

BARRIERS PREVENTING WOMEN FROM ENTERING MILITARY SERVICE AND INSTITUTIONAL SOLUTIONS TO OVERCOME THEM



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ABSTRACT

The study examines the experiences and challenges faced by women joining the Defence Forces of Ukraine, particularly in the areas of recruitment, military service, and social guarantees. In the context of low public support for the idea of general mobilisation, the involvement of motivated female professionals in national defence becomes especially important. The analysis reveals the presence of regulatory, socio-cultural, and gender-based barriers that limit the realisation of women service members' potential.

Based on interviews with women service members and candidates for military service, the study formulates recommendations for the legislative and executive branches of government, the Ministry of Defence, and the media. Key priorities include creating a safe and non-discriminatory environment, updating the regulatory framework, introducing effective complaint and harassment prevention mechanisms, and improving social guarantees and medical support. Implementing the proposed measures will strengthen the human resources capacity of the Defence Forces and contribute to building an army that respects the dignity of every individual and enhances Ukraine's defence capability.

Keywords: women in the military; gender barriers; social guarantees; mobilisation; comprehensive defence.

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The project draws on gender mainstreaming practices within Sweden’s comprehensive defence system and represents the first attempt in the Ukrainian context to explore the possibilities of implementing a Swedish-style comprehensive defence strategy in Ukraine while simultaneously integrating a gender perspective across key sectors, including the economy, care work, the armed forces, civil defence, governance, information policy, and the volunteer movement.

Analytical reports on the above-mentioned sectors are available on the website of the CSO Expert Resource Gender in Detail.

<https://genderindetail.org.ua/>

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ABBREVIATIONS

AFU	Armed Forces of Ukraine
ATO	Anti-Terrorist Operation
CATI	Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing
CSO	Civil Society Organizations
IVF	In Vitro Fertilisation
JFO	Joint Forces Operation in eastern Ukraine
NAKO	Independent Anti-Corruption Commission
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund

BRIEF SUMMARY

This study aims to identify a range of barriers (socio-cultural, regulatory-legal, institutional, and others) that hinder women service members from fully realising their potential within the Defence Forces of Ukraine across different branches and services. Drawing on a combination of data collection methods, as well as a review of previous thematic reports produced by various experts and organisations, the report seeks to identify a set of factors that either motivate or deter Ukrainian women who have considered entering into a contract with the Defence Forces of Ukraine from pursuing military service. It also explores the challenges and concerns women face prior to enlistment and examines how these concerns are reflected in the realities of military service. Based on the barriers identified, a series of recommendations has been developed for relevant state authorities and other authorised bodies and actors.

During the research design phase, the following objectives were defined:

- To examine public attitudes toward the mobilisation of women and women's military service;
- To identify institutional, legal, socio-cultural, and other barriers faced by women in the military sphere;
- To collect and synthesize the experiences of current women service members and women who are considering military service;
- To develop recommendations for improving policies, procedures, and practices in the defence sector, with due consideration for gender equality.

The study applies a combination of approaches, including gender-transformative, gender-sensitive, anti-discrimination, and anthropocentric approaches. The research methodology is based on a mixed-methods design that combines quantitative methods (a nationally representative survey, $n = 1,000$ respondents) and qualitative methods (20 in-depth interviews and two expert interviews), conducted in parallel. The methodological tools of these approaches were aligned to ensure that data related to the same thematic areas could be compared in a methodologically sound manner. As an additional method, the study employed an analysis of open sources, including official statistics, nationally representative surveys, advocacy initiatives of the feminist movement (such as petition texts), and legislation related to gender equality.

Specific sections of the study address the identified barriers that deter individuals willing to join the Defence Forces of Ukraine, as well as the transformative experiences and the practical manifestation of these barriers during the actual military service of individual women.

A series of conclusions and recommendations was formulated based on the comprehensive set of research methods employed.

INTRODUCTION

Russia's war against Ukraine, ongoing since 2014 and particularly following the full-scale invasion in 2022, has increasingly underscored the need for systematic and effective approaches to mobilisation (as well as contract-based military service) in order to ensure national defence capability. Any defence model must ensure dignified treatment of those serving within the Defence Forces and enable the most effective use of the skills and capacities of both male and female service members. Respect for human dignity, the development of human resources, access to training opportunities, and recognition of individuals prior experience are key to strengthening the system as a whole. In order to renew and strengthen the defence system, it is therefore essential to listen to the needs of women service members and to draw on women's experience and expertise in building a comprehensive defence system.

At present, a growing number of women are joining the Defence Forces, and the overall share of women in the military is steadily increasing, as well as their representation in combat roles. According to Olha Hryhorieva, Gender Adviser to the Armed Forces of Ukraine, "approximately 100,000 women serve in the Ukrainian military out of a total of one million service members. Of these, around 5,500 are serving directly on the front line" (Forbes, paraphrasing *The Economist*, 2025). This progress has been made possible by the activism of women service members and women veterans, as well as by the development of civil society institutions led by women who served in the military at a time when their contributions were not yet recognized by the state. It is largely due to their persistent efforts and sustained advocacy for change that women in the military today are able to hold combat positions and pursue military careers.

However, even in 2025, women continue to face significant challenges in joining the military or advancing within it. Some of these challenges are shared by service members regardless of gender, while others are shaped by distinct gender-specific factors.

This study was conducted to examine the real-life experiences, challenges, and problems women faced during the recruitment process and throughout military service, as well as to identify regulatory, socio-cultural, and other barriers that hinder women's fulfilment of military duty. We hope that this research will contribute to the ongoing discussion on strengthening a comprehensive defence system against Russian aggression and will enable more effective use of the knowledge and experience of women service members involved in defending Ukraine, its territorial integrity, and sovereignty. At present, it is precisely the synergy between a military that respects the dignity and experience of every individual and a civil society that provides the necessary "rear support" that constitutes the most reliable guarantee of Ukraine's security and recovery, as well as the deterrence of future aggression.

METHODOLOGY

The study employs a mixed-methods design, combining qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis. This approach made it possible, on the one hand, to identify a broad range of perspectives and narratives present in society and, on the other, to assess their prevalence at the level of public opinion and to draw conclusions about broader trends. Data collection and analysis were conducted between May and September 2025.

The desk-based component of the study involved a secondary analysis of data, specifically a review of findings from previous research on public attitudes in Ukraine toward the potential mobilisation of women (Budz et al., 2025), issues of discrimination against various social groups within the Armed Forces of Ukraine (*Discrimination against Various Social Groups in the AFU*, 2023), and the specific features of women's military recruitment from the perspectives of both candidates and military units (Lobby X, 2025).

Within the empirical component of the study, several data collection methods were employed. The quantitative component of the research relied on two methods: a nationally representative survey and an online questionnaire.

The purpose of the nationally representative survey, conducted by the research agency Info Sapiens at our request, was to assess public attitudes in Ukraine toward the potential mobilisation of women under certain circumstances. The sample size comprised 1,000 respondents. The survey was carried out using the computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) method based on a random sample of mobile phone numbers. The survey was not conducted in temporarily occupied territories or in areas without Ukrainian mobile network coverage (it is estimated that at least 96% of the adult population of the country have mobile phone numbers). The sample is representative of the population of Ukraine aged 16 and older by gender, age, region, and size of settlement. During the interviews, respondents were asked the following question: "Would you support the idea of mandatory conscription of women into military service if this would help ensure gradual demobilisation, that is, the release of service members who have been serving for an extended period of time?"

An online survey was also conducted among girls and women who were not serving in the military at the time of the survey. The purpose of this questionnaire was to explore respondents' personal attitudes toward the possibility of military service, the barriers preventing women from joining the armed forces, and the factors that could motivate women to do so, particularly those who do not currently consider military service.

The survey was administered via Google Forms and consisted of 14 questions (see [Appendix A](#)). The questionnaire was structured into thematic sections covering both respondents' socio-demographic characteristics and their attitudes toward military service.

The first section collected socio-demographic information, including age, the presence of children or dependents, level of education, and current employment status, with clarification of the professional field. The questionnaire also accounted for the presence

or absence of prior military-related experience, including military service, participation in training programmes, or education at military institutions.

The second section focused on respondents' attitudes toward women's military service and included a question on whether they had considered voluntary enlistment. For those who had not joined, respondents were asked to indicate their reasons for opting out, with the option to select multiple responses. In addition, the survey explored which factors might serve as motivators and increase the likelihood of considering military service as a viable option.

Finally, the questionnaire provided space for open-ended comments, allowing participants to share their reflections or recommendations regarding women's participation in the military.

Data collection took place August 4-12, 2025. The questionnaire was disseminated via the personal social media accounts of the study's authors, as well as through the Facebook page "Invisible Battalion / Nevidyymi Battalion." In total, 476 respondents aged 18-60 participated in the survey.

The largest age group consisted of women aged 25-34, numbering 255 respondents (53.6%). The second largest group comprised women aged 35-44, with 109 respondents (22.9%). Younger women aged 18-24 accounted for 57 respondents (12.0%), while older women aged 45-60 accounted for 55 respondents (11.6%). This distribution should be taken into account when interpreting the findings, as women aged 25-34 constitute the largest share of respondents.

For the qualitative component of the study, 15 in-depth interviews were conducted with current women service members and five interviews with women who are considering joining military service. Among the former were women with diverse service trajectories: those with 20-30 years of service as well as those who had signed a contract only a year prior; those who began their service in 2022 and those who joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) outside the active phase of the war. This diversity made it possible to capture both retrospective assessments and reflections on changes within the military from women with longer service experience, and more immediate impressions from those who joined relatively recently. It also allowed the study to identify differences in motivations and contextual factors depending on the period in which service began. Participants were recruited through a call for interview participation disseminated via a sign-up form shared on the authors' personal social media pages and on the Facebook page "Veteranka Movement." This recruitment strategy entails certain limitations, including a potential self-selection bias: those who chose to complete the participation form are likely to be more interested in the topic and to hold a gender-sensitive perspective. Accordingly, as with any qualitative research, the findings cannot be considered representative of the entire population. The interview guides are in [Appendix B](#) and [Appendix C](#).

The recruitment of interviewees who are currently only considering military service followed a similar strategy, relying on dissemination through the authors' personal social media accounts. In this case, a key limitation is that all respondents were young women aged 20-27 who currently reside in Kyiv. Accordingly, the findings do not reflect the

experiences of all women interested in military recruitment and cannot be considered comprehensive. The interview guide for this category of respondents is in [Appendix D](#).

The study design also included expert interviews. Experts were defined as individuals with extensive experience in defending the rights of women service members and those with personal experience of military service and/or military education. Two expert interviews were conducted: with Yuliia Bilousova, a veteran and expert of the Veteranka Movement, and with Alla Bieloshenko, an expert from Prostir Mozhlyvostei (Space of Opportunities). The list of questions used for these interviews is in [Appendix E](#).

To obtain official statistics on the number of complaints submitted by women service members concerning gender-based discrimination, sexual violence, and psychological violence, formal information requests were sent to the Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights and the Presidential Commissioner of Ukraine for the Protection of the Rights of Service Members and Their Family Members. The responses received are described in the analysis section below.

CHAPTER 1. BARRIERS FACED BY WOMEN IN THE MILITARY: SOCIO-CULTURAL, INSTITUTIONAL, AND LEGAL

This section examines public attitudes in Ukraine toward the potential mobilisation of women (based on the results of a nationally representative survey conducted by Info Sapiens in August 2025 and a qualitative, non-representative study by Cedos, 2023-2024) and attitudes toward women serving in the AFU (based on a survey conducted by the Rating Sociological Group in 2023). It then analyses whether specific societal attitudes contribute to the emergence of socio-cultural barriers for women seeking to realize their military potential.

The barriers identified through the in-depth interviews conducted with women service members and women intending to join the defence forces have been categorised accordingly.

This was followed by an analysis of regulatory and legal acts and the findings of previous studies in order to identify the legal and institutional barriers women face at different stages of military service.

1.1 Public Attitudes in Ukraine toward the Mobilisation of Women and Women's Military Service

Public perceptions of the mobilisation of women and women's military service serve as indicators of the prevailing gender order in society. They reflect societal assumptions about the distribution of roles in the event of an external threat and about who is primarily expected to perform protective and defensive functions. These attitudes are critically important for analysis, as they shape social expectations, determine the perceived legitimacy of women's presence in the military, and significantly affect women's ability to realise their military potential. Ultimately, when translated to a more applied level, the perceptions held by individual actors may influence everyday recruitment practices within military units and, in turn, the overall combat readiness of the armed forces. For this reason, before turning to an analysis of socio-cultural or institutional barriers women face in the military, it is essential to examine the factors that underpin them, namely, public opinion regarding compulsory conscription (mobilisation) of women and women's military service more broadly.

The results of the nationally representative survey conducted by Info Sapiens in August 2025 show that a clear majority of Ukraine's population (75.7%) would either definitely not or rather not support the idea of mobilising women, even if such a measure were to facilitate the initiation of a demobilisation process. Only 21.5% expressed a supportive position, while 2.9% were undecided (see Figure 3.1). Given the high sensitivity of the question and the potential for strongly negative reactions among respondents, it was framed as a hypothetical scenario ("If this helps ensure a gradual demobilisation, that is, the release of service members who have been serving for a prolonged period").

However, despite this formulation, intended to mitigate perceptions of the proposal, the findings indicate a persistent public rejection of the idea of conscripting women.

**WOULD YOU SUPPORT THE IDEA OF
MANDATORY CONSCRIPTION OF WOMEN INTO
MILITARY SERVICE IF IT HELPED ENSURE A
GRADUAL DEMOBILIZATION—THAT IS, THE
RELEASE OF SERVICE MEMBERS WHO HAVE
BEEN SERVING FOR A LONG TIME?**

- █ Strongly oppose
- █ Rather oppose
- █ Rather support
- █ Strongly support
- █ Difficult to say

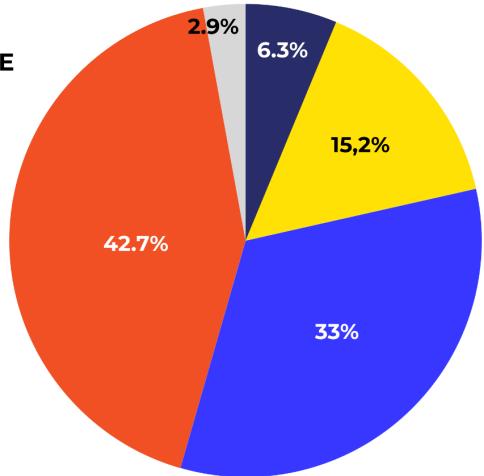


Figure 1.1. Public attitudes in Ukraine toward the idea of mobilising women, based on a nationally representative survey using the authors' methodology, n = 1,000

Certain differences can be observed between men's and women's responses. In particular, a substantially larger share of women fully or rather support the idea of compulsory conscription of women into military service: 25.9%, or approximately one-quarter of the population. Among men, the share of supportive responses is considerably lower, at only 16.18%. The proportion of men who do not support the mobilisation of women at all is particularly notable: more than half of male respondents (52.3%) selected this option, compared to only about one-third of female respondents (34.62%) (see Figure 3.2).

WOULD YOU SUPPORT THE IDEA OF MANDATORY CONSCRIPTION OF WOMEN INTO MILITARY SERVICE IF IT HELPED ENSURE A GRADUAL DEMOBILIZATION—THAT IS, THE RELEASE OF SERVICE MEMBERS WHO HAVE BEEN SERVING FOR A LONG TIME?

