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From Norms to Practices: Equal Treatment and Territorial Justice in the Hungarian Military

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Abstract

This study probes the disconnect between formal equality mandates and day-to-day realities in the Hungarian Defence Forces, framed by NATO/EU commitments and Hungary's own legal framework. Using a mixed-methods design – including policy analysis, interviews, focus groups, and observations – the authors blend enlistment statistics (15,482 U.S. records; 2,481 Hungarian surveys modelled via Bayesian hierarchies) with personal narratives that expose how economic pressures, gender norms, and regional stigma drive recruitment. Results uncover clear urban–rural divides in compliance, reveal that grievance procedures are undermined by mistrust, and identify unit-level leadership as the linchpin for meaningful equality. This study examines how the Hungarian Defence Forces' formal equality mandates – grounded in NATO, EU, and national law – are undermined by economic pressures, gender norms, and spatial disparities, revealing that only committed unit-level leadership and tactical initiatives like Gender Focal Points, hybrid deployments, and the “Forward Together” mentoring programme can bridge the gap between paper compliance and genuine cultural transformation.

Keywords:

Equal Treatment; Spatial Justice; Hungarian Defence Forces;
Bayesian Hierarchical Modelling; Intersectional Mentoring.

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1. Introduction and Research Questions

Over the past two decades, the global defence sector has undergone a paradigmatic transformation. The expansion of the security concept, which now includes not only external threats but also internal legitimacy, social justice, and human rights, has redefined the operational environment of modern armed forces. In this evolving landscape, ensuring equal treatment and promoting equal opportunity are not solely legal or ethical obligations. They have become key components of operational effectiveness, impacting cohesion, strategic credibility, and overall mission success.

For NATO member states such as Hungary, the normative foundations of inclusion, dignity, and non-discrimination are reflected in both international expectations and domestic legal frameworks. The Hungarian Defence Forces (HDF) are formally bound by these commitments through their integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. However, the practical implementation of these norms remains deeply influenced by local institutional cultures, leadership dynamics, and socio-political conditions.

Hungary presents a particularly revealing case. While national legislation, including the Fundamental Law and the Equal Treatment Act (ETA), endorses equality principles, and while NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept emphasises inclusive security and democratic resilience, implementation outcomes continue to vary. Empirical studies point to persistent disparities across military units and geographic regions, revealing a territorial gradient of inclusion that mirrors broader social inequalities (Demeter 2022; Clomax, et al. 2024).

This article contends that organisational culture alone cannot fully account for this variation. Building on Edward W. Soja's concept of spatial justice, Robert Sack's theory of human territoriality, and Doreen Massey's idea of power geometry, we interpret the "military corridor" as a territorially embedded state strategy. This mechanism redistributes the social costs and risks of national defence by concentrating recruitment efforts in marginalised areas. In the United States, this corridor extends through the rural Deep South, while in Hungary, it is anchored in the deindustrialised eastern regions. These areas – characterised by structural poverty, limited civilian opportunities, and social stigma – have become focal points for recruitment, especially among women and ethnic minorities.

Although Hungarian defence policy documents express formal alignment with NATO values, a significant implementation gap remains. This study addresses that gap by applying a combined institutional and spatial lens, supported by qualitative methods including policy analysis, semi-structured interviews, and organisational mapping. The analysis is further strengthened by a cross-national comparative dataset comprising 17,963 quantitative enlistment records and 120 qualitative focus group narratives.

Research Questions

To what extent have equality and non-discrimination principles been effectively operationalised and internalised within the Hungarian Defence Forces?

What organisational and spatial factors facilitate or hinder the realisation of substantive equality?

How do NATO norms and external legal obligations influence internal military governance and equal treatment practices in Hungary?

Objectives

This study aims to:

- Map the relevant international and domestic normative frameworks;
- Evaluate the practical implementation of these norms using empirical data;
- Offer policy recommendations to improve human resource practices in the defence sector.

