

BLUEPRINTS FOR CHANGE – BENCHMARKING GENDER DYNAMICS WITHIN NATO AND EU –

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DOI: 10.55535/RMT.2024.4.46

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has regionally and globally shifted the security paradigm and consequently undermined the international peace and stability. In this context, global security organizations have been put to a hard test and determined to use the blueprints of deterrence and defence based on political-military cohesion, resilience and adaptation. Developments on all dimensions of the defence and security sector have been reconsidered, thus the gender perspective being reconfirmed as crucial on the agendas of NATO and EU across all core tasks. Military capability, effectiveness and interoperability represent the most valuable assets for the challenging security landscape unfolding at present, therefore benchmarking the NATO and EU gender developments is key in the process of advancing gender equality and enhancing its integration in a coherent and coordinated manner. The new adopted Women, Peace and Security policies, plans and procedures enable both NATO and the EU to respond better to the broader security challenges and to thoroughly approach the intersection between gender and all other emerging security threats, by recognizing and employing diversity as a catalyst for a more secure future.

Keywords: Ukraine; shift mechanisms; gender dynamics; integration; diversity;

INTRODUCTION

The continuously evolving and changing security environment has brought to the forefront of international security-providing organizations the ongoing need to augment the two coordinates of deterrence and defence, relying in this endeavour on political cohesion, resilience, and military adaptation. The war in Ukraine, the conflict in the Gaza Strip, terrorist threats, as well as the visibly assertive attitude of China under Xi Jinping's leadership (Loh, 2024, p. 7), overlaid by a wide range of security challenges associated with elements such as demography, climate, resources, or public health, which are also in full evolution, are the reason why the gender perspective has continued to be validated as crucial on the NATO and EU agendas in all core tasks. The adoption of the updated version of the *Alliance's Policy on Women, Peace, and Security* at the NATO Summit in Washington demonstrates, on the one hand, the firm commitment to integrating gender perspectives into activities and across all specific NATO structures (Washington Summit Declaration, 2024, point 35) and, on the other hand, the profound understanding of the interconnection between advancing the gender agenda and improving the Alliance's ability to understand conflict-generating factors and operating environments, identify security risks and vulnerabilities, develop more tailored and gender-sensitive interventions, and identify effective solutions (NATO Policy on Women, Peace and Security, 2024, point 19). The conflict in Ukraine, generated by Russia's unprecedented aggression, has brought to the dialogue on ensuring peace and security in the Euro-Atlantic area the critically important idea that, in an interconnected world, isolationism will not provide safety to any state. The current security challenges are far too great, and the competition is too fierce for any nation or even security organization to combat them alone. Therefore, the only winning option for them lies in partnerships and cooperation, especially if they leverage resources and geography. In this context, we observe that the European Union approaches gender as a facilitator of interoperability and supports its members and partners in developing security and defence institutions that are accessible and responsive to the needs of both women and men, while also concretely promoting the participation and representation of women at all levels of national armed forces. The gender dynamics within NATO and the EU are in continuous flux thanks to the deliberate choices of the members and partners of the two organizations, as well

as the political will to thoroughly address the intersection between gender and all other emerging security threats, by recognizing and utilizing diversity as a catalyst for a safer future. This study further aims to adopt a nuanced and comparative approach to the integration of the gender concept within NATO and the EU, while exploring in parallel the policies, plans, and implementation of gender in current military operations.

GENDER DYNAMICS WITHIN NATO

As NATO advances in a complex geopolitical context, deterrence and defence are becoming increasingly important. Without a doubt, Russia's aggression against Ukraine has provided a powerful reminder that we must expect the unexpected and, equally, we must be prepared for all types of scenarios that may unfold in the future. Under these circumstances, it is essential to maintain conventional fighting forces, as it paradoxically constitutes a premise for dialogue, while developing the ability to combat unconventional threats and introduce new technologies with the necessary skills for their effective use. Therefore, it is important to encourage diversity within the workforce, particularly in the military, to generate the skill sets and mindsets necessary to counter the conventional and unconventional challenges we face.

