

The place of women in the Lithuanian army

The gender equality topic appeared relatively early in Lithuania. Birmontienė and Jurėnienė date it back to the end of the 19th century (Birmontienė & Jurėnienė, 2009). The most significant advancement in terms of Lithuanian women's rights occurred during the 20th century. The first Republic of Lithuania (1918-1940) was particularly modern in this regard, offering new guarantees such as equal pay, longer maternity leave (Caven and al, 2021) and the right to vote in 1918 (Bielskienė, 2020). Today, women's rights in Lithuania are protected by the Constitution and several laws such as the 1998 Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men (Caven and al, 2021). Legal protection is an important step to reach gender equality, but is not sufficient by itself. It needs to be supplemented by political and individual commitment. In this regard, there is considerable room for improvement in Lithuania. Despite progresses made over the last decade, by 2022, Lithuania had a score of 60.6 out of 100 on the Gender Equality Index, positioning the country at the 20th rank in the EU. This score is 8 points below the EU's average (EIGE, 2023).

In this framework, this article aims at studying the position of women in one specific area of Lithuanian society, its army. Traditionally, the army is considered as a "masculine" and "patriarchal" institution where women are relatively not integrated. This perception is however progressively changing and some international actors such as the UN or NATO are now seeking for a stronger gender mainstreaming dynamic in the field of security. Considering this dynamic, this article aims at evaluating the place and experiences of women in today's Lithuanian army.

I. Historical involvement of Lithuanian women in military activities and legal framework.

A. Historical role of women in Lithuanian military activities.

Lithuanian military history is also a story of women. The most famous among them is certainly captain Emilia Plater¹, who joined the 1830-1831 uprising and successfully led several battles with a group of approximately 500 soldiers against the Russian army (Kazanci, 2018). Unfortunately, most of the military women did not obtain the same recognition as Plater. They have been discarded and de-individualized by memory politics. This is all the more unfortunate as women have repeatedly played key roles in the Lithuanian resistance movements. Women were crucial in the 1918–1920 Wars of Independence against Poland, serving as nurses, organising fundraising activities and providing meals and clothes to the soldiers (Sereičikas, 2021). Later, they proved to be particularly efficient spies in the war of Polish-Lithuanian intelligence of 1920-1939 (Rezmer, 2020). During the Second World War and the post-war resistance, women played the role of messengers, medical providers (Budryte, 2016), cooks, seamstresses, publishers (Platūkytė, 2020) and, for some of them, directly got engaged as active fighters in the resistance movement of the "Forest Brothers" (Budryte, 2016). This latter group included around 50,000 members. According to Enrika Kripienė, a historian at the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, 250 of them (0.5%), were women, (Platūkytė, 2020). This percentage is explained, according to Ėmužis by the reluctance of male soldiers to see women in this kind of role, due to their inexperience in the battlefield and their physical conditions (Platūkytė, 2020).

1. Emilia Plater is part of both Lithuanian and Polish national narratives.

Looking back to the last two hundred years, one can say that women are part of the military history of Lithuania. They were generally not active combatants (although this profile also existed). Women were in constant contact with military movements. They played the roles of handcrafters, fundraisers, healthcare providers, messengers and spies. Although predominantly not having distinguished themselves on the battlefields, their roles were crucial and should be recognized.