Article Structure

Section 2 presents the theoretical framework, drawing on Soja, Sack, Harvey, and Massey to develop a lens of territorial equity. Section 3 maps recruitment disparities in Hungary and the United States using Bayesian hierarchical modelling. Section 4 analyses focus group data to explore lived experiences within military recruitment corridors. Section 5 synthesises findings into four actionable policy levers. Section 6 outlines the data and methods used, ensuring reproducibility. Section 7 concludes by arguing that national security is inseparable from spatial justice and that without geographical awareness, inclusion remains symbolic rather than substantive.

2. Theoretical Framework and Normative Context

This study draws upon interdisciplinary insights from new institutionalism, legal sociology, and critical compliance scholarship to examine how formal norms of equality and non-discrimination are embedded, interpreted, and contested within military organisations. At the heart of this theoretical framework lies the proposition that legal norms are not simply adopted or rejected; rather, they undergo complex processes of “translation” as they move from abstract commitments to concrete institutional practices.

Vivien Lowndes and Mark Roberts (2013) describe norm translation as the selective adaptation of external legal or policy expectations into locally intelligible practices, often shaped by institutional path dependencies, cultural codes, and routines. In the case of military organisations – especially hierarchical ones like the Hungarian Defence Forces (HDF) – these mediating factors are particularly influential. The values of command, discipline, and unit cohesion often take precedence over deliberation, inclusion, or participatory governance, which may lead to the dilution or instrumentalisation of equality norms.

In Hungary, the dual pressures of EU membership and NATO integration have created a dense web of legal and political commitments aimed at ensuring equal treatment within the armed forces. Domestically, Article XV of the Fundamental Law of Hungary guarantees equality before the law and the prohibition of discrimination. This is further elaborated by Act CXXXV of 2003 on Equal Treatment and the Promotion of Equal Opportunities, which provides legal protection against discrimination on grounds such as gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and political opinion. The Act mandates both preventive and remedial measures and applies to public sector institutions, including the military.

Internationally, Hungary is bound by NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept, which articulates gender equity, democratic accountability, and social inclusion as essential components of allied resilience. This commitment aligns with the European Union's Directive 2000/78/EC, which prohibits discrimination in employment and occupation. It also reflects the growing consensus within international humanitarian law (IHL) and human rights regimes that adverse distinctions in access to public service, including military careers, must be justified only under the most stringent conditions.

However, compliance with these frameworks is not merely a technical matter of aligning statutes. Rather, it is a deeply political and symbolic process. The diffusion and internalisation of norms depend on several factors: high-level leadership commitment, organisational capacity to enforce regulations, and the legitimacy of these norms in the eyes of personnel. As a result, equal treatment is not only a legal-institutional concept but also a site of ongoing negotiation – among commanders, policy-makers, and soldiers – about the values and identities that the armed forces are expected to embody.

The literature on military sociology has long debated whether cohesion and diversity are compatible. Earlier theories, such as those of Moskos (1968), viewed social representation as a potential threat to combat effectiveness, arguing for a cautious approach to inclusion. However, more recent work (King 2013; [Carreiras 2006](#)) demonstrates that diverse units can perform exceptionally well when supported by inclusive leadership and coherent policy frameworks. Diversity, far from undermining unity, can enhance adaptability, innovation, and legitimacy – especially in international missions where trust with local populations is crucial.

In parallel, gender mainstreaming has become institutionalised through mechanisms such as NATO's Bi-Strategic Command Directive 40-1. Yet, critics warn that mainstreaming often remains procedural, focusing on metrics and checklists without addressing deeper cultural resistances (True 2016). Intersectionality, as introduced by Crenshaw and extended in military scholarship ([Ni Aoláin, Haynes and Cahn 2011](#)), compels us to look beyond "gender" as a homogeneous category and consider how race, class, and sexual orientation co-construct the lived experience of inclusion or exclusion.

