

Military identity of women veterans and its impact on their social (re)adaptation to civilian environment

Artemenko Anna

*Kharkov University of Humanities "People's Ukrainian Academy", 27,
Lermontovska str., Kharkiv 61024, Ukraine,*

Abstract: This paper examines the features of military and post-military transition of Ukrainian women veterans, as well as their social (re)adaptation to the civilian sphere of public life. The paper investigates how Ukrainian female veterans evaluate practical aspects of integrating women into the military field and what factors affect the process of social (re)adaptation of women to civilian life after returning from the army. It has been found that having a family and children really contributes to the process of (re)adaptation of women after returning from the army; the military experience of servicewomen affects the change in their life values; the length of stay in the armed forces and in the war zone has an impact on the military identification of women with the army and their desire to devote their lives to a military career. It has been concluded that post-military transition of female veterans is associated with certain shifts in their coordinate system of values. Thus, after returning from the armed conflict area, women began to render greater value to life, family and health (traditional values) and less to material benefits. Almost all respondents supported the idea of gender equality in the army and emphasized the positive results of their stay in the military field.

Keywords: Military identity; Women veterans; Social adaptation; Civilian environment.

1. Introduction

Significant changes are currently underway in the Ukrainian society regarding the gender (in)equality of women and men in the military. In military sociology, there is a continuous discussion about participation of female soldiers in the military field. The main theme is the gender integration and the search for an answer to the question of what should be a modern army, and, of course, the role of women in it. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that Ukrainian female military personnel have not yet been granted equal rights with male military personnel in senior military management and have little influence on decision-making in the military sphere. In this regard, it becomes important to study the problems and conditions of stay of Ukrainian servicewomen in the Armed Forces, as well as to clarify the specifics of the process of their (re)adaptation to civilian life after returning from the army [1], [15]. The purpose of the article is to identify the features of the military and post-military transition of Ukrainian women veterans, as well as their social (re)adaptation to the civilian sphere of public life.

As a theoretical basis, we will use the social constructivism according to which social actors interpret the world and their position in it under the influence of the sociocultural context of everyday existence. Social constructivism emphasizes the impact of culture on us, which shapes the way we see things and sets characteristic perspective of the world [4]. The gender identity of a servicewoman is largely shaped by the norms and values that are accepted and highly valued in the military field.

2. Literature Review

American researcher Medi Siegel identified three groups of factors that stimulate the integration of women in the army. Firstly, it is a change in the armed forces (a change in the concept of national security, an understanding of the purpose of the armed forces and directly the policy of recruiting military personnel); secondly, changes in the social structure of modern society (recently women have been actively involved in the labor market and in the public sphere) and the third is the change in cultural values regarding women and the promotion of equal rights and opportunities for women and men [13]. Israeli researchers O. Sasson-Levy and S. Amram-Katz analyze degenderisation processes of relationships in the army, which are manifested in the weakening of gender imbalances, since in the army all servicemen must perform the same combat/army roles regardless of gender; and, on the other hand, processes of regenderization, which are manifested in the gender disproportions reproduction (since women in the army are required to perform less complex tasks, they do not have to participate in combat actions) [11].

O. Sasson-Levy and S. Amram-Katz emphasize that the army retains the priority of a masculine model of behavior (which values aggressiveness, perseverance, integrity, strength, endurance, a strong body, ability to take great physical exertion, willingness to risk one's life, ability to use weapons, and so on), therefore, the

successful transition of women into the military field implies the assimilation of this model. Degenderisation means that the functioning of men and women in the military is relatively similar, so more differences can be seen not between male and female servicemen, but between different representatives of individual gender groups (who have different military experience, different education levels, different age) [11]. At the same time, there exists re-gendering of relationships in the army that is difficult to identify and change. It manifests itself in reproduction on a daily basis of cultural codes (e.g., a woman is weaker than a man), stereotypical patterns of behavior (for example, a woman is a worse fighter) and a hegemonic gender belief in the superiority of masculinity. Discriminatory practices are also manifested in the fact that women in the army have special standards in physical training (fewer push-ups, squats, pull-ups on the horizontal bar, shorter running distances).

O. Sasson-Levy and S. Amram-Katz have distinguished two patterns in feminist specialized literature that differently evaluate women's participation in the army. Liberal feminists I. Feinman and L. Peach believe that women, on an equal basis with men, should have the right to serve in the military and to participate in combat [5], [9]; depriving them of this right is discriminatory because it is related with the treatment of women as a less professional "lower category" of military personnel who may occupy a limited number of jobs in the army. On the contrary, radical feminists do not consider the army to be a social field in which women must fight for equal rights with men, since the army is an institution of legitimate violence dominated by masculine patterns of behavior [11]. They believe that women joining the army help to strengthen the "immoral" institution and divert public attention from critical analysis of goals and functions of military institutions [9], [10].

