. For this purpose, it is expedient to counteract gender inequality and gender-based violence to introduce various successful practices of implementing the ideas of equal rights and opportunities both at the level of state policy and individual institutions of higher education. Being a part of the education and military sphere, professional military education is expected to face challenges that are typical for both.

Methodology: Making Women in PME More Visible

Since the summer of 2015, the author of this article, together with other sociologists (Anna Kvit and Hanna Hrytsenko), has conducted research into women's access to professional military education as part of the Invisible Battalion project of sociological investigations into women in the Ukrainian military and gender equality in the AFU. The research team's first study "Invisible Battalion: Women Participating in ATO Military Operations" (2015),⁵ identified the phenomenon of vertical

5. ATO, the Anti-Terrorist Operation was a term used by the government of Ukraine, the OSCE, and other foreign institutions to identify Ukrainian territory of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts under the control of Russian military forces

and horizontal gender segregation in the AFU as a labor market (Martsenyuk et al. 2015). Vertical segregation is inequality between men and women related to their positions on the career ladder. The phenomenon of horizontal segregation is also one of the gender inequality tools implying the existence of the so-called “male” and “female” areas in society. Similar phenomena could be expected to be found in PME.

The second sociological study, “Invisible Battalion 2.0: Female Veterans Return to a Peaceful Life” (2019), revealed that some female veterans interviewed for the project expressed their interest in gaining additional knowledge, skills, and qualifications through PME. In particular, the female veterans interviewed noted that “they see no significant challenges in receiving higher or additional education, in certain cases, the state itself offers such programs to those willing to participate” (Martsenyuk et al. 2019, 83). But this ambition for greater professional education and higher standards on the part of women soldiers co-exists with attitudes that demean their capabilities and achievements. One such example of the objectification of women soldiers and their depiction as the army’s “adornment” was a journalist’s report on the participation of female cadets in Ukraine’s Independence Day parade in 2018: “Female cadets of Taras Shevchenko National University Military Institute and the Military Institute of Telecommunication and Information Technologies named after the Heroes of Kruty really adorned the holiday. Their composite battalion was definitely the most beautiful one” (Karpiuk 2018). For women soldiers to achieve their potential, it is crucial to reduce the acceptability of such gender stereotypes in PME and the media and to eliminate them entirely.

The third Invisible Battalion sociological study focused on the problem of gender-based violence and sexual harassment in the military sphere in Ukraine. Sexual harassment in the AFU is a symptom that reveals the existence of broader problems—misogyny, toxic masculinity, gender discrimination, and a lack of professionalism. These broader problems can, in part, be traced back to the professional culture that the AFU inherited from the Soviet Armed Forces (Invisible Battalion 3.0. 2021, 20–21). Education and awareness raising among military personnel can play an important role in challenging and changing the military’s masculinist culture, although the existence of that culture

and pro-Russian separatists. A significant part of ATO zone is considered temporarily occupied territory of Ukraine.

can itself limit women's access to PME and the introduction of gender awareness in its curriculum.

This article is based on the results of the fourth Invisible Battalion sociological study "Access to Military Education for Women in Ukraine." This study was conducted in the winter of 2022 (before the full-scale invasion) as a part of the Independent Anti-Corruption Commission (NAKO) project "Promotion of Gender Equality in the Armed Forces of Ukraine." The methodology of the study consisted of two parts: desk research and field (empirical) research. The desk research component was interdisciplinary and involved a review of Ukrainian and international studies, publicly available information, responses to official requests for relevant statistical information sent to the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, and the legal basis for women's access to military education. Experts from the Legal Hundred—an All-Ukrainian Human Rights Organization—conducted a study of the legal aspects of women's access to professional military education in Ukraine.

Public opinion about whether women should be given equal opportunities as men to receive military education was assessed based on a nationally representative survey conducted in September 2018 in Ukraine (Martsenyuk et al. 2019). Although this survey was undertaken before women were granted full access to PME in Ukraine, it is nevertheless important to identify public attitudes about this issue before the new policy was introduced. In addition, the Invisible Battalion research team conducted an anonymous online survey for respondents with experiences of PME in institutions and military vocational schools, whether they were successful in their efforts or not.