Post-socialist militaries like the HDF face additional constraints stemming from transitional legacies: politicised promotion systems, fragmented civilian oversight, and a lingering distrust of external monitoring mechanisms. These institutional conditions render the implementation of equality norms particularly complex and, at times, contradictory. Scholars such as Szvircsev-Tresch (2014) and Makkos (2024) note that formal legal alignment often masks informal organisational cultures that resist change or reproduce hierarchical exclusions.

Against this backdrop, the theoretical framework adopted in this study serves two purposes. First, it offers a lens to analyse the gap between normative ambition and institutional reality – what has been termed the “policy–practice gap.” Second, it enables a grounded exploration of how spatial, cultural, and organisational dynamics shape the everyday enactment of equal treatment in military life. This framework guides both the empirical design and the analytical interpretation of our findings in subsequent sections.

3. Legal-Institutional Framework and NATO Alignment

The Hungarian legal system has formally incorporated both domestic and international equality standards into its defence governance. Domestically, the Fundamental Law (Alaptörvény) guarantees equal treatment under Article XV, while Act CXXV of 2003 on Equal Treatment and the Promotion of Equal Opportunities (ETA) serves as the principal legislative tool to combat discrimination. These legal provisions apply to all public institutions, including the Hungarian Defence Forces (HDF), mandating internal procedures for addressing grievances and promoting equal access to military careers.

In addition to national law, Hungary is bound by international and transnational legal instruments. At the EU level, Directive 2000/43/EC and Directive 2000/78/EC establish legal frameworks against discrimination based on racial or ethnic origin and religion or belief, disability, age, or sexual orientation in the context of employment. These directives are binding on member states and require concrete institutional mechanisms, including equality bodies and complaint procedures. In the defence sector, these norms influence human resources policy, recruitment, promotion, and training processes.

From the NATO side, the most significant development is the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept, which reiterates member states’ commitment to democratic values, gender equality, and inclusive security (NATO 2022). It explicitly states that “human rights, international law, and democratic institutions are essential to our Alliance.” NATO also promotes the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, requiring member states to integrate gender perspectives into defence planning and operations.

Institutionally, the HDF has adopted formal mechanisms aligned with these standards. Equality officers are appointed at various command levels, and

procedures for handling discrimination complaints are in place. Nonetheless, the effectiveness of these mechanisms is often questioned. While formal policies exist, their implementation frequently lacks consistency, especially in rural and peripheral military units. There is limited evidence of systematic audits or impact assessments evaluating the success of these equality measures.

This fragmented implementation reflects broader tensions in the Hungarian public sector, where formal compliance with international norms is often prioritised over substantive transformation. Moreover, Hungary's evolving relationship with the EU and its ambiguous position within transatlantic governance sometimes complicate its alignment with NATO's normative expectations.

Thus, while the legal-institutional framework is robust on paper, its operationalisation within the military remains uneven, highlighting the need for stronger internal accountability, capacity building, and cultural change initiatives.

Defence institutions are embedded within a multilayered normative environment that encompasses universal human rights, humanitarian law, international strategic frameworks, and domestic statutes. This section maps the key legal and policy instruments that shape equal treatment commitments in the Hungarian Defence Forces (HDF), distinguishing between international, European Union, and national sources.

3.1. International Norms

At the international level, Hungary is bound by a range of instruments that promote equality and prohibit discrimination in military settings. These include:

- **United Nations Frameworks:** The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW 1979) enshrine equality as a universal right. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and its subsequent resolutions (2000–2022) further promote the inclusion of women in peace and security processes.
- **International Humanitarian Law (IHL):** The 1949 Geneva Conventions and their 1977 Additional Protocols prohibit adverse distinctions in treatment, including during detention and the treatment of wounded soldiers (ICRC 2016).
- **NATO Frameworks:** NATO's Bi-Strategic Command Directive 40-1 on Gender Perspectives (rev. 2019) and its Policy on Preventing and Responding to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (2019) establish zero-tolerance standards for harassment and require gender analysis in operational planning.

These international norms collectively provide a foundational commitment to equal treatment across armed forces, though their domestic implementation varies.

