




Colloquium 1(49)/2023
ISSN 2081-3813, e-ISSN 2658-0365
CC BY-NC-ND.4.0
DOI: <http://doi.org/10.34813/03coll2023>

FEMININITY AND MILITARY CAREERS OF POLISH WOMEN. A STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN IN THE OFFICER'S RANK

Kobiecość i kariera zawodowa Polek w przestrzeni militarnej. Badania doświadczeń kobiet w stopniu oficerskim

Aneta Judzińska
Wydział Studiów Edukacyjnych
Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu
e-mail: atena.j@amu.edu.pl
ORCID  0000-0001-6686-7131

Abstract

The process of military participation of Polish women began when Poland joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The paper addresses the issue of construction of military professional career by women in the officer's rank. The study aimed at reconstructing the professional experience of women in the military officer corps and analysing the processes of their career development. The research group consisted of 31 female soldiers holding officer ranks. An individual semi-structured interview was used, consisting of a narrative part and a free interview part with a list of information pieces sought in the form of an interview scenario, created on the basis of detailed research questions. This paper focuses on the part of the results concerning the experiences related to the female soldiers' perceptions of their own position and professional role, and the meanings given to the notion of military career. The study found that only about half of female soldiers believe that they have pursued, are pursuing, or are beginning to pursue a career. The study reveals that the ambiguity of the patterns inherent in the concept of female soldierhood leads to an internal split in the way of defining oneself as a female soldier.

Key words: women in masculine professions, women's career, army, female soldier.

Streszczenie

Z chwilą przystąpienia Polski do struktur Sojuszu Północnoatlantyckiego rozpoczął się proces militarnej partycypacji Polek. Artykuł podejmuje zagadnienie konstruowania wojskowej kariery zawodowej przez kobiety w stopniu oficera. Badanie miało na celu rekonstrukcję doświadczeń zawodowych kobiet wojskowego korpusu oficerskiego oraz analizę procesów konstruowania przez nie karier. Grupę badawczą stanowiło 31 żołnerek w stopniu oficera. Posłużono się indywidualnym wywiadem częściowo ustrukturyzowanym, składającym się z części narracyjnej oraz części wywiadu swobodnego z listą poszukiwanych informacji w formie scenariusza wywiadu, stworzonego na podstawie szczegółowych pytań badawczych. W artykule skoncentrowano się na tej części wyników, które nawiązują do doświadczeń

związanych z postrzeganiem przez badane własnej pozycji i roli zawodowej oraz znaczeń nadawanych pojęciu kariery wojskowej. Badanie wykazało, że tylko około połowa żołnerek uważa, że zrealizowała, realizuje bądź zaczyna realizować karierę. Okazuje się, że niejednoznaczność wzorców wpisujących się w pojęcie żołnierskości kobiet prowadzi do wewnętrznego rozłamu w sposobie definiowania siebie w roli żołnierki.

Słowa kluczowe: kobiety w zawodach zmaskulinizowanych, kariera kobiet, wojsko, żołnierka.

Introduction

Military structures represent a relatively new professional field,¹ to which Polish women gained full access. In the context of the issues addressed in this article, by access I mean the formal regulation of women's opportunities to participate in careers on an equal footing with men. In the case of the army, the area of education should be considered a key element of legal changes. Opening military universities also to women became a *sine qua non* for access to military careers. This happened in 1999 when Poland joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Czuba, 2015, p. 59).² It should be added here that although, according to the historical records, Polish women had already performed soldiers' roles, the army was a space created by men and for men³ (Wawrzykowska-Wierciochowa, 1988). Therefore, we cannot effectively consider the issue of women's participation in the military space without outlining its characteristic gender order. Theoretical implications are provided by R. W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity (2005, p. 77) and corresponding areas related to the construction of soldier identity by women (Sasson-Levy, 2003), female sexuality and its significance in career dynamics (Miller, 1997) or social limitations in the perception of women's soldier roles (Segal, 1995). The notion of hegemonic masculinity focuses on the assumption of a cultural division of gender roles in which men hold the right to power, dominance, and physical prowess. In the case of the army, this ideal is expressed in the construction of soldierhood – both in terms of identity and physicality – in the opposition to traditional female characteristics (Connell, 2005, pp. 76–77, 213; Whitehead, 2005, p. 416). D. Harrison and L. Laliberté (1997, p. 36) refer to this phenomenon as the polarization of gender

¹ In the context of my considerations, I will focus on the term profession, not service.

² Making it possible for women to have access to participation in professional careers through military colleges was one of the conditions for Poland's admission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization structures.

³ A distinction must be made between women's membership in military structures and their access to military careers. The former did not condition the latter for very long. It is therefore worth reflecting on the course of women's military careers since the implementation of all legal regulations relatively unifying the legal situation of men and women in the military.

within military structures.⁴ The relationship between soldierhood and the ideal of masculinity is aptly illustrated by the example of World Wars I and II. It was not uncommon for Polish women who wanted to fight on the front lines to assume a male identity. As a result, they cut their hair, wore men's uniforms and adopted men's pseudonyms (Dufurat, 2002, p. 113).