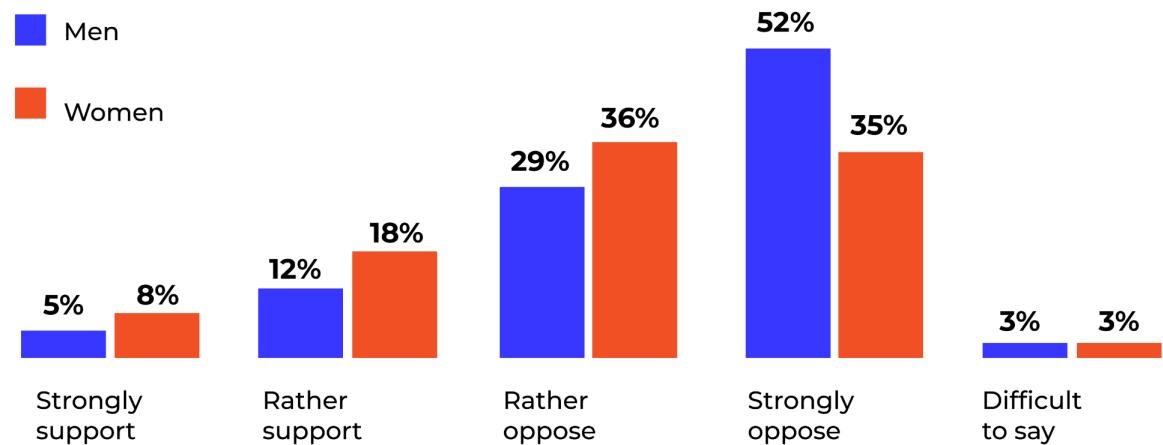


Figure 2.2. Attitudes toward the idea of mobilising women, responses by gender, nationally representative survey using the authors' methodology, n = 1,000

Some differences can also be observed across age groups. The highest level of support for the idea of mobilising women was expressed by the oldest respondents, at 30.2%. It can be assumed that this distribution of responses is driven by the fact that mobilisation is least personally relevant for this age group. Consequently, respondents in this group may be more inclined to perceive the issue in a detached manner, as a broader socio-political matter rather than a personal one.

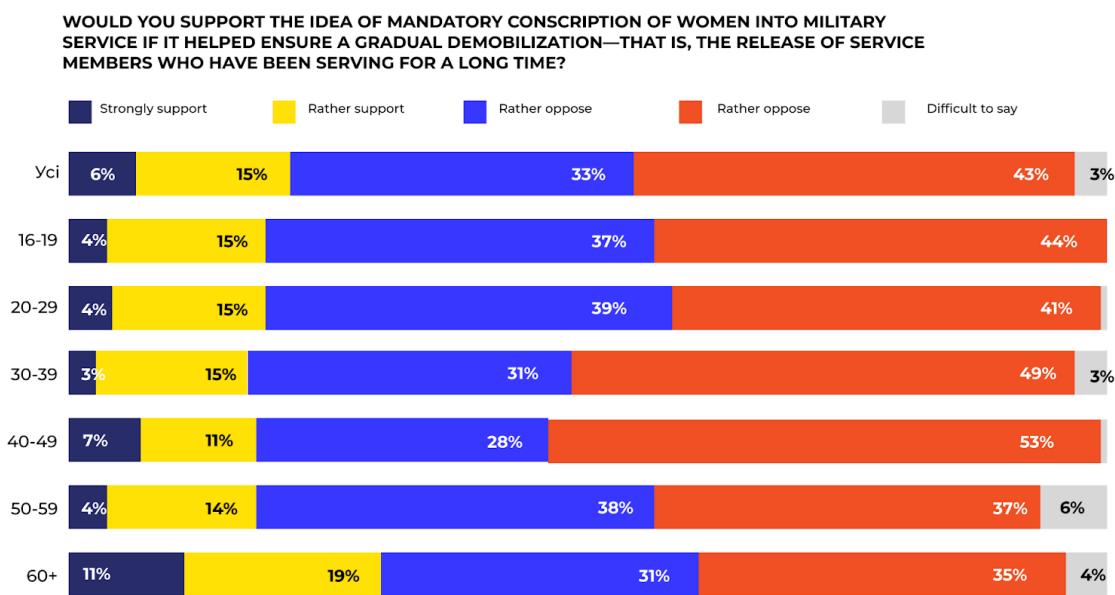


Figure 1.3. Attitudes toward the idea of mobilising women, responses by age, nationally representative survey using the authors' methodology, n = 1,000

Among the remaining respondents aged 20-59, levels of support are virtually identical: the share of those who would fully or rather support the idea ranges between 17% and 18%. The most categorical responses were observed in the 40-49 age group, where more than half of respondents (53.2%) would not support the idea at all. It is also noteworthy that in some age groups there were almost no “undecided” or “difficult to say” responses, particularly among respondents aged 16-29 and 40-49. By contrast, a considerably higher level of uncertainty was recorded among respondents aged 50-59, with 6.3% not selecting any response option.

The question posed was closed-ended and therefore did not allow respondents to provide detailed explanations for their choice of answer. The results raise a number of questions, most notably, why the majority of the population remains unwilling to support the mobilisation of women despite the difficult situation at the front and the persistent shortage of personnel. To better understand the reasons underlying these public attitudes, it is useful to turn to the findings of a qualitative study conducted by the analytical centre Cedos in February-March 2023 and 2024 (Budz et al., 2025). Although the study employed a qualitative methodology and its findings cannot be extrapolated to the entire population of Ukraine or used to assess the prevalence of specific narratives in society, its value lies in presenting a wide range of experiences, views, and attitudes that have existed, and likely continue to exist, within public opinion.

The question proposed by the study authors was: “From time to time, public debates arise about the compulsory mobilisation of women. If you support this idea, in what form, under what conditions, or for which categories of women do you think compulsory mobilisation should be introduced? If you believe that compulsory mobilisation of women should not be introduced under any circumstances, please explain why you hold this view.” Thus, respondents were not subject to any constraints in their answers and were able to share their reflections on women’s mobilisation in detail.

As noted in the research report, “at the time of the survey, nearly half of the study participants did not support this idea and believed that the mobilisation of women should be voluntary” (Budz et al., 2025, p. 38). Elaborating on their position, respondents:

- Reproduced traditional notions of the roles of women and men, specifically assigning reproductive and care work to women;
- Equated women’s role during wartime with motherhood, appealing to the demographic situation;
- Expressed their own perceptions of physical and psychological differences between men and women.

Among other arguments cited by respondents were views that “women are already performing important work and have their own role in this war, including volunteering and working to support the Defence Forces,” as well as the belief that “it is important first to improve the system of men’s mobilisation, which, in their view, is currently ineffective” (Budz et al., 2025, p. 39).

Some respondents opposed mobilisation for both men and women, instead expressing support for establishing a contract-based army. Others agreed with introducing compulsory mobilisation for women under certain conditions. Respondents who

supported compulsory mobilisation of women emphasized the importance of taking into account women's professional background and skills, age, level of physical fitness, and family status. Some responses suggested that mobilisation should apply only to women in specific professions or specializations and be limited exclusively to non-combat or rear positions. Respondents also mentioned the need for special service conditions for women with children; the importance of high-quality military training prior to deployment; providing appropriate women's military uniforms; and the necessity of changing societal perceptions and attitudes toward women in the military (Budz et al., 2025).

It is also worth noting that some respondents were unable to articulate a clear position on mobilising women or expressed doubts about the feasibility of implementing such a policy. Among the most significant reasons why mobilising women was perceived as unlikely were the entrenchment of reproductive labour as women's responsibility; the lack of military training among most women; prejudiced attitudes toward female service members; and the overall complexity of implementing this idea (Budz et al., 2025).

We observe that the 218 responses collected represent nearly the full spectrum of attitudes and opinions regarding women's military service. Although it is not possible to draw conclusions about the dominance of any particular narrative in society, this once again underscores the diversity of perspectives and the demand for identifying a "correct answer" in the near future. The findings of this study also allow for a deeper understanding of what underlies the low level of support for the idea of mobilisation, namely, the considerations that may guide those who choose the response option "fully or partially disagree."

Respondents' arguments suggest that the low level of support may be driven by deeply entrenched perceptions of traditional (gender-stereotypical) roles of men and women and by fears associated with potential changes to these roles in the context of war. It is important to emphasize that such a cautious attitude toward the idea of women's mobilisation as a phenomenon does not in any way indicate negative attitudes toward women who are already serving. On the contrary, findings from other studies show that the vast majority of respondents express clearly or rather positive attitudes (85%) toward women serving in the AFU (Discrimination against Various Social Groups in the Armed Forces of Ukraine: Views of Military Personnel and Civilians, 2023). A similar pattern is observed with regard to attitudes toward women veterans, with 80% of respondents describing their attitudes as clearly or rather positive.

The findings of the same study also indicate that other egalitarian beliefs regarding women in the military are widespread among the population. For instance, a large majority (81%) agreed that a woman can command a combat unit just as effectively as a man; 74% disagreed with the claim that women in combat units distract men; and 75% disagreed that female service members raise children worse than civilian women (see Figure 3.4). At the same time, 54% believed that "women in the army are better suited to non-combat roles" (Discrimination against Various Social Groups in the Armed Forces of Ukraine: Views of Military Personnel and Civilians, 2023).

TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS ABOUT WOMEN'S SERVICE IN THE ARMED FORCES?

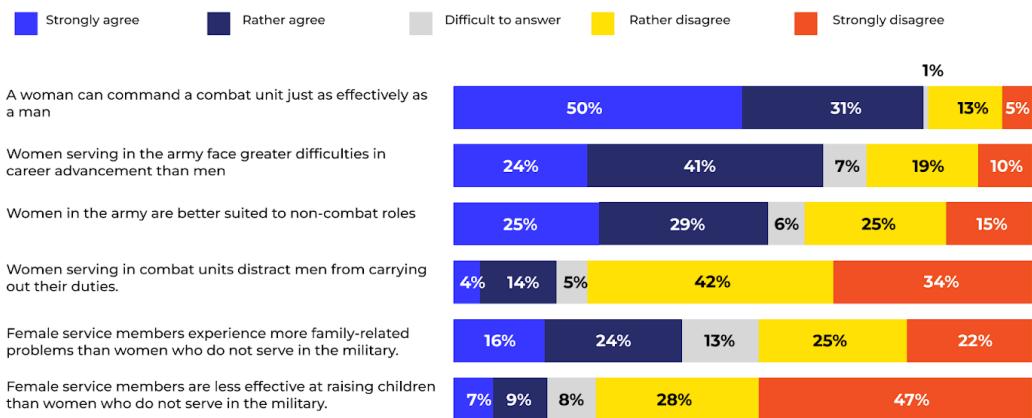


Figure 1.4. Public attitudes in Ukraine toward women's military service (Rating, 2023)

What do these findings indicate, and how do they relate to the widespread lack of support for the idea of mobilising women? Several points are worth highlighting. First, it is important to distinguish between attitudes toward women who are already serving in the military and attitudes toward women as potential service members. Those who have already joined the armed forces are unequivocally perceived through the lens of heroism, gratitude, and admiration. However, this does not negate the fact that their trajectory may still be viewed by society as exceptional. Accordingly, support for and positive attitudes toward exceptional stories do not necessarily translate into readiness to normalise such experiences as a broader social phenomenon. Second, positive attitudes toward women in the AFU may reflect support at a symbolic level — gratitude, respect, admiration, and pride — whereas the question of potential mobilisation operates in a fundamentally different, practical domain. At this level, respondents immediately raise derivative practical concerns: who will take care of children, manage the household, or look after elderly parents. Therefore, the results of the representative surveys discussed above should not be interpreted as contradictory or conflicting. Rather, their interpretation requires an understanding that declarative support for equality does not automatically imply readiness for its radical implementation.

1.2 Socio-Cultural Barriers Women Face in the Military

The societal perceptions and the level of support for the idea of women's mobilisation identified above directly affect the actual ability of women who already wish to join the armed forces to do so and who are actively attempting to realise this intention. This is because such perceptions and beliefs do not remain at the level of individual opinions but are always materialised; that is, they take on very concrete forms in practices, communication, behaviour, and the symbolic space at both micro- and macro-levels. For this reason, this section focuses on the categorisation and analysis of socio-cultural barriers operating at different levels of manifestation. The analysis draws on in-depth interviews conducted with women currently serving in the military and with women who are presently considering the possibility of joining the armed forces.

The first category of barriers identified consists of informational barriers. Most notably, respondents pointed to a lack of information already at the recruitment stage. Women actively seek information about military service but encounter its fragmented and often contradictory nature. They frequently lack clarity regarding which documents are required for mobilisation, what service conditions to expect, how to choose a position, and where to turn for detailed guidance. The absence of clear and structured information creates a sense of uncertainty and complicates the decision-making process. This is further exacerbated by the fact that the recruitment system and information campaigns are primarily oriented toward men, which further limits women's access to relevant information. This is confirmed, among other sources, by the findings of social advertising monitoring conducted in August 2024 by the National Council on Television and Radio Broadcasting (Gender Monitoring of Social Advertising Videos, 2024). In these conditions, for most women, personal contacts with current service members remain the most valuable source of information. Respondent 2 explained her approach:

“I don’t really want to rely on articles or interviews — I want to talk to people.”

A further critical issue is the lack of women-centred narratives about military service, particularly given that recruitment efforts are predominantly oriented toward men. For instance, one respondent noted that recruitment campaigns by the Khartiaa brigade resonate with her far more than those of Azov, where women are largely not positioned as subjects. Women lack accessible information about what everyday life in the military is like, what challenges they may face, what they should prepare for, and which steps can help them prepare effectively. This issue concerns not so much a purely technical shortage of information (although this remains a problem) as the fact that women service members are far less frequently positioned as subjects in the public sphere. This, in turn, creates an additional barrier for women who are only considering mobilisation, as the absence of positive, or at least realistic, examples undermines confidence in their own capabilities.

The removal of informational barriers is possible through systematic and consistent communication with potential women service members. Military units should develop and implement their own information strategies specifically targeted at women who are considering military service. A successful example to follow, as noted by one respondent,

is the National Guard's 13th Operational Brigade, Khartia. In late May 2025, together with Dignitas and Protect Ukraine, the brigade launched a campaign aimed at recruiting women for technological roles, using the slogan, "Her strength is her mind. Her choice is Khartia" (Dignitas, 2025). The unit's social media platforms regularly feature content in which women service members share their paths into military service and their motivations for joining. This approach not only increases the visibility of women in the armed forces but also contributes to the recruitment of new women fighters.

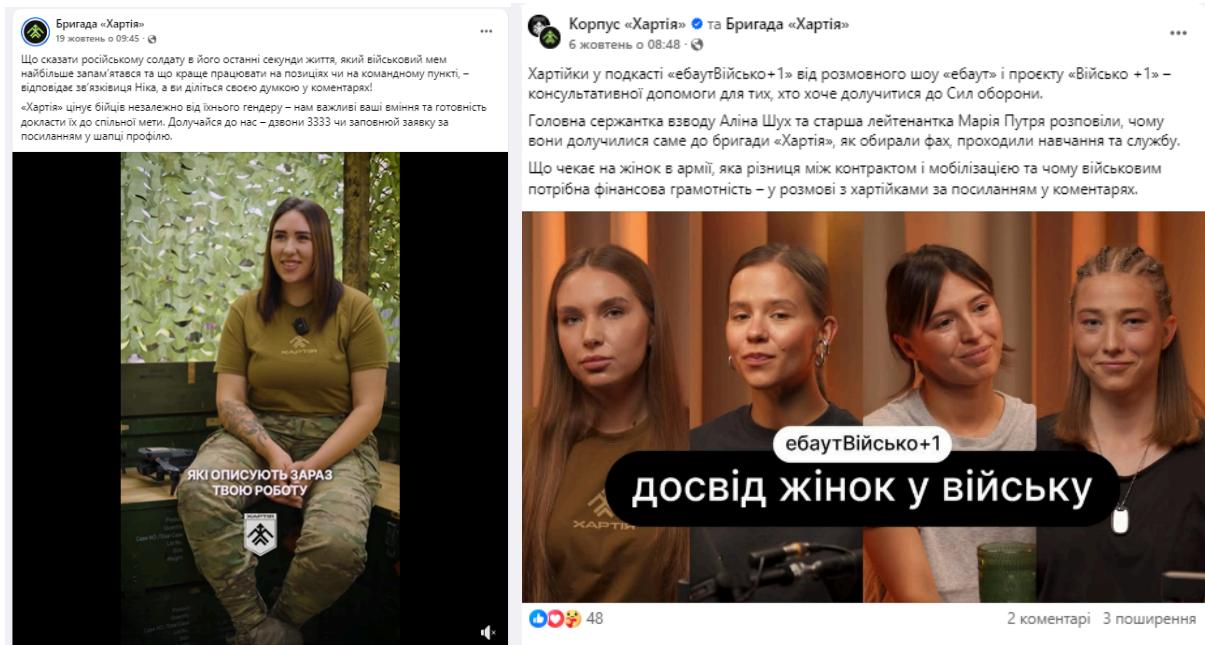


Figure 1.5. Examples of coverage of women's military service

The need to expand the presence of women service members and women veterans in the information space was also emphasized during expert interviews. As noted by Alla Bieloshenko, an expert from Prostir Mozhlyvostei (Space of Opportunities):

"Greater attention should be paid to ensuring a systematic presence in the information space. This goes beyond standard social media posts to include full-fledged communication formats — podcasts, video interviews, and live broadcasts with women service members, where they can personally speak about their experiences, challenges, and achievements. Such formats make it possible to create a genuine dialogue and build trust, as audiences hear real stories rather than generalised statements."