A gender-sensitive approach was taken to the analysis of women's access to PME in Ukraine. A gender-sensitive approach recognizes that nominally gender-blind or gender-neutral policies have a disproportionately negative impact on women and, instead of reducing gender gaps, actually widen them (Islam 2013, 65). A gender-sensitive approach, therefore, involves understanding the problems of inequality and gender discrimination in various manifestations and the ability to respond to them, prevent them, and criticize them.

Women's Access to PME in Ukraine: Successes and Challenges

Women's access to professional military education is an important component of establishing the value of equal rights and opportunities

in the military sector (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine 2020). Ukraine's implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 "Women, Peace, and Security" provides for the equal access of women and men to educational institutions at all levels in the security and defense sector and for the inclusion of a gender component in education. It means providing comprehensive access for women to PME institutions; integrating gender approaches into the system of training specialists for the security and defense sector; and ensuring infrastructural, material, and technical conditions at education institutions in the security and defense sector for the training of girls (see Table 1).

In particular, there is a reference to overcoming gender inequality in military education—removing restrictions for girls to enter military lyceums. This has been done in recent years. As stated in the results of the study "Invisible Battalion 5.0" (2023), "women are now able to enter PME institutions in any specialty, without being limited to once-defined positions. This is an extremely big step forward, which increases the professionalism of the army and brings it closer to the world level" (23).

The second measure is the provision of infrastructural material and technical conditions of educational institutions in the security and defense sector for the education of girls. In this case, the focus is on taking a gender-sensitive approach, when the specific circumstances and conditions of women, and security issues are considered.

A peculiarity of military education is that it is subject to additional regulation. Higher military education institutions and military departments at civilian higher education institutions are subordinated to both the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Education and Science. According to the experts from Legal Hundred All-Ukrainian Human Rights Organization, the military education system has five major disadvantages that are distinctive to this sector:

1. The need to harmonize by-laws, particularly the Regulation on Military Service by Citizens of Ukraine in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, with other laws and by-laws on education enacted by the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Education and Science.
2. Military personnel are not always able to take education leave (for example during the period of martial law which was imposed on February 24, 2022), which limits their ability to exercise their right to education.

Table 1. Activities of the task, “Ensuring equal access of women and men to educational institutions of all levels of the security and defense sector and including a gender component in the educational process,” National Action Plan for the Implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 “Women, Peace, Security” for the period until 2025 (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine 2020).

No	Activities	Responsible for implementation	Timeline
1	Amendments to the statutes/regulations on military lyceums, and educational institutions regarding the removal of restrictions on the admission of girls to them	Ministry of Defense Ministry of Internal Affairs National Guard Administration of the State Border Guard Service State Service of Ukraine for Emergency Situations National Police Office of the Prosecutor General (with consent) educational institutions	2021–2022
2	Provision of infrastructural, material, and technical conditions of educational institutions in the security and defense sector for the education of girls	Ministry of Defense Ministry of Internal Affairs National Guard Administration of the State Border Guard Service State Service of Ukraine for Emergency Situations National Police Office of the Prosecutor General (with consent) Security Service of Ukraine (with consent)	2021–2025
3	Application in the educational process of methodological recommendations on the integration of gender approaches in the system of training specialists for the security and defense sector	Ministry of Defense Ministry of Internal Affairs National Guard Administration of the State Border Guard Service State Service of Ukraine for Emergency Situations National Police Office of the Prosecutor General (with consent) Security Service of Ukraine (with consent)	2021–2025

3. The principle of legal certainty and fairness is violated by the right of each military education institution to establish its admission policies, which may differ from the general conditions for admission to higher education institutions approved by the Ministry of Education and Science.
4. Standards for determining the level of physical fitness are different for men and women, which are an exception to the policy of uniform admissions standards for men and women.
5. There is a lack of awareness about PME among schoolchildren and prospective entrants to the military.