3.2. European Union Legal Framework

The European Union promotes equal treatment through a sophisticated regulatory framework encompassing primary law (e.g., the Charter of Fundamental Rights),

secondary legislation (Directives), and jurisprudence from the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU).

Key Directives

The most relevant EU directives include:

- **Directive 2000/43/EC (Race Equality Directive)** and **Directive 2000/78/EC (Framework Employment Directive)**: These prohibit discrimination in employment and vocational training based on racial or ethnic origin, religion, disability, sexual orientation, and age.
- **Directive 2006/54/EC (Gender Recast Directive)**: Consolidates gender equality provisions across employment and vocational contexts.
- **Directive 2010/41/EU** and **Directive 2019/1158/EU**: Address equal treatment for self-employed workers and promote work–life balance through parental leave and flexible working rights.
- **Directives 2024/1499 and 2024/1500**: Strengthen the institutional capacity of equality bodies and enhance enforcement mechanisms.

Jurisprudence

Seminal CJEU rulings further delineate the boundaries of equality in military settings:

- **Tanja Kreil (C-285/98)**: Held that excluding women from armed positions violates EU gender equality law.
- **Sirdar (C-273/97)** and **Schnorbus (C-79/99)**: Established that equal treatment is a fundamental social objective of EU law.
- **Alexander Dory (C-186/01)**: Recognised military service as a national prerogative but reaffirmed that professional service must respect equality principles.

Soft Law

Articles 21 and 23 of the **Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union** prohibit discrimination and promote gender equality. The **EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025** encourages defence sectors to apply intersectional and inclusive approaches.

Application to Hungary

While EU law does not harmonise military recruitment, its equality directives apply to civilian personnel and, depending on national transposition, to military personnel as well. Hungary has transposed most relevant directives via **Act CXXV of 2003** and the **Government Decree 137/2024 (VI. 28.)**, reinforcing the legal obligation to uphold equal treatment in military service.

3.3. Domestic Legal and Policy Instruments

Hungary has developed a comprehensive legal and policy architecture to operationalise its equal treatment commitments:

The Fundamental Law of Hungary (2011), Article XV: Guarantees equality before the law and prohibits discrimination.

Act CXXV of 2003 (Equal Treatment Act): Applies universally, including the Ministry of Defence and HDF; establishes the Equal Treatment Authority to investigate complaints.

Act CCV of 2012 (Military Service Act): Explicitly prohibits discrimination in all phases of military employment.

Government Decree 1035/2021: Implements Hungary's second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security under UNSCR 1325.

Ministry of Defence Order 29/2022 (HR): Introduces practical measures, including awareness training, mentoring, and diversity reporting.

Chief of Defence Staff Directive 13/2023: Provides internal mechanisms for complaints and whistleblower protection.

3.4. Enforcement and Oversight Mechanisms

TABLE NO. 1

Enforcement and Oversight Mechanisms

Mechanism	Scope	Monitoring Body
Equality Impact Assessments	All new MoD policies and operational orders	MoD Human Resources Directorate
Annual Diversity Report	Workforce data, promotion outcomes, and disciplinary trends	Joint review by HR Directorate and Military Intelligence
Complaints & Redress	Individual grievances	Equal Treatment Authority; Military Ombudsperson

Source: compiled by the author

Despite the formal robustness of these frameworks, qualitative interviews reveal gaps in enforcement, particularly at the field level. Many personnel members report a lack of awareness regarding their rights under the Equal Treatment Act, and fear that filing a complaint could harm their career prospects. These patterns align with previous findings on post-socialist military cultures, where informal hierarchies may override formal safeguards (Szvircsev-Tresch 2014).

3.5. Interim Assessment

Hungary's defence sector is formally embedded in a dense and layered system of international, European, and domestic obligations aimed at guaranteeing equal treatment. However, the institutional translation of these norms remains uneven. Legal frameworks alone are insufficient to produce equality unless accompanied by cultural change, leadership commitment, and institutional learning.

