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АНАЛИЗ НА ИНТЕЛЕКТУАЛНИТЕ РЕЗУЛТАТИ ОТ УЧАСТИЕТО НА БЪЛГАРСКИ КУРСАНТИ В МЕЖДУНАРОДЕН ПРОЕКТ ПО УПРАВЛЕНИЕ НА РАВНОПОСТАВЕНОСТТА ВЪВ ВЪОРЪЖЕНИТЕ СИЛИ

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ANALYSIS OF THE INTELLECTUAL OUTPUTS FROM THE PARTICIPATION OF BULGARIAN CADETS IN MILITARY GENDER STUDIES INTERNATIONAL PROJECT

Abstract: *Cadets from Vasil Levski National Military University, Bulgaria, along with their colleagues - cadets from the military academies in Portugal, Italy and Romania, are the main target group in conducting the various activities of the Military Gender Studies International Strategic Partnership Project. The current paper presents an analysis of some of the findings obtained from questionnaires and individual interviews with Bulgarian cadets focusing on equality policies.*

Keywords: *military educational environment, gender equality and mainstreaming, MGS intellectual output, male and female cadets.*

INTRODUCTION

European programs and projects in recent years have focused on studies and research in various scientific fields and professional sectors. The interest of European structures in the field of humanities and social sciences, where various challenges are present, is constant. The scientific research of the European Union is aimed at combining economic prosperity with levels of social protection, at the promotion of shared European values such as human rights, democracy, cultural diversity, mobility, gender equality, etc. (1)

Opportunities for funding of activities and innovations are presented through operational programs that facilitate the achievement of certain results in line with EU policies. Organizations of private or public nature use these programs to develop and implement projects in the fields of education, scientific research, regional development, humanitarian aid, employment and social inclusion, and many others.



A good example is the European Erasmus Programme which supports initiatives in the fields of education, training, sports and youth. With its various key actions, the program supports the educational, professional and personal development of citizens of Europe and beyond.

Key Action 2 is aimed at cooperation between organizations and institutions, offering support for partnerships and capacity-building projects in the field of higher education, vocational education and training, etc. (2)

The current paper presents some of the intellectual outputs of an international strategic partnership project under Key Action 2 of the Erasmus+ Programme, entitled Military Gender Studies. The project was approved at the end of 2020 and received funding for the implementation of an array of activities for a period of 30 months.

According to the website of the project www.mgs-erasmus.eu/project “The Portuguese Military Academy coordinates the MGS Project, and the Military Academies of Bulgaria (Vasil Levski National Military University), Italy (Università Degli Studi di Torino), and Romania (Academia Fortelor Terestre ‘Nicolae Balcescu’) constitute the strategic partners. The main goal of the MGS Project is to increase the knowledge, and improve the practices, regarding gender perspectives in European Military Institutions. The different socio-political realities of the partner institutions are expected to contribute to a more diverse, and dynamic approach to our research on gender issues in European Military Institutions.” (3)

ANALYSIS OF THE RESEARCH RESULTS

The main objective of the project is to develop a new model of research related to gender perspectives in military educational environment. An ambitious task of the Project was also the preparation and writing of a handbook on gender equality in the Armed Forces, to be implemented in the curricula of the partner military academies. The basis for the preparation of the handbook, which is to be distributed and implemented in other European military academies and universities, is the vast dataset collected following a research with male and female cadets from the participating military institutions. It is the results of the first intellectual activity, which includes filling in a questionnaire on equality and conducting standardized interviews to further develop the assessments shared in the questionnaire, that are included in the analysis of the report. The paper will specifically dwell on some of the findings of the research conducted with the cadets of both sexes at Vasil Levski National Military University, Bulgaria.

The MGS questionnaire prepared by the leading nation was sent to all partners. 218 Bulgarian cadets from the 3rd, 4th and 5th year of study filled in the project questionnaire, which is a representative sample of the cadets from the University. The diverse information obtained during the processing of the cadets' answers to the questionnaires is used for a number of analyzes regarding the opinion of young people about the current situation at the University. This is related to the review of the gender equality education conducted so far, as well as to the need for a change in the policy of the University in this direction.