According to the expert, this would increase both the visibility and societal recognition of women's military experience.

The second major barrier identified is the refusal of some military units to consider women candidates for certain positions. Formally, such practices have no legal basis: current legislation does not prohibit women from holding specific combat roles. In practice, however, women applicants either receive rejections on the grounds of their gender or experience a complete breakdown in communication.

This has negative consequences for both sides: clearly, it limits the professional realisation of women candidates while simultaneously depriving military units of motivated personnel. Drawing on their own experiences, respondents emphasize that such refusals are based on outdated notions about women's "proper roles" and their physical and intellectual capacities. Respondent 7 described one particularly paradoxical case:

"A fellow servicewoman of mine applied to multiple units, and they called her back... She has a unisex name, so they addressed her as a man. She corrected them, and they said, 'Oh, sorry, in that case you're not a good fit for us'—simply because she is a woman. For me, this is a very strange story given the severe personnel shortages in the military, especially when women could fill positions, they are fully capable of performing."

Yuliia Bilousova, a veteran and an expert with Veteranka Movement, also reinforced the argument about the importance of societal attitudes and the normalisation of women's presence in combat roles. Although women formally have access to such positions, in practice many units remain reluctant to assign these roles to women, even when they may be better trained and more motivated than others, including those who, for instance, have returned from unauthorised absence, for whom state authorities have repeatedly revised return mechanisms in an effort to strengthen motivation for service. As Yuliia noted, society is often hostile toward women service members, because:

"She abandoned her children because she is a bad mother, a bad wife; she should be stripped of her parental rights. And the fact that she is fighting so that her children do not end up under occupation does not interest anyone."

Therefore, alongside ensuring real, practical access to all positions, a shift in the paradigm of societal perception is equally important — a topic that will be explored in greater detail below. Respondent 6, who attempted to join Azov in a combat role but, due to the unit's policy, ultimately enlisted in the 3rd Separate Assault Brigade as a UAV operator, explained:

"The first place I went was Azov, and even at the recruitment centre itself, the female recruiter made it very clear with her whole demeanour that it was like, 'Well, little girl, what are you doing here?' I asked, 'What combat positions do you have?' and she replied, 'Combat ones — I don't even know, we don't really take girls.' So, essentially, I didn't get any information

from them at all. They offered me a position as a cook or in personnel administration, but with the condition that to be a cook I needed formal training, and to work in personnel I needed an accounting background. So, you could say it was a kind of choice without a choice."

This issue has also been identified in other studies, including a recent study conducted by the recruitment platform Lobby X. In June 2025, the platform carried out two online questionnaires: one among women who applied for military vacancies via Lobby X, Reserve+, and Diia (316 respondents), and another among representatives of military units involved in recruitment (153 unit representatives) (Lobby X, 2025).

When discussing recruitment-related challenges, respondents pointed to the "lack of communication from military units at the recruitment stage; unwillingness to consider women for combat roles; commanders lack of competency; bureaucracy and excessive paperwork; and the absence of career advancement opportunities" (Lobby X, 2025, p. 10). In addition, among the 104 participants who responded to this question, every second respondent reported having experienced gender-based discrimination during recruitment and/or military service (Lobby X, 2025, p. 10). Given that the number of responses is smaller than the overall sample size, it can be assumed that this question was optional and that a degree of self-selection is therefore present. Nevertheless, the existence of these responses indicates that such practices and experiences continue to occur in recruitment processes and/or military service.

The results of the same study show that 77% of surveyed military units are willing to consider women as candidates, while 23% are not (Lobby X, 2025). However, even among units that expressed such willingness, women are not considered equally for all positions. Figure 3.6 illustrates which specialties are prioritised by military units and which are preferred by women candidates. The data reveal certain discrepancies: military units predominantly consider women for medical roles, whereas medicine does not rank among the top priorities for candidates themselves. Even greater divergence is observed with regard to kitchen and press office positions. While units often stereotypically assume that women candidates will be interested in "traditionally female" roles, women's actual preferences do not support this assumption.



Figure 1.6. Positions for which military units consider women and positions women consider for themselves, according to Lobby X, 2025, p. 11

Representatives of military units that are not prepared to recruit women cited a range of explanations for this stance. The most frequently mentioned included “physiological capacity” (54.3%), “women’s romanticisation of military service” (34.3%), “previous negative experience with women service members” (28.6%), “the inability to ensure adequate living conditions” (22.9%), “decisions by command” (11.4%), and “male service members’ unwillingness to serve alongside women” (2.9%), among others (Lobby X, 2025, p. 12). As the authors of this report, grounded in a feminist perspective, we unequivocally disagree with these “explanations” and do not consider them valid justifications for refusing to consider women as candidates. Nevertheless, we see value in identifying and understanding these views in depth, as this is necessary for planning further advocacy efforts aimed at ensuring equal rights and opportunities for women in the military.

As the authors of the Lobby X study themselves note, whose position we share, “the barriers are largely not institutional, but cultural and organisational, and therefore can be changed” (Lobby X). Moreover, they must be changed, given the relatively high mobilisation potential of women, as evidenced by the findings of this study and by women’s responses in the national survey. The reluctance of military units to recruit women cannot be understood as an isolated issue or as a lack of competence on the part of individual candidates. Rather, this situation represents a systemic reproduction of gender inequality in the military. As a result, a vicious circle emerges: women are forced to invest significantly more effort to prove their professional competence → fewer women enter military service → fewer positive role models are available → fewer women express a willingness to join the armed forces.

Overcoming this barrier primarily requires changes in organisational culture and recruitment practices at the unit level. However, rather than attempting to “convince” all units simultaneously, we consider it more effective to pursue a gradual approach by disseminating the “success stories” of units that already actively recruit and integrate women. If these examples and outcomes are communicated systematically, demonstrating that women’s participation does not diminish but rather enhances unit

effectiveness, this can become a catalyst for change among units that remain hesitant, and eventually even among the 23% that are currently unwilling to consider women as candidates.

Despite gradual positive changes for women in the military, gender stereotypes remain one of the key socio-cultural barriers for women seeking to realise their military potential. The perception of defence as primarily a male obligation continues to shape women's pathways into military service as well as their experiences within it. Gender stereotypes may manifest at various stages, beginning with the moment a woman first voices her intention to enlist to those close to her. According to respondents, such a decision can provoke resistance from family members, close social circles, or employers. By contrast, when a man decides to join the military, similar criticism from his surroundings is generally absent, and the decision is typically met with greater support. Respondent 2 noted that she encountered strong opposition from those close to her:

“I kept hearing, ‘Anyone but you... You’re such a sweet little girl — what are you thinking?”

Overcoming resistance at this initial stage does not mark the end of the barriers. Respondents reported that they continued to systematically encounter unequal treatment and lowered expectations regarding their ability to serve during training, selection, and the process of entering service itself. During training courses, instructors often displayed distrust toward women's readiness for service, devoting greater attention to male trainees. Respondents noted that expectations placed on women tend to be lower, and their participation in training is frequently perceived as temporary or not fully serious. As Respondent 2 explained:

“I observed favouritism toward men, because instructors were more confident that men would actually go on to serve rather than drop out. Women, on the other hand, were treated as civilians who had come just to find out more, with no real certainty that they would actually join. As a result, more time during training was devoted to men.”

A systemic problem lies in the double standards applied to assessments of motivation and competence. Men's motivation is typically presumed to be sufficient by default, as they are subject to military obligation and mobilisation, and their presence in the armed forces is perceived as "self-evident" and expected. By contrast, women are sometimes required to justify their right to serve and to provide additional proof of competence, as their motivation is often regarded as less serious or merely situational. Respondent 2 described her experience of training and selection:

“The attitude toward us is different. Many of the men doubt our motivation... I have to, essentially, bring three or four certificates just to prove that I’m capable — like, please, take me.”

At the stage of entering military service, women often encounter not support but additional resistance and stereotypical remarks. Instead of assistance with documentation or navigating bureaucratic procedures, representatives of military institutions frequently display distrust, scepticism, or an explicit unwillingness to help. Women's participation in the military is not perceived as natural or legitimate, which forces them not only to go through already demanding procedures but also to explain and justify their very decision to serve. In many cases, they are confronted with comments that devalue their choice or directly discourage them from mobilisation. As Respondent 4 described:

“A guy at the Territorial Recruitment and Social Support Centre told me, ‘Why are you going there? You should be having kids, replenishing Ukrainians...,’ and the chief medical officer said to me, ‘Why do I need all this? Stay at home — you’re a girl.”

Moreover, the devaluation of women's military experience often continues even during or after their service. For instance, experts noted that a number of issues related to gender stereotypes are also characteristic of veterans' experiences. Alla Bieloshenko observed that:

“...the stereotyping and disregard for women’s military experience is currently one of the key problems — most notably in the context of employment and teams’ unwillingness to accept that a woman may have been a commander or spent most of her time performing combat tasks. This is especially the case when a woman veteran is active on social media, where she is often subjected to harassment and abuse, which in turn exacerbates psychological difficulties.”

Several women service members who participated in in-depth interviews also noted that, at least at the initial stage of service, they were first perceived as women and only later as professionals capable of performing their duties effectively, assuming responsibility, and taking on leadership roles within their units. Consequently, the issue of societal perceptions of women veterans can be traced back to experiences during military service itself.

This once again underscores the importance of having effective transition mechanisms both from civilian to military life at the beginning of service and, conversely, from military to civilian life after service. This is particularly important for women and men with dual status, for example, women veterans who have returned to military service, whose needs should be at the centre of interagency coordination between the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry for Veterans Affairs.

1.3 Institutional and Legal Barriers to Women's Military Service

First and foremost, it should be acknowledged that compared to 2014, the situation regarding the recruitment of women into military service and the creation of opportunities for building a military career has improved significantly. As of today, it is already possible to state that women service members and their needs have become visible at the state level.

Thus, since the publication of the first *Invisible Battalion* study (Martsenyuk, ed., 2016), which documented the ban on women occupying combat positions, their invisibility in combat operations, and the resulting denial of basic guarantees such as compensation in cases of injury or death (for the families of women defenders), Ukraine's Defence Forces have made significant progress toward advancing gender equality in military units. Women are now able to obtain military education across all specialties (an issue addressed, among others, in the *Invisible Battalion 4.0* study). However, a substantial number of barriers faced by women during service have been resolved only partially or at a declarative level. For example, problems with equipment and supplies persist, and there is still no comprehensive and fully developed mechanism for preventing and responding to sexual harassment and gender-based violence. Since the publication of the *Invisible Battalion 3.0* study in 2021, no systemic regulatory framework to address these issues has been adopted. Overall, both in the context of countering harassment and in other forms of non-statutory relations, the complaints system remains ineffective and marked by a lack of trust, leaving individuals, regardless of gender, within the system without access to adequate support.

The number of women in Ukraine's Defence Forces has been growing rapidly. In particular, as Brigadier General of Justice S. Melnyk noted, "as of 1 January 2025, more than 70,000 women are serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine... which represents a 20% increase compared to 2022" (Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, 2025).

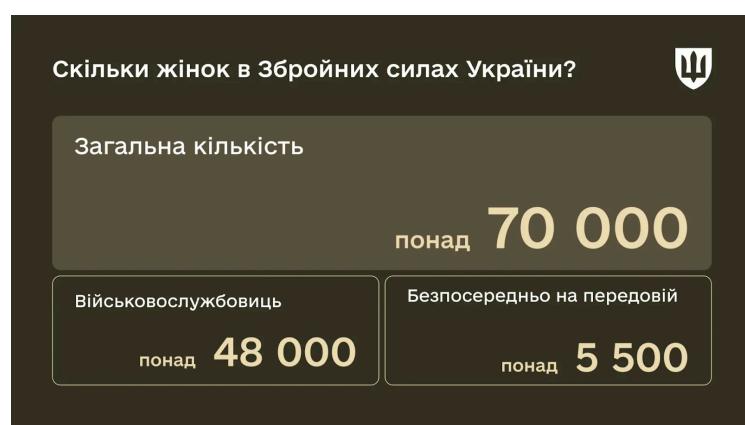


Figure 1.7. Number of women in the Armed Forces of Ukraine as of January 1, 2025
(Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, 2025)

However, even in 2025, systemic institutional and regulatory barriers remain that negatively affect women's ability to fully realise their potential in military service. Some of

these challenges are, of course, gender-neutral and affect both women and men, while others are specific to women's experiences.

Barriers to Entering Military Service

Some in-depth interview respondents reported encountering barriers to the start of service even before signing a contract or being mobilised. These barriers included both unlawful refusals or requirements that would not be imposed on men (e.g., requiring parental consent for an adult woman to sign a contract), incomplete or misleading information about the conditions and nature of service, intimidation during the preparatory stage, and similar practices. Several respondents also reported cases of being discouraged from signing a contract in general or from applying for a specific position in particular, with such discouragement justified by references to the alleged difficulty of service conditions or the availability of other (predominantly rear or non-combat) positions.

Despite the fact that the initial stage of military service is thoroughly regulated by legislation and subordinate regulations (regardless of whether a person begins this process at a recruitment centre or at a Territorial Recruitment and Social Support Centre), in practice women often encounter difficulties, particularly when they apply for positions involving the execution of combat orders and when they lack prior service experience.

According to Part 11 of Article 1 of the Law of Ukraine On Military Duty and Military Service (2025), women who are fit for military service by health status and age and who have completed vocational (vocational-technical), professional pre-higher, or higher education institutions and obtained a medical or pharmaceutical specialty are subject to mandatory registration as persons liable for military service.

Women who possess a specialty and/or profession related to a corresponding military occupational specialty included in the list approved by the Ministry of Defence, and who are fit for military service by health status and age [with the exception of those with a medical or pharmaceutical specialty — authors' note], are registered as persons liable for military service on a voluntary basis.

The list of specialties and professions related to the designated military occupational specialties is established by Ministry of Defence Order #313 dated October 11, 2021 (as amended) (2022).

According to this law, "women who are registered for military service may be called up for military service or engaged in activities to ensure the defence of the state during wartime on a voluntary basis. In peacetime, women may be admitted to military service and service in the military reserve only on a voluntary basis (under contract). Women perform military duty on an equal basis with men (with the exception of cases provided by legislation on the protection of motherhood and childhood, as well as provisions prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of sex), which includes voluntary enlistment (under contract) and conscription for military service, completion of military service, service in the military reserve, fulfilment of military obligations while in the reserve, and

compliance with military registration rules" (Law On Military Duty and Military Service, 2025, Art. 1, Part 12).