D. Silva examines the integration of women into the US army, which is linked to the transformation of traditional gender relations in the military field in this country. Based on the results of interviews with 38 US servicewomen, D. Silva concluded that for the majority of women surveyed (about two-thirds), the main thing is to evaluate the military personnel not by sex, but by professional characteristics, and, accordingly, personal quality of servicemen [14]. On the other hand, the women interviewed emphasized the importance for them of traditional signs of femininity – attractiveness, sensitivity, marriage and motherhood – although they acknowledged that these characteristics were difficult to combine with military practices. Many women said they did not want a long military career, as this could hinder their plans to marry and have children (and only one woman interviewed said she planned to stay in the army for a long time if necessary) [14].

O. Sasson-Levy in the article entitled "Feminism and Military Gender Practices: Israeli Women Soldiers in "Masculine" Roles" (2003) emphasizes that "Israeli female soldiers form gender identity in accordance with the model of hegemonic courage of a warrior by performing three interrelated practices: 1) imitation of bodily and discursive actions of fighters (carrying weapons, sharp movements, good physical condition, obscene language); 2) distancing themselves from "traditional femininity" (with its emphasis on external decoration and concern for the beauty of the body); and 3) trivialization of sexual harassment" [12]. The consequence of the implementation of these practices is the assimilation of the male ideology of the soldier and identification with the patriarchal order of the army, which is in fact an obstacle to the real integration of women in the military field and the reason for their role marginalization.

On the contrary, F. Pinch, A. McIntyre, F. Brown, and A. Okros emphasize that in many Western countries servicewomen have been granted equal rights with men, allowing them to participate in hostilities and serve in all branches of the armed forces, enabling them to fully integrate into the army system. So, in 1985 in Norway women were given the right to perform all combat functions, including submarine service. Denmark adopted a policy of full integration of women in the army system in 1988. Canadian servicewomen obtained an opportunity to serve in almost every military branch since 1989, and since 2001 – aboard submarines. In theory, all army positions are open to women in the USA, the Netherlands and France, although F. Pinch, A. McIntyre, F. Brown and A. Okros note the possibility of deviation of practice from theory, since in reality it can be observed that the higher the level of command staff, the fewer women are there [3]. In Belgium, for example, the number of female private soldiers in 2001 was 10%; non-commissioned officers – only 5.8% and officers – 4.7%. In Denmark, women make up 8% of private soldiers, 4% of sergeants and 3% of officers. Most often, servicewomen occupy administrative and technical positions [3]. In the United Kingdom, a ban on women's participation in close combat was lifted in 2016, after which women were allowed to serve in the Royal Tank Corps and in 2017 in the Air Force [7]. In 2016 in the United States, women were allowed to serve in all combat units, including the marines and the Special Forces. More than 200,000 women are currently serving in the U.S. Army (about 15% of the total U.S. military).

In 2018, some laws were amended in Ukraine to "ensure equal rights and opportunities for women and men in military service in the Armed Forces of Ukraine and other military formations" [8]. Servicewomen obtained equal access to posts and military ranks with men and equal responsibilities. Almost 25,000 women are serving in the Ukrainian army, of whom more than 3,000 are in officer positions. More than 9,000 women serve in military units as combat personnel. In total, over 55,000 women serve and work in the Ukrainian army.

M. Berlinska, T. Martseniuk, A. Kvit, G. Grytsenko studied the attitude of Ukrainian women to the problem of women’s integration into the ranks of the Ukrainian army [6]. “In general, the respondents approve the idea that women should have the opportunity to serve in the army on an equal basis with men at their own free will, as well as to occupy leading and advantageous positions along with them” [6]. At the same time, Ukrainian servicewomen noted that despite the introduction of a policy of integrating women into the military field, they still have no opportunity to make decisions in the army.

3. Methodology and results

In April-May 2019 in Zhytomyr and Kyiv, we conducted a semi-structured interview with eight female veterans that took part in armed conflict in the Donbass (see Table 1) on the topic: “The military identity of female veterans and their social (re)adaptation to civilian life”. The purpose of the interview was to identify how female veterans evaluate the practical aspects of integrating women into the military field; how men treat servicewomen; what factors affect the process of social (re)adaptation of women to civilian life after returning from the army. The hypotheses of our study were the following: 1) the presence of a family and children should facilitate the process of women adaptation after returning from the army; 2) the military experience of servicewomen should influence the change in their life values; 3) the length of time spent in the armed forces and participation in hostilities should affect the military identification of women with the army.