Developments and Key Milestones regarding Changes to Gender-Related Policies, Strategies, and Action Plans at the North Atlantic Alliance Level

With the occasion of NATO's 75th anniversary and nearly 25 years since the adoption of UNSCR 1325 by the UN Security Council, the world is facing the highest number of violent conflicts since the Second World War. Millions of women worldwide are thus experiencing a regression of their overall rights, along with a shrinking access to participation in security efforts and peace negotiations, disproportionately affected by ongoing conflicts. Currently, NATO is navigating the Euro-Atlantic area, dealing with the turmoil created on multiple fronts by the conflict in Ukraine, and through the mechanisms of change adopted in both theoretical and legislative terms, it demonstrates its intention to remain a presence firmly anchored in protecting and building upon the achievements already made in advancing the Women, Peace, and Security agenda.

Building on this reality and aligning with the 2022 Strategic Concept, NATO's new gender policy provides the necessary political framework for the Alliance to continue promoting the UNSCR 1325 agenda. The document acknowledges that the integration of the gender dimension enhances NATO's political decision-making

processes, operational effectiveness, and all efforts to achieve gender equality. It also recognizes that gender equality and the Women, Peace, and Security agenda are integral to sustainable peace and reflect the core values and priorities of the Alliance.

Thus, the new policy outlines the relevance and status of the Alliance, presenting essentially four strategic objectives:

1. *Strengthening gender-responsive leadership and accountability processes in this area;*
2. *Increasing women's participation at all levels of activity, including decision-making and leadership roles;*
3. *Preventing threats that disproportionately affect women and girls;*
4. *Protecting women and girls from gender-based violence.*

The four strategic objectives mentioned above are inspired by the global gender agenda, adapted to the Alliance's mandate and mission, with the aim of guiding NATO's present and future political and military efforts, both internally and externally.

As a new element, looking beyond the lines that define traditional security threats, the Policy brings to the forefront the interconnection within NATO between the gender agenda and the human security agenda, particularly in the sphere of sexual violence in armed conflicts, a fact also observed in the evolution of the conflict in Ukraine. Thus, we observe that the two agendas reflect people-centred, human rights-based approaches that complement and reinforce each other, even though they remain separate in essence. While the concept of human security considers the safety and security of all people, the concept addressed through UNSCR 1325 emphasizes the impact of gender in armed conflicts, an impact that is often disproportionate due to gender inequality and discrimination. Sexual violence in armed conflicts, used as a deliberate war tactic, represents an acute threat, as it undermines societal resilience and regional stability on multiple critical fronts (NATO Policy on Women, Peace and Security, 2024, point 6). For this reason, through the new Gender Policy, NATO is committed to ensuring the effective prevention and response to this threat in all missions, operations and activities conducted under NATO's aegis, thus aligning with the NATO Policy on Preventing and Responding to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV, 2021) as well as with NATO's Women, Peace, and Security Action Plan for the 2021–2025 period.

The gender perspective is key to understanding current conflicts, especially now, when they are fought both on the battlefield and beyond, in the areas of economic sanctions, hybrid warfare and disinformation. In this regard, the Gender Policy

adopted in 2024 refers for the first time to new aspects associated with emerging security challenges, such as gendered disinformation, gender-based violence facilitated through technology, the gender dimension of climate change, and the use of artificial intelligence in everyday life. It also emphasizes the importance of partnerships with civil society and advocates for closer cooperation with the private sector, particularly concerning technology-related threats.

In an organization like NATO, which is based on the respect for shared values, the gender perspective can be deliberately leveraged to enhance any doubts regarding whether Western international organizations are defending their own interests at the expense of the democratic values upon which they were founded. Therefore, if the gender perspective is not accepted as an essential premise in negotiating, achieving, and guaranteeing peace, NATO risks its reputation as a security-providing organization due to the use of disinformation tactics in this dimension, the insertion of cognitive biases in information analysis, the reduction of resilience towards its own societies, or by diminishing the effectiveness of planning and conducting operations (Military Voices on the Gender Perspective: A NATO Anthology, 2024, p. 8).