Women who are not registered for military service may also conclude a contract for military service, provided that they undergo professional and psychological screening and meet the requirements set out in Article 20 of the Law On Military Duty and Military Service.

This is how the commencement of military service is defined at the regulatory level, taking into account the specific features of women's military service.

However, this framework only partially reflects the actual experiences shared by women service members specifically for this study. For instance, one adult respondent (who was already serving in the military at the time of the interview) was repeatedly informed at the Territorial Recruitment and Social Support Centre that she needed permission from her mother or father to sign a contract. Another respondent in an in-depth interview was denied the opportunity to sign a contract for a combat position because recruiters were unwilling to enlist the only daughter of a military serviceman.

Many respondents also reported experiencing various forms of pressure, even when such pressure was subtle or informal. In particular, women described having to actively demand access to professional training or retraining opportunities, as well as repeatedly prove that they genuinely wished to occupy certain positions (despite the availability of positions within unit staffing structures), among other challenges.

As noted by Respondent 9 during an in-depth interview:

"A woman in service has to prove that she deserves the position. If a man is physically healthy and doesn't drink, he already meets all the requirements."

Respondents also noted that, when applying to recruitment centres or territorial recruitment offices, they actively asked about cases of discrimination and, more broadly, about attitudes toward women. As one respondent explained, following her experience of service in one unit, she independently raised questions about discrimination and the general treatment of women when seeking a transfer. One of the factors that ultimately influenced her decision to transfer was the presence of "a supportive commander without gender bias."

The law also fails to account for societal stigmatisation, which is often present in media discourse when a woman with children (or relatives requiring care), or a woman employed in a civilian position, enters military service. As Respondent 15 recounted, prior to her dismissal, her employer repeatedly questioned why she was choosing to enlist, emphasising that military service is not mandatory for women and that they do not receive draft notices.

Therefore, in addition to improving legislation, it is important to disseminate recommendations for all relevant stakeholders not only on how women's military service

should be portrayed, but also on the initial stage of recruitment once a woman has already made the decision to enlist.

After the start of military service, despite all the positive developments, barriers for women service members unfortunately do not disappear.

Insufficient Capacity to Ensure Adequate Sanitary and Hygienic Conditions

Naturally, this does not refer to situations involving the execution of combat missions. However, even at permanent duty stations, conditions necessary to meet the hygienic needs of women service members may be lacking. In such cases, the standards set out in legislation are not human-centred and do not prioritise the comfort of service members.

For example, a provision of the Military Regulations currently in force stipulates that “service members must bathe in a bathhouse at least once a week, while cooks and bakers must additionally take a daily shower. Mechanics-drivers (drivers) and other service members whose duties involve the operation and maintenance of weapons, combat equipment, and other machinery shall take a shower as needed.”

At the same time, another provision of the regulations states that “washbasins shall be installed at a ratio of one tap per 5-7 persons, with at least two foot baths with running water per company; shower facilities shall be equipped at a ratio of one tap (shower head) per 15-20 persons. In workshops, vehicle parks, bakeries, bread factories, and canteens, shower facilities with warm water must also be provided, and soap and towels must be available near washbasins.”

Taken together, these provisions allow for the conclusion that the absence of warm water may not be considered a violation of the regulations. Thus, even at the normative level, access to showers remains dependent on position and time rather than on human needs. In the case of women service members during menstruation, such an approach is entirely unacceptable.

This places the everyday living conditions of women and men service members not only dependent on the conditions under which service-related tasks are performed, but also on the personal initiative of commanders or individual personnel. At the same time, making access to showers contingent on occupational duties does not, in general, contribute positively to meeting contemporary sanitary and hygienic needs.

We emphasize that this discussion does not concern periods when women service members are engaged in the execution of combat tasks.

These legal provisions generally require updating, as regulating laundry practices or inspections of footwraps (which are also mentioned in the regulations) appears clearly outdated in the context of today's Defence Forces. Moreover, such provisions enable command staff to resort to manipulative practices by dismissing service members complaints about living conditions (regardless of gender), invoking the regulations to justify providing only minimally acceptable conditions, even at deployment locations

where the distance from the line of active hostilities would allow for a higher level of comfort.

In practice, these norms have a negative impact on both women and men.

With regard to accommodation arrangements outside permanent duty stations, the regulations stipulate that women should be housed in separate tents allocated for three persons. However, women service members currently in service reported cases in which these standards were not observed: in one instance, five to six women were accommodated simultaneously in a “women’s tent” (where their personal belongings were also stored). As a result, one respondent in an in-depth interview expressed a preference to sleep elsewhere rather than in an overcrowded tent.

Another female service member noted that she did not feel safe in the area designated for women’s sleeping quarters due to incidents of harassment, whereas in a different location she could rely on the protection of her fellow servicemen. This case referred to the early period of the full-scale invasion, when temporary sleeping arrangements were organised outside permanent duty stations.

Challenges of Reconciling Reproductive Rights, Pregnancy, and Military Service

Several respondents reported having experienced pregnancy during military service, or noted that their fellow servicewomen were pregnant while serving. This brought to light a range of atypical problems faced by women service members during pregnancy, which directly affect their subsequent decisions about whether to continue or terminate their service.

First and foremost, respondents pointed to the absence or insufficiency of medical care throughout pregnancy. In situations where it was not possible to promptly secure an appointment with a trusted physician, qualified specialists were often unavailable at or near permanent duty stations, and commanders refused to authorise medical examinations at a woman’s place of residence.

Pregnant service members also reported difficulties in obtaining confirmation from civilian medical facilities where they were registered for prenatal care in order to formalise maternity leave. Instead, they were required to undergo a military medical commission to confirm the fact of pregnancy. Under Ministry of Defence Order #402 dated August 14, 2008, “maternity leave for women service members is granted on the basis of a decision of a hospital or garrison military medical commission from the date the right to leave arises, or on the basis of a medical certificate of temporary incapacity for work with the category ‘Pregnancy and childbirth’” (Regulations on Military Medical Examination in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, 2025).

BBC Ukraine has reported similar challenges faced by pregnant women service members, effectively echoing the same issues described by respondents in this study (Hrybovska, 2025).

Another need articulated by respondents as crucial for their ability to remain in the military for a longer period concerns state protection and support of women’s

reproductive rights, including access to assisted reproductive technologies such as in vitro fertilization (IVF). This need arises from the fact that women service members also sustain health injuries that may negatively affect their reproductive function.

Currently, Law #3496-IX of November 22, 2023, "On Amendments to Certain Laws of Ukraine on Ensuring the Right of Servicemen and Other Persons to Biological Parenthood (Motherhood)" (2024) is in force. It provides for the free collection, cryopreservation, and storage of reproductive cells in cases where reproductive function may be lost as a result of performing defence-related duties. However, respondents' expectations regarding state support for using reproductive technologies are significantly broader.

As early as 2023, a study by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Ukraine demonstrated that access to IVF technologies constitutes an important need for contemporary women veterans. According to women veterans, it would be essential to introduce benefits or coverage for IVF (assisted reproduction), as "a large number of women have experienced damage to their reproductive function or missed their reproductive window, yet they would still like to have children once they return from service" (Kirillova et al., 2023, p. 39).

Issues related to motherhood and its protection can be identified as a separate normative barrier, given the absence of clear and predictable guarantees for combining military service and motherhood (with the exception of leave provisions). This barrier also has an institutional dimension. In practice, a military unit is unable to create conditions that adequately account for the rights of the child in cases where a mother is raising a child on her own.

With regard to the right to the protection of motherhood and childhood, the Internal Service Regulations (2024) contain only a fragmented provision related to daily duty assignments. Specifically, they state that "service members shall be assigned to daily duty in compliance with legislation on the protection of motherhood and childhood. Depending on rank and position, women service members may be assigned as assistant to the duty officer of a military unit, duty officer or assistant duty officer at a checkpoint, duty officer or orderly of a medical unit (from among medical personnel), duty officer of headquarters, canteen, courier, or duty officer or orderly of a dormitory."

If a woman does not require such preferential treatment or, at her own request, seeks to perform other types of daily duty assignments, a commander cannot authorise this without risking a formal violation of the regulations. Certain regulatory provisions related to duty assignments or deployments (in cases where no objective grounds exist, such as the need to care for a child) may therefore lead to a deterioration of service conditions. For instance, when women are prohibited from participating in duty rotations even at their own request — citing the regulations — and are subsequently criticised for allegedly being unable to perform service on an equal footing with men.

Limited Access to Certain Medical Services for Women Service Members

As of 2025, the Internal Service Regulations (2024) assign to the head of the medical service the duty to "organise medical equipment and ensure the sanitary condition of

the personal hygiene and gynaecological disease prevention room for women service members." Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine Resolution #1234 of October 29, 2024, "On Approving the Procedure for Material, Medical, Psychological, and Social Support of Service Members with Due Consideration of the Needs of Women and Men" (2025), further stipulates that "healthcare facilities of the security and defence forces shall provide specialised medical care, including gynaecological and mammalogical examinations and treatment for women service members, as well as mammalogical and urological examinations and treatment for men service members. In the absence of military medical facilities or relevant departments or specialised medical equipment at the place of service or residence, as well as in urgent cases, medical care shall be provided by state or municipal healthcare institutions in accordance with the law."

However, it is evident that this requirement is not implemented everywhere in practice, as respondents in in-depth interviews frequently reported difficulties accessing medical care when experiencing gynaecological health issues.

In addition to delayed or limited access to specialised medical care, respondents also reported cases in which their fellow servicewomen were assigned to perform tasks despite health complaints, on the grounds that "if it really hurt that much, she would not have gone." Some of these and similar problems are partially addressed by Draft Law #13436 (2024), which proposes a number of safeguards for pregnant service members. These include, *inter alia*: a 5-day workweek with two days off; the possibility to extend working hours or reduce rest days only with the service member's consent and taking into account recommendations of the head of the medical service; assignment to daily duty, garrison duty, combat duty, or engagement in combat (special) tasks exclusively on a voluntary basis and with due regard to medical recommendations; and the establishment of categories of service members who may be assigned to duty rotations, combat duty, deployments, appointments, or transfers to another locality different from the child's place of permanent residence solely with their consent. On August 21, 2025, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine adopted the draft law in the first reading and it is currently being prepared for the second reading.

With regard to women veterans, respondents identified the lack of programmes for breast reconstructive surgery and breast prosthetics as a key issue, particularly given that a number of women service members were forced to leave the military during martial law due to oncological diseases (Beloshenko et al., 2025).

Gaps in the Material Supply Mechanism

Respondents in in-depth interviews who had experienced pregnancy during military service pointed to the absence of adapted uniforms, which significantly complicates the performance of even non-combat duties. However, challenges related to material supply are far broader. Although uniforms for women service members are formally provided for by Ministry of Defence Order #606 of November 20, 2017, Rules for Wearing Military Uniforms and Insignia by Service Members of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the State Special Transport Service, and Cadets of Military Lyceums (2024), the regulations provide no specific designs or adaptations for pregnant women.

As a result, women service members are often forced either to rely on civil society organisations (one respondent specifically mentioned the NGO Zemlyachky, which, within its limited capacity, responds to requests for uniforms that account for anatomical characteristics and operational needs) or to “find their own solutions.”

Some respondents identified the lack of women-adapted equipment more generally as a barrier during service, including plate carriers, underwear, and footwear in smaller sizes. Other respondents, by contrast, assessed the provision of uniforms as generally adequate but noted that they still prefer to purchase certain items independently.

It is worth noting that despite extensive research and statistical evidence demonstrating the growing number of women in the military, women service members of the AFU first received summer field uniform sets designed with female anthropometric parameters in mind only in 2024 (Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, 2024). The Ministry of Defence certified the first body armour specifically designed for women service members at the end of December 2023, featuring narrower shoulders and a widened lower section. In 2024, a second model of body armour for women service members was approved, developed by the company Temp-3000 (Kikhtenko, 2024).

Nevertheless, such equipment is still not systematically supplied. Respondents in in-depth interviews also reported continued use of male-designed protective equipment or the need to independently purchase armour plates, body armour, and related items.

Lack of a Comprehensive System to Prevent Gender-Based Violence and Sexual Harassment

Respondents in in-depth interviews reported experiencing manifestations of discrimination, such as inappropriate or offensive jokes and remarks, harassment, or other forms of behaviour that may constitute administrative or criminal offenses.

In particular, respondents complained about inappropriate or derogatory jokes made by instructors at training centres, especially in the context of additional training for prospective combat positions. They also described incidents involving attempts at unwanted physical contact or inappropriate comments. Several respondents further noted efforts to diminish the significance of their role within the unit, including assumptions that women join the defence forces primarily to find a partner and lack any other motivation.

It is important to note that Ukraine has long had in force the Law “On the Principles of Preventing and Combating Discrimination.” In addition, the general duties of service members set out in the AFU Internal Service Regulations (2024) have been supplemented with an explicit reference to the prohibition of discrimination and harassment. These duties include the obligation to “respect combat and military traditions; assist other service members who are in danger; prevent them from committing unlawful acts; respect the honour and dignity of every person; and refrain from violations related to discrimination on the grounds of sex, sexual harassment, gender-based violence, and offenses against sexual freedom and sexual integrity.”

However, it is evident that such general provisions do not currently constitute a comprehensive mechanism for responding to cases of sexual harassment or discrimination. Respondents repeatedly identified this gap as a source of concern when considering entry into military service or as a criterion for selecting a unit. For example, Respondent 11 noted:

“First and foremost, during the interview, I asked about attitudes toward women in the unit...”

Some respondents, drawing on both their personal experience and cases they had learned about through media coverage (Bida, 2021), expressed concerns about the inability to hold perpetrators accountable.

In 2024, in implementation of the Istanbul Convention, amendments were introduced to the Code of Ukraine on Administrative Offenses to establish administrative liability for sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is defined as the intentional commission, against a person's will, of offensive or degrading actions of a sexual nature, expressed verbally or non-verbally (including words, gestures, or body movements). The code was supplemented with Article 173-7, which regulates administrative liability for sexual harassment.

Prior to these amendments (i.e., before 2024), there was no legal possibility to hold an individual administratively liable for such actions.

However, a legal gap remains, as corresponding amendments were not introduced to Article 15 of the Code of Ukraine on Administrative Offenses, which lists the administrative offenses for which military personnel may be held liable. Currently, this article includes, *inter alia*, “the commission of domestic violence, gender-based violence, failure to comply with an emergency restraining order, or failure to notify authorities of one's temporary place of residence in the event an emergency restraining order is issued,” but contains no reference to sexual harassment.

In 2024, the Disciplinary Statute of the Armed Forces of Ukraine introduced requirements regarding the composition of commissions conducting internal investigations into cases of harassment or gender-based violence, stipulating that such commissions must include representatives of both sexes and a psychologist.

Undoubtedly, these changes indicate a gradual improvement in protection and prevention mechanisms against harassment, including within the AFU; however, a comprehensive mechanism for addressing sexual harassment has yet to be formally approved. Despite the fact that a petition calling for the implementation of an already developed instruction on preventing sexual harassment and gender-based violence, initiated by the Women Veterans Movement (2024), collected the required 25,000+ signatures on the President of Ukraine Official Website, the mechanism has unfortunately not yet been implemented in practice.

Ineffectiveness of the Complaints System

As noted in a study by the NGO Pryntsy: "Given the requirements of military discipline and subordination, a written report remains the key instrument for initiating official responses to issues within a military unit. In particular, it is used not only to address personal matters, but also to report violations of order or to provide explanations regarding one's own actions. At the same time, practice reveals a number of systemic problems that undermine the effectiveness of this instrument" (Hatseniuk, 2025).