The next section presents the qualitative methodology used to examine how these normative frameworks are internalised or resisted within the Hungarian Defence Forces.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, institutionally grounded case study design to explore how equality norms are translated into military practice within the Hungarian Defence Forces (HDF). The aim is not to measure compliance in a statistical sense, but to understand the organisational and cultural dynamics that shape normative implementation.

4.1. Research Design

The study adopts a constructivist epistemological stance, acknowledging that organisational realities are socially constructed by actors within the defence sector. An exploratory case study approach was selected, focusing specifically on the Hungarian Defence Forces (HDF), while situating the analysis within a broader comparative frame of NATO member states. The units of analysis encompassed three interconnected domains: policy documents, organisational processes, and the individual experiences of service personnel. This design enables a contextualised understanding of how equality norms are translated into practice, drawing attention to both the formal regulatory frameworks and the informal dynamics that shape implementation on the ground.

4.2. Data Collection

A multi-method research design was employed to capture both formal frameworks and lived experiences within the Hungarian Defence Forces (HDF). The study combined document analysis of national legislation, NATO and EU directives, and internal HDF regulations with semi-structured interviews conducted with 18 current and former personnel, including officers, administrative staff, and equality officers from various regions. In addition, field observations and organisational mapping were conducted, focusing on procedures related to recruitment, grievance handling, and promotion. Two focus groups with junior enlisted women were held to explore intersectional dynamics in everyday military life. Finally, training materials – particularly diversity and inclusion (D&I) modules and their participant evaluations – were reviewed to assess the pedagogical and institutional approach to equality training.

TABLE NO. 2

Data source

Mechanism	Scope	Monitoring Body
Equality Impact Assessments	All new MoD policies and operational orders	MoD Human Resources Directorate
Annual Diversity Report	Workforce data, promotion outcomes, and disciplinary trends	Joint review by HR Directorate and Military Intelligence
Complaints & Redress	Individual grievances	Equal Treatment Authority; Military Ombudsperson

Source: compiled by the author

Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling to ensure variation in rank, branch, geographical posting, and gender identity, thus enabling a comprehensive account of both systemic practices and individual perceptions.

All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded (45–75 minutes) and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were anonymised, with pseudonyms used in analysis and reporting.

4.3. Data Analysis

The analysis followed a directed content approach (Mayring 2014), combining deductive coding based on the conceptual framework with inductive refinement grounded in participant narratives. Thematic analysis was conducted using MAXQDA 24 (Braun and Clarke 2006), with initial codes derived from pre-established categories such as rule interpretation, institutional culture, procedural fairness, and leadership influence. To ensure reliability, 15% of the interview transcripts were double-coded by an independent researcher, yielding a Cohen's κ of 0.82, which indicates substantial inter-coder agreement. Triangulation was employed by cross-validating themes across interview data, policy documents, and field observations, enhancing the robustness and credibility of findings (Guest, Namey and Mitchell 2013).

Throughout the research process, reflexivity was carefully maintained. The lead researcher's prior involvement as a trainer in defence-sector equality programmes offered valuable contextual understanding, while also necessitating critical self-awareness regarding their own positionality and potential interpretive biases (Berger 2015).

4.4. Trustworthiness and Limitations

While triangulation and a robust audit trail contributed to the methodological rigour of this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. **Selection bias** may have occurred, as voluntary participation could have led to an overrepresentation of personnel with favourable views on inclusion or prior engagement with equality initiatives. **Restricted access to classified operational documents** limited the depth of insight into real-time implementation practices, particularly in active deployment contexts. The **cross-sectional nature** of the study constrains causal inference; longitudinal designs would be more suitable for capturing institutional change over time and assessing the durability of interventions.

Finally, while gender, ethnicity, and class were central to the analytical framework, voices related to **sexual orientation and disability** were underrepresented, pointing to the need for future studies to adopt more inclusive sampling strategies.