B. The legal framework determining the role of women in the Lithuanian army

The difference between female participation in Lithuanian military activities of the 19th-20th centuries and the 21st century is that now, their participation is determined by law. Today, women are formally allowed to be part of the Lithuanian army. Three specific dates are particularly significant in this regard. The first one is 1996 when the Conscription law of Lithuania was enacted. This law made conscription mandatory for men and optional for women. If a woman wants to be conscripted, she has to fulfil a written request (Guščinskienė, 2021). From the beginning, this law created a gender-based difference in terms of military service opportunity between men and women and implicitly promoted the idea that the army was first and foremost a domain of masculinity. It was then followed in 1998 by another law on the organisation, gestion and control of the national defence system of Lithuania (KASOTI). This law dictates the careers of Lithuanian soldiers. It establishes and recognises the same service conditions for women and men (attribution and payment of salaries, allowances and other advantages, other conditions of material provision) and the same social guarantees. However, women may be subject to certain exemptions from service requirements if they are pregnant, have recently given birth or are breastfeeding (Guščinskienė, 2021). These exemptions can be considered as equity exemptions, allowing women to pursue a career despite their pregnancy and the birth of a child. This law also states that the salary of an officer only depends on their grade and does not make any distinction on their previous experience, age, or gender (Guščinskienė, 2021). In order to obtain a higher grade, a soldier can participate in preparatory classes providing them new competences. The higher the grade, the higher the requirements for it. The salary is therefore a question of grade only. According to Guščinskienė, this law is unfair because the career of an officer is based on their military grade (vertical dynamic) and not his function (horizontal dynamic) (ibid.). This law was eventually followed in 2000 by the admittance of women to the only military school of the country as cadets, the Lithuanian Military Academy of General Jonas Žemaitis (LKA) as cadets. By opening its doors to women, the military education system of Lithuania admits the role of women in its ranks and gives them the opportunity to benefit from the same high-education skills as their male counterparts.

Except for the conscription question, the Lithuania arm has a legal basis determining soldiers' careers based on equal treatment between men and women. The law guarantees equal rights for men and women in the Army in terms of treatment and career opportunities. From a legal perspective, the Lithuanian army is not a place of discrimination. Legally speaking, women can join the institution and make a career in it. The army is, therefore, an institution that, since the late 1990s, expresses its willingness to utilise male and female potentials (Guščinskienė, 2021).

II. The place of women in the Lithuanian army

A. From a modern to a postmodern society ?

This equal legal basis does not mean that gender equality is truly established in today's Lithuanian army. Despite being more and more included, there are currently significantly fewer women than men in the Lithuanian army (Guščinskienė, 2021). Women represented 12% of the Lithuanian Armed Forces in 2020 (NATO, 2020). This percentage raises questions. Are women not interested in joining the army, or is the army truly presenting itself as appealing to women? It is nevertheless important to mention that this percentage is slowly improving. Comparatively, women represented 11.1% of the country's military corps in 2010 (Guščinskienė, 2021). It is particularly interesting to notice that, despite their relatively small numerical increase, female Lithuanian soldiers have noted the feminization of their army. They recognize that changes in terms of gender inclusivity are occurring. Sergeant Viktorija Navikaitė, chief paramedic of the Air Defence Battalion of the Lithuanian Air Force, claims that the situation is changing and sees "more and more women join[ing] the ranks of the military every year" (Keizikienė, 2022).

It is also important to mention that, despite being far from a ratio representative of the nation's demographics, Lithuania's percentage is largely better when compared with other NATO countries such as Italy (4.9%), Estonia (9%) or even the United Kingdom (10.9%) (securitywomen, 2020). Despite being slow, there is a tendency of inclusion. Guščinskienė explains this inclusion tendency by using Hayward's theory. The more advanced an army is, the less physical strength remains the main military criteria. By consequence, it increases the integration possibilities of the army (Guščinskienė, 2021). The army is now looking for competencies that are not dominated by men only. In this regard, the Lithuanian army is considered by Guščinskienė as shifting from a modern to a postmodern identity. While the modern army is mainly considered a purely "masculine" environment, the post-modern army is characterised by the increasing importance of women within its rank (Duncan et al. 2016).