With regard to interaction with state authorities, it is important, according to expert Alla Bieloshenko, to minimise the number of formal responses to inquiries and complaints that remain without effective follow-up:

"It is also necessary to introduce a military ombudsperson who would be able to build an independent system and respond effectively to complaints. The issue of anonymity remains particularly acute..."

The need to develop a complaints mechanism that upholds the principle of confidentiality is also evidenced by a recent study conducted by the NGO Pryntsy: "A confidential reporting channel must be organised in such a way that the information received can genuinely serve as a basis for an appropriate response and the achievement of tangible results. Trust in such a channel therefore directly depends on its effectiveness. Accordingly, the institutional design of this channel requires careful consideration to ensure that the body or bodies receiving such reports have the capacity to process them effectively" (Hatseniuk, 2025, p. 26).

Data obtained in response to public information requests submitted within the framework of this study confirm that the issues discussed here are not merely subjective accounts of individual respondents. Specifically, over the entire period of its operation, the Office of the Presidential Commissioner for the Protection of the Rights of Military Personnel and Their Family Members received 35 appeals from women service members. Of these, six concerned sexual harassment (two were confirmed), two related to violations of the right to dignified conditions of service (one was confirmed, while another appeal was anonymous), and three concerned refusals to ensure rights related to pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood (all three were confirmed).

In response to an information request submitted to the Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights, it was reported that between January 1, 2022, and August 5, 2025, a total of 569 appeals from women service members were registered: 31 in 2022, 172 in 2023, 185 in 2024, and 181 in 2025 (as of August 5, 2025). Among these, eight appeals were identified as directly raising issues of discrimination, bullying, and sexual or psychological violence. Specifically, in 2023, one appeal concerned discrimination on the grounds of sex and one concerned bullying; in 2024, one appeal concerned sexual violence and one concerned mobbing; and in 2025, two appeals concerned psychological violence and two concerned discrimination on the grounds of sex or gender identity. In all cases, explanations were provided, and in some instances, rights were restored or the appeals were placed under monitoring.

Data on appeals submitted by women service members to both institutions confirm that complaints regarding violations of rights often concern both issues of discrimination and harassment, as well as purely everyday and service-related problems. At the same time, this official statistics is not exhaustive and does not fully reflect the actual scale of the problems, as a significant number of women simply do not file complaints. This is due both to fears of negative consequences for themselves and to the lack of an adequate systemic response to violations that have already been documented. Evidence of the systemic and persistent nature of this problem can be found, for example, in the findings of the *Invisible Battalion 3.0* study, which was published prior to the start of Russia's full-scale invasion. According to *Invisible Battalion 3.0*, "most women who participated in the study reported that they had experienced sexual harassment on at least several occasions; the difference compared to men's experiences is statistically significant. The findings also indicate that in a number of cases the perpetrators were under the influence of alcohol or drugs" (Martsenyuk, ed., 2021, p. 174). The risks for complainants are particularly high in cases where the perpetrator is a commander or another official holding authority over subordinates. As noted by Respondent 12 in the in-depth interviews conducted for this study:

"If I file a complaint against my commander, he will most likely be promoted."

Despite the experiences described by women service members, a significant share of the problems within the armed forces are gender-neutral and hinder the performance of military duties for both women and men. Systemic obstacles affecting both women and men include long waiting periods, pervasive bureaucracy, lack of coordination between institutions, as well as disorganisation in the processes of entering service and completing Basic Military Training. Respondent 4 described this problem in detail:

"I applied in February... and I only received the official order in June... you're left in a state of limbo: it seems like they are taking you, but you don't know when."

The absence of defined terms of service, a clear rotation mechanism, prolonged waiting times for transfers, and other systemic obstacles (despite the digitalization of processes) are among the factors that cause both women and men to hesitate when considering entry into military service.

An extremely acute problem concerns the provision of habitable accommodation equipped with a basic level of everyday amenities and not placing the financial burden on the individual residing in the building, apartment, or part thereof. This issue is relevant for both women and men; however, it requires a separate, dedicated analytical study (Yevych, 2025).

Overall, in the area of social rights and guarantees, women pointed to a shared, gender-neutral experience of difficulties in accessing leave (in particular annual leave), primarily citing a range of objective and subjective factors: understaffing within units, the specific nature of assigned tasks, the inability to ensure rotations, attitudes of commanders, internal unit rules, and related considerations.

1.4 Summary of Chapter 1

It can be concluded that women encounter specific barriers both during the recruitment process and in the course of military service. While acknowledging that a significant share of challenges in the Defence Forces is gender-neutral, it is important to emphasize that some obstacles and barriers are, unfortunately, specific to women's military experience. Whereas at the recruitment stage it is crucial to increase the visibility of women and their experiences, as well as to improve awareness among recruitment centres and Territorial Recruitment and Social Support Centres regarding women's rights and opportunities in the AFU, the remaining institutional and regulatory barriers require more comprehensive regulation.

In order to strengthen the protection of the reproductive rights of women service members, the system of state guarantees requires further regulatory and institutional development. To improve medical support, it is advisable to simplify the procedure for granting leave (including maternity leave and childcare leave) by allowing women to independently choose a medical facility without the need to undergo a Military Medical Commission.

The Internal Service Regulations require substantial updating with regard to ensuring and monitoring compliance with sanitary and hygiene standards, as well as revising the rules governing women's military service during duty shifts and at night (at least where this does not conflict with the best interests of the child). Equally critical for military service is introducing an effective and safe complaints mechanism, along with developing a system for preventing and addressing sexual harassment and gender-based violence. Addressing these and other issues identified in the report would contribute to strengthening the human-centred nature of military service and increasing motivation to serve, particularly among women who, due to their position or professional specialisation, are not currently subject to mandatory mobilisation, while also enabling them to build effective military careers both under martial law and beyond.

The analysis confirms that, despite the formal opening of opportunities for women in the military, Ukraine's defence system remains insufficiently gender-sensitive. Existing barriers — institutional, social, legal, and informational — significantly affect women's participation in military service. Key challenges include practical obstacles in recruitment procedures, limited access to positions, an underdeveloped regulatory framework governing service conditions and the protection of rights, and persistent societal stereotypes. At the same time, the study reveals a high level of motivation among women considering military service, indicating substantial yet unrealized human resource potential.

CHAPTER 2. WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF MILITARY SERVICE AND THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN SERVICE MEMBERS

The previous section outlined the general landscape of societal attitudes toward women's military service, as well as the barriers encountered, or anticipated, by respondents who either planned to join the military or had prior service experience before the onset of the full-scale invasion. The barriers described by women do not merely exist in media discourse or regulatory frameworks; they have a tangible impact on the individual lived experiences of women service members.

Undoubtedly, some barriers are gender-neutral and negatively affect the military service of both women and men. However, a number of barriers are specific to women's military service. This section focuses on the correlation between women's perceptions of military service and the actual experiences they acquire while serving in rear positions or performing combat tasks. For the purposes of this section, the analysis considers only the lived experiences of women who consciously chose military service and the defence of state sovereignty, and who, to some extent, were aware prior to enlistment of the scope and nature of the obstacles they would face. At the same time, a significant number of women are consciously preparing to join the Defence Forces, planning to enlist or considering this path. The concerns they articulate regarding military service often transform or acquire a different depth once service begins. In our view, this is partly due to a lack of effective communication examples, particularly in the media, as discussed in section 1.2.

2.1 Why Women Consider Joining the Military and Why They Decide Not to Join

The results of the online survey conducted by the research team demonstrated a relatively high level of support for the idea of women serving in the military. This is primarily due to a process of self-selection among participants in the online survey: responses were provided mainly by women who were interested in the topic and who already demonstrated a certain level of readiness or inclination to engage in similar initiatives. It should also be noted that the results of this online survey should not be compared with the results of the nationally representative survey presented above, as the wording of the questions and the sampling design differed significantly.

Overall, a high level of support for women's military service was recorded across all age groups of respondents, ranging from 74% to 84% (see Table 1.1; data rounded to the nearest whole number).

Classification of Respondents		Strongly support	Somewhat support	Difficult to say	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose
Age	18-24 years	49%	35%	11%	4%	2%
	25-34 years	35%	45%	15%	4%	2%
	35-44 years	44%	35%	12%	6%	4%
	45-60 years	40%	35%	16%	4%	5%
Presence of children or dependents	Yes	39%	39%	13%	6%	3%
	No	39%	42%	14%	3%	2%
Military service experience, education at military higher education institutions, and training	Yes	68%	19%	9%	1%	3%
	No	34%	44%	15%	4%	2%
Overall result		39%	41%	14%	4%	3%

Table 1.1. Attitudes towards the idea of women serving in the military

The analysis of responses demonstrates that one of the factors influencing support for or opposition to women's military service is the presence of children or dependents. Among respondents who oppose women's military service, more than 50% have children or dependents, whereas among younger respondents who support it, such responsibilities are almost absent (see Table 1.2). In age groups where family responsibilities are more common, particularly among respondents aged 35-44 and 45-60, higher shares of both "difficult to say" responses and opposition are observed.

Attitudes toward the idea of women's military service	Do not have children	Have children
Strongly support	62%	39%
Somewhat support	63%	37%
Difficult to say	63%	37%
Somewhat oppose	42%	58%
Strongly oppose	50%	50%

Table 1.2. Attitudes toward the idea of women's military service by presence of children

The analysis also shows that military experience is an important factor shaping attitudes toward the idea of women's military service and constitutes one of the strongest drivers of support. Only 15% of all respondents report having personal experience of military service, education at military higher education institutions, or participation in training programmes. This relatively small group demonstrates a significantly higher level of support compared to respondents without such experience. The difference is most pronounced in the "strongly support" category: nearly one-quarter of respondents in this group have a military background, compared to only 7% among those who "somewhat support" the idea. Among respondents who are uncertain ("difficult to say"), the share of women with military experience is 9%, which is lower than among strong supporters but higher than among those expressing only partial support. This suggests that even direct exposure to military practice does not always translate into a clear position; for some respondents, service experience may also have fostered a more critical view of the conditions that limit women's participation in the military. By contrast, military experience is almost absent among opponents of women's military service: only 5% in the "somewhat oppose" category and 17% in the "strongly oppose" category report such experience (see Table 1.3).

Attitudes Toward the Idea of Women's Military Service	No military experience	Have military experience
Strongly support	75%	25%
Somewhat support	93%	7%
Difficult to say	91%	9%
Somewhat oppose	95%	5%
Strongly oppose	83%	17%

Table 1.3. Attitudes toward the idea of women's military service, by prior military experience

Thus, the findings indicate sustained approval of women's participation in military service across all age groups, with the greatest variation observed among older respondents, where higher levels of uncertainty and opposition emerge. In these groups,

family circumstances, including the presence of children or dependents, and stable employment appear to be decisive factors. The highest level of support is observed among the youngest respondents.

Women's Views and Comments on Military Service

During the study, 93 out of 476 respondents (20%) provided written responses in the section "Please leave your comment or opinion regarding women's participation in the Defence Forces." These comments enabled a deeper understanding of women's motivations, the barriers influencing decisions about joining military service, and their perceptions of military service more broadly.

Full support for women's military service (50%). Comments from respondents in this group demonstrated, first, admiration for women serving in the military and recognition of their courage and sense of responsibility. Respondents who fully support women's military service also put forward proposals to improve service conditions, such as "short-term contracts for women, for example, for one year" or "fixed-term contracts so that women can try it out and make an informed decision." These suggestions reflect a desire to adapt military service to women's needs and create safer and more accessible entry pathways into the armed forces. Some respondents also expressed personal readiness to join in the event of mobilisation, emphasizing their motivation to defend the state: "Deep down, I am waiting for the mobilisation of women. If it were mandatory and applied to everyone, I would join 100%." At the same time, many comments reflect a critical stance toward systemic problems within the military. For example, a respondent with veteran status noted: "The lack of rights affects all service members, discrimination in the military is extreme, and I had to buy my own women's uniform," while another respondent remarked: "Stories about harassment of women by commanders have surfaced repeatedly, and nothing is being done about it."

Somewhat support women's military service (33%). This group placed emphasis on personal and family-related barriers. Respondents frequently cited fear of physical danger and risks to children, as well as psychological factors: "I am afraid of death, and even more so of injury and captivity," "A tendency toward depressive episodes that depend on sleep and nutrition," and family responsibilities: "My husband is serving, and I am the only one who can provide stable conditions for the child." These comments also reflect systemic concerns about the military, particularly its insufficient preparedness for women's service and the lack of viable exit options: "The army is not ready for women's service — from uniforms to pervasive sexism." Overall, this group demonstrated support for the idea of military service while simultaneously expressing caution due to personal and structural risks.

"Difficult to say" (13%). This group's comments revealed an internal dilemma between willingness to contribute to the state and awareness of existing limitations and risks. For example, one participant noted: "If the state requires it, women may be mobilised, but for rear positions," while another emphasized fear of a dual burden: "I am afraid of the double burden placed on women. The trauma for children would be too severe."

“Do not support” (4%). The smallest group of respondents expressed categorical opposition to women’s participation in military service. Their comments focused either on practical considerations, such as: “First, develop uniforms designed for women’s bodies and ensure equal pay,” or on principled arguments, for example: “This is not women’s work.”

Overall, the analysis of comments demonstrated the multidimensional nature of motivations and barriers, ranging from admiration and patriotism to fears of physical risk, systemic distrust, and family obligations. Importantly, even among respondents who support military service, women frequently propose concrete ways to improve service conditions, pointing to a desire for the realistic and safe inclusion of women in the armed forces.

Women’s Personal Readiness for Military Service

Overall, the vast majority of respondents had at least considered the possibility of military service. Out of 476 women surveyed, 410 respondents (86%) reported that they had either seriously or casually thought about joining the military, though predominantly at the level of interest rather than actual readiness. More than half of respondents (54%) reported having considered this possibility in a non-serious manner, while only one third (32%) had seriously contemplated military service. Only 14% (66 respondents) stated that they had never considered this option or were not prepared to consider it in the future. These findings point to a relatively high level of latent readiness, which nevertheless varies significantly by age, the presence of children or dependents, and prior military experience.

The highest levels of readiness were observed among women aged 18-24 and 45-60, while the lowest levels were recorded among women aged 25-34, which may be related to family circumstances and career considerations. The presence of children or dependents reduces readiness only partially and does not constitute a key factor among respondents. A more influential factor proved to be prior experience of military service, education at military educational institutions, or participation in training programmes: among women with such experience, more than 78% reported having seriously considered joining the military.

Classification of Respondents		Yes, seriously considered it	Thought about it, but not seriously	No, never considered it	No, and I will never consider it
Age	18-24 years	39%	53%	5%	4%
	25-34 years	27%	60%	11%	2%
	35-44 years	36%	49%	8%	7%
	45-60 years	40%	40%	15%	5%
Presence of children or dependents	Yes	35%	47%	14%	4%
	No	30%	59%	7%	4%
	Yes	78%	22%	0%	0%

Military service

experience, education at military higher education institutions, and training	No	24%	60%	12%	5%
Overall result		32%	54%	10%	4%

The fact that 86% of respondents had at least considered the possibility of joining the military and that 32% had seriously contemplated this option indicates the prominence of military service in public consciousness and the existence of a certain potential for women's recruitment. However, it is important to emphasize that expressed interest, or even serious consideration, does not necessarily reflect actual readiness or intention to join the military. Rather, these responses point to a general openness to the idea, which is constrained by institutional, family, and social barriers described in Section 1 of this report.