The year 2003, when the first women graduates of military universities appeared, was a breakthrough in the context of Polish women entering the formal career path. Probably for this reason, one of the most frequently undertaken themes in Polish research is the process of adaptation. A report from 2009 devoted to the professional service of female soldiers by Justyna Branicka and Magdalena Baran-Wojtachnio revealed that about 84% of surveyed female soldiers are satisfied with their professional situation. The vast majority (approx. 70%) believe they reconcile family and maternity duties well with professional responsibilities (24% of the respondents still need a family). It turned out that both male and female soldiers positively assessed the quality of business contacts. In addition, most male soldiers believe that female superiors enjoy the authority of their subordinates. The analysis of the domestic literature on the subject allows us to assume that female soldiers in 2015, just as 10 years earlier, expressed a tendency to adapt to male organizational culture (Czuba, 2015). While this was not diagnostically clear in 2005, due to the novelty of the phenomenon and the inability to relate to the experiences of senior female soldiers (Dębska, 2004), it appears research-wise significant in 2015. Women, aware of the stereotypes and prejudices of some soldiers, show a higher level of determination in pursuit of their dream job compared to men (Drapikowska 2013, p. 82; Piotrowska-Trybull & Jabłońska-Wołoszyn, 2017, p. 49). Statistics available on the website of the Ministry of Defence indicate that there has been about a seven percent increase in female soldiers in the Polish army over almost twenty years. Currently, women account for 7.5% of all soldiers, with the largest numbers in the rank of a private, the lowest one in terms of career development.⁵ On the other hand, there is still no female general in Poland. From time to time, information about abuses in the form of mobbing, sexual harassment or other forms of violating the rights of female soldiers circulates in the press (Gozdur, 2021). Therefore, there is no doubt that the issue of the military career of Polish female soldiers, especially representatives of the officer corps, is complex and requires an in-depth analysis. Previous research does not provide an answer to the question of how women construct their careers and what dilemmas – also about identity – they confront.

⁴ As they write: "In the army, gender polarization facilitates the creation of negation, the content of which becomes the basis for solidarity in the group: to be male is not to be female, which is to be valued positively".

⁵ Website of the Republic of Poland, Ministry of Defence (n.d.). *Pierwsze kobiety w służbie wojskowej*. <https://www.gov.pl/web/obrona-narodowa/sluzba-wojskowa-kobiet-w-silach-zbrojnych-rp-wczoraj-i-dzis>.

Some scholars adopting a gender perspective in military research draw attention in this context to the need for a qualitative analysis of female soldiers' experiences. Paradigmatic approaches that are aligned with such an idea write into the mainstream of interpretive research (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Focusing on women's experiences provides an opportunity to deepen perspectives (Kronsel, 2005; Nuciari, 2006; Stachowitsch, 2013; Harel-Shalev & Daphna-Tekoah, 2019). The international discourse shows a departure from the general narrative – characteristic of Poland – related to monitoring the process of "joining" women to the male military space. This is due to the different, and thus – more advanced – dynamics of women's access to military structures, including individual positions. The issue of adaptation here focuses on specialized career paths in particular sectors of the military. Most attention is now focused on women's experiences in combat roles. This includes female soldiers' perceptions of combat and threat (Strong et al., 2015; Daphna-Tekoah et. al., 2021), engagement in violence (Harel-Shalev & Daphna-Tekoah, 2015), or the reconstruction of alternative forms of femininity based on, among other things, aggression (Knudsen & Teisen, 2018; Harel-Shalev & Daphna-Tekoah, 2020) or sexuality (Persson & Sundevall, 2019). Particular attention is paid in this context to the professional experiences of women veterans: strategies for coping with the unusual nature of service (Strong, 2013), identity construction (Eichler, 2016), or potential physical and mental health issues (Dodds & Kiernan, 2019), (Conard, 2014), (Gutierrez et. al, 2013), (Feldman & Hanlon, 2012). This includes research on the topic of women's participation in military operations and stabilization missions (Heinecken, 2015) or there are also themes related to the motives for joining the army or the experience of gender in the context of service (Kiven & Sone, 2015).

Due to the fact that such in-depth qualitative analyses have not been conducted in Poland before, my research aims to reconstruct the professional experiences of women in the officer corps of the Polish Armed Forces and analyses the processes of constructing careers about the socialization and educational backgrounds. In this article, I will focus on the part of the results that addresses experiences related to the female soldiers' perceptions of their own position and professional role and the meanings given to the notion of military career.⁶

Methodology

The aim of the study was to reconstruct professional experiences of female officers in the Polish Armed Forces and to analyse the processes of career construction adopted by them. In accordance with the assumptions of constructivism, I assumed that reality is produced

⁶ This article is based on a fragment of research published in a Polish-language book: Judzińska, A. (2020). *Wojskowa kariera zawodowa w doświadczeniach kobiet. Studium socjopedagogiczne*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM. Although it is based on the reflections included in the book, it presents new analyses and interpretations.

as a result of its constant interpretation by the participants of social interactions. The way it is perceived is therefore subjective in nature. It consists in assigning meanings through the prism of cultural and individual – psychological, socialization – experiences (Berger & Luckmann, 1983, pp. 85–121). I used a similar logic when situating constructivism within qualitative research methodology. I assumed that discovering fragments of social reality of the studied women will be a complex process of assigning meanings, both by the subject and the researcher (Bauman, 2001, p. 268; Flick, 2011, p. 13).