However, this inclusion tendency can be considered critically. If it is true that women are present in today's Lithuanian army, one may however question the nature of the positions they have. Are these women occupying high-responsibility positions or, on the contrary, low ones? The answer to this question, based on data provided by the Ministry of National Defense (KAM), is distinguished. One can see over the past 10 years a strongly increased presence of women occupying the posts of officers and lieutenant colonels. In 2010, there were 59 female officers (10.7%) and 2 lieutenant colonels in the Lithuanian army. Comparatively, women now represent 22.5% of all officers (237) and occupied, in 2019, 6 posts of lieutenant colonel (tripled) (Guščinskienė, 2021). This growth, however, hides some underlying inequalities. It has been noted that in 2017 there were more women than men occupying the OF 1-2 military ranks (junior officers). This tendency is however not observed in the higher ranks of the army. In 2017, there were almost twice as many men as women occupying the OF 3-5 ranks (superior officers) in the army. And none of the OF-6 ranks or more (generals) were occupied by women (Guščinskienė, 2021). Only last year, in 2022, a female officer, Jurgita Savickaitė, became the first battalion commander in Lithuanian history. She took command of the Communications and Information Systems Battalion of the Lithuanian Armed Forces, responsible for securing unit communication. (LRT, 2022). One can say that the post-modern transition of the Lithuanian army is occurring, but at a slow pace. Despite an integration tendency, women are occupying lower positions of the Lithuanian army. The high-responsibility functions remain a male-dominated area. It remains challenging for Lithuanian women to equalise their career in the army with men, especially for the highest ranks.

B. The central question of the conscription

B.1. The 2015 conscription law debate

During the last decade, the place of women in the Lithuanian army became a more debated question. An important starting point of the conversation is the Russian annexation of Crimea. After this event, in 2015 the Lithuanian Parliament decided to reinstate mandatory military conscription for men (Lithuanian Armed Forces). So far, between 3,500 to 4,000 young men from ages 19 to 26 are randomly drafted by a computer program every year for a period of 9 months (ibid.). During their training, participants benefit from state support (food, housing, clothing, social and life insurance) as well as allowances and employment privileges (Mustafinaitė, 2015 ; Lithuanian Armed Forces). Women can serve as well, but only as volunteers (Lithuanian Armed Forces).

This measure was accepted under the first female Lithuanian president, Dalia Grybauskaitė. According to her, it was the only way for Lithuania to quickly form complete effective units at a lower cost (Delfi, 2015). Some citizens argued that this decision was not fair because it excluded women (Dykovienė, 2015). If a woman wants to attend military service, she has to complete an extra step of filling in the volunteering application, implying that the army is first and foremost a male area. On the other hand, some other public figures were opposed to any proposition of integrating women in the mandatory military service. They used both psychological and physical arguments in an effort to demonstrate that women were less military-valuable than men. This was particularly notable in the words of Egidijus Kazlauskis, head of the historical military club of Lithuania :

“In my opinion, girls should not be drafted into the army. It is not necessary to invite them to the army and compare what cannot be compared. Unless women in the army can be in exceptional positions, where no special psychological and physical training or strain is required. Let’s say they could save in a hospital, communications structure, headquarters, but only a very small percentage”
(quotation from Dykovienė, 2015)

According to Harrison, this decision mobilised masculinity and participated in the construction of militarised identities “to shape public support for its national security objectives” (Harrison, 2020). It adds a layer of pressure on young Lithuanian men “to perform their masculinity and patriotism ahead of the draft, but also for women who, while permitted to engage in volunteer service, are nevertheless evaluated against masculinist expectations” (Harrison, 2020). One female soldier interviewed by Harrison expressed her disappointment and stated that this model of conscription “reinforced the family-oriented expectations of Lithuanian women” (Harrison, 2020).

B.2. The current debate over the universal conscription

The question of universal conscription then re-appeared in the wake of the 2022 war in Ukraine. The re-emergence of this question should therefore be understood directly in parallel to the fear of aggression from Russia and its Belarusian ally. In Lithuania there is a correlation between the question of women in the army and the geopolitical reality of its neighbourhood.

As a reaction to the ongoing war, the Ministry of National Defence in 2022 presented two models of universal conscription. The first one only includes 18-19 year-old men, while the second also includes women of the same age (Jurčenkaitė, 2022). In the first scenario, four new battalions would have to be created with a minimum cost of 415 million euros to conscript around 6,100 men every year. In the second case, 14 new battalions would be created with an investment of about 1,5 billion euros to enlist around 11,900 citizens every year (Jakubauskas, 2022). In the former case, the reform could be validated by 2027, in the second case, by 2029 (Jakubauskas, 2022).