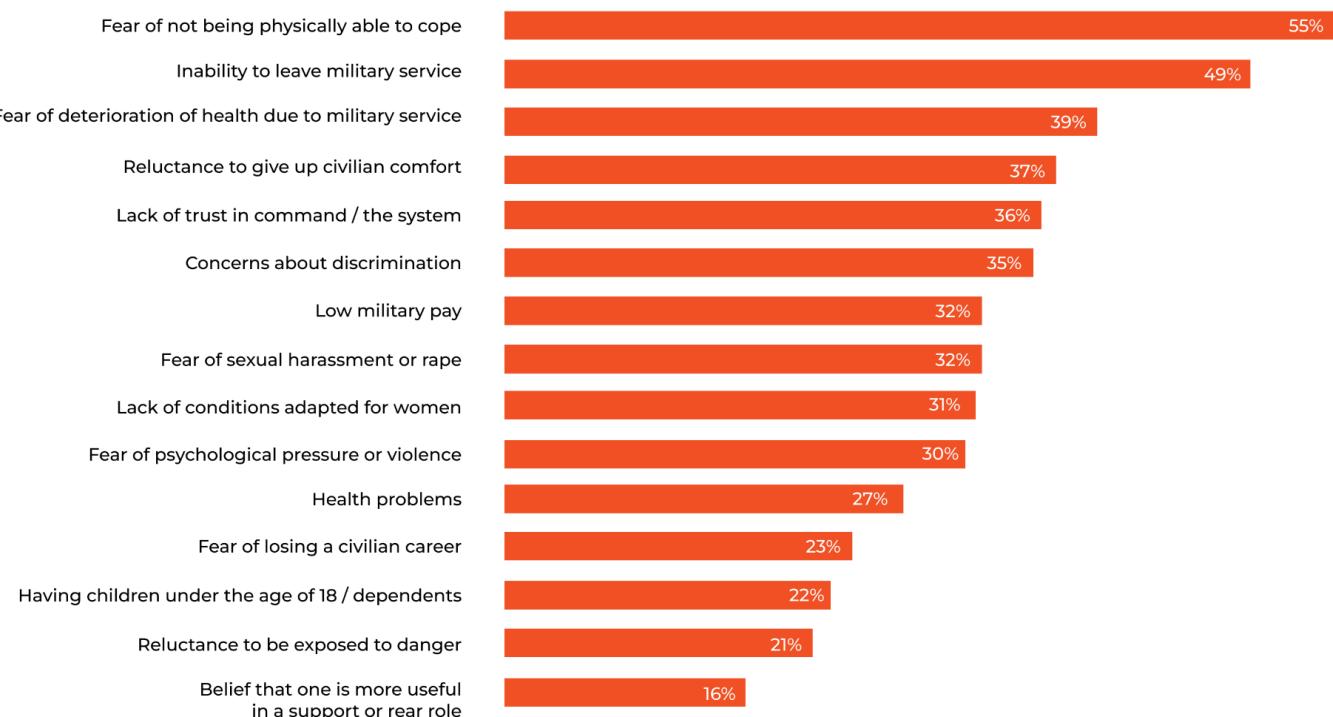


Figure 2.1. Reasons for Women's Reluctance to Join the Military

Not all of the reasons cited are gender-specific or require targeted solutions grounded in a gender-sensitive approach. For example, the inability to leave military service, concerns about deteriorating health, the desire to preserve civilian comfort and career trajectories, dissatisfaction with financial compensation, existing health issues, and reluctance to face physical danger are primarily related to institutional constraints, general service conditions, personal limitations and beliefs, and broader socio-economic circumstances. These factors affect readiness for military service regardless of gender.

Fear of being physically unable to cope with service duties was the most common barrier to women's entry into the military, cited by 55% of respondents. This reflects a widespread perception that military service requires exclusively "male" physical endurance, as well as insufficient awareness of the training system, task allocation, and the actual physical demands of service. Such concerns are driven not only by individual assessments of personal capacity, but also by institutional and socio-cultural factors, including stereotypes that frame women as physically unfit for military service. In this regard, public perceptions that "women are better suited for non-combat roles in the army" (according to a NAKO study) are reproduced at the institutional level, where military units demonstrate reluctance to consider women on equal terms with men, most often referring to women's "physiological capacities." This approach, whereby units stereotypically assign women to "traditionally female" roles, such as medical positions or kitchen work, reinforces women's sense that their physical readiness will be constantly questioned.

The high level of concern regarding the inability to leave military service constitutes direct evidence of systemic, gender-neutral institutional problems described in Section 1, which significantly shape women's decision-making. In addition to the absence of defined service terms, these problems also include the lack of a clear rotation mechanism and difficulties related to transfers.

Distrust toward command structures and the military system, as expressed by surveyed women, is also a gender-neutral factor and may, in particular, reflect an institutional problem related to the passivity of command in addressing violations of the rights of both male and female service members.

Women also point to high risks associated with gender inequality, including fears of gender-based discrimination and concerns about sexual harassment or rape. These concerns are corroborated by findings from a Lobby X study, according to which every second female candidate has already experienced gender-based discrimination during recruitment and/or military service. Even official statistics record reports from women service members regarding discrimination, bullying, and sexual violence; however, such data do not reflect the full scope of the problem due to fears of negative repercussions for those who file complaints.

The issue of inadequately adapted conditions for women, raised by some respondents, stems from the system's organisational unpreparedness, which manifests both in logistical provision and everyday living arrangements. For instance, women report a lack of uniforms adapted to their anatomical needs. Moreover, institutional unpreparedness to ensure basic comfort is also reflected in the positions of military units themselves: 22.9% of representatives of military units that refuse to accept women explicitly cite the "inability to organise adequate living conditions." However, leadership perceptions of what constitutes "adequate" living conditions for women, often shaped by sexist assumptions about women's supposed "vulnerability" and special needs, do not necessarily correspond to women's actual conditions and needs within the military environment.

Family circumstances also remain a significant factor constraining women's readiness for military service. For respondents with children or dependents, military service is often perceived as incompatible with caregiving responsibilities, particularly in the absence of mechanisms that would enable combining these roles.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that reluctance to join the military is shaped at the intersection of several dimensions: gender-specific factors (physical limitations, family obligations, and fears related to gender-based discrimination and personal safety) and gender-neutral factors (health-related constraints, economic risks, distrust in the system, and the inability to leave service). The relative weight of these factors varies by age: younger women tend to focus more on systemic and cultural barriers, while family- and health-related considerations become more prominent among older age groups. This configuration of barriers indicates that the potential for women's recruitment largely depends on the state's capacity to adapt service conditions to diverse life circumstances, ranging from eliminating discriminatory practices and ensuring safety to establishing mechanisms that enable reconciling military service with family responsibilities and providing adequate medical support.

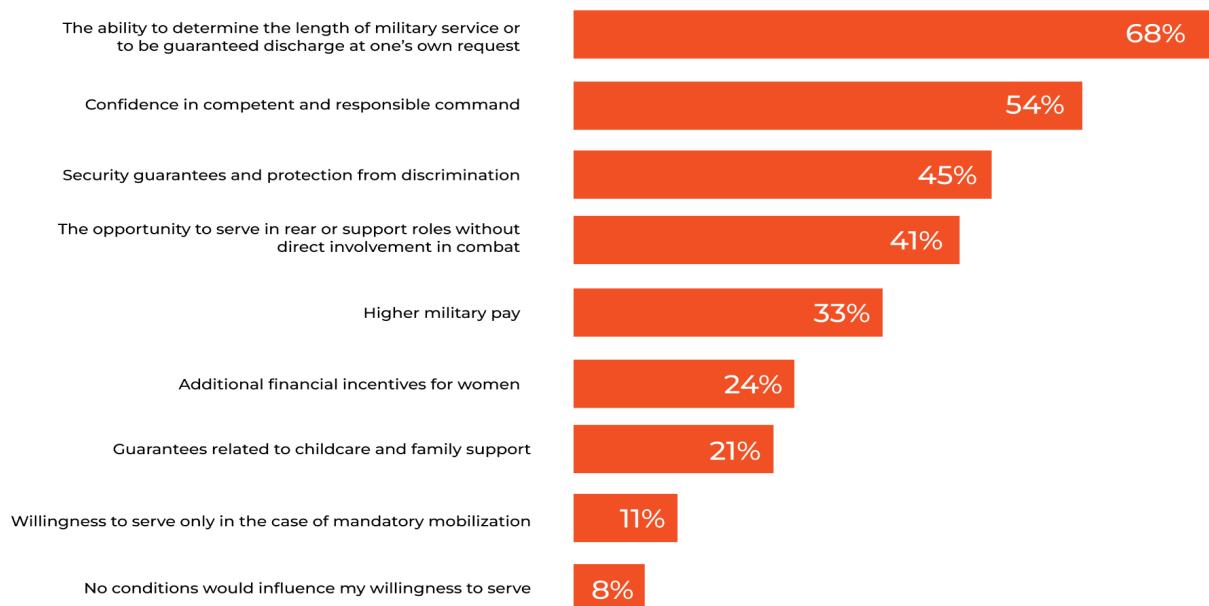


Figure 2.2. Motivational factors increasing women's readiness to consider military service

The analysis of motivational factors that increase women's readiness to consider military service shows that these incentives constitute a direct mirror image of the identified institutional, regulatory, and socio-cultural barriers. The high latent readiness of women to join the military (32% reported having seriously considered this option) can be realised only if the very structural problems that generate the greatest concerns are addressed. The most significant incentive relates to overcoming the institutional barrier associated

with the loss of control over one's service trajectory: 68% of respondents identified as decisive the ability to determine the duration of service or to be guaranteed the right to leave service voluntarily. This directly responds to the previously expressed concerns regarding the inability to leave military service and uncertainty about service terms (49.4%). Similarly, confidence in competent and accountable command (54%) emerges as a critical precondition, counterbalancing the high level of distrust toward the military system overall (36%), which includes complaints about commanders' incompetence and excessive bureaucracy.

Alongside institutional factors, removing socio-cultural barriers and gender-related security risks plays a key role. Nearly half of respondents (45%) emphasize the need for safety guarantees and protection from discrimination, reflecting women's expressed concerns about sexual harassment (32%) and gender-based discrimination. An additional motivating factor is the opportunity to serve in rear positions (41%), which reflects women's willingness to contribute to national defence while minimising physical risks and fears of being physically unable to cope with service demands. This approach is consistent with the concept of comprehensive defence, under which contributions to national security are not limited to direct participation in combat operations, but encompass a broad range of tasks in rear support, volunteering, logistics, and the support of military structures. Ensuring opportunities for women to engage in these areas contributes not only to increased readiness for service, but also to the overall effectiveness of the defence system.

To address the family-related and social barriers that dominate among older age groups, the availability of guarantees related to childcare and family support is decisive. The economic dimension is also highly significant: 33% of respondents emphasized the need for improved financial compensation, while 21% pointed to the importance of additional financial incentives for women, analogous to the payments provided under contracts for the 18-24 age group.

At the same time, 8% of women stated that no conditions would affect their readiness to serve. Another 11% of respondents (53 women) indicated that they would be willing to join only in the event of mandatory mobilisation. This group exhibits distinct socio-demographic characteristics: it consists primarily of women aged 25-34 with higher education and full-time employment; approximately one-third have children or dependents, while prior military experience is significantly less common than in the sample overall. Although this group generally supports the idea of women's military service, their reluctance to volunteer is driven primarily by family obligations, economic risks, and concerns related to uncertainty.

Women's motivation to consider joining the military is multi-faceted and varies across age groups. While younger respondents tend to focus on trust and transparency, women in midlife seek ways to combine military service with career development and family responsibilities, and older women place greater emphasis on stability and authoritative leadership. Flexibility in service terms, the quality of command, and guarantees of safety and family support constitute key conditions, whereas economic factors play an important but variable role across different age categories.

2.2 Perceptions of Military Service among Women Considering Enlistment

Based on the analysis of in-depth interviews with women considering joining the military and with servicewomen who joined the armed forces over the past two years, key motivations, expectations, concerns, and barriers to women's entry into service were identified, along with criteria for unit selection. Women who are already serving or planning to join the Defence Forces demonstrate a high level of readiness for professional development, resilience in the face of challenges, and strong motivation. Their experience, competencies, and leadership potential represent a significant resource for building a modern, inclusive, and effective defence system.

Motivation to Join Military Service

The analysis of in-depth interviews reveals a complex, multi-layered structure of motivation that has evolved from the initial emotional responses of 2022 to more deliberate and rational decisions in 2024-2025.

Motivation 1. The strongest motivating factor identified was the existential threat to national identity. All interviewed women, in one way or another, noted that thoughts about and intentions to join the military had been present since February 24, 2022; however, these were primarily emotional impulses and immediate reactions to the perceived threat.

Motivation 2. In 2024-2025, motivation takes on more mature and rational forms. Particularly illustrative is the civic-patriotic motivation, which was most clearly articulated by a respondent who had been studying abroad. Respondent 3 described her desire to join the military:

“With each passing month, my sense that I did not know how to exist in this world if Ukraine were not to survive as a state kept growing. This passive waiting — the expectation that someone would descend from the heavens and help — began to irritate me. And when I returned [to Ukraine], I realised that I could no longer remain in this passive role of constant waiting, relying on the idea that, thank God, thank the Armed Forces, someone else is protecting us. If we want to stand against such a massive enemy — one we initially underestimated — then everyone must become involved.”

Motivation 3. An important motivational component behind women's decision to consider military service is the lack of a sense of personal usefulness, the desire to make a tangible contribution to the struggle, and the awareness of civic duty. Women feel that they are capable of doing more and believe that what they do in civilian life is insufficient to contribute meaningfully to victory. For instance, Respondent 5 explained this:

“They have advanced, say, ten kilometres deeper inside... And I keep asking myself: am I doing anything useful to stop this?”

Fundraisers, donations — that is essentially all. And I understand that it is far too little. And so I keep thinking that now is the moment to step in... there will be no other time."

Motivation 4. For some women, an important motivating factor is the desire to apply their professional skills in the military. They do not seek to simply "go to war," but rather look for opportunities to be effective within their area of expertise. Respondent 8, who worked as a medical professional in civilian life and is now a servicewoman, explained:

"People without medical training are carrying the wounded, hauling backpacks, learning on the go, and managing all of this — while I, with a medical education, would be sitting somewhere in Kyiv. That is not who I am. That is why I understood that I would be mobilised."

Motivation 5. A decisive factor becomes a conscious fatigue with civilian life during wartime, coupled with an awareness of personal responsibility for the fate of the state. Respondent 1 articulated this transformation:

"By 2025, I had become completely exhausted by the atmosphere in the rear, and I wanted to apply my intellect within the military, because at times — even at work — people start playing God."

Motivation 6. Moral responsibility toward those who have been killed also emerges as a powerful motivating force. Respondent 3 formulated this:

"There are so many remarkable people who are no longer with us, but who gave us time — to live until this year, 2025, to prepare, and to stand in their place. This thought compels me to keep moving and preparing, despite fear and despite my own reservations."

A similar view is expressed by Respondent 13, who noted that:

"We must do everything to ensure that they did not die in vain, because they gave us time to prepare."

Key Concerns and Fears

The analysis revealed a clear hierarchy of fears that differs from conventional perceptions of military risks. The most significant threat women identified was not death or physical injury, but sexual violence and rape, particularly when perpetrated by fellow service members. This fear is universal across all respondents. Respondent 1 spoke most openly about this issue:

"During service itself... what frightens me most is rape. I feel that I am not even as afraid of death as I am of this. Violence from the Russian side is something one can expect — one

understands that a ‘peaceful’ death would not be allowed — but the possibility of such violence coming from one’s own fellow service members is something I would not want to even calculate in terms of risk or likelihood.”

Respondent 3, drawing on her personal traumatic experience, pointed to a lack of trust in the system:

“What is probably most frightening about such situations is the sense of impunity. Even when a case becomes publicly visible, you see that there is still no decision or outcome.”

Respondent 5 also reported fears related to systemic gaps and the absence of effective mechanisms for responding to such violations:

“To be honest, I do not really know what methods exist to address this at the local level. What worries me is the lack of any tools or mechanisms I could turn to if something were to happen.”