After the first project activity 22 cadets (6 female and 16 male) from Vasil Levski National Military University took part in the interviews. In spite of the fact that 40 of the cadets had given their emails for receiving feedback, not all responded to the invitation to participate in the interviews on the topics included in the questionnaire. The interviews were conducted at a time convenient for the cadet and the interviewer, ensuring anonymity and comfort during the conversation.

The duration of the interviews varied according to the dynamics of the conversation and the desire and willingness of the cadets to share their opinion. Some interviews lasted 20 minutes, others lasted 1 hour and 10 minutes - the average duration of most interviews was 30 - 40 minutes.

The questions asked during the interview were in accordance with the cadets' answers to the questionnaire. Each expert conducting an interview had had access to the cadet's data and had read their answers in advance in order to choose the best approach for asking the interview questions. In 80% of the cases, the information from the questionnaires was confirmed and further elaborated with a specific opinion. There were changes from the previously given answers in the cases when the cadet had not understood the question correctly and had given some answers, which he then changed in the course of the interview.

For example – one of the questions from the questionnaire was if the cadets have ever felt discriminated against because of their gender – see figure 1 and table 1. Approximately half of the cadets of both sexes answered positively or "sometimes" to this question. Therefore, this question was further developed during the interview.

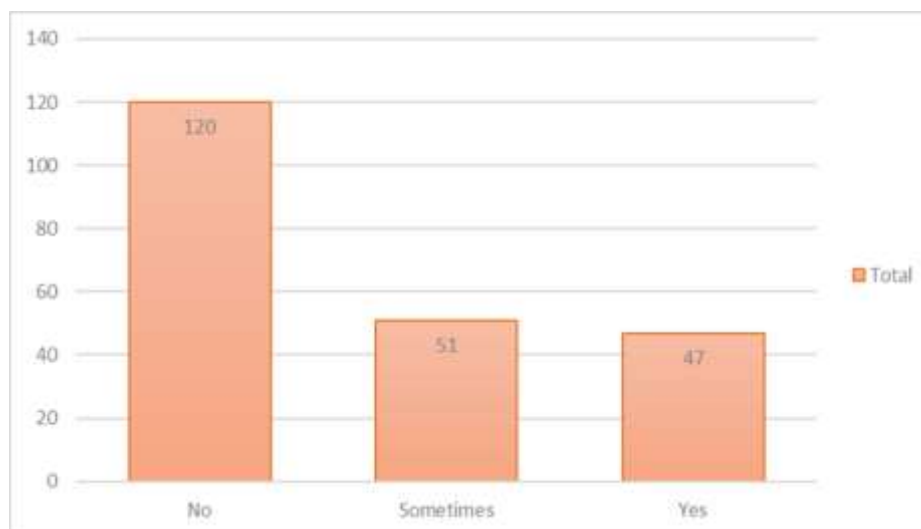


Figure 1. Cadets answers of the question
“ Have you ever felt discriminated against because of your gender?”



During the interview the cadets were asked to describe some situations when they felt discriminated against or treated differently (either better or worse) because of their gender.

More than half of the male cadets interviewed have stated they have not felt discriminated against on the basis of their gender. Other respondents have given examples of different situations in which gender segregation has been observed. Most often these are situations related to doing physical work. The cadets say that the division into "male" and "female" activities is most often done by their commanders - officers. When there are purely physical tasks requiring more physical strength, it is a normal practice for platoon or company commanders to appoint only male cadets for the execution of these tasks, and for female cadets to be entrusted with administrative work.

Table 1. Distribution of answers according to the cadets – male and female

Have you ever felt discriminated against because of your gender?	Gender	Total
No	Female	29
	Male	91
Sometimes	Female	9
	Male	42
Yes	Female	7
	Male	40

Male cadets believe that when they have felt discriminated against, it has stemmed from the emphasis on the main physical differences between males and females in strength and anatomy. This does not irritate the males in most cases but is a prerequisite for artificially created tension in the mixed-gender platoons.