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of interview participants

	Name	Age	Service duration	Kind of troops	Voluntarily or by profession took part in an armed conflict	Marital status	Education level
1	Alina	20	3 years	Overland troops	Voluntarily	Unmarried	College graduate
2	Elena	23	2 years	Overland troops	Voluntarily	Married, no children	College graduate
3	Tatiana	24	4 years	Airborne assault troops	Voluntarily	Unmarried	Bachelor
4	Victoria	25	2 years	Airborne assault troops	Voluntarily	Married, one child	Bachelor
5	Katerina	27	2 years	Overland troops	Voluntarily	Married, one child	Bachelor
6	Inga	28	3 years	Overland troops	By profession	Divorced, one child	College graduate
7	Olga	31	10 years	Airborne assault troops	By profession	Married, two children	Bachelor
8	Natalia	42	15 years	Overland troops	By profession	Unmarried	College graduate

When asked whether women should serve in the army, all respondents answered positively and emphasized that according to their abilities, women differ little from men. Women emphasized the importance of gender equality in the military sphere. For example, according to Elena, 23 years old:

“Yes, a woman should be in the army. I don’t even understand how a woman differs from a man. In some cases, women are better at working or with some kind of order than men. And how many such examples of women who can do everything and still command men. I think that a woman in the army should not be discriminated”.

Respondents reported a different attitude of male servicemen to women in the army, from negative to positive. Some men consulted with respondents about various life problems, some perceived them as their colleagues, but there were also those who did not hide their annoyance about the presence of women in the war. For example, Victoria, 25 years old:

“For me, the problem was that men do not always perceive you as a specialist. There were such cases when men asked why you came here, how you can help. This is certainly not very pleasant, but other men supported us.”

Olena, 23 years old:

“There were those who did not accept us, well, as soldiers. Here is a nurse or a cook there, yes. But the same nurse or cook is already under bullets and is not afraid, so why can’t she go to battle with the men?”

Among the problems faced by women in the army, respondents identified: difficult living conditions, often related to the need to live in the same room with men; difficulties with hygiene (shower, toilets); psychological trauma associated with the death and trauma of colleagues. Three respondents (physicians by profession) pointed to professional problems, such as lack of medication and lack of training of military personnel to provide primary self-help.

Alina, 20 years old:

"I don't want to suffer such an experience anymore, when you watch your comrades die and get injured, it's very difficult. The conditions there are generally bad."

Inga, 28 years old:

"I came across such problems when people could not elementarily help themselves and this issue was especially at the beginning of the war because people were not ready for this."

However, despite the difficult conditions of being in the war, all respondents said they had positive feelings about the army and their combat experience. All of them reported that they are proud of being soldiers and could not imagine themselves out of the army (they want to continue serving in military structures). It can be assumed that the existence of stable identification of respondents with the army is explained by the fact that they all spent quite a long time in the army (from 2 to 15 years), which had to be related to alternative and militaristic re-socialization (according to P. Berger and T. Luckmann). For example, Alina, 20 years old:

"I relate myself with the army, I am proud that I am a servicewoman, that I can do something for my country. I want to help further so that this war ends faster. Now I will help as a volunteer, I want to support my friends, because I understand how hard it is for them".

Inga, 28 years old:

"I will not work in any civilian institution somewhere. Moreover, I'm even not afraid to say this, the salary in the military, as for a woman, is a very good salary".

All respondents said that returning from the army to the civilian field was difficult because it was associated with a sharp contrast between the way of life of military personnel and civilians. Hasteless civilian life was perceived as something unreal and absurd. All respondents reported that it takes a long time to get used to the conditions of civilian life (more than three months). They also stated that they had adapted to civilian life on their own or with the help of relatives; none of them addressed the services of psychologists.

Our study identified a relation between having a child/a family and the success of social (re)adaptation of female veterans. The presence of children accelerates the period of adaptation to civilian life for women. For example, Inga, 28 years old (divorced, has a child):

"When you have kids, you adapt faster. You're in the family, you are at ease, but it's hard ... If not for a child, I don't know. Probably this all would be longer..."

Kateryna, 27 years old (married, has a child):

"My relatives helped to adapt, somehow they found those words, and the kids, that's what helps us. I had why and for whom to adapt as quickly as possible."

With regard to the impact of the military experience on the lives and well-being of the respondents, they all drew attention to such a positive result of being in the army, as a change in life values and developing discipline and resilience. Women said that the priority value has become the life and health of loved ones, rather than material wealth.