Recognized within NATO's Warfighting Capstone Concept, technology serves as a critical facilitator in the development of military capabilities. At the same time, the gender perspective needs to be considered to maximize the advantages created through the use of military technologies, as incorporating gender differences as part of the implementation process of gender in specific capability requirements can ensure that armed forces are better trained and prepared to respond to any future threats. NATO utilizes innovative and disruptive technologies as part of its deterrence and defence posture. Therefore, if technological capabilities are developed with a gender-sensitive approach, all future fighters are likely to be able to use advanced technological systems and capabilities that enhance effectiveness, protection, and connectivity on the battlefield, within the context of responsibly designing equitable technologies guided by a human rights-centred approach and the integration of the gender perspective. The new benchmark is based on ongoing military adaptation efforts, including the complete and rapid implementation and operationalization of two high-level military concepts: the *Concept for the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area*, which focuses on the engagement of force for deterrence and defence in the present, and the *NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept*, which provides a 20-year vision for the development of the Alliance's military power and establishes a practical path to turn this vision into reality (Bâtcă, 2023). In this regard, the Alliance responds to current challenges in the security environment

by strengthening advanced conventional capabilities, investing in new platforms, and adapting its exercises, information environment, and air and missile defence posture (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Romania in NATO, 2024), as well as by utilizing diverse mechanisms, such as the gender agenda, which facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the international security environment as a whole. Thus, in fulfilling deterrence and defence objectives, gender plays an essential role in the development of the Alliance's areas of action, providing granularity (NATO Policy on Women, Peace and Security, 2024, point 20) and ensuring robust forces whose training is tailored to the complexity of the operational environment (Ib., point 24). In the area of crisis prevention and management, NATO Allies show increased interest in integrating the gender perspective as it contributes to refining the information management process, operational leadership, and decision-making at the Allied level, within a political and military context. Moreover, the gender agenda, through its relevance and characteristic diversity, easily ensures effective and nuanced prevention and response to crises through implementation mechanisms (Ib., point 26). The objective of ensuring security through cooperation strengthens the Alliance and secures the safety of millions of European citizens while also contributing to the preservation of peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic space. The gender perspective contributes in this context to facilitating political dialogue and deepening practical cooperation with partners, cooperation based on a shared value vision, respect, and mutual benefits. At the NATO level, the extensive network of relationships and partnerships essential for protecting common goods globally, enhancing resilience, and maintaining a rules-based international order provides the right framework for advancing the international gender agenda, focusing relevant actors on implementing UNSCR 1325 and the decisive means to achieve the objectives of NATO's gender policy on a large scale.

In another context, the gender perspective is also an opportunity, representing a means of building and ensuring the connection between political ideals and military operational necessity. Through a better understanding of the gender perspective, NATO can comprehensively address the vectors of threat and existing vulnerabilities within the societies it seeks to protect. Women communicate effectively, build relationships, and manage complex social dynamics differently and complementarily to men, and their skills can be invaluable for engaging local populations, gathering intelligence and supporting mission success in conflict zones. Therefore, the assertion brought into discussion is clear: when women participate in shaping security strategies, their unique perspectives lead to the identification and selection of more comprehensive and sustainable solutions regarding this dimension.

During global security challenges, the world witnesses the profound impact of women's active participation in the actions carried out by the Armed Forces. Ukraine is a testament to this reality, with 66,000 courageous women serving their country in uniform, over 5,000 of whom are on the front lines, demonstrating resilience and courage in the face of Russian aggression (Military Voices on the Gender Perspective: A NATO Anthology, 2024, p. 18). Their indispensable role underscores the universal need for the integration of gender into security sectors worldwide, and their example illustrates a path toward building a more inclusive and resilient security landscape, where every individual, regardless of gender, can significantly contribute to global peace and stability.

Reflections and Perspectives

Integrating the gender perspective is and will continue to be an integral part of NATO's efforts to ensure peace, stability and security, contributing to strengthening unity, legitimacy, resilience and cognitive superiority. Thus, in the future, NATO forces will remain more accountable for their actions, opting to operate exclusively within the legal framework adopted by the Alliance, upholding the highest standards of behaviour and committing to ensuring that the military actions in which they participate – be they exercises, operations or responses to natural disasters – will have a minimal impact, as short-term as possible, on the entire population.