Study subjects and the context

The study involved 31 female soldiers from the officer corps. On the basis of previous empirical analyses, I assumed that it would provide knowledge about the ways in which women experience military careers and would make it possible to reconstruct a fragment of reality from the female soldiers' lives (Kopciwicz, 2003, p. 107; Kubinowski, 2001, p. 281). The selection of the female interlocutors was purposefully random. The purposefulness of selection referred to the criterion of gender (female), occupation (a female soldier) and position in the military structure (an officer's rank). Its randomness was evidenced by the atypical nature of the study population and, consequently, difficult access. This was due to the specific nature of military service and the limited number of women holding an officer's rank. Another premise pointing to this way of organizing the group of female soldiers' stemmed from the nature of the legal regulations binding in the Ministry of Defence. The largest number of women in the study were soldiers in the rank of a captain (13), followed by a lieutenant (7) and a second lieutenant (7), while the least were in the rank of a major (2) and a lieutenant colonel (2). Among the women surveyed, the longest stretch of professional military service was seventeen years, while the shortest was one year. The largest number of female soldiers (6) had nine years of professional experience. Among my female interlocutors, there were eight women holding commander positions: a platoon commander, a company commander, or, in the case of the air force, a service and a crew commander.⁷ More than half of the female soldiers (18) had completed a one-year (or six-month) officer's training program and earned their Master's degree (Master of Engineering) from a civilian university. The others were graduates of a five-year military college (13). My female interlocutors ranged in the age from 25 to 41. Most of them (24) were in a marriage/partnership relationship. Ten women were daughters of professional soldiers, two were daughters of police officers. The research was conducted in five military units located in Mazowieckie,

⁷ Five female representatives of staff positions were section chiefs. The remaining female soldiers served as section officers, including the division chief accountant, operations section, training section, personnel section, education section, or reconnaissance section, as well as officers in the support squadron and air squadron in the air operations group. Several women held the position of a press officer. The study group also included female soldiers who held the positions of an engineer and a physician.

Dolnośląskie, Lubuskie and Wielkopolskie Voivodeships, in which the female soldiers' were on duty. The units were located in large and small urban agglomerations as well as in rural areas. They represented land forces and air forces (no combat units).

Research tool and material interpretation

In this research, I used an individual semi-structured interview consisting of a narrative part and a free-form interview part with a list of information pieces sought in the form of an interview script created on the basis of detailed research questions. The information sought set the thematic framework for the narrative conducted (Każmierska, 1997, p. 36; Straś-Romanowska et al., 2010; Urbaniak-Zajac & Kos, 2013). Conventionally, they can be divided into three areas. The first relates to socialization experiences. The meanings female soldiers give to the family and peer environment about childhood and adolescence allow us to analyse the process of shaping their aspirations and interests in a broader context. The category of socialization experiences also includes how the interlocutor perceives their private life and the roles they play in it: single, wife/partner and mother. Focusing on this aspect of female soldiers' biographies allows us to determine whether and how private life corresponds to professional development in the army. The second level of experience in the questionnaire deals with the interlocutor's education. The military school/university is the first formal confrontation of the issues with the military reality. It also determines entering the path of a professional military career. The third area of experience included in the interview questionnaire deals with issues related to professional life. It directly refers to constructing a professional military career, thanks to the questions associated with the interlocutor's perception of their professional position, the meanings attributed to the concept of an army career, and the barriers and supporting factors perceived on the way to its implementation.

I collected the research material personally after obtaining the consent of both the commanders of individual units and the Ministry of National Defence.⁸ I conducted the

⁸ Previously, in accordance with the decision (No. 78/Ministry of Defence) of the Minister of National Defence of February 15, 2008 on conducting social research in the national defense sector, I had to ask commanders of particular military units for permission to conduct interviews among female soldiers serving there. The persons assigned to contact me were mainly press officers (or officers of the education section). They were responsible for organizing the group of female officers participating in the study. In selecting units that met the gender and corps criteria, I was guided by available statistical summaries. The basic form of contact I assumed was electronic. I made requests via email to unit commanders for permission to conduct community surveys. Feedback was given to me electronically or by telephone. The officers contacting me specified the formal details. The next step in organizing the group of women to be surveyed was to obtain a one-time authorization from the Secretary of State at the Ministry of Defence. In order to obtain it, I had to send a written request (application) with a set of documents, including the consent of the commanders of the units where I intended to conduct the tests. After obtaining one-time authorization No. 32/2017 granted to me between

research in late September and early November 2017. The audio recordings of the interviews were made after obtaining the consent of the female participants, respecting the principle of confidentiality and anonymity. The collected material in the form of audio recordings was transcribed, interpreted and analysed.

Selected research results

In this paper, I will focus my attention on the part of the results that relate to the female soldiers' experiences of perceiving their own position and professional role and the meanings given to the notion of a military career.

Table 1
Career conceptualization

General category	Subcategories	Detailed criteria
Meanings given to the notion of a career	Career – mixed approach	Career as internal fulfilment Career as competence development Career as family and profession balance Career as a way out of the careerist pattern
	Career – traditional approach	Career as a step up in rank Career as mobility on the commander path Career as a combination of circumstances related to a promotion
Meanings given to one's own occupational position	Orientation towards a career	"I think I have made a career" "I am starting to make a career" "I am not making a career yet"
	Retreat from a career	"I want to do what I like. I am not interested in a career" "I will not make a career in this unit" "I don't meet career-related standards"

Meanings given to the notion of a career

The results of the study revealed that although most women evoked the classic definition of promotion, more than half did not identify themselves with it. Female soldiers used the category of promotion to build an opposing definition or treated it as one of the elements co-creating the concept of career (see Table 1).

August 1 and November 30, 2017, I contacted representatives of the units where I was to conduct the study. In this way, I determined the organizational issues necessary to specify the conditions and timing of the interviews. I was also informed about the number of female soldiers assigned to participate in the study.