Among the main concerns, the vast majority of women voiced doubts about their own physical capacity to withstand the expected demands and to meet the requirements of military service. Respondent 6, who is now serving in the military, explained her concerns:

“I think that the main factor holding me back was a certain lack of self-confidence. I am very small in stature, and I was afraid that I simply would not be able to cope physically, or that next to male fellow service members I would look inadequate — and that no one would take me seriously or see a need for me.”

Fear of professional inadequacy occupies an intermediate position in the hierarchy of concerns. For some respondents, it is linked to uncertainty about their readiness to acquire a new specialisation and to fears of failing to cope with assigned tasks or letting others down. Women often doubt their own competency due to the lack of military education or practical experience, which reinforces a sense of uncertainty and complicates the decision to join the military.

A practical continuation of the two fears outlined above, as articulated by women who are already serving, is the perceived need to constantly prove one’s professional suitability, physical capability, and the seriousness of one’s motivation. This pressure stems from prejudice, sexism, and negative past experiences within units related to the recruitment of women, which have undermined trust in women’s service. As a result, some women feel compelled to outperform their male counterparts in physical training and task performance in order to demonstrate their competency and neutralise persistent stereotypes. Respondent 10 described this experience:

“If you differ in any way from the majority — if you are a woman, or too young, or too old — you will always be looked at with a degree of suspicion until you prove that you are worth something.”

Respondents perceive everyday living conditions as the least threatening aspect of military service. Some participants noted that they had prior experience living in unstable or difficult circumstances and therefore did not view adapting to military daily life as a serious challenge. This suggests that, for most women, the primary sources of concern are not material conditions but rather moral and psychological readiness, personal safety, and opportunities for professional self-realisation.

Constraining Factors and Hesitations

Surveyed women described the decision to join the military as a complex balancing act between personal circumstances, professional ambitions, and internal readiness. Most often, these considerations are linked to financial circumstances, professional uncertainty, and the desire to be better prepared before enlistment.

Financial or other family-related obligations emerged as a powerful constraining factor. This dilemma between responsibility toward loved ones and readiness to serve was particularly acute for women who consistently assumed the role of family providers or caregivers throughout their lives.

Readiness for service among some women is also influenced by professional uncertainty and an internal dilemma between self-realisation in the civilian sphere and a sense of moral duty. For example, Respondent 3 described this:

“I really love this job. I love translation, and I know that this is exactly what I would like to do for the rest of my life... so it's a rather difficult choice, even in terms of self-realisation... But it's a necessary choice [to join the military].”

For some women, a key factor is a sense of personal usefulness and of making a contribution to the defence of the state. Accordingly, if a woman finds work or activities in civilian life that she considers meaningful and that provide a tangible contribution to defence efforts or fulfil socially necessary functions, this may reduce her motivation to pursue military service. Respondent 5 emphasised that, for her, the decisive factor was the substance of the work and the extent to which a position aligned with her abilities and values:

“If there is some civilian job that gives me the sense that I am doing something useful, and that I would simply enjoy, I do not rule out the possibility that I would postpone mobilisation to a later time.”

The desire to be fully prepared for service can also delay the decision to enlist. In this context, women's caution should not be interpreted as indecisiveness, but rather as a form of conscious preparation for a new role. Respondent 3 explained her position:

“I understand that I want to be ready for this both rationally and psychologically. I will be serving my country, and I want to know that I am as prepared as possible for that service. I won’t get very far on enthusiasm alone... I realise that it is better for me to prepare properly now... and that I will go there as a much stronger person.”

Unit Selection Strategies

The respondents demonstrated a strategic approach to unit selection, based on several key criteria.

Safety, both physical and psychological, and attitudes toward women are critical selection criteria. Due to a lack of trust in the system and a desire to protect themselves from gender-based violence, women primarily rely on personal connections and recommendations when choosing a unit.

Drawing on her own experience, Respondent 7, who is a servicewoman, advised:

“The only option is to look for a unit that you are ready to trust with your life and your safety — including your safety as a woman.”

Guided by this criterion, Respondent 1 selected a unit through a personal acquaintance:

“I will join the unit where a close acquaintance of mine is serving. He told me that there have been no such incidents [of harassment or sexual assault]. There was one case involving sexist comments [toward women], and the person responsible was severely reprimanded, after which nothing like that happened again.”

Media visibility and the strong reputation of brigades also play an important role. Public recognition and a positive reputation serve as markers of reliability and adequate conditions for women. Respondents were more inclined to consider well-known, media-visible brigades with an established public image, perceiving them as more predictable and accountable. At the same time, it was essential for them that a unit be combat-ready, perform effectively on the battlefield, demonstrate tangible results, and maintain appropriate treatment of personnel without creating additional difficulties during service.

For some respondents, alignment between a unit’s values and their own views and principles is a decisive factor in unit selection. An unwillingness to tolerate homophobia, conservative norms, or sexism may lead women to reject even prestigious, media-visible units.

Expectations of Military Service

Surveyed women perceive military service in a realistic manner, at times even with a degree of pessimism. Rather than idealising the army, they prepare for a stricter regime, hierarchical subordination, and the inevitable loss of some personal autonomy. For those accustomed to working creatively or independently, this is perceived as the greatest challenge, as service is associated with the need to adapt to externally imposed rules and relinquish familiar control over one's own life.

Respondents emphasize that their expectations largely depend on unit leadership and internal culture. They recognise that the quality of service will be shaped not only by formal conditions, but also by leadership style and the internal climate within the unit. Respondents also acknowledge the heterogeneity of the AFU: experiences may vary significantly across units, and the system itself is often perceived as chaotic and unpredictable, which heightens feelings of uncertainty and complicates long-term planning.

Professional expectations vary depending on prior experience. Women with technical or managerial skills are confident that they will find it easier to integrate into the military environment and quickly become useful to their unit. By contrast, those with a background in the humanities or without specialised expertise tend to question their readiness for high-tech tasks and seek roles they perceive as a better fit. Some respondents postpone decisions about mobilisation while waiting for positions aligned with their interests and competencies, or simultaneously explore civilian opportunities.

Social expectations combine aspirations toward a shared purpose and a sense of teamwork with an understanding that women will need to continuously prove their competency in an environment shaped by gender stereotypes. Women also identify working under conditions of gender bias as a distinct challenge: they anticipate sexist remarks, questions such as "Why did you come here?", doubts about their professional competency based solely on their gender, and a constant need to demonstrate their capabilities.

Respondents approached practical challenges pragmatically. They acknowledged physical demands as difficult, yet manageable through discipline and preparation. They associated more serious and long-term challenges with adapting to a new environment and the loss of one's familiar circle of close relationships. They expected the greatest pressure in the psychological dimension; accordingly, some respondents prepared in advance by engaging in psychotherapy or other forms of support.

A Retrospective on Women's Experience: From Civilian to Military

Women who are currently serving in the military and who either signed a contract or were mobilised during the full-scale invasion generally did not report having had any specific expectations. For instance, Respondent 14, who serves in a non-combat position, noted that she had been looking for a job and that acquaintances suggested she apply to the Territorial Defence Forces. Another respondent stated that she joined the service immediately after completing her education, chronologically following the Revolution of Dignity, and simply does not recall having had any particular expectations.

Some respondents recalled concerns about harassment or other forms of discrimination. Unfortunately, several women reported that these concerns were, in fact, confirmed by their experience. As a result, most respondents indicated that they sought placement in units with a good reputation, either in the media or among personal contacts. One respondent noted that during unit cohesion training, the commander required all “newcomers” to complete an online course on preventing discrimination and harassment on the Prometheus platform; although “the course was not entirely clear to everyone, it demonstrated the commander’s overall attitude toward such issues” (Respondent 11).¹

Women also reported concerns about everyday living conditions; however, they did not express any illusions and were mentally prepared for them. “Even though I miss that Kyiv vibe, I knew what I was going there for” (Respondent 15). “If you are told you will be living in the forest, what else should you expect?” (Respondent 1).

However, in retrospective in-depth interviews, respondents identified the following key features of the relationship between expectations and reality.

The romanticisation of military service. As noted by Respondent 5:

“I went in with a certain sense of romanticism — this idea that our Armed Forces are ‘kitties,’ and that I wanted to be part of these ‘kitties.’ And I suppose it was this romanticism that motivated me... I expected to see real warriors, real heroes around me, and to be among them.”

However, as the servicewoman noted, these perceptions dissipated after her first combat deployment, which took place several months after the beginning of her service. “Because if you are a woman, you have to prove that you are smart.”

By contrast, women veterans with experience of service during the Anti-Terrorist Operation/Joint Forces Operation (ATO/JFO) spoke about shifts in their perceptions related to the intensity of combat operations and certain organisational aspects. One respondent, who had previously served in a volunteer battalion, noted that she found it difficult to adjust to the frequent rotation of commanders appointed “from above,” who were then reassigned again after a relatively short period of time.

The need to be useful. As one respondent explained, “People without medical training carry the wounded, haul backpacks, learn on the go, and manage all of this — while I, with medical training, would just be sitting somewhere...” At the same time, the respondent reported no particular fears or specific expectations.

Organisational complexity. As one respondent noted, upon entering service, she expected things to be resolved “more or less as in civilian life.” Instead, in the military, she encountered a situation in which even relatively simple issues could require “five to ten approvals.”

¹ <https://prometheus.org.ua/prometheus-free/gender-equality-anti-harassment-military>

Self-doubt. Some respondents, reflecting on their trajectories, noted that at the outset they were uncertain about their ability to be useful specifically in the military. However, beginning their involvement through volunteering and gradually interacting with service members, they eventually arrived at the decision to pursue a military position. As one respondent with nearly a year of service explained, trial weeks and training programmes organised by certain brigades were particularly helpful. By familiarising herself with the requirements, everyday conditions, and assessing the presence or absence of bias, she gradually crystallised her intention to pursue a military path with a specific unit, no longer feeling as inexperienced as before.

4.3 Summary of Chapter 4

Despite significant improvements, the practical experiences of servicewomen indicate the need to continue developing a gender-equal and safe environment, which should become one of the strategic priorities of state policy on national security, particularly following the end of the legal regime of martial law. This is not only a matter of upholding human rights principles, but also a practical step toward strengthening the state's defence capacity, building trust in military institutions, and enhancing the effectiveness of Ukraine's comprehensive defence system.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that, despite positive changes that have taken place in Ukraine's defence sector since 2014, the issue of equal opportunities for women in the military remains pressing and unresolved. The growing number of women in the armed forces, expanded access to combat positions, and the emergence of new educational programmes and career opportunities constitute significant achievements. These developments have been implemented through the joint efforts of the Ministry of Defence, the General Staff, other authorised bodies, civil society institutions, and individual servicewomen and women veterans who have actively engaged in awareness-raising, advocacy campaigns, and efforts to increase the role and visibility of women in Ukraine's security and defence sector.

Women encounter both general systemic challenges in the AFU and obstacles that are distinctly gender-specific. Women's participation in military service is constrained by institutional, legal, social, and informational gaps and by persistent stereotypes.

Overall, the barriers identified as constraining women's participation in the Defence Forces of Ukraine can be grouped into the following categories.

Informational: Lack of clear, accessible, and structured information on service conditions, requirements, mobilisation procedures, and position selection; predominant orientation of information campaigns toward men.

Institutional: Unequal access to positions (particularly combat roles), reluctance of certain units to consider women candidates, absence of career advancement mechanisms, and bureaucratic barriers at the recruitment stage.

Legal and regulatory: Outdated provisions in the AFU Statutes; lack of a coherent framework governing service conditions for pregnant women, women with children, and other women engaged in caregiving work; gaps in the regulation of sanitary and hygiene conditions, leave policies, and reproductive rights; and the absence of effective legal accountability for sexual harassment within the military.

Socio-cultural: Stereotypes about women's "natural roles"; biased attitudes on the part of commanders and peers; lowered expectations regarding women's competence; and, to some extent, societal stigma directed at women who serve.

Material and technical: Lack of protective equipment designed to account for women's anatomy, as well as hygiene products; shortages in women's uniforms and gear, including problems with sizing systems and protective equipment.

Rights protection: Ineffectiveness of complaint mechanisms, absence of confidential reporting channels for harassment and violence, and lack of trust in internal response procedures.

The findings of the qualitative interviews demonstrate that even where formal opportunities for women exist, the actual realisation of these rights is often hindered by biased attitudes on the part of commanders, fellow service members, and society at large. Overall, the results suggest that women's potential within Ukraine's national

defence system remains largely underutilised. This is driven not only by objective organisational or material factors, but also by deeper social and cultural norms. A key task within the framework of comprehensive defence is therefore developing an institutional culture grounded in respect for human dignity, equality of rights and opportunities, and an understanding of the value of diversity within the armed forces.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine:

- Ensure oversight of the effectiveness of the Military Ombudsman's activities and establish the foundations for developing an effective complaints and reporting mechanism within the military, with due regard for the principle of confidentiality.
- Amend Article 15 of the Code of Ukraine on Administrative Offences by introducing provisions on the administrative liability of military personnel for sexual harassment, as such liability is currently not provided for members of the armed forces.
- Update the AFU Internal Service Statute by removing outdated provisions and revising requirements related to living conditions in line with contemporary standards.
- Adopt, in the second reading, Draft Law #13436 on strengthening the social and legal protection of pregnant servicewomen, which provides for a 5-day working week and other benefits.
- Legally enshrine the right of servicewomen to state support for using reproductive technologies (IVF) in cases of loss of reproductive function during service and expand access to programmes for breast reconstructive surgery and prosthetics.

To the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine:

- Approve a comprehensive instruction on preventing sexual harassment and gender-based violence in the military, encompassing not only confidentiality guarantees but also mechanisms for survivor support, measures to hold perpetrators accountable, procedures for complaint review, and monitoring arrangements.
- Develop and approve a mechanism for confidential reporting of violations of service members' rights, with clear procedures for response, protecting complainants, and monitoring effectiveness.
- Expand regulatory guarantees for providing uniforms and equipment for women, including protective gear adapted to anatomical characteristics and body weight, and provide appropriate material for pregnant servicewomen.

To the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine:

- Ensure expanded access for women to medical professionals, in particular to gynaecological care, either within military medical units or through referral mechanisms.
- Expand the target audience of recruitment campaigns by explicitly including women as a core target group by developing specialised informational materials featuring women's success narratives, designing dedicated advertising

campaigns on social media and in media outlets popular among women, and by ensuring the consistent representation of servicewomen across all recruitment materials — not as exceptions or a special category, but as equal participants in national defence with their own professional trajectories and achievements.

- Ensure support for a zero-tolerance environment toward gender-based violence and sexual harassment in the military, including by disseminating educational courses, using additional prevention mechanisms, and implementing dedicated mechanisms to address and counter such practices.

To the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and military units:

- Develop pilot training programmes (ranging from one week to one month) to facilitate the transition from civilian to military life for individuals who are not subject to mandatory mobilisation but are considering a military career (including women without medical qualifications and individuals granted deferments), with the aim of demonstrating the realities of service and physical demands.
- Develop and implement standardised recruitment procedures that eliminate discrimination on the basis of sex and ensure assessment based solely on professional skills and competencies across all units.

To the Ministry of Veterans Affairs of Ukraine:

- Ensure state support for veterans' access to reproductive technologies for women veterans who have lost reproductive function as a result of military service.

For the media and journalists:

- Increase the media visibility of servicewomen and women veterans through formats that enable audience engagement and the sharing of personal experiences of women who have joined Ukraine's Defence Forces.
- Create dedicated sections or projects focused on women's military experiences, with an emphasis on professional achievements and contributions to the defence of the country.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A. Survey Questionnaire: “Are Women Ready to Join the Military? Factors That Deter Them”

We are a research team conducting the project “A Gender Approach in the Context of Comprehensive Defence.” Within this project, the team consisting of Mariia Zviahintseva, Anna Pashkina, and Daryna Zavhorodnia studies women’s participation in the defence of Ukraine. One of the key areas of our work focuses on examining the factors that deter women from entering military service, as well as the barriers faced by women who do not currently plan to join the Defence Forces.