For example, Inga, 28 years old:

"The military service tempered me, and the hostilities that I was in, they helped to rethink life, that is, to understand other values in life, and when I returned, I looked at life very differently. Life is appreciated, much appreciated."

Kateryna, 27 years old:

"This is such a reevaluation of everything. Your life, the lives of people close to you. You understand that everything that was important is no longer that way. You start to appreciate something else. I will say so, before going to war, material benefits were very important for me, I just wanted to have the best for me and my baby, but when I got there, I realized what is primary in this life".

It can be concluded that, as a result of participation in the armed conflict in the Donbass, Ukrainian women veterans began to give priority not to the modernist values of material well-being or post-modernist values of creativity, but to the traditionalist values of health, family, and preservation of life.

4. Conclusion

According to the results of our study, the hypotheses were confirmed. It has been found that having a family and children really contributes to the process of (re)adaptation of women after returning from the army; the military experience of servicewomen affects the change in their life values; the length of stay in the armed

forces and in the war zone has an impact on the military identification of women with the army and their desire to devote their lives to a military career. Post-military transition of female veterans is associated with certain shifts in their coordinate system of values. Thus, after returning from the Donbass conflict area, women began to render greater value to life, family and health (traditional values) and less to material benefits. Almost all respondents (seven out of eight) supported the idea of gender equality in the army and emphasized the positive results of their stay in the military field.

In the future, it is necessary to conduct quantitative research using the mass survey method to identify correlations between the military experience of female veterans and their value priorities, as well as a deeper study of the attitude of Ukrainian female veterans to the problem of gender equality in the army.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the editor and anonymous referees to provide suggestions and substantive comments to improving the paper.

References

- [1]. Bataeva, E., Artemenko, A. (2018). Concept of Military Identity in Modern Sociology. *Visnyk V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University. Series "Sociological Studies of Contemporary Society: Methodology, Theory, Methods*, 40, 29-35. URL: <https://doi.org/10.26565/2227-6521-2018-40-03>
- [2]. Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- [3]. Challenge and change in the military: gender and diversity issue. (2006). Edited by Franklin C. Pinch, Allister T. MacIntyre, Phyllis Browne, and Alan C. Okros. Canadian Defence Academy Press, Kingston, Ontario.
- [4]. Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. London, UK: Sage.
- [5]. Feinman, I. (2000). *Citizenship Rites: Feminist Soldiers and Feminist Antimilitarists*. New York: New York University Press.
- [6]. Invisible Battalion: participation of women in military operations in ATO (sociological research) (2016). Kyiv: FOP Klimenko, 2016.
- [7]. Historic day for the military as all roles are opened to women (2018). URL: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/historic-day-for-the-military-as-all-roles-are-opened-to-women>
- [8]. On Amendments to Some Laws of Ukraine on Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men during the Military Service in the Armed Forces of Ukraine and Other Military Formations. (2018). *Verkhovna Rada (VVR) Gazette*, 44, URL: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2523-viii>
- [9]. Peach, L. (1996). "Gender Ideology in the Ethics of Women in Combat." In *It's Our Military Too! Women and the U.S. Military*, ed. Judith H. Stiehm, 156–194. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- [10]. Robbins, J., Uri, Ben-Eliezer. (2000). New Roles or 'New Times'? Gender Inequality and Militarism in Israel's Nation-in-Arms. *Social Politics*, 309–343.
- [11]. Sasson-Levy, O., Amram-Katz, S. (2007). Gender Integration in Israeli Officer Training: Degendering and Regendering the Military. *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 33(1), 105-133.
- [12]. Sasson-Levy, O. (2003). Feminism and Military Gender Practices: Israeli Women Soldiers in "Masculine" Roles. *Sociological Inquiry*, 73(3), 440–465.
- [13]. Segal, M. W. (1995). Women's Military Roles Cross-Nationality: Past? Present? And Future. *Gender and Society*, 9(6), 760.
- [14]. Silva, J. A. (2008). New Generation of Women? How Female ROTC Cadets Negotiate the Tension between Masculine Military Culture and Traditional Femininity. *Social Forces*, 87(2), 937-960.
- [15]. Sokurianska L., Bataeva E. & Bakirov V. (2019). Ukrainian veterans in higher education: military identity and educational practices. *The Ideology and Politics Journal*, 2(13), 167-184.

Author Profile

Artemenko Anna received the B.S. and Master in Humanities degrees in Zhytomyr Economic and Humanitarian Institute in 2014 and 2015, respectively. She is currently a PhD student of the Postgraduate Program in Sociology, Department of Social Management, Kharkov University of Humanities "People's Ukrainian Academy".