“Career – mixed approach”

Two ways of conceptualization emerged from the female soldiers’ statements. The first, mixed, was represented by the largest number of women. The starting point here was the feeling of job satisfaction and the desire to develop competence. External reward in the form of promotion was in this case conditional (Schein, 1996, p. 80). From the statements of this group of female soldiers, the following career categories emerged: „Career as internal fulfilment”, „Career as competence development”, “Career as family and profession balance”, “Career as a way out of the careerist pattern”. The first two categories most often represented by female soldiers in the lowest officer’s ranks: a second lieutenant and a lieutenant. Their attitude to a career in most cases remained consistent with their motives to pursue the profession of a female soldier. It was of an autotelic character.

“Career – traditional approach”

The second way of conceptualization directly referred to the phenomenon of promotion on the military professional ladder (Parsons, 1972, p. 306; Poczowski, 1993, p. 104). Its supporters were most often female soldiers with the rank of captain or major. I have conventionally divided the statements of the female soldiers into three types of narratives: “Career as a step up in rank”, “Career as mobility on the commander path”, “Career as a combination of circumstances related to a promotion”.

Meaning given to one’s own occupational position

Another area of empirical analysis that correlates with the previous one concerned the meanings which the female soldiers gave to their own occupational position (see Table 1). For more than half of the female soldiers, there was a puzzling divergence in how they defined military career and their own career. While in the former case my female interlocutors focused mainly on subjective factors related to internal satisfaction and a sense of satisfaction with their position, in response to the question about their own career they usually referred to objective indicators of promotion. Accordingly, it can be assumed that the classical understanding of a career was for more than half of the female soldiers one of the key criteria for reconstructing their professional experience. The results of the study revealed that only about half of the female soldiers perceived themselves as pursuing a military career. This led to the emergence of two categories.

“Orientation towards a career”

Although it directly referred to the phenomenon of a career, the representatives of this group were characterized by a high level of caution in identifying themselves with its meaning. In this context, female soldiers emphasized the dynamic nature of a career, locating themselves at one of its stages (mainly initial, less often advanced). On the basis

of female soldiers' statements I distinguished four types of narration: "I am still pursuing a career", "I think I have made a career", "I am starting to make a career", "I am not making a career yet". The unifying element of the last two types of narrative was a similar way of defining a professional career perceived in terms of inner fulfilment. This view was held mainly by junior female soldiers or those who held the rank of a captain, but performed (less prestigious) staff functions.

"Retreat from a career"

It was represented by fourteen female soldiers. These were female soldiers who responded negatively to the question about a career. This took the form of three types of narratives given by representatives of various military ranks: "I want to do what I like. I am not interested in a career", "I will not make a career in this unit", "I do not meet career related standards".

The concept of soldierhood

An important issue raised during the research on military careers in women's experiences were the meanings given to the concept of soldierhood (see Table 2). It turned out that more than half of the female soldiers, regardless of their military rank, differentiated the definition of a soldier by gender. On the basis of the female soldiers' statements, three areas of meaning of the concept of a female soldier emerged, with the first two dominating in terms of frequency of responses. The representatives of the two most numerous groups were mostly women who socialized in a male environment (brothers, colleagues) and/or were daughters of a professional soldier or a policeman and grew up on a military estate. Some of these women also performed commander functions.

Table 2
Soldierhood in developing a career

General category	Subcategories
Concepts of soldierhood	Soldierhood defined through the prism of individual differences
	Female soldierhood as an expression of adaptation to male standards
	An essential view of soldierhood – "a woman can never be on par with a man"
Appraising soldierhood	Body and sexuality
	Service and professional role
	Relationships with other female soldiers

„Soldierhood defined through the prism of individual differences”

For this group of female soldiers, the meaning inherent in the image of female soldierhood went beyond the stereotypical division of gender competencies. Female soldiers referred to the concept of individual differences. This was mentioned both by women performing staff (administrative) functions, as well as commanders. The former focused mainly on the importance of individual characteristics and predispositions. At the same time they minimized the importance of the physical dimension of masculinity and femininity. On the other hand, female representatives of commander posts took into account the importance of the category of physical fitness and female physiology, such as maternity. Several female soldiers representing such an approach also pointed to the social character of the roles imposed on women. This understanding of soldierhood created a holistic image of the female soldier.

“Female soldierhood as an expression of adaptation to male standards”

The second area of significance, equally widespread in terms of statements, presented women’s soldierhood as a category identical with being on par with male standards. While in the first view the requirements for participation in the army were perceived by the female interlocutors to be gender-independent, the proponents of this narrative described them as typically masculine. Here, my female interlocutors mentioned the need to adapt to a space organized according to masculine rules of conduct. This concerned both the area of relations and communication with men, as well as the competence level related to confirming one’s own professional value. In some cases, the desire to confirm one’s own competences in the eyes of men was a manifestation of the struggle against the stereotypical perception of femininity.

“An essential view of soldierhood – a woman can never be on par with a man”

The representatives of the last, and least numerous, group referred to the traditional division of male and female competencies. Gender differences were highlighted both in terms of physicality and character traits or manners of behavior. Soldierhood perceived through the prism of traditional masculine traits was defined by the female interlocutors in terms of an ideal unavailable to women. Most of them were women performing administrative and educational functions.