NATO must also develop a workforce with the right proportions and the appropriate diversity of talents to have the real capacity for deterrence and defence in the context of a potential future war. It certainly entails that the Alliance will ensure that both women and men have equal access to the security sector and the armed forces, and therefore they can have the opportunity to defend their fundamental values, namely freedom, peace and security.

Finally, NATO must develop the appropriate processes and capabilities to conduct future warfare by integrating a gender perspective. The Alliance, during its multi-domain operations supported by new technologies, should collect sex- and age-disaggregated data as a strategic advantage. Such data can effectively facilitate gender analyses of personnel functions, thereby enhancing situational awareness on the battlefield and understanding the human environment operating within it. These actions will document the decision-making and planning processes, increasing the efficiency of NATO's future military operations and activities, and thereby contributing concretely to ensuring mission success.

GENDER DYNAMICS WITHIN THE EU

The European Union is regarded as one of the most advanced political systems in the world concerning the promotion of gender equality. Its policies primarily aim to combat gender inequality and are often seen as exceptional political instruments compared to other European policies involving social regulations. For nearly four decades, the EU has imposed a series of norms and values on member states that surpass those in practice at the national level, creating a conducive environment for the development and mobilization of feminist movements.

The European Union's Integrative Vision for Advancing and Implementing the International Gender Agenda

In 1957, the construction of a European initiative focused on gender equality was not directly emphasized, especially in the context of a community founded on the implementation of a Single Market. European policies on gender equality were initiated and developed through treaties based on the gradual expansion of community competencies, in line with the enlargement of the European space, the political balance within the Council and the European Commission, and the increased emphasis on the role of women through key figures.

The Gender Equality Index is a tool used by the EU to measure the level of gender equality within the Union and its member states across various fields of activity. According to trends recorded in 2019, half of the member states failed to reach the European average on gender equality, prompting the European Parliament and the Commission, in the exercise of their functional responsibilities, to renew and rethink the vision for gender equality in the European context. Consequently, to give new momentum to gender equality and establish new political objectives in this area, the Commission developed a new EU Gender Equality Strategy valid for the period 2020-2025.

The Gender Equality Strategy outlines key actions for the next five years and commits to ensuring that the Commission will include a gender perspective in all policy areas of EU concern, at all levels and stages of the policymaking process. It will also address the phenomenon of intersectionality from a discrimination perspective, ensuring specific funding for this area through an increased number of programmes within the EU budget for the period 2021-2027 (Towards a Union of Equality – Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, 2020, p. 3).

This strategy for all of Europe, for all its member states, and for all its citizens embodies the vision of a space where women and men, girls and boys, in all their diversity, are treated equally and are free to pursue their chosen paths in life,

with equal opportunities to thrive, participate and lead in European society. However, it is important to note that this space is not geographically confined to the borders of the European continent. Through its development cooperation programmes and its foreign and trade policies, the EU positions itself as a crucial player in the international arena regarding gender equality.

The priorities within the strategy refer to the importance of establishing a Union of Equality, which promotes and supports equality for all and equality in all its senses (Questions and Answers: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, 2020). These priorities are addressed in a dual manner, combining key actions to achieve gender equality with measures to streamline the integration of gender into all major EU political initiatives. The key actions essentially involve ending violence against women, combating gender stereotypes, eliminating gender disparities in the labour market, ensuring equal participation of women and men in various sectors of the economy, eliminating the gender pay gap and pension disparities, addressing gender discrepancies in family responsibilities, and achieving gender balance in decision-making processes and politics (Gender Equality Strategy, Achievements and Areas of Action, 2020).

On the other hand, it is necessary to include gender perspectives in all EU policies and processes, ensuring an adequate response to the needs of each gender while maximizing the multidisciplinary potential of EU citizens. To support the operational and technical integration of gender, the Commission has established a Gender Equality Working Group composed of representatives from all Commission services and the European External Action Service.