The fourth point on the list above relates to the gender-sensitivity aspect of gender equality implementation processes. On the one hand, some argue that women's physical fitness cannot be determined by the same indicators as men's, and so having different standards is a way of exercising gender sensitivity by acknowledging biological differences. That is why women and men perform different exercises, but in accordance with a common list for higher military education institutions. If women and men do perform the same exercises, the evaluation system differs. For example, a woman is required to run the same distance as a man (three kilometers), but she is given a longer time period to achieve the same score: sixteen minutes rather than twelve minutes. In similar fashion, the Ivan Cherniakhovskyi National Defense University of Ukraine requires a woman applicant to swim 100 meters as part of the test for admission, but she is given two minutes to achieve the same score that a man must reach in just one minute and thirty-five seconds.⁶

On the other hand, there is an alternative (gender-neutral) opinion that during the performance of military duties, there cannot be a distinction between men and women in terms of professionalism, which includes physical training. According to this view, if a service woman performs only part of the work, she cannot be considered a full-fledged member of the army unit. The unit cannot be considered fully staffed, which will have an impact on the unit's capabilities and, by extension, on those of the armed forces as a whole. Research into the attitudes of military men in the United States suggest that gender-sensitive approaches to different standards of physical fitness for men and women

6. Webpage of the Ivan Cherniakhovskyi National Defence University: <https://nuou.org.ua/en/u/>

can generate skeptical and critical opinions toward women's military service (Cohn 2000). However, there are other areas where gender sensitivity as an approach could be effective in making women in the armed forces more visible, such as using gender-sensitive and gender-inclusive language. This includes developing terminology that introduces feminine gender forms for military ranks and other military-related terminology: in administration work (for rules and regulations, correspondence); education (in military schools and colleges, in textbooks and reference books, etc); in the media (for public announcements including advertising job vacancies); and in everyday spoken communication, as suggested by Savić (2011).

Enrollment in military education begins as early as high school, with the teaching of the "Defense of Ukraine" subject in vocational counseling activities. In the past, the subject was gender-segregated and taught only to boys. Both boys and girls study "basic medical skills," albeit separately. More recently, girls were permitted to join the program designed for boys, but only with the consent of their parents or guardians (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine 2021a). Therefore, girls did not automatically participate in military vocational counseling; the division of girls and boys into groups indicates an approach based on gender stereotypes rather than gender sensitivity. The importance of raising the awareness of civilian schoolchildren, both boys and girls, about the possibilities of choosing a military education and military career have now been recognized by the Ukrainian government. More than two years after the full-scale invasion, the Ministry of Education and Science approved an updated educational program "Defense of Ukraine" for students of grades 10–11. Beginning with the 2024–2025 academic year, girls and boys will be taught together, during the discipline study, and only separated by gender for practical skills training (New Ukrainian School 2024).

More attention has recently been devoted to the issue of gender equality implementation in the PME. At the end of 2021, the Ministry of Defense adopted a new military education policy that includes the provision for all citizens to receive military education on the basis of equal opportunity, with the aim of advancing gender equality (Ministry of Defense of Ukraine 2021). The fifth strategic goal of Ukraine's defense also includes improving the system of PME and personnel training. This was implemented by integrating gender components when harmonizing the educational content and quality of training and qualification courses for military personnel (including reserves) with

the needs of the defense forces (UN Women 2017, 11). Part of the context for these decisions is the Ukrainian government's desire to demonstrate that it is working to bring its policies and practices in line with NATO standards—in this case, NATO's gender policy. NATO's gender policy provides for integrating a gender approach in planning, operations, missions, education, and training (NATO 2024). By investing in women's access to PME, the AFU can demonstrate its commitment to gender equality on the international stage.

Addressing the issue of sexual harassment within the armed forces and finding effective ways of preventing this form of abuse marks another step on the path to creating a professional army (NATO 2024). Education is an important factor here, as it can help to raise awareness of the issue of gender equality and improve the ability to recognize sexual harassment, counteract it, and deal with the consequences. In 2021, the Prometheus online educational platform introduced a course designed to achieve these goals: Gender Equality and Counteracting Sexual Harassment in the Military Sector. The course was developed by the Invisible Battalion research team and the Institute of Gender Programs as part of the information campaign "Invisible Battalion 3.0. Sexual Harassment in the Military Sector of Ukraine." It was designed for personnel in Ukraine's security and defense sector, as well as veterans, military journalists, employees of the military education sector, and those interested in promoting gender equality in the military (Prometheus 2021).