Despite being more actively discussed, the question of universal conscription, 8 years later, still seems to divide the Lithuanian population. So far, the President of Lithuania, Gitanas Nausėda does not have a “definite position” on it (LRT, 2022). For his part, the Minister of National Defense, Arvydas Anušauskas seems to have a more directional, although cautious, answer to it. He considers that Lithuania will probably have to implement universal conscription due to its demographic evolution in around 6 to 8 years but thinks that inclusion of women in it is unlikely (Jurčenkaitė, 2022). Furthermore, according to the Minister, only 14% of Lithuanian women support such an initiative (Jurčenkaitė, 2022). His position is shared by the commander of the Lithuanian army, Valdemaras Rupšys. He also believes that women should not be obliged to part to any universal conscription plan. One of his main arguments is that women are unable to perform some physical tasks (Jurčenkaitė, 2022). Some other personalities, notably from civil society, strongly disagree with such a perception of women. One example is the case of Jūratė Juškaitė, head of the Lithuanian Human Rights Center. She considers the words of commander Valdemaras Rupšys as an illustration of the general attitude of the army towards women and defends the idea of an universal conscription that would include women as well (Jurčenkaitė, 2022).

In 2015, as in 2022, the question of universal conscription is therefore very much a question of gender. The public discussion on this project highlights the perception of women in the army and questions the future of the institution as a whole in an interlacing of social values, geopolitical realities and budgeting concerns.

[B.3. Lithuanian army communication about conscription](#)

Having a look at the official conscription webpage of the Lithuanian army also helps us understand the current attitude of this institution towards female soldiers. On the webpage one can read “Boys and girls aged 18-38 can voluntarily perform permanent mandatory initial military service” (Karys, 2023). This message highlights the inclusiveness of the institution. Then we can see two videos. The first one, entitled “Mūsų pareiga - saugoti rytojų!” (Our duty is to protect tomorrow!) was released 3 years ago. In this two and a half minute video, female soldiers are represented. We can see women wearing military helmets, wielding weapons, being on tanks and boats and commanding other soldiers. The penultimate scene shows a young woman on her phone in the street, scrolling her Facebook feed and clicking on a post where it is written “Mūsų pareiga - saugoti rytojų!” (Our duty is to protect tomorrow!). The last scene shows her in diving gear on a boat after having decided to enlist. This video material therefore shows a willingness of the Lithuanian army to also address women in its communication. The second video on the webpage, published 5 years ago, is very different. It is entitled “Savanoriškai atlik privalomąją pradinę karo tarnybą!” (Volunteer for mandatory initial military service!) and is almost as long as the first one. This video represents a young Lithuanian man registering for conscription and posting pictures of his military training on his social media. Only one female soldier is depicted in this video.

She is not on the training ground but in an office. Towards the end of the video, a second woman comments on the last post of the young conscripted man. She writes : “Dėl tokių kaip jis, jaučiuosi saugi” (With someone like him, I feel safe). In the last scene we see this young man and this woman together, in what seems to be a house. They are on a sofa. The woman snuggles into the man's arms, and then the video stops. While the first video is promoting gender inclusivity, the second one is unquestionably based on a gender difference used to attract young heterosexual Lithuanian men into the ranks of the army by promising them success with women. In the second video, women are not considered by the army. Instead of actual soldiers, they are depicted as rewards for male soldiers. One can nevertheless notice that this second video is 2 years older than the first one. This can indicate a change in communication from the army and illustrate its progressive gender inclusion. However, it is interesting to note that the second video has not been replaced by the first one. The fact that the two videos are present on the same page of the Lithuanian army may suggest that these two videos are made to attract two different kinds of young individuals. In this regard, the second one targets traditional misogynistic male mindsets. The official webpage of the conscription therefore promotes both at the same time gender inclusive messages and stereotypical misogynistic clichés. This makes the official military communication vis-à-vis women ambiguous and paradoxical.

