



Ministerie van Defensie

## Women in the military: linking a gendered division of labour and (lack of) perceived social support

Dr. E. Maliepaard

Ministerie van Defensie

4 juni 2025

### Vrouwelijke militairen zonder veteranenstatus over uitzendingen en hun loopbaan

Belang van uitzendingen, ervaren en verwachte uitzendingbarrières en aandachtspunten voor het behoud van militairen

Emiel Maliepaard



### Zorgbehoeften van Nederlandse veteranen

Een inventarisatie en vergelijking van ervaringen, stressoren, coping en (sociale) steun van vrouwelijke en mannelijke ISAF- en MINUSMA-veteranen

Emiel Maliepaard  
Tessa op den Buijs  
René Moelker





## This presentation

- Women in the NLD Armed Forces: overview
- Women during ISAF and MINUSMA deployment
- Women in hot units: do their experiences differ?
- Ways forward



## Women in the NLD Armed Forces: overview

11,4% of military personnel is woman (2023), 6,5% of veterans is woman

Navy: 13,1%

Airforce: 19,7%

**Joint support command: 28,2%**

Army: 9,9%\*

**Staff officers: 27,0%**

Material and IT command: 17,6%

\* This includes infantry, artillery, sappers/pioneers, *medics, logistics* etc.

Reflects a gendered division of labour



## Women during ISAF and MINUSMA deployments

Often not deployed with their own unit, more often

- 1) Attached to a unit (i.e. combat units as nurse, medic, psychologist, or as pioneer)
- 2) Part of temporary units (people from unit A, B, C and D: examples are maintenance, logistics, medical personnel)
- 3) Individually deployed (often staff function, but also specialists or military police. *Important*: overrepresentation of women in officer ranks)

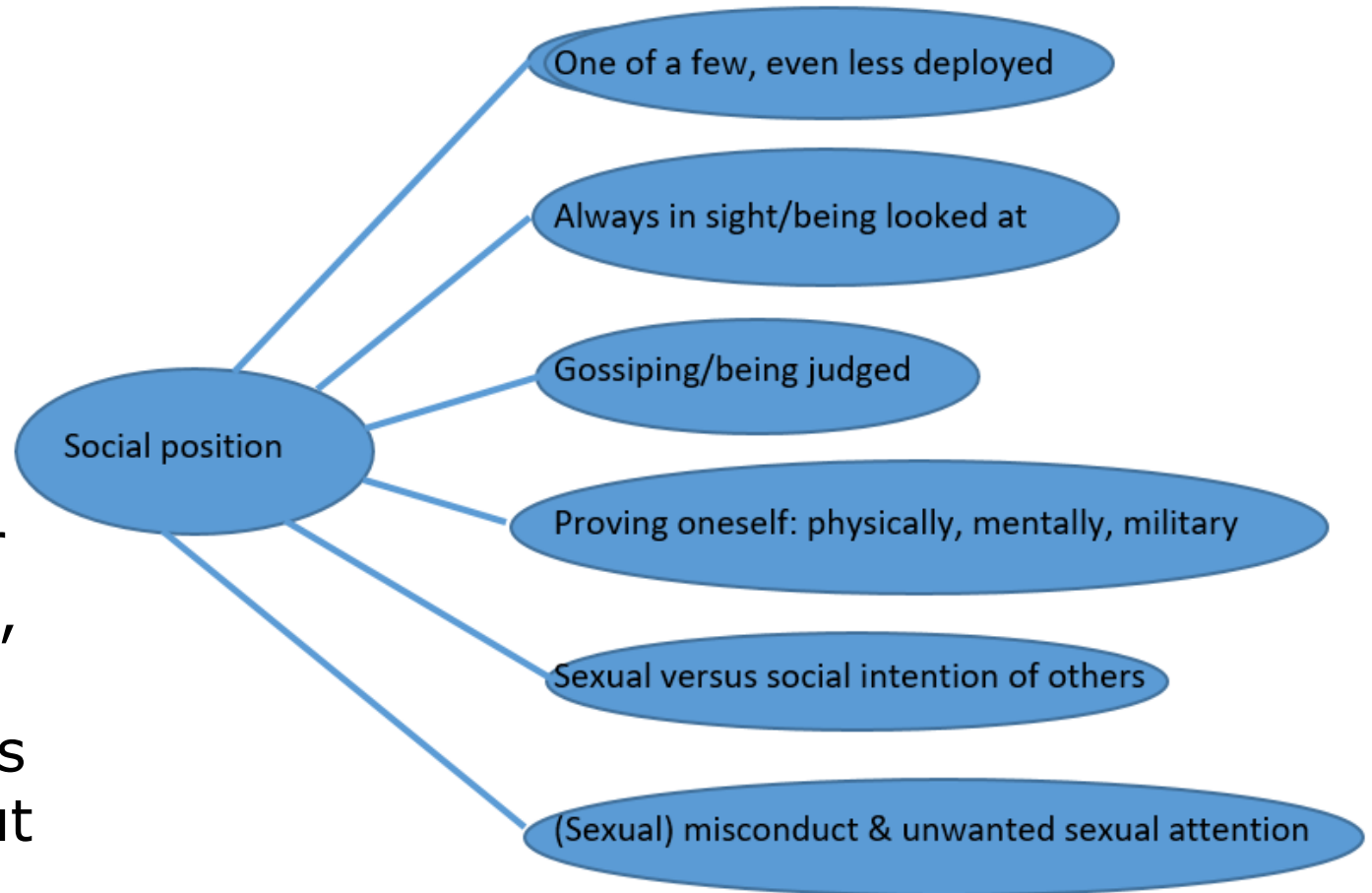
Women deployed with their own units: combat units, logistics, wings