“Appraising soldierhood – a good and a bad female soldier”

The study revealed that most of the women described themselves as a soldier. It turned out that androcentric language was the only acceptable form of describing professional identity for them. The expression “female soldier” evoked extreme emotions: from laughter to irritation. They identified it with the problem of exclusion, infantilisation of

the image, splitting of professional roles, and unnecessary emphasis on gender differences. Interestingly, the female interlocutors on the one hand, diminished the significance of gender in the way soldierhood was defined. On the other hand, they referred to women's experiences as a source of exclusion (such as pregnancy and motherhood) or a lack of consideration for their needs (e.g., in uniforms or the use of separate spaces for lockers or toilets). Thus, there is no doubt that the controversy around the linguistic layer constitutes a fragment of the complex process of identification with the professional role of a female soldier. Two universal categories emerged from the female interlocutors' statements: a good and a bad soldier. The appraisal involved three areas of functioning. In each of the three groups discussed below, as a rule, there were representatives of all military ranks.

“Body and sexuality”

It turned out that in the experience of this subject group, one of the main characteristics defining a “good female soldier” is her gender neutrality. Women of both traditional and masculinized socialization identified with this vision. The female interlocutors were critical of the display of femininity, both in its physical and psychological dimensions. The disciplining of traditional femininity by women appeared in more than half of the subjects. In the case of my subjects, the extreme form of disciplining femininity took the form of the queen bee syndrome. It was revealed by two women: a major and a lieutenant colonel. In the case of most of the female interlocutors, the desire to maintain the image of a “soldier” co-existed with the maintenance of traditional femininity outside the workplace.

“Service and professional role”

Two groups emerged from the statements of this subject group. The first reflects a set of positive experiences based on the belief that women are ambitious, hardworking, and open to cooperation. The second group was represented by the female interlocutors with ambivalent attitudes. They were usually in commander positions. On the one hand, they mentioned women who fit into the definition of a good soldier. On the other hand, they referred to examples of female soldiers being their opposite, e.g. using maternity to protect themselves from excessive duties.

“Relationships with other female soldiers”

Although most of the female interlocutors considered the relationships with women in the military to be correct, they pointed out to their superficial nature. Female soldiers emphasized the lack of a sense of community and the persistence of competitive tendencies. They mentioned the need to remain vigilant in the situation of a similar professional goal. They considered the lack of trust as the main reason for such behaviour.

Discussion

The research revealed the complexity of experiences related to the perception by the female interlocutors of their own professional position and role and the meanings assigned to the concept of a military career. What is surprising in this study is the ambiguous attitude towards career. The results obtained allow us to put forward the assumption that a career is a controversial concept for female soldiers, leading to a division in the way it is perceived. It turns out that more than half of them reject the classical definition of promotion to a higher position and focus mainly on its subjective indicators. Most representatives of such an approach are women holding lower ranks (a second lieutenant and a lieutenant). They are characterized by relatively low seniority. Attention is also drawn to the nature of the subjective indicators, built on the narrative of “satisfaction with the job well done”. The concept of competence comes to the focus here. Interestingly, it was mainly female soldiers in this group whose socialization had a masculinized character. Given their childhood experience of participation in, or confrontation with, the male environment (in the case of their soldier/police father), one can assume that this attitude is a continuation of the process of assimilation into the male space. Perhaps this is how women wish to emphasize their usefulness to the army. It is also worth noting the sources of motivation to work, which in the case of this group of female soldiers appear to be internal, and therefore more persistent. Similar conclusions were revealed by the research of T. Stein-McCormick (2011, pp. 40–41) among American women warriors. It turned out that female soldiers who came from military families “seemed to be the most adaptive, resilient and tenacious”. My research revealed that the classic career approach appears mostly among women in the rank of a captain and a major – that is, those in higher positions. This seems understandable, since it is probably the personal experience of promotion to a higher position that influenced this way of perceiving a career. Not without significance is also the fact that most of them were women who faced the possibility of promotion to the senior officers' corps. Ambivalent approach in the perception of the concept of career reveals the area of meanings given to one's professional position. It turns out that in this case most of my female interlocutors adopt an objective criterion. As if from the position of an observer or critic, female interlocutors comment on their position on the military professional ladder. What is noteworthy is the high level of caution exercised in thinking about the career-making categories. It turns out that only about half of the female soldiers believe that they have pursued, are pursuing, or will begin to pursue a career. This attitude may have its sources in high aspirations and standards setting the criterion of career, experienced barriers or/and in (self-)criticism supported by the belief in the need to confirm one's competence in the eyes of soldiers (Nanglu & Chandho, 2019; Do & Samuels, 2021).

Another conclusion concerns the specificity of the valuation of soldierhood. It turns out that most of the women soldiers' show a tendency to evaluate it. Additionally, they

formulate a set of orders and prohibitions that define the content of female soldierhood, according to standards based on hegemonic masculinity. The research revealed that the process of disciplining femininity in the military space takes place on several levels. It concerns the area of physicality (sexuality), language and identity. This corresponds with the results of research conducted among Israeli female soldiers (Sasson-Levy, 2003; Karazi-Presler, 2020). The women's tendency to suppress the physical aspect of femininity as a manifestation of adaptation and adjustment to male standards – that the calls T. Karazi-Presler (2020, p. 14) “malleability required in the process of acquiring a certain skill or knowledge” – has been also confirmed by the research conducted among Dutch and American female soldiers (Sion, 2008; Nanglu & Chandhok, 2019). This mechanism is underpinned by the tendency inherent in hegemonic masculinity to dominate by disciplining women in order to perpetuate distance and power hierarchies. As a result, female soldiers identify themselves with the “oppressor” in an effort to ensure their ostensible protection from exclusion (Sion, 2008, p. 19). Thus, one can speculate that the mechanism of women's self-discipline, or women disciplining women, has its original source in male disapproval of manifestations of femininity (Nanglu & Chandhok, 2019, p. 356). Interesting, in the context of constructing a military career, is the attitude of the female soldiers towards the way they name their professional role. The study revealed that the majority of women define themselves as a soldier. Following the constructivists' assumption that language produces social reality, the influence of hegemonic masculinity on the female interlocutors' mindset becomes apparent (Berger, Luckmann, 1983, p. 85–121). A study among Congolese female soldiers reached similar conclusions (Baaz & Stern, 2013). It can be assumed that the masculine lexical form of defining one's professional role is dictated by the desire to assert one's worth in a masculinized environment.