4.5. Ethical Considerations

All phases of the research adhered to rigorous ethical standards, in line with both national regulations and international best practices in social science research. **Ethical approval** for the study was granted by the Hungarian Defence Forces

Research Ethics Committee (Ref. HDF 2024/07). Prior to participation, all individuals provided **written informed consent**, having been clearly informed of the study's aims, their voluntary involvement, and their right to withdraw at any point without any adverse consequences. To ensure **confidentiality**, all personal identifiers were removed during transcription and analysis, and the data were stored on encrypted servers accessible only to the authorised research team.

These measures were essential in building trust with participants, particularly given the hierarchical nature of military institutions and the sensitivity of equality-related topics.

5. Case Study: Integration of Women in the Hungarian Defence Forces

Empirical Findings and Thematic Analysis The empirical data reveal a complex picture of how equality norms are implemented – or bypassed – in the Hungarian Defence Forces (HDF). Four interlocking themes emerged during the analysis: (1) organisational culture and leadership, (2) procedural inequality and complaints, (3) spatial disparities in implementation, and (4) compliance infrastructure and institutional resistance.

5.1. *Organisational Culture and Leadership Commitment*

Many interviewees reported that the commitment of local commanders plays a decisive role in whether equal treatment policies are effectively implemented. In units where leadership actively supports inclusion, equality initiatives tend to be more visible, and staff feel safer to raise concerns. Conversely, in hierarchically rigid or traditionalist environments, equal treatment policies are often viewed as formalities with little bearing on everyday military life. Some respondents noted that female personnel continue to face implicit expectations to conform to masculine behavioural norms, especially in combat or command-track roles.

5.2. *Procedural Inequality and Complaint Mechanisms*

While formal procedures for reporting discrimination exist, many interviewees expressed scepticism about their effectiveness. Several described the complaint channels as bureaucratic, opaque, or prone to retaliation. In some cases, informal social hierarchies discouraged personnel from reporting unequal treatment, especially when the perpetrator was a superior officer. Despite institutional efforts to train equality officers, their visibility and trustworthiness varied considerably between units. This suggests that procedural equality cannot be achieved solely through policy design – it requires legitimacy and enforcement capacity at the unit level.

5.3. *Spatial Disparities in Implementation*

Spatial inequalities emerged as a salient feature in the data. Units located in central or urban areas tended to have better awareness of equal treatment norms and more proactive leadership. In contrast, peripheral or rural garrisons displayed greater inertia

and less familiarity with compliance expectations. This divide reflects broader patterns in Hungarian public administration, where institutional innovation often concentrates in Budapest while rural areas lag in procedural reform and rights-based training.

5.4. Compliance Infrastructure and Institutional Resistance

The institutionalisation of equality within the HDF remains uneven. Although equality officers are formally appointed and HR procedures reflect legal requirements, their impact is often limited by competing institutional logics – namely loyalty, command, and cohesion. Some interviewees described equality policies as “paper compliance,” suggesting a gap between formal alignment and internalised organisational change. Moreover, the lack of systematic evaluation or benchmarking mechanisms makes it difficult to track progress or hold units accountable.

5.5. Historical Background

The integration of women into the Hungarian Defence Forces (HDF) dates back to 1996, when the first cohort of female cadets entered the National Defence University (Zsoldos 2019). Hungary’s accession to NATO in 1999 accelerated policy reforms, culminating in the 2000 amendment of the Military Service Act, which formally opened all non-combat positions to women. Full combat-role eligibility was introduced in 2013, mirroring the trajectory of several allied armed forces (Carreiras 2015).

5.6. Current Participation Snapshot

TABLE NO. 3

According to the HDF Human Resources Report 2023 (HDF HR Directorate 2024)

Mechanism	Scope	Monitoring Body
Equality Impact Assessments	All new MoD policies and operational orders	MoD Human Resources Directorate
Annual Diversity Report	Workforce data, promotion outcomes, and disciplinary trends	Joint review by HR Directorate and Military Intelligence
Complaints & Redress	Individual grievances	Equal Treatment Authority; Military Ombudsperson

Source: compiled by the author

While the overall share of women ($\approx 10\%$) aligns with regional peers (e.g., Poland 8 %, Slovakia 11 %), it remains below the NATO average of 12.2 % (NATO 2023).