We are interested in understanding why some women do not consider joining the military, what specifically discourages them, and which factors shape their decisions. Our aim is to gain a deeper understanding of these perspectives in order to develop realistic and balanced policy recommendations in the defence sector that take into account the needs, circumstances, and voices of women who remain in the civilian sphere.

This survey is anonymous and takes up to five minutes to complete. Participation is a contribution to the public discussion on how national defence can become a shared responsibility of the entire community, without coercion, and based on understanding and respect.

An asterisk (*) indicates a required question.

1. Your age: *

- 18–24
- 25–34
- 35–44
- 45–54
- 55–60

2. Do you have children? *

- Yes
- No

3. Do you have other dependents (e.g. elderly people, persons with disabilities)? *

- Yes
- No

4. Your level of education: *

- Secondary education
- Vocational education (technical/vocational training)
- Incomplete higher education
- Higher education (Bachelor’s / Master’s degree)

5. Are you currently employed? *

- Yes, full-time employment
- Yes, part-time employment / freelance
- No, currently unemployed
- No, on maternity leave / providing care for relatives

6. If you are employed, what is your occupation?

7. Do you have any experience of military service, training courses, or education at a military educational institution? *

- Yes
- No

8. How do you generally feel about the idea of women performing military service? *

- Strongly support
- Somewhat support
- Difficult to say
- Somewhat oppose
- Strongly oppose

9. Have you personally considered joining the military on a voluntary basis? *

- Yes, I have seriously considered it
- I have thought about it, but not seriously
- No, I have not considered it
- No, and I would never consider it

10. If you have not joined the military, why? (You may select multiple answers)

- I have health issues
- I have children under the age of 18 / dependants
- I do not want to put myself at risk
- I do not know where to start or where to find information about this option
- It is difficult to choose a unit or a position
- I am concerned that I would not be physically capable
- I do not want to give up civilian comfort (good living conditions, freedom of action)
- I am afraid of losing contact with my loved ones
- I am concerned that my health may deteriorate due to military service
- I am concerned about the inability to leave military service and fear that it would be a long-term commitment
- I do not trust the command or the system
- I believe I am more useful in a non-combat role
- I believe this is "not a woman's role"
- I have a partner who is serving, and I feel it is my responsibility to support them
- I am afraid of psychological pressure or abuse
- I face disapproval from people close to me
- I am afraid of sexual harassment or rape
- I am concerned about sexism and biased treatment toward me as a woman

- Lack of facilities adapted for women (separate showers, improved toilet facilities, etc.)
- Low pay / I earn significantly more in my civilian job
- I do not want to jeopardize my career and am concerned that it may be difficult to return to my civilian job or that I may lose professional skills
- Other: _____

11. What would motivate you to more seriously consider military service? (You may select multiple answers)

- Better social benefits / higher pay
- Additional financial support from the state for women (similar to contract payments for those aged 18–24)
- Guaranteed care arrangements for children and dependent family members during the period of service
- The possibility of serving in non-combat roles (rear-area service)
- Clear terms of service / the possibility to leave service voluntarily
- Full confidence that I would serve under a good commander in a unit that shares my values and respects human life
- Guarantees of safety and non-discrimination
- I would only consider service if mandatory mobilisation of women were introduced
- Nothing would change my position
- Other: _____

12. Do you have female acquaintances who are currently serving or have previously served in the military?

- Yes
- No

13. Would you like to learn more about opportunities for women in the military?

- Yes
- Rather yes
- No
- Rather no
- Hard to say

14. Please leave any comments or thoughts regarding women's participation in the defence forces (optional):

Appendix B. In-Depth Interview Guide for Current Women Service Members (since February 24, 2022)

Introduction

- Please tell us your name and age.
- When did you join the military? How long have you been in service?
- What were you doing before joining the military?
- Please tell us about your current position or role. What are your main duties and responsibilities at the moment?
- Have you served in the same unit throughout your service, or in different units? What other positions or roles have you held?

Path to Military Service

- How did you personally come to the decision to join the military? What factors were decisive for you?
- How did you enter military service? How did you choose the unit you joined? Did you encounter any difficulties being accepted into the selected unit because you are a woman? How did the selection process take place?
- How did your close ones react to your decision? Did their reaction or attitudes influence you in any way?

Perceptions of Military Service

- How did you generally imagine military service and your life in it? How did you see yourself in this new role — in interaction with fellow service members (men and women), in new living conditions, and in a new format of relationships with your close ones?
- Did you have any fears or concerns? What were they, and what were they related to? Were your fears, doubts, or concerns connected to everyday living conditions, attitudes toward you, physical challenges, or new responsibilities?
- When choosing a position, did you opt for a combat role, or did you also consider non-combat (rear-area) positions?

Beginning of Service

- When you started your service, what were your first impressions? What were the first weeks or months of service like?
- What was the most difficult and what was the easiest part of transitioning from civilian to military life?
- What challenges did you face at the early stages of service? How did you cope with them? What was the hardest part of that process?
- Are there other women in your unit? How are women generally treated in your unit?

- How did you build relationships with fellow service members (men and women) and with your commander? Did you experience any difficulties? What was the overall attitude of your commander(s)?

Current Challenges

- Has anything changed over time? From your perspective as someone who has been in service for a while, do you think attitudes toward women have changed?
- What is currently the most challenging aspect of your service?
- Did any of the concerns or fears you had before starting service materialize?
- Which fears did not align with reality? In what ways did your expectations differ from what you actually experienced?
- Is there anything that regularly makes it more difficult for you to perform your duties? *For example: bureaucracy, attitudes, gender stereotypes, administrative workload, etc.*
- Are there situations in which you feel you are treated differently because you are a woman? *This may include overly lenient treatment, discrimination, hierarchical pressure, or other forms of differential treatment — in general, situations where attitudes toward you are shaped by your gender.*
- In your opinion, is it easier for women to avoid certain tasks or combat deployments?
- What about physically demanding tasks (e.g., carrying heavy loads, building fortifications)? Is it easier for women to avoid such work? How do fellow service members usually react when a woman is required to perform physically demanding tasks?
- Have any special conditions or exceptional treatment (positive or negative) been created for you during service, different from how others are treated?
- Do you feel that your service has been easier or more difficult compared to your male colleagues?
- When did you first go on a combat deployment after starting your service? What has been the most difficult aspect of combat deployments for you?
- Please describe your routine and schedule in the military and during combat deployments (if your role is combat-related). What do you like or dislike about it?
- Do you plan to continue your military career after the end of martial law?

Overall Assessment, Looking Ahead, and Recommendations

- If you could go back to 2022, would you change your decision to join the military?
- If you had the opportunity now, would you choose to leave the service? Why or why not?
- In your view, are there factors that make it more difficult for women to join the military, or that complicate their service once they are in?
- What would you like to see changed in the system to make it easier for women to start military service and to remain in service?
- Do you think there should be any “special conditions” for women during service or in combat roles? If so, what kind?

- In your opinion, what prevents women from joining the military? And what needs to change to encourage more women to enlist?
- Do you think the state should place a specific focus on recruiting women? Should there be additional incentives or conditions to motivate women (*for example, financial incentives similar to contract payments for those aged 18–24*)?
- What would you say to a woman who is currently hesitant about whether to join the military?
- In your opinion, should mandatory mobilisation for women be introduced (with the possibility of deferments, exemptions, etc.)? Under what conditions?

Closing the Interview / Thank You for Your Participation

Appendix C. In-Depth Interview Guide for Current Women Service Members Who Joined Outside the Active Phase of the War (in 2018, 2020, or 2023-2025)

Introduction

- Please tell us your name and age.
- What were you doing before joining the military?
- Please tell us about your current position or role. What are your main duties and responsibilities? (e.g., *RVP / battery, combat medic, officer*)
- When did you join the military? How long have you been in service?
- Have you served in the same unit throughout your service, or in different units? What other positions or roles have you held?

Path to Military Service

- How did you personally come to the decision to join the military? What was decisive for you? Was this decision made instantly, or did it develop gradually over time?
Was there anything that held you back? If so, what was it? Was there anything that encouraged or pushed you toward this decision?
- How did your close ones react to this decision?
Did their reaction or perceptions influence you in any way?

Perceptions of Military Service

- How did you generally imagine military service and your life in it? How did you see yourself in this new role — in interaction with fellow service members (men and women), in new living conditions, and in a new format of relationships with your close ones?
- Did you have any fears, doubts, or concerns? What were they, and what were they related to? Did you consider alternative paths instead of military service? Were your fears, doubts, or concerns related to everyday living conditions, attitudes toward you, physical challenges, or new responsibilities?
- Did you try to verify or check the accuracy of your expectations in any way? If so, where did you look for information? (e.g., *conversations with active service members, groups or chats, official information sources such as websites or social media, etc.*)

Steps Before Starting Service

- What were your next steps after making the decision to join the military? Did you prepare for service in any way (e.g., courses, training programmes, reading

information about joining the military, communicating with acquaintances who are service members, etc.)?

- How much time passed between the moment you made the decision and the moment you actually began your service? What happened during this period? What difficulties did you face? Did you receive any support or assistance from anyone during the recruitment process?
- How did you choose the unit you joined? Did you encounter any difficulties being accepted into the selected unit because you are a woman? How did the selection process take place?
- Did you feel that state institutions or the military focused primarily on men in their recruitment efforts? Did you feel that, as a woman, it was more difficult for you to find information about service or about opportunities to join the military?

Beginning of Service

- When you started your service, what was the most difficult and what was the easiest part of transitioning from civilian to military life?
- Did your expectations or concerns come true? Did any of the fears you had before starting service materialize? Which fears did not align with reality, and in what ways did your expectations differ from what you actually experienced?
- Are there other women in your unit? How are women generally treated in your unit?
- How did you build relationships with fellow service members (men and women) and with your commander? Did you experience any difficulties? What was the overall attitude of your commander(s)?

Current Challenges

- What is currently the most difficult aspect of your service?
- Is there anything that regularly makes it harder for you to perform your duties? *For example, bureaucracy, attitudes, administrative tasks, etc.*
- Are there situations in which you feel you are treated differently as a woman? *This may include overly lenient treatment, discrimination, hierarchical pressure, or other forms of differential treatment — in general, situations where attitudes toward you are shaped by your gender.*
- In your opinion, is it easier for women to avoid certain tasks or combat deployments? And when it comes to physically demanding work (e.g., carrying heavy loads, building fortifications), is it easier for women to avoid such tasks? How do fellow service members usually react when a woman is required to perform physically demanding work — do they help, discourage her from doing it, ignore it, or treat it as normal?
- Have any special conditions or exceptional treatment (positive or negative), different from how others are treated, been created for you during your service?
- Do you feel that your service has been more difficult or easier compared to that of your male colleagues?

- When did you first go on a combat deployment after starting your service? What has been the most difficult aspect of combat deployments for you?
- Please describe your routine and schedule in the military and during combat deployments (if your position is combat-related). What do you like or dislike about it?
- Do you plan to continue your military career after the end of martial law?

Overall Assessment, Looking Ahead, and Recommendations

- If you had the opportunity now, would you choose to leave the service? Why or why not?
- Is there anything you would do differently before starting your service?
For example, spending more time on physical training, talking more with service members, etc.
- In your view, are there factors that make it more difficult for women to join the military, or that complicate their service once they are in?
- What, in your opinion, may prevent women from joining the military?
- What would you like to see changed in the system to make it easier for women to start military service and to remain in service?
- Do you think there should be any “special conditions” for women during service or in combat roles? If so, what kind?
- In your opinion, should the state place a specific focus on recruiting women? Should there be additional conditions or incentives to motivate women (for example, financial incentives similar to contract payments for those aged 18–24)?
- Do you think mandatory mobilisation for women should be introduced (with the right to deferments, exemptions, etc.)? Under what conditions?
- What would you say to a woman who is currently hesitant about whether to join the military?

Closing the Interview / Thank You for Your Participation

Appendix D. In-Depth Interview Guide for Women Planning to Join Military Service

Introduction

- Please tell us your name and age.
- Please tell us a bit about yourself. What do you do, and where do you work?
- Do you have any experience related to the military, security, or the armed forces?

Emergence of the Intention to Join the Military

- Do you remember when you first developed the desire to join the military?
- Was this intention immediate, or did it develop gradually over time? Was there anything that held you back? If so, what was it? Was there anything that encouraged or pushed you toward this decision?
- What has held you back from joining the military over the years?
- Did you share this intention with your close ones? How did they react?
- Does their attitude influence your intentions? If so, how?

Perceptions of Military Service

- How do you generally imagine military service and your life in it? How do you see yourself in this new role — in interaction with fellow service members (men and women), in new living conditions, and in a new format of relationships with your close ones?
- Do you have any fears or concerns? What are they related to?
Are your fears, doubts, or concerns related to everyday living conditions, attitudes toward you, physical challenges, or new responsibilities? Do you have concerns related specifically to being a woman?
- Are you afraid of or concerned about issues such as rape, sexism, lack of acceptance as a woman within a unit, the absence of fixed terms of service, or problems with leave and rotations?
- Have you tried to verify or check the accuracy of your expectations about military service in any way? If so, where did you look for information? (e.g., *conversations with active service members, groups or chats, official information sources such as websites or social media, etc.*)
- What do the service members you know prepare you for, and what advice do they give you?

Preparation and Information Seeking

- What were your first steps after the desire to join the military emerged?
- Did you try to find more information about military service? Where exactly did you look? (e.g., *official sources, personal contacts, chats or groups, social media, volunteer initiatives, etc.*)
- Did you communicate with women who are currently serving? Did their experiences influence your decision in any way?

- Did you lack — or do you still lack — any information? If so, what kind of information specifically?
- Do you feel that state institutions and the military focus primarily on men in their recruitment efforts? Do you feel that, as a woman, it has been more difficult for you to find information about service or about opportunities to join the military?

Current Situation

- Which positions are you currently considering? Non-combat or combat roles? Why? Which specific positions?
- How did you choose the position you are considering? Why this one in particular?
- Are you currently at any stage of the recruitment process?
- If so, which stage of recruitment are you currently at?
- Which unit are you considering or applying to? How did you search for or identify this unit?
- Have you encountered any obstacles during the recruitment process? If so, please describe what they were related to.
- Have you already communicated with a potential commander or other members of the unit? What challenges and advantages of service did they talk to you about?

Needs and Support

- In your opinion, how could the state (government institutions) support you or simplify the process of joining the military and the transition from civilian to military life?
- What kind of support do you currently lack at this stage? (e.g., *psychological, informational, organisational support, etc.*)

Looking Ahead

- What is your main personal motivation at this stage — and what could strengthen it, or, on the contrary, undermine it?
- What advice would you give to a woman who, like you, is currently hesitating about whether to join the military?

Closing the Interview / Thank You for Your Participation

Appendix E. List of Guiding Questions for Expert Interviews

- Could you please tell us how often you receive complaints specifically from women service members?
- Please describe the types of complaints you receive. (*For example, complaints related to service conditions, harassment, violations of statutory relations, etc.*)
- In your opinion, how could state institutions address the issues raised in these complaints in a comprehensive manner?
- In your view, how could the pathway into military service be simplified for women who are currently considering joining or are already in the recruitment process?
- Do you think it is possible to improve conditions for women who are already serving in the military? Would such improvements also be beneficial for men?
- Which legal norms or regulations are currently lacking to encourage women to join the military or to remain in service?
- What is the current communication strategy of the state regarding the recruitment of women into the military, given that this is a rather sensitive topic? What narratives or messages are being used, and which ones are deliberately avoided? Why?