According to official data from Prometheus, the number of students on the course as of February 15, 2024, was 25,194, while 22,344 certificates were awarded for completing the course. This is a completion rate of 88.7 percent, which is high, especially for an online course. The average age of those taking the course was 35 years and the vast majority (81 percent) were men, while 12.6 percent of those who registered have at least some higher education. These statistics could mean that the majority of those taking the course are military students—a conclusion that is supported by the fact that the Defense Ministry's Department of Military Education and Science recommended that the course be included in the work plans of those higher education institutions providing military education. In addition, the list of training courses for military and civilian employees of the Armed Forces includes a course on gender equality and the basics of gender policy in the AFU, which is held based on the Ivan Cherniakhovskyi National Defence University of Ukraine (Invisible Battalion 5.0 2023, 56).

Amendments were made to the Regulation on the Military (Naval) Lyceum in 2019 that abolished restrictions on the admission of girls (CEDAW 2021). Information on the number of women in Ukraine's military education institutions during the period of full-scale invasion is not available, but there is some data for 2019–2022. In the 2021–2022 academic year, the number of females studying at the Ivan Bohun Military High School doubled (from 25 to 50) in comparison to previous years. This pattern was also visible in other military institutions: the Training and Health Complex of the Ivan Bohun Military High School (from 15 to 30) and Vice-Admiral Volodymyr Bezkorovainyi Naval Vocational School (from 15 to 30). In the academic year 2021–2022, 110 women studied at three military vocational schools. The successful process of their integration into military education of Ukraine should include those aspects that are mentioned in the National Action Plan for the implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1325 “Women, Peace, and Security” for the period until 2025 (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine 2020):

- gender-sensitive provision of infrastructural, material, and technical conditions
- application in the educational process of methodological recommendations on the integration of gender approaches in the system of training specialists for the security and defense sector

The second aspect is very important to enable women in the military to study in an atmosphere of dignity and professionalism, without gender discrimination and sexual harassment. This was demonstrated in a survey conducted in 2021 as part of the Invisible Battalion research project. The survey was conducted online and anonymously among people with experience of military education, whether positive or negative: current students, graduates of military education institutions, and people with unsuccessful experiences enrolling in PME institutions and military vocational schools. The survey included questions on the nuances of entering a military education institution and the learning experience: motivation, level of satisfaction, problems and stereotypes, and successful experiences. In total, eighty-five questionnaires were completed by seventy-two women and thirteen men.

The survey revealed that women are motivated to pursue military education and are often satisfied with the process of entering military education institutions and the quality of training offered there. The

following are the main reasons for dissatisfaction with the learning process among both male and female respondents and according to experts in the field:

- a lack of a professional gender-sensitive approach (that is, there is no proper infrastructure—uniforms, shoes, sports classes, and the expectations of men's and women's appearance is non-standardized and therefore unreasonable)
- gender stereotypical attitudes (men's disrespectful or indulgent treatment of both teaching staff and cadets, including direct discrimination and sexual harassment)
- a lack of female military role models (not only among the teaching staff but also the absence of positive examples of women who have successfully pursued a military career)

The most common issues raised by female respondents, aside from sexism and discrimination, are low self-confidence and fear of humiliation. These issues are common when entering a specialty that is stereotypically associated with men, even if they are not always recognized as gender-related issues. A more inclusive and more positive attitude towards female cadets is important in the process of women's integration into military education.

Public Opinion on Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women in the Military

One of the components of women's equal participation with men in all areas of public life is the chance to acquire a military education. To determine the extent of public support for (or opposition to) this issue, a survey was conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) on September 8–23, 2018, in 109 localities across all regions of Ukraine under Ukraine's control. During the fieldwork stage, 2,026 questionnaires were completed—915 by men and 1,111 by women. The study targeted adult residents of Ukraine aged 18 and over. A Z-test with Bonferroni correction was used for the data analysis to determine if there is a significant difference between sample data and a population parameter or between two sample means. It is relatively straightforward to perform and interpret, making it a convenient choice for hypothesis testing, especially when sample sizes are large. Results marked with an asterisk show columns where the proportion of answers

Table 2. (Dis)agreement with the statement that women should be given equal opportunities with men to receive military education (September 2018, N = 2026)

Variants of answers	%	Combined variants of answers	
I agree completely	25.8	60.3	Agreement
I rather agree than disagree	34.5		
I rather disagree than agree	15.8	25.7	Disagreement
I completely disagree	9.9		
Difficult to say	12.5	14.1	No specific answer
Refusal to answer	1.6		
Total	100*	100*	Total

*May not be exactly 100% due to the weighting and rounding procedure.

is significantly different from the percentage of responses to the same question in other columns, indicating within-group differences in response patterns.