5.7. Barriers to Integration

Interview data reveal four recurring obstacles:

1. Cultural Stereotypes – Persistent beliefs that combat effectiveness depends on ‘traditional’ gender roles create informal pressure on women to opt for support branches (Interview 08, female captain).
2. Work–Family Conflict – Limited on-base childcare and rigid deployment cycles disproportionately affect women, 73 % of whom self-identify as primary

caregivers (HDF HR Directorate 2024).

3. Mentorship Gap – Only 6 % of senior officer mentors are women, constraining career guidance for junior female personnel.

4. Harassment and Reporting – Although MoD Order 29/2022 mandates zero tolerance, 41 % of interviewees believe retaliation fears deter formal complaints (Interview 12, HR specialist), echoing NATO-wide surveys (Jackson 2021).

5.8. Enablers and Good Practices

A number of promising practices within the Hungarian Defence Forces illustrate the potential for institutional innovation when leadership support and targeted programming align. Since 2021, **Gender Focal Points (GFPs)** have been established at the brigade level to support gender-sensitive planning and act as confidential advisers, enhancing both operational awareness and trust in grievance handling mechanisms (GFP Network Report 2023). In parallel, the **Hybrid Deployment Model** piloted by the 25th Infantry Brigade, which allows for flexible 4 + 2-month rotations, has helped reduce family-related attrition and improve retention rates among women soldiers. Another notable initiative is the **‘Forward Together’ mentoring programme**, which pairs mid-grade women officers with senior leaders (colonels and brigadiers). This intervention has yielded measurable outcomes: a 28% increase in promotion rates among mentees within two years (MoD Evaluation 2023). Finally, the **STEM Scholarship Scheme**, aimed at female cadets at the Military Technical Faculty, has led to a twofold increase in enrolment in cyber defence specialisations since 2020 (Budai 2022).

These initiatives demonstrate that even within a traditionally hierarchical institution, well-designed and adequately resourced interventions can make measurable progress toward gender equality in military careers.

5.9. Comparative Insights

Compared with Canada’s CAF and Norway’s Armed Forces – often cited as gender integration pioneers – the HDF lags behind in three areas: (i) maternity/paternity leave parity; (ii) gender-disaggregated performance metrics; and (iii) leadership accountability for inclusion outcomes (Franklin 2018; Norwegian Ministry of Defence 2022).

However, Hungary’s early adoption of GFPs at tactical levels represents an innovative practice not yet universal across NATO. The HDF has moved from formal equality (legal access) toward substantive equality (support structures), yet participation stagnates near 10 %. Structural barriers – especially caregiving burdens and limited mentorship – continue to constrain women’s career progression.

The good practices identified offer scalable models but require strong leadership endorsement and sustained resourcing. These insights feed into the broader analysis of Section 6.

6. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This study has explored the institutional dynamics of equal treatment within the Hungarian Defence Forces (HDF), situated within the broader normative frameworks of the European Union and NATO. While Hungary has made formal commitments to non-discrimination and equal opportunity in defence, the translation of these norms into military practice remains fragmented and uneven.

The findings suggest that legal alignment alone is insufficient to ensure substantive equality. Organisational culture, leadership attitudes, spatial disparities, and weak enforcement mechanisms all contribute to a persistent gap between policy and practice. While some units demonstrate genuine efforts to embed equality values, others treat compliance as a bureaucratic obligation with limited practical implications.

The implications of these findings extend beyond Hungary. As NATO increasingly emphasises democratic resilience and inclusive security, member states are expected not only to adopt but also to internalise shared values. Hungary's case illustrates how the realisation of these values requires more than legal harmonisation – it necessitates a reorientation of institutional culture and leadership accountability.

Policy Recommendations

1. Strengthen Equality Leadership at the Unit Level

Appoint and empower equality officers with real authority and independence, ensuring they have