The establishment of a Union of Equality must serve as a common plea from all stakeholders, particularly focusing on eliminating gender-based violence and gender discrimination, fostering prosperity within an inclusive economic system, and ensuring equal meritocratic participation in decision-making and leadership roles across all sectors.

Implementing the key actions represents a shared responsibility, tailored to the specifics of each action, among EU institutions, the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission, member states, representatives of civil society, social partners, and the private sector. In this regard, the Commission undertakes necessary actions to achieve the objectives of the current strategy and to ensure that gender equality is treated as a priority. The key actions outlined in this strategy are regularly updated and supplemented, with their implementation continuously monitored, and progress – including examples of best practices from member states – reported annually.

The annual reports are designed to include data from Eurostat and Eurofound, as well as indicators for measuring progress based on the EU's annual Gender Equality Index. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) will also provide detailed data and research to contribute to evidence-based policy-making and the updated information from EU institutions and member states.

In the sphere of external activities mentioned above, relevant to the research undertaken in this study, in addition to reaffirming the strategic commitment to gender through the adoption of the EU Gender Equality Strategy for the period 2020-2025, there was also the launch in 2020 of the third Gender Equality Plan (Gender Equality Plan III – GAP III) and the continued application of the EU's Comprehensive Approach to Implementing UNSCR 1325 and 1820 on Women, Peace, and Security. GAP III has been supported at the level of 24 member states, with the selected areas of action outlining the EU's clear vision regarding the essential elements that must be developed in the future for the organization's external action, including in situations of fragility, conflict and emergencies (A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, 2020, p. 20).

These elements include combating all forms of sexual and gender-based violence, integrating the Women, Peace, and Security agenda, strengthening the system of economic and social rights, empowering women and girls, advancing equal participation and leadership, addressing the gender dimension of the green economic transition and digital transformation, as well as health and reproductive rights (Presidency conclusions on the Gender Action Plan (GAP) III 2021-2025 – An ambitious agenda for gender equality and women's empowerment in EU external action, 2020, p. 6).

From the perspective of assimilating the provisions of UNSCR 1325 and its related resolutions, as well as from the perspective of gender integration, there are several documents at the EU level that regulate the essential aspects concerning the interplay between gender and security. Thus, to reinforce the EU's actions in this area, in December 2008, the Council of the European Union adopted the document titled *"The EU Comprehensive Approach to Implementing UNSCR 1325 and 1820 on Women, Peace, and Security"*, which covers the entire spectrum of the EU's external actions throughout a specific conflict cycle, from prevention to crisis management, peacebuilding, reconstruction, and development through cooperation.

As a parallel development of this key policy, it is noteworthy that the Council simultaneously adopted an additional operational document entitled *"Implementing UNSCR 1325 Enhanced by 1820 in the Context of the CFSP"* (December 2008). This document, based on previous operational documents related to this area, emphasizes new elements such as Resolution 1820 concerning sexual violence.

Essentially, we can consider that this document, combined with the Comprehensive Approach, forms the two pillars of the EU's policy on Women, Peace, and Security.

At the European level, EU institutions are responsible for implementing the integrative approach to gender equality, while at the national level, this task falls to the governments of member states. Therefore, although we acknowledge that gender inequalities still persist within the Union, significant progress has been made with the adoption of a proposal for a directive aimed at combating violence against women and domestic violence, as well as the launch in 2022 of the European Care Strategy, which addresses rights concerning the balance between private and professional life. Additionally, the EU Gender Equality Integration Strategy 2020–2025 has identified a series of additional advancements within the areas included in EU policies, among which we highlight climate change (The European Green Deal), artificial intelligence, health, energy, as well as the development of emerging technologies and digitalization.

The European Union is committed to promoting the long-term agenda of gender equality and women's empowerment in its external actions. In this regard, the EU has recently incorporated the principle of gender equality into its support for partner countries and adopted a measurable set of objectives regarding gender equality applicable to all European external initiatives, in line with GAP III.

As a novel element, the EU has implemented its own mechanisms, as well as through the EUMAM advisory mission in Ukraine, to support victims of gender-based violence and implement gender equality through three distinct projects (2024 Report on gender equality in the EU, 2024, p. 69).