As can be seen from Table 2, about 60 percent of respondents to the 2018 survey supported the idea of giving women equal opportunities with men to access PME. In general, 25.7 percent of respondents disagreed with this statement, and only 9.9 percent completely disagreed that women should be given equal opportunities with men to access military education. About 14 percent of respondents did not give a specific answer to this question. This high proportion of respondents with no clear response may indicate a lack of information and discussions on this topic and the limited coverage that it receives in mass media.

Some small but statistically significant gender differences were found in the responses (see Table 3). Men, to a greater extent than women (19.3% against 12.9%), did not agree that women should be given equal opportunities with men to obtain military education. Women also chose the answer “difficult to say” more often than men, which may reflect the fact that women are less involved in the military sphere in Ukrainian society and may not feel that they know enough about the topic to comment.

There were regional differences in attitudes to the statement that women should be given equal opportunities with men to receive military education (see Table 4). The responses from the eastern region of Ukraine (Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv oblasts) differed most statistically. Nearly one-third of respondents from eastern Ukraine “rather disagree than

Table 3. (Dis)agreement with the statement that women should be given equal opportunities with men to receive military education. Distribution of answers by gender (September 2018, N = 2026)

Variants of answers	Total	Men	Women
I agree completely	25.8%	25.1%	26.3%
I rather agree than disagree	34.5%	34.6%	34.4%
I rather disagree than agree	15.8%	19.3*%	12.9%*
I completely disagree	9.9%	9.1%	10.5%
Difficult to say	12.5%	10.2*%	14.4%*
Refusal to answer	1.6%	1.7%	1.5%
Total	100%	100%	100%

* The difference between groups is statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level with a 95 percent confidence interval.

Table 4. (Dis)agreement with the statement that women should be given equal opportunities with men to receive military education. Distribution of answers by regions of Ukraine (September 2018, N = 2026)

Variants of answers	Total	Western	Central	Southern	Eastern
I agree completely	25.8%	26.3%	24.3%	26.0%	28.2%
I rather agree than disagree	34.5%	36.0%	36.3%	34.0%	27.6%*
I rather disagree than agree	15.8%	13.8%	18.3%	12.0%*	20.3%*
I completely disagree	9.9%	9.7%	7.9%	11.2%	13.0%*
Difficult to say	12.5%	11.3%	12.5%	14.7%	10.9%
Refusal to answer	1.6%	2.9%	0.7%	2.1%	0.0%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

* The difference between groups is statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level with a 95 percent confidence interval.

agree” (20.3 percent) or “completely disagree” (13 percent) with the idea that women should be given equal opportunities for military education. This represents a significantly higher level of disapproval compared to other regions of the country. For comparison, only one-quarter of the overall population in Ukraine shares this view (see Table 2).

Table 5 shows differences in responses according to the level of education. Respondents with a lower level of education are less likely to support the idea that women should have equal access to PME. Only 14.8 percent of those with incomplete secondary education fully

Table 5. (Dis)agreement with the statement that women should be given equal opportunities with men to receive military education. Distribution of answers by level of education (September 2018, N = 2026)

Variants of answers	Total	Incomplete secondary education	Full secondary education	Special secondary education	Higher (full, incomplete)
I agree completely	25.8%	14.8%*	25.8%	25.6%	28.6%
I rather agree than disagree	34.5%	30.6%	28.0%*	36.0%	36.8%
I rather disagree than agree	15.8%	18.8%	18.9%*	13.3%	16.7%
I completely disagree	9.9%	10.6%	12.0%*	9.7%	9.0%
Difficult to say	12.5%	22.1%*	13.7%	13.5%	8.5%*
Refusal to answer	1.6%	3.2%	1.6%	1.9%	0.4%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

* The difference between groups is statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level with a 95 percent confidence interval.

support equal access, compared to 25.8 percent of respondents overall. Uncertainty was also more common among respondents with the lowest level of education: 22.1 percent of those with incomplete secondary education chose “difficult to say,” compared to only 8.5 percent of those with higher education.