III. Between acceptance and sexism, the experience of women in the Lithuanian army

This analysis would not be complete without giving space to the voices of female soldiers themselves. Most testimonies of female Lithuanian soldiers are accessible to us thanks to various articles published in popular Lithuanian newspapers and in the study conducted by Guščinskienė in 2021 among the women of the Command of the Mechanised Infantry Brigade (MPB) Iron Wolf (Guščinskienė, 2021).

A. Why do women join the Lithuanian army ?

Why do women join the Lithuanian army ? Some of them “just knew it” such as Senior Lieutenant Lauryna Bubnytė. In her case, she “always knew that [she] would be an officer, because [she] like[s] serious activities and often choose[s] the more difficult path, despite society's gender stereotypes” (Pučėta, 2017). In this case, the main motivations seem to be a certain sense of duty and willingness to fight gender prejudices. In her study on women who volunteered in the 9-month military service, Beatričė Juškaitė noticed, for her part, that many interviewees decided to join the army out of patriotism. Some joined it for “adventures, career opportunities or social guarantees. Others choose the army as a remedy to a quarter-life crisis or for an atypical gap year” (Juškaitė, 2020). In this regard, the army is a choice driven by different types of realities and concerns, both by personal psychological and/or economic concerns and duty-driven patriotism.

B. Women soldiers' perception of their careers

After their motivations, a major aspect to take into consideration in evaluating the role of women in the Lithuanian army is their career perspectives and their opinion on it. Guščinskienė's study showed us that more than half of the women participating in her study claimed that the legal framework ruling the Lithuanian military careers was the same for both sexes (Guščinskienė, 2021). However, while half of them (4) stated that career opportunities

were the same for men and women, the other half disagreed and claimed that women were disadvantaged (ibid.) This division demonstrated a preliminary ambiguity about female careers in the army. Three of them mentioned problems related to pregnancy and maternity leaves that are mentioned in the 1998 law ruling the soldiers' careers in Lithuania. According to them, the leaves are not an advantage. They block them from participating in classes and seminars that, according to Lithuanian law, are the only way to increase a soldier's rank. They also mentioned the fact that during these leaves their post was not protected and could be transferred to another soldier. This constitutes an informal barrier to their career development (Guščinskienė, 2021). One can also say that it contributes to a salary gap, as the incomes of soldiers are only vertically determined. Guščinskienė explains the different answers of her interviewees by the fact that they probably do not seek the same career dynamics and states that some women may not seek for high positions. They are therefore less confronted to men and do not encounter career disadvantages (ibid.).

It has also been pointed out that some sectors were easier for vertical women career progression. Those are the ones that are not favoured by male soldiers such as communications and public relations. Positions such as deputy platoon commander, company sergeant, battalion non-commissioned officer, machine gunner and similar functions are more difficult for them to access (Guščinskienė, 2021). In this regard, we can say that female careers are, at least partially, determined by men's preferences. Eventually, half of the participants also noted the fact that there were very few women in the direct positions of the army (Guščinskienė, 2021) which is in correlation with the NATO studies mentioned earlier.

According to Guščinskienė, all this information suggests that it is more difficult for some women in the Lithuanian army to pursue a vertical career, especially when they have high ambitions. Pursuing horizontal careers for women seems easier, more than half of the participants agreed with it. Two of them nevertheless consider it as a problem and not an opportunity because it hides the lack of vertical integration of women (ibid.) previously statistically proven.

C. Sexism and how to counter it ?

Eventually comes the question of sexism (and stereotypes) in the Lithuanian army. To what extent is the institution integrating feminism in its values ? Stereotypes were actually considered the biggest informal barrier to their careers by 4 participants of Guščinskienė. The stereotypical personal attitude of commanders towards female soldiers (personalities) was highlighted by three of them (ibid.). Other issues were also mentioned, such as the lack of rotation in the workplace, an unstimulating working environment and the exclusion of women in decision-making, the accommodation of women to their situations were also mentioned (ibid.).