Another area in the process of (self-)disciplining women that the research revealed concerns identity as reflected in the concept of the female soldier. In the vast majority of subjects, the ability to transcend the traditionally understood female identity comes to the forefront. Although the female soldiers differ in their understanding of these differences (some explain it in terms of individual differences, others talk about being on par with men) (Eichler, 2022, p. 38), they assume the possibility of effective participation in a masculinized professional role. Similar conclusions were obtained by A. Doan, S. Portillo in a study of American female soldiers. It turned out that, contrary to men, women experienced fluidity of their identity, depending on the interaction partner and the place where the interaction occurred. This means, the ability to “juggle” characteristics stereotypically considered masculine or feminine, which is not without effort. Participants in the study cited the experience of being outside the gender binary category in this respect. (Doan, Portillo, 2017, p. 13). The fluid nature of the meanings surrounding the notion of femininity -/and soldierhood has also been confirmed by other researchers (Silva, 2008; Badaro, 2014). Interestingly, these often contradictory

representations of identity, particularly evident in female interlocutors in commander roles, coexist with each other. Moreover, they contribute to their increased adjustment to both their military and family roles (Baaz & Stern, 2013). On the other hand, when we re-examine the concepts of soldierhood, we see their differentiation in terms of fundamental assumptions. Each of the three visions is based on different arguments and translates differently into the functioning of women in the army. Thus, we can conclude that the image of the female soldierhood is not homogeneous. Female soldiers are searching for their professional identity through trial and error. It seems that the greatest potential lies in an approach based on the idea of individual differences. Female soldiers abandon the tendency to polarize competencies into masculine and feminine. At the same time, they create space for typically female experiences caused by physiology, e.g. pregnancy.

This study does not exhaust the issue of how women construct their military careers. The results of the study are not representative of the entire community of female soldiers. In the future, it is worth designing a study that will be devoted to the career trajectory of women in the rank of an officer who perform only commanders' functions, i.e. one of the most masculinized professional paths in the army.

Limitations

This study does not exhaust the issue of how women construct their military careers. These results are not representative of the entire community of female soldiers. Although representatives of the officer's corps participated in the study, they showed great diversity in terms of military ranks and functions performed (with particular emphasis on the division into staff-administrative and commander). Hence, obtaining a coherent picture of career reconstruction and accompanying difficulties is impossible, specific to a given position and rank. In the future, it is worth designing a study devoted to the career trajectory of women in the rank of an officer who performs only commanders' functions, i.e. one of the most masculinized professional paths in the army. A methodological limitation related to organizing the group of women subjected to the study is the requirement to obtain one-time authorization from the Secretary of State in the Ministry of National Defence. To get them, the researcher must first obtain the consent of the unit commanders researcher intend to conduct the research. Such a procedure, she notes A. Baranowska, "Constitutes [...] a significant obstacle and condemns the researcher to goodwill unit commander, on whom the success of the undertaking largely depends research" (Baranowska, 2016, p. 179). Moreover, it causes no possibility of using a full random selection of participants.

Conclusions

The aim of the study was to reconstruct professional experiences of women officers in the Polish Armed Forces and to analyse the processes by which they construct their careers. Although there is no doubt that the growing participation of women has become, in a formal sense, tantamount to their access to careers, the social assessment of the phenomenon indicates insufficient manifestations of acceptance of what has become a fact since 1999. The experiences of the female soldiers allow us to assume that the process of mental transformation in the organizational culture of the army has not yet been completed. The research revealed that a probable reason for the difficulties in creating a sense of community among female soldiers are different visions of (auto-)soldierhood. Lack of mutual trust or contradictory definitions of a female soldier image become an object of frustration and conflict, which subsequently hinders the process of women's adaptation to military structures.

I would like to conclude this discussion by referring to the area of meanings that regulate the process of women's participation not only in professional careers, but also more broadly – in military structures. To illustrate its specificity, I will use the concepts of integration and inclusion. The analysis of the female soldiers' experiences rather indicates an identity with the former term. This manifests itself in the necessity for women to adapt to the masculinized standards of the military. I am thinking, for example, of maternity (pregnancy, childbirth, taking care of the child) which, both biologically and socially, makes it difficult or impossible to meet these requirements.⁹ This, in turn, carries the risk of stereotyping women and widening the gender gap. For although they start the process of constructing their career paths from relatively equal positions (in the formal and legal sense), the stereotypical meanings given to the notion of femininity lead to their depreciation. Therefore, it may be concluded that it would be more accurate to adopt an inclusive perspective. According to such an approach, it is not so much the adaptation of women to the environment of soldiers that is the essence of the actions, but the modification of this environment in a way that allows each participant to freely develop professionally. According to this assumption, it is the army that should change its culture in such a way that the needs of either gender are not neglected.

REFERENCES

1. Baaz, M., & Stern, M. (2013). Fearless fighters and submissive wives: Negotiating identity among women soldiers in the Congo (DRC). *Armed Forces & Society*, 39(4), 711–739. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X12459715>

⁹ In this context, it is worth reflecting on the area of formal and legal solutions (and mental), which should be implemented to make the army more friendly toward female soldiers' maternity, making it easier for them to reconcile their roles.