The crosstabs of the distribution of this answer were analyzed along with other sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents, such as age and type of settlement. Six age groups were considered: 18–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59, 60–69, 70 and over. Four types of settlement were considered: village, city of less than 99 thousand inhabitants, city of 100–499 thousand inhabitants, and city of 500 thousand inhabitants or more). The most statistically significant difference in answers related to the option “difficult to say,” which was more likely to be given by the oldest age group (70 and over)—19.5% versus 12.5% in general. Younger respondents (aged 30–39) were the least uncertain about women’s access to military education: only 8.3 percent chose “difficult to say.” Residents of rural areas were more likely to choose this answer (16.2 percent), while residents of large cities (500,000 or more) were statistically significantly more likely to agree with women being given equal opportunities with men to obtain a military education.

Table 6. In your opinion, in which areas are women discriminated against the most in Ukrainian society? Several answer options are possible (November 2020, N = 2002)

The answer options are listed in descending order of support	%
In general, there is no discrimination as such	27.6
Politics	25.0
Labor market	22.0
Difficult to say	17.7
Family	15.7
Economics	8.2
Religion	6.1
Medicine	4.3
Education	4.1
Sport	1.8
Other	1.5

The results of another public opinion survey representative of the population of Ukraine, conducted by the Ilko Kucheriv Foundation “Democratic Initiatives” in November 2020, provided an opportunity to analyze the spheres of social life with gender discrimination (see Table 6).

The military was not among the list of options for respondents to choose, although the educational sphere was on the list, and only 4.1 percent of respondents chose education as a field in which women are discriminated against. In contrast, politics and the labor market were regarded as the most problematic areas for gender discrimination. Public opinion did not consider that education an area in which women face discrimination, although it is unlikely that the respondents would have considered military education for that category.

Conclusions

Since 2014, the number of women in the Armed Forces of Ukraine has been increasing, which indicates an increase in women’s interest in the security and defense sector. This article has argued that the issue of women’s access to military education is becoming even more urgent and requires a prompt solution. Equality of opportunities for all

citizens to receive PME is a component of the Ministry of Defense policy for military education. Ukraine's implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 "Women, Peace and Security" provides for equal access of women and men to educational institutions of all levels of the security and defense sector and the inclusion of a gender component in the educational process. In practice, this means providing full access to women to enter military educational institutions, integrating gender approaches into the system of training specialists for the security and defense sector, and ensuring infrastructural and material and technical conditions of educational institutions of the security and defense sector for the training of girls. Protection from sexual harassment in the military and in military educational institutions is another important aspect of the implementation of gender equality policy, especially its gender sensitivity aspect. This article has drawn attention to an online course designed to raise awareness of the importance of gender equality in the military sphere and how to work towards that goal.

This article has also presented and analyzed the results of a national public opinion survey indicating that support for providing women with equal opportunities to obtain military education varies by respondents' gender, age, region of residence, size of their town or city, and level of education. Women were slightly more egalitarian in supporting women's access to military education than men. On the other hand, they were more likely to express uncertainty in their responses. As might be expected, more egalitarian views regarding women's access to military education were demonstrated by respondents with a higher level of education and those living in larger cities. Residents of the eastern part of Ukraine were less likely than those in other regions to support women being given equal opportunities with men to obtain military education.

Women's access to professional military education is a critical element in advancing gender equality in the AFU. It enables women's professional growth and the development of female leadership, but ensuring that women have equal access to PME and the PME curriculum informed by gender perspectives are steps that will not only benefit individual women in the military but the armed forces as an institution. These are measures that will play a significant role in challenging persistent gender stereotypes, helping the AFU to make better use of all available talent and thereby improving its effectiveness and bringing it closer to achieving the international standards that it aspires to reach.

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