The sexism issue has also been found numerous times in the analysis of newspapers. The way female soldiers deal with it is nevertheless varied. Senior Lieutenant Lauryna Bubnytė also confirmed that she often had to face questions of her presence in the army as a woman but admitted that gender is secondary to her and felt comfortable around men. She stressed the fact and the importance that men and women "communicate, share tasks, coordinate actions" (Pučeta, 2017).

Some, such as the female volunteers in the 9-month military service who were interviewed by Beatričė Juškaitė were more critical about it and led to a supposed general presence of misogyny and sexism in the ranks of the army (Juškaitė, 2020).

“If a woman with initiative, goal, and ideas comes to the military... And if her goal is to stay at the office doing accounting or communication, or anywhere else where no actual fieldwork is needed, all right then”, remembered Meda. “But if you want to participate with a gun and – God forbid! – maybe want to command men, you will most likely be told no. Military is no place for women”. “You should have a child instead”. “Do you lack attention in civilian life?”. “Does your boyfriend not satisfy you?”. (female soldier’s testimony during an interview conducted by Juškaitė, 2020)

According to Juškaitė, these comments have a political dimension in the sense that they deny the political commitments of these women by reducing “them to being naïve, overly romantic, or misguided” (Juškaitė, 2020). It also builds the image of women as non-violent and caring individuals, deprived of leadership competences over men. In this regard, it seems that these male soldiers create a rapport of superiority over their female counterparts.

There is eventually the question of how do women react to such issues? As explained by Juškaitė, a misconception would be that women would bond together and form some kind of protective sisterhood that would somehow exclude them from their male colleagues. Instead, the opposite happens. Women try to fit into this male-dominated environment by mastering “military talk”, accepting these gendered mistreatments, and stress their “rights” reasons to join the army to distinguish themselves from other women (Juškaitė, 2020).

“I feel despondent for those women and people in general who came to serve with no national feelings or sense of duty. For them, everything was like a summer camp with lots of guys whom you can do your catwalk for”, complained one conscript. (female soldier’s testimony during an interview conducted by Juškaitė, 2020)

It is interesting to see how some women can accept and maintain sexism, highlighting the fact that “military women are far from a homogenous group” (Juškaitė, 2020). In this regard, it seems that some female soldiers have acquired and promoted some kind of internalised sexism. In her study as well, Beatričė Juškaitė noticed that some women as well adopted such an attitude. While some women were actively encouraging other women to “learn to defend the nation”, others instead adopted a sexist attitude, promoting the policy of “the fewer women, the better”. One of them even declared to the research “these blondes with huge tits who come with wrong motivations undermine us all”. (ibid). She also noticed that while some of them were reluctant to do tasks considered “feminine” such as administrative tasks, others intentionally sought them to shy away from activities considered “too masculine” (Juškaitė, 2020). In this regard, it seems that the willingness of some female soldiers to prove female capabilities paradoxically participates in the perpetuation of sexism, misogyny, and gender stereotypes within the army institution.

Conclusion :

What can eventually be said about the place of women and their experiences in the Lithuanian army? First, it is important to stress that the Lithuanian Army, from the late 1990s progressively tried to incorporate women in its ranks, supposing a slow transition to a post-modern nature. Women now represent around 12% of today's Lithuanian troops. Despite being far from a representative ratio, one can appreciate this relatively high percentage in this army, restored only 33 years ago, especially compared to its NATO counterparts. Legally speaking, female and male soldiers now benefit from equal rights and conditions in today's Lithuanian army, except in terms of conscription. This legal framework can however be ambiguous and hide background treatment differences, notably in terms of pregnancy at the expense of female soldiers' careers. While in quantitative terms, women are being more and more present in the Lithuanian troops, in terms of high-responsibility positions they are however still virtually absent. In this regard, military responsibilities remain today in Lithuania, a matter for men. In addition to that, sexist comments may sometimes be pronounced by both female and male soldiers. These comments may discredit female soldiers' physical and psychological capacities. The question of female soldiers even goes further than the army institutions and is part of the current civic debates animating Lithuanian society. Should women be part of the universal conscription? If the answer is not yet known, one may nevertheless agree with the following statement : the question of women in the Lithuanian army is not yet neutral.

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