Female cadets say that they feel too protected by their commanders who do not assign them harder work. Women do not like this division and most of them prefer to receive equal treatment. A small percentage of girls take advantage of their physiological characteristics and avoid stressful tasks.

Another comment is related to the attitude of the male cadets who are also junior commanders and who assign easier tasks to subordinate cadets of the opposite sex.

In their attitude towards the trainees, the members of the academic staff do not tolerate either sex - the same requirements are imposed on all. In some cases, according to the male cadets, there is a higher evaluation of females, which can be attributed either to their abilities or to their hard work and diligence.

The shared opinions of the cadets during the interview are also confirmed by the data collected from the questionnaire regarding their perception of the origin of such discriminatory treatment. (table 2)



Table 2. Distribution of answers according to the cadets – male and female

This discrimination usually comes from:	Gender	Total
Cadets of the opposite gender	Female	14
	Male	15
Cadets of the same gender	Female	6
	Male	1
Other(s)	Female	4
	Male	1
The institution's staff	Female	57
	Male	14

Statistics shown in the chart below represent the opinion of the cadets based on their daily routine, which is an example of how life in the military institution is going in terms of gender perspective. (fig.2 and table 3)

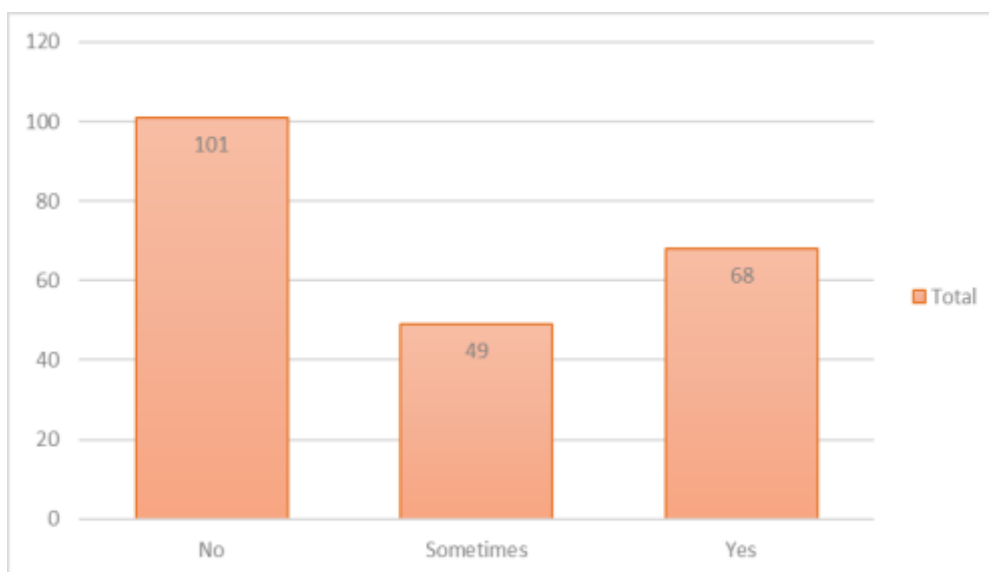


Figure 2. Cadets answers of the question
“Do you feel that you are treated differently because of your gender in this institution?”



Table 3. Distribution of answers according to the cadets – male and female

Do you feel that you are treated differently because of your gender in this institution?	Gender	Total
	Female	26
No	Male	75
	Female	15
Sometimes	Male	34
	Female	4
Yes	Male	64

More detailed information from the questionnaires about whether the cadets felt treated better or worse by the opposite sex was based on the interview to get specific information about these ratings. (fig.3)

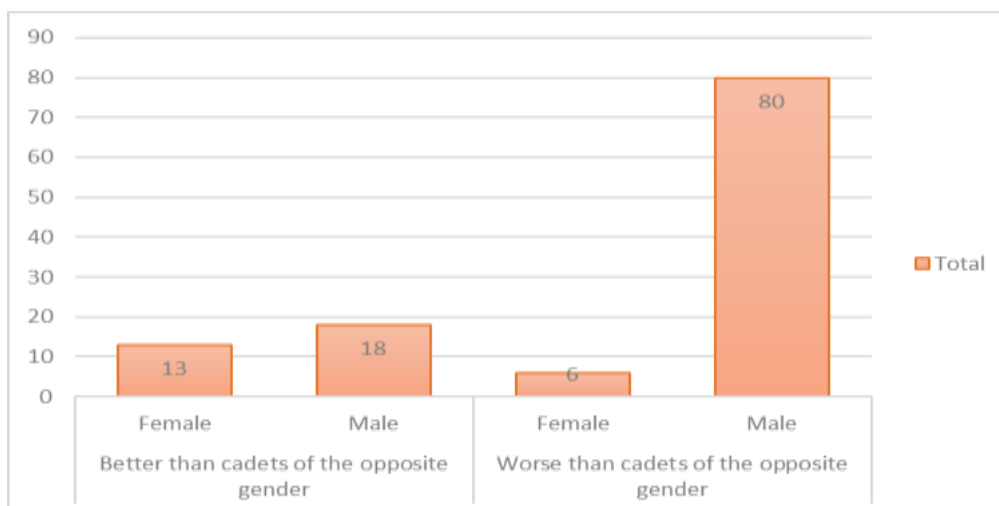


Figure 3. Cadets answers to the question “Do you think you are treated: better/worse than the cadets of the opposite gender?”

A variety of answers and examples were obtained from the cadets participating in the interviews to the question “You have indicated that men and women are [not] treated differently in [this institution]. What led you to this conclusion? Could you give us a couple of examples that sustain this belief.”

Male cadets point out several kinds of situations in which they have been treated differently compared to their female colleagues. For example:

- the two genders are not treated equally here (in this institution) because of the privileges that female cadets have. These privileges exist due to our commanders’ attitudes - being released from morning PT or physical work because you are female are some of them;
- Males and females are not treated equally because some take advantage of their position. Some of the females assigned to junior commander positions do less work and this irritates their male colleagues. There are similar situations with boys, but not very



many. If there is a romantic relationship between cadets - a girl and a boy, "personal favors" begin to be asked for, and the others do not like it. Such a situation should be controlled, and one should bear in mind that once they have put on a military uniform, the rules and norms of military behavior should be observed unreservedly.

There has also been an observation shared by senior cadets, who have more experience as junior commanders, which helps them pay attention to the mental characteristics of the cadets of both genders. During the social isolation of the cadets in the spring of 2020, due to the threat of spread of the coronavirus, all young people were locked down on the University campus for 80 days. A male cadet, graduate, has noted that of all his subordinates -22 females and 70 males - none of the females complained during this period and found a way to cope and find a solution to their needs; whereas the males suffered from the isolation and the impossibility to go out much more, and they complained more often. In conclusion, the cadet shared that women are better from psychological point of view; they are more communicative, more motivated and it is easier for them to find the information they need. While men are more reserved, they do not share much of their feelings and are not very flexible when seeking solutions.

At the interview, the female cadets have stated that good conditions for gender equality in the educational process and in the military duties have been created at the NMU. Legislation is in place and, furthermore, regulations and methodologies have been updated. They assess this as a serious progress in terms of equality at the Military University. That is why they do not approve of the different attitude and treatment by their commanders towards them and their male colleagues.

The military profession has been virtually all male for most of its history, and the role of soldier reinforces the traditionally masculine role, but in 21 century, the gender equality in general is different in the Armed Forces. The opportunities and abilities of the military personnel in terms of the gender perspective in the Armed Forces are the same and share equal responsibilities to reach the desired end state, but there is still controversy about gender equality and different capabilities in the armed forces.

One of the most frequently discussed topics in the Armed Forces regarding the participation of women and men in military activities is related to the differences in their physical and mental capabilities. The MGS survey questionnaire included questions about the evaluation of cadets to perform activities of physical or mental strength compared to their colleagues of the opposite sex. (table 4 and table 5)



Table 4. Answers to the question “How would you assess your capability of performing operations which require physical strength when compared to cadets of the opposite gender?”

How would you assess your capability of performing operations which require physical strength when compared to cadets of the opposite gender?	Gender	Total
	Equally capable	Female
Male		27
Less capable	Female	19
	Male	32
More capable	Female	3
	Male	114

It can be seen that male cadets continue to perceive themselves as physically stronger, and rate their female colleagues as having better mental activity. Despite much evidence to support one or the other statement arising from gender stereotypes or other situational factors, more information was obtained during the interview.

The cadets’ responses to the question: “In your opinion, what would you consider an appropriate approach to these different capabilities? What should [the military institution] do to address this divergence, if anything?”, can be summarized as follows.

Table 5. Answers to the question “How would you assess your capability of performing operations which require mental strength when compared to cadets of the opposite gender?”

How would you assess your capability of performing operations which require mental strength when compared to cadets of the opposite gender?	Gender	Total
	Equally capable	Female
Male		55
Less capable	Female	5
	Male	27
More capable	Female	19
	Male	91

All male cadets agree that females are physically weaker and created so by Nature. They also take into account the fact that the level of physical capabilities is strictly individual - for both males and females. Therefore, the motivation for physical fitness training is very important. The cadets view the different physical fitness requirements for both sexes as something normal, and are not bothered by this differentiation, but, on the other hand, they do not want this to be used to artificially oppose cadets from different genders. Both males and females put a lot of efforts in their training; however, there are still cadets of both sexes who take advantage of gender peculiarities.



Regarding mental abilities, the majority of male cadets admit that their female colleagues have greater mental potential, and at the same time they also work harder and are more motivated to prove themselves. In addition, there is an opinion that females sometimes receive higher evaluation than they deserve.

With respect to this, the interviewed cadets have made the following suggestions:

- there should be the same tasks for all, the same discipline requirements, and the same respect for all;
- if conflicts arise, people should be separated and each one should be assigned an individual task;
- the university should work towards increasing the competencies of all the students;
- it is necessary to raise the criteria for admission to the university;
- to improve the physical fitness training including more varied and new exercises, suitable for females as well;
- there is a necessity to change the commanders' approach and, when allocating tasks, not to divide them into "male and female" work;
- to unify the criteria for assessing the abilities of both sexes (admission, physical training, work activities, etc.).

For a modern armed force to be cohesive, Army needs teammates to trust one another, to be dependent upon one another, and to be united in a common cause and not be discriminated in terms of a gender perspective. In this way of thinking the military career would be the same for military personnel. Decision-makers should understand the need for professionals and leaders for the Army with the same opportunities and responsibilities to execute the full range of operations. Generation Z lives with the idea that they have to prove themselves and have an equal start for everyone, and the military profession is no exception.

A good impression is made by the answers of more than half of the cadets who expect to have the same opportunities for a future military career, although it should be noted that female cadets are more cautious in these expectations. (fig.4 and table 6)

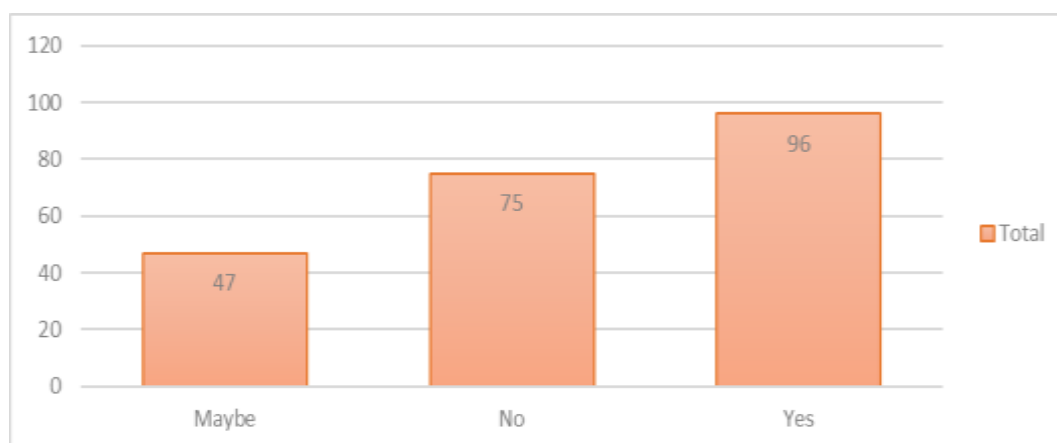


Figure 4. Cadets answers to the question

“Do you think you have the same opportunities for a military career as cadets of the opposite gender?”



Table 6. Distribution of answers according to the cadets – male and female

Do you think you have the same opportunities for a military career as cadets of the opposite gender?	Gender	Total
	Female	16
Maybe	Male	31
	Female	16
No	Male	59
	Female	13
Yes	Male	83

To the follow-up question, „Why do you think that you do not have the same opportunities for a military career, and equal access to all military ranks and operations, as [male/ female] cadets?“, the cadets have answered, that they are acquainted with the regulations in the Armed Forces, according to which all servicemen have the opportunity for equal career development and growth in the military hierarchy.

The reality, according to the cadets, is a little different and they evaluate their career opportunities according to everyone's abilities - if you are motivated and have clear goals, it doesn't matter if you are a man or a woman. There are servicemen of both sexes with more or less capabilities, which also affects their professional development.

The female cadets interviewed have shared their concerns about the restraints of occupying certain positions because of their gender. They have added that according to them, women in the Bulgarian Armed Forces have been deprived in terms of participation in operations. They support their opinion with the fact that there is still no woman holding a senior officer rank, as well as the fact that there are very few women in command positions in the units.

The above statements have also been confirmed by the distribution of answers in the questionnaire regarding the equal access to all military ranks and to participation in military operations.

Table 7. Distribution of answers according to the cadets – male and female

Do you think there should be equal access to all military ranks and operations regardless of gender?	Gender	Total
	Female	13
No	Male	63
	Female	32
Yes	Male	110

An important element of the project's research was related to cadets' views on the need for gender training in military institutions. In connection with the above analyses, the fact that nearly 2/3 of the cadets gave a positive answer in the questionnaire regarding the inclusion of the subject of gender equality in the curricula is somewhat reassuring. (fig.5 and fig.6)

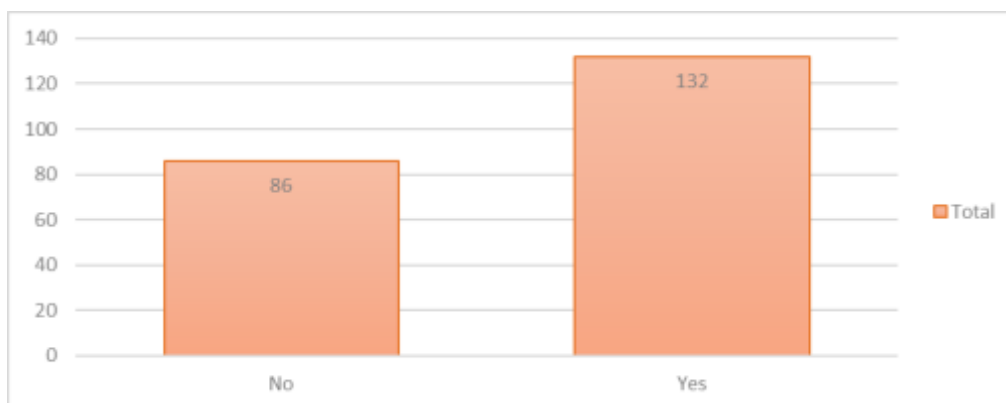


Figure 5. Cadets answers of the question
“Do you think the topic of gender perspectives should be included in this institution’s curricular offer?”

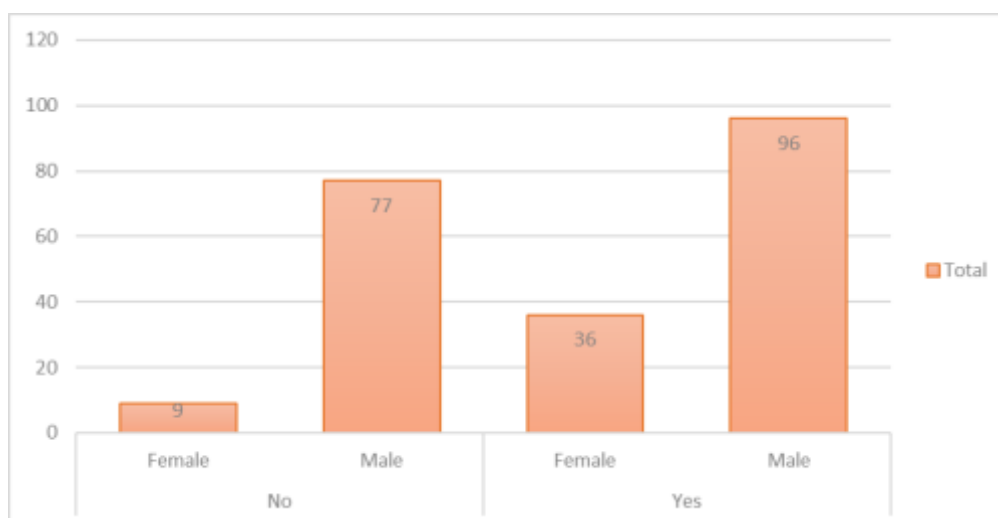


Figure 6. Distribution of answers according to the cadets – male and female

Integrating the gender perspective into military education and training is a challenging task, bearing in mind stereotypes, gender prejudices, and discriminatory attitudes in the Armed Forces. During the interview all interviewees, with the exception of one male cadet, agreed that the topic of gender equality should be part of the training curriculum. Some cadets suggest that this topic be included at an earlier stage - at the beginning of their military education. Young people point out the need for specialized training and additional information such as lectures, seminars, discussions, etc. Such measures can fight stereotypes; enrich personal and professional performance, increase communication opportunities, mutual understanding and respect between the sexes. This training will contribute to the prevention of gender-based conflicts and to the creation of a good environment for learning and work.



Additional information from the Bulgarian cadets regarding their general attitude to the topic of gender equality policies was obtained during the interview, answering the question “How do cadets in [this institution] perceive the topic of gender mainstreaming, which consists in the integration of a gender equality perspective at all stages and levels of policies, programs, and projects?”

Several senior cadets who have already held command positions say that they have learned from their mistakes in working in a mixed-gender environment and already know how to react and why they need to learn how to implement equality policies.

Unfortunately, it is a more common and widespread understanding that cadets generally do not pay serious attention to this topic; they are not interested in the specifics of the relationship between men and women and generally neglect such discussions. Both males and females point out their male colleagues as the main bearers of the negative attitude on the topic.

The cadets also shared their views on the ways in which it would be most appropriate for the topic of gender equality to be included in their curriculum. The data from the answers to this question is a very good guide for the teachers and managers of the military academies, in which way young people prefer to receive their knowledge and develop their competences both in general and in relation to the study of the specific subject of gender equality. (fig. 7)

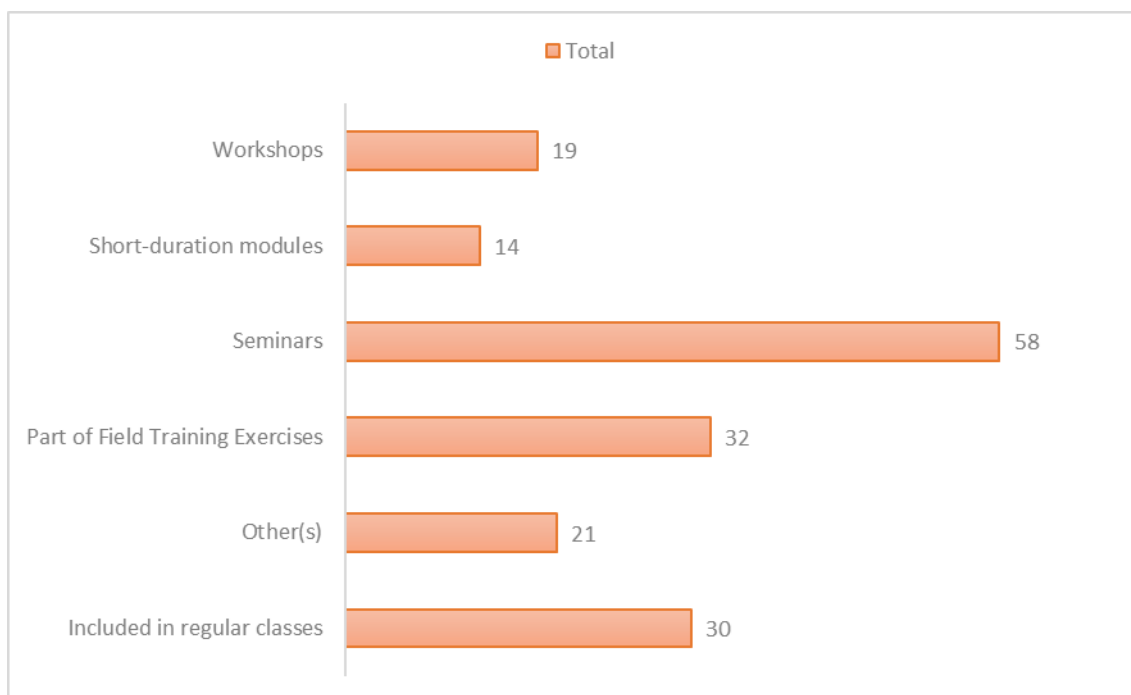


Figure 7. Cadets answers of the question
“Which format do you think is more suitable for this topic?”



At the end of the interview, the cadets were asked what their general impression was, whether trainees of both sexes were treated equally at the Military University. The cadets' opinions on the question "In general terms, do you think there is gender equality in [this institution]?" can be divided into several areas:

- the majority of the cadets believe that there is equality at the university and that all cadets are the same, as they have the same common responsibilities and distribution of time (duties, training, workout, etc.);
- a small number of cadets indicate that equality is partial - situations of different assignments given to female and male cadets, personal attitude of commanders and some faculty members based on gender differences
- very few cadets consider that there is no equality in the institution and that females should be given the opportunity to perform, as well as to occupy command positions.

CONCLUSION

As a general conclusion from the conducted interviews with the Bulgarian cadets, it can be noted that they are positively disposed to the integration of policies for equal treatment and equal treatment of all trainees. The cadets are on the opinion that Vasil Levski National Military University has ideal opportunities to train males and females together, for which there are no legal obstacles. The emphasis should be on quality reception and compliance with regulations and methodologies by the superiors.

The cadets believe that there will be a change in the policy of the institution regarding equality, and there will be opportunities for positive manifestations of both genders. As an example, they point to the lack of a female officer in the management of the university or in another managerial and / or command position, which implies a change in the policy for the recruitment and retention of female service personnel.

In addition, the cadets say that in the years of training, they have seen how difficult it is to work with people on a team, and when the platoons are mixed, things are different and delicate. They have understood the need for effective motivation and individual approach to the each service member, so that everyone could understand the right place and field for expression.

They reaffirm their view that the topic of gender equality is unpopular and that the lack of serious attention leads to a distance in the relations between males and females in the military, and sometimes to artificial tensions and conflicts.

In this regard, they express their satisfaction with the work on this project and define it as a step in the right direction. They declare their readiness to participate in future activities and trainings under the current international project and propose that the results of it be made available to the staff at Vasil Levski National Military University.



As a summary the entire database, collected from the completed questionnaires and the analyzes of the interviews conducted both with the Bulgarian cadets and with the cadets from the partner military academies served for the preparation of the content of the MGS Handbook. The subsequent project trainings with both the cadets and their teachers and commanders proved the need for serious preparation and constant attention to the managing the processes for integrating gender equality in military educational institutions.

“The MGS Project is committed to actively contribute to a more modern, dynamic, devoted, and professional environment inside Military Institutions, hopefully making a difference in the lives of military women and men, their institutions, and ultimately, European societies.” (3)

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