2. Badaro, M. (2014). „One of the guys”: military women, paradoxical individuality, and the transformations of the Argentine Army. *American Anthropologist*, 117(1), 86–99. <http://doi.org/10.1111/aman.12163>
3. Bauman, T. (2001). Podstawowe Założenia Badań Jakościowych. In: T. Pilch, T. Bauman (red.). *Zasady badań pedagogicznych. Strategie ilościowe i jakościowe* (267–293). Wydawnictwo Akademickie Żak.
4. Baranowska, A. (2016). Wojsko jako przedmiot badań społecznych: uwagi na marginesie badań własnych, *Zeszyty Naukowe WSG*, 27, seria: „Edukacja – Rodzina – Społeczeństwo” (1), 175–192.
5. Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1983). *Społeczne tworzenie rzeczywistości*, trans. J. Niżnik. Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy.
6. Branicka, J., & Baran-Wojtachnio, M. (2009). *Służba zawodowa kobiet – żołnierzy*. WBSS.
7. Connell, R. (2005). *Masculinities*. Polity Press.
8. Conard, P., & Scott-Tilley, D. (2015). The lived experience of female veterans deployed to the Gulf War II. *Nursing Forum*, 50(4), 228–240. <http://doi.org/10.1111/nuf.12097>
9. Czuba, B. (2015). *Kobiety w wojsku: przystosowanie zawodowe, relacje społeczne, emocje: studium socjologiczne*. Wojskowa Akademia Techniczna.
10. Daphna-Tekoah S., Harel-Shalev A., & Harpaz-Rotem I. (2021). Thank you for hearing my voice – listening to women combat veterans in the United States and Israeli militaries. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, Article 769123. <http://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.769123>
11. Dębska, A. (2004). *Kobieta w mundurze: czyli nowa jakość w systemie bezpieczeństwa państwa*. Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek.
12. Drapikowska, B. (2013). Kompetencje dowódcze – własne oraz innych kobiet – w opiniach kobiet – żołnierzy. *Obronność – Zeszyty Naukowe Wydziału Zarządzania i Dowodzenia Akademii Obrony Narodowej*, 4(8), 68–84.
13. Do, J. J., & Samuels, S. M. (2021). I am a warrior: An analysis of the military masculine-warrior narrative among U.S. Air Force officer candidates. *Armed Forces and Society*, 47(1), 25–47. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X20931561>
14. Doan, A., & Portillo, S. (2017). Not a woman, but a soldier: Exploring identity through translocational positionality. *Sex Roles*, 76(3–4), 1–14. <http://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-016-0661-7>
15. Dodds, C. D., & Kiernan, M. D. (2019). Hidden veterans: A review of the literature on women veterans in contemporary society. *Illness, Crisis, & Loss*, 27(4), 293–310. <http://doi.org/10.1177/1054137319834775>
16. Dufurat, J. (2001). *Kobiety w kręgu lewicy niepodległościowej: od Ligi Kobiet Pogotowia Wojennego do Ochotniczej Legii Kobiet (1908–1918/1919)*. Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek.
17. Eichler, M. (2022). Making military and Veteran women (in)visible: the continuity of gendered experiences in military-to-civilian transition. *Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health*, 8(1), 38. <http://doi.org/10.3138/jmfvh-2021-0077>
18. Eichler, M. (2016). Add female veterans and stir? A feminist perspective on gendering veterans research. *Armed Forces & Society*, 43(4), 674–694. <http://doi.org/10.1177%2F0095327X16682785>
19. Feldman, S. E., & Hanlon, C. (2012). Count us in: The experiences of female war, peacemaking, and peacekeeping veterans. *Armed Forces & Society*, 38(2), 205–224. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X11410859>
20. Flick, U. (2011). *Managing Quality in Qualitative Research*. SAGE Publications.

21. Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences. In: N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*, 3rd ed., (191–215). Sage.
22. Gutierrez, P. M., Brenner, L. A., Rings, J. A., Devore, M. D., Kelly, P. J., Staves, P. J., Kelly, C. M., & Kaplan, M. S. (2013). A qualitative description of female veterans' deployment-related experiences and potential suicide risk factors. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 69(9), 923–935. <http://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.21997>
23. Gozdur, S. (2021). Skala jest ogromna, tylko bardzo dużo osób boi się o tym mówić. O molestowaniu i mobbingu w służbach mundurowych. <https://warszawa.naszemias-to.pl/skala-jest-ogromna-tylko-bardzo-duzo-osob-boi-sie-o-tym/ar/c15-8138033>.
24. Harel-Shalev, A., & Daphna-Tekoah, S. (2019). *Breaking the binaries in security studies: A gendered analysis of women in combat (Oxford Studies in Gender and International Relations)*. Oxford University Press.
25. Harel-Shalev, A., & Daphna-Tekoah, S. (2015). Gendering conflict analysis: Analysing Israeli female combatants' experiences. In: S. Shekhawat (Eds.). *Female combatants in conflict and peace: Challenging gender in violence and post-conflict reintegration* (69–83). Palgrave Macmillan. http://doi.org/10.1057/9781137516565_5
26. Harrison, D. Laliberté, L. (1997). Gender, the military, and military family support. In: L. Weinstein, & C. White (Eds). *Wives and warriors: Women and the Military in the United States and Canada* (35–53). Bergin & Gravey.
27. Heineken, L. (2015). Are women 'really' making a unique contribution to peace-keeping? *Journal of International Peacekeeping*, 19(3–4), 227–248. <http://doi.org/10.1163/18754112-01904002>
28. Judzińska, A. (2020). *Wojskowa kariera zawodowa w doświadczeniach kobiet. Studium socjopedagogiczne*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM.
29. Karazi-Presler, T. (2020). Note passing as gendered practices of public ambiguity in a hyper-masculine organization. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 27(4), 615–631. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12439>
30. Kaźmierska, K. (1997). Wywiad narracyjny – technika i pojęcia analityczne. In: M. Czyżewski, A. Piotrowski, & A. Rokuszewska-Pawełek (red.). *Biografia a tożsamość narodowa* (34–44). Katedra Socjologii Kultury Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego.
31. Kiven, J. K., & Sone, P. M. (2015). Gender in the military: A phenomenological study of the lived experience of female soldiers in the Cameroon Army. *International Journal of Social Science Research*, 3(1), 100–119. <http://doi.org/10.5296/ijssr.v3i1.7069>
32. Knudsen, S. E., & Teisen, M. S. (2018). Negotiating gender: Female combat soldiers in Denmark. *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning*, 2–3, 49–61. <http://doi.org/10.7146/kkf.v27i2-3.110847>
33. Kopciewicz, L. (2003). *Polityka kobiecości jako pedagogika różnic*. Wydawnictwo Impuls.
34. Kubinowski, D. (2010). *Jakościowe badania pedagogiczne: filozofia, metodyka, ewaluacja*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej.
35. Kos, E. Wywiad narracyjny jako metoda badań empirycznych. In: D. Urbaniak-Zając, & E. Kos (Eds.). *Badania jakościowe w pedagogice. Wywiad narracyjny i obiektywna hermeneutyka* (91–116). Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
36. Kronsell, A. (2005). Gendered practices in institutions of hegemonic masculinity. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 7, 280–298. <http://doi.org/10.1080/14616740500065170>
37. Miller, L. L. (1997). Not just weapons of the weak: gender harassment as a form of protest for army men. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 60(1), 32–51. <http://doi.org/10.2307/2787010>

38. Nanglu, D., & Chandhok, S. (2020). Experiences from the ground: narrative of a woman Marine soldier. *Journal of Psychological Research*, 14(2), 353–361. <http://doi.org/10.32381/JPR.2019.14.02.13>
39. Nuciari, M. (2006). Women in the Military. In: G. Caforio (Ed.). *Handbook of the sociology of the military. Handbooks of sociology and social research* (279–297). Springer US. http://doi.org/10.1007/0-387-34576-0_16
40. Parsons, T. (1972). *Szkice z teorii socjologicznej*, trans. A. Bentkowska. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe.
41. Persson, A., & Sundevall, F. (2019). Conscripting women: Gender, soldiering, and military service in Sweden 1965–2018. *Women's History Review*, 28(7), 1039–1056. <http://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2019.1596542>
42. Piotrowska-Trybull, M., & Jabłońska-Wołoszyn, M. (2017). Atrybuty różnorodności kobiet żołnierzy w świetle wyników badań pilotażowych. *Zarządzanie Zasobami Ludzkimi*, 3–4(116–117), 39–52.
43. Poczowski, A. (1993). Rozwój potencjału pracy jako problem zarządzania zasobami ludzkimi w przedsiębiorstwie. *Zeszyty Naukowe/Akademia Ekonomiczna w Krakowie. Seria Specjalna, Monografie*, 118.
44. Sasson-Levy, O. (2003). Feminism and military gender practices: Israeli women soldiers in “masculine” roles. *Sociological Inquiry*, 73(3), 440–465. <http://doi.org/10.1111/1475-682X.00064>
45. Schein, E. H. (1996). Career anchors revisited: implications for career development in the 21st century. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 10(4), 80–88. <http://doi.org/10.5465/ame.1996.3145321>
46. Segal, M. W. (1995). Women's military roles cross-nationally: past, present, and future. *Gender and Society*, 9(6), 757–775. <http://doi.org/10.1177/089124395009006008>
47. Silva, J. M. (2008). A new generation of women? How female ROTC cadets negotiate the tension between masculine military culture and traditional femininity. *Social Forces*, 87(2), 937–960. <http://doi.org/10.1353/sof.0.0138>
48. Sion, L. (2008). Peacekeeping and the gender regime Dutch female peacekeepers in Bosnia and Kosovo. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 37(5), 561–585. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0891241607309988>
49. Stachowitsch, S. (2013). Professional soldier, weak victim, patriotic heroine. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 15(2), 157–176. <http://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2012.699785>
50. Stein-McCormick, T. (2011). *Sisters in arms: a case study of the experiences of women warriors in the United States Military*. University of South Florida.
51. Straś-Romanowska, M., Bartosz, B. & Żurko, M. (red.). (2010). *Badania narracyjne w psychologii*. ENETEIA.
52. Strong, J. D., Findley, P., McMahon, S., & Angell, B. (2015). What is war? Female veterans' experiences of combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. *Journal of Women & Social Work*, 30(4), 489–503. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0886109915585383>
53. Strong, J. D. (2013). *Women at war: a qualitative study of combat experiences of female veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan*. New Jersey – New Brunswick.
54. Wawrzykowska-Wierciochowa, D. (1988). *Rycerki i samarytanki*. Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej.
55. Whitehead, A. (2005). Man to man violence: how masculinity may work as a dynamic risk factor. *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*, 44(4), 411–422. <http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2311.2005.00385x>