The first project involves the establishment of a Ukrainian Women's Fund aimed at helping women's organizations strengthen their capacity to respond to crisis situations arising from acts of sexual violence. The second project provides support and expertise to the Prosecutor General of Ukraine through mobile justice teams to investigate cases of sexual violence occurring in armed conflicts. Finally, the third project, conducted in collaboration with the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative on sexual violence in conflict, primarily aims to support the Ukrainian Government with specialized advisors for women's protection, appointed at all ministry levels, in implementing national action plans regarding violence against women.

Current Challenges

Therefore, to ensure that the EU continues to be recognized as a global actor in paying particular attention to human rights, diversity, gender equality, and the widespread exercise of democratic principles, as well as to emphasize the importance

of its capacities regarding the allocation of its funds, several actions must be taken to maintain and surpass the recent positive dynamics and to provide responses that meet the demands of the ever-changing and evolving security environment.

Combining an enforceable system with coercive measures for member states, along with investing European funds in practices and projects that advance the integration of gender perspectives, leads, in our view, to a deeper and more prompt involvement of state actors in assuming and implementing gender considerations. This proactive attitude of states, in turn, contributes to achieving regional political and operational targets associated with gender, significantly aiding the generation of outcomes aligned with the legislative framework and the specialized human resources utilized to ensure long-term gender equality within the EU's sphere of influence.

CONCLUSIONS

According to the World Bank in 2024, men continue to enjoy more legal protection than women (Global Gender Gap, 2024, p. 36). For this reason, developments regarding the adoption of gender policies at the national level can no longer be minimized or dismissed, especially since gaps in implementation are widespread. Furthermore, out of the more than 100 countries recently analysed by the World Bank (Women, Business, and the Law dataset, 2024) and recognized as having national policies and programmes focused on addressing gender issues across multiple dimensions, only 53% report having sufficient resources allocated for their implementation (UN Women, 2023).

Thus, it is evident that both NATO and the EU must pay the price for peace, as more substantial financial investment ensures the durability of both organizations and their effectiveness in deterring foreign and hostile interventions. Budget allocation, even in the context of integrating gender perspectives across these innovative areas of action and interest for NATO and the EU, remains the *Achilles' heel*. It is because the true value and importance of the gender equality domain are reflected not only in its actual necessity for implementation but also in the concrete funding allocated to it.

The European Union is a unique and essential partner for NATO, as NATO Allies and EU members share the same values and have complementary and coherent roles that mutually reinforce each other in supporting international peace and security. Based on their long-standing cooperation, there is a desire to strengthen the NATO-EU strategic partnership, develop political consultations, and intensify cooperation on common interests such as military mobility, resilience, the impact

of climate change on security, emerging and disruptive technologies, human security, the Women, Peace, and Security agenda, as well as countering cyber and hybrid threats and addressing the systemic challenges posed by other states to Euro-Atlantic security.

For the development of the strategic partnership between NATO and the EU across multiple dimensions, including gender integration, the full involvement of Allies outside the EU in the EU's defence efforts is also essential. NATO recognizes the importance of leveraging diversity as a catalyst for a safer future, as well as the value of a stronger and more capable European defence that positively contributes to transatlantic and global security and is complementary and interoperable with NATO. Initiatives to increase defence spending and develop coherent capabilities that mutually reinforce each other, while avoiding unnecessary duplication, are essential for effectively and coherently leveraging joint efforts to make the Euro-Atlantic area safer in the context of comprehensive approaches to gender and all other emerging threats to international security.

In conclusion, we can assert that, from the perspective of the functioning mechanisms of the entities responsible for gender integration, both NATO and the EU stand out for their complexity and authenticity. However, although using different means and personnel with diverse qualifications and expertise, both organizations manage to fulfil their responsibilities regarding the promotion of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda based on common organizational values and international standards. This is eminently possible through the comprehensive approach to gender practiced at the level of security organizations, as well as through the constructive attitude that underpins the gender integration strategy, an attitude that facilitates the development of competence in the field and enhances this aspect as a necessary capability for completing the operational picture, as well as a key element in conflict prevention and, consequently, in ensuring international peace and security.

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