Women *often* worked on-base, even more as men in similar functions.



## Women during ISAF and MINUSMA deployments

“Your hair looks well, your hair looks bad, your hair looks wild, you look grumpy, you look so happy, you don’t look...” Always something had to be said about me, I could not *not* be there





## Social position and social support during ISAF and MINUSMA

For your understanding Emiel, I received many times chocolates on my desk, or people came to my desk to ask whether I was free tomorrow, or if I would want to drink a cup of coffee.” (result: doubts about someone’s sexual vs social intentions: limiting contacts to people in their unit, or some people in their unit) (E19)

I: And did you adjust to it? (to being always in the picture as woman)

P: By keeping more distance. Being not too friendly with everyone, but just with a small group” (result: not wanting to give someone a “too friendly impression”: limiting contacts) (E2)



## Cold units versus hot units

Hot units: units that operate off-base during deployments, and went through hardship and/or combat (Soeters et al., 2006)

\* Infantry units, marines, special forces, and to a lesser degree artillery units and enablers/combat support (pioneers)

Cold units: units in garrison life, and units who predominantly are combat-support without experiencing harsh (battle) conditions (cf Soeters et al., 2006)

\* Staff, logistics (incl. maintenance), medical personnel (Role 1, 2, 3) who mainly work on-base.



## Women in hot units?

I was assigned to that platoon, [name of battalion], and these men were very hard. They were thinking “such a little girl”, I was quite shy, “do we really need her?” But they needed women, and I was assigned to this platoon, but that was difficult to accept for them. So they were extremely tough on me, but I was very fit and could handle it. I was physically really strong. So I could prove myself. (E36)

I: So you taught yourself, “I have to be tough, being hard to others” to show you were strong?

Yes, but I am not like that. My first deployment I made many friends because I was myself. And the second deployment I hardly kept in touch with anyone, because I wasn't myself. I lost myself. I was only tough and hard, and that was painful. (E36)





## Women in hot units?

### In the Army:

- Often met with hostility “we don’t need women here”
- Women need to prove themselves
- Some losing themselves in hardening → less authenticity results in loss of social resources
- Less social support from commanders / transgressive behaviour
- But also experiencing “freedom”

### Air Force:

- More egalitarian culture, more acceptance of women, women more part of the group.



## Core message:

Despite combat functions are open to women for several decades (!), servicewomen mainly occupy combat support functions. Women occupy more specialist functions and more individual functions instead of functions embbed in organic units. This reflects a gendered division of labour.

Women are often not deployed with their own unit which results in social disadvantages



## Ways forward?

Women experience less social support, what could be ways forward?

- Cultural changes in the NLD Armed Forces?
- More women in combat units?
- Accepting servicewomen as a minority and focus on the implications of their minority position for their mental, physical, and social health and wellbeing?  
*e.g. more attention from social workers and chaplains during deployment? More aftercare from social workers?*



## References

- Maliepaard, E., op den Buijs, T., & Moelker, R. (2025). *Zorgbehoeften van Nederlandse veteranen. Een inventarisatie en vergelijking van ervaringen, stressoren, coping en (sociale) steun van vrouwelijke en mannelijke ISAF- en MINUSMA-veteranen*. NLDA.
- Soeters, J,L., Winslow, D.J. & Weibull, A. (2006). Military culture, in G. Caforio (Ed.), *Handbook of the sociology of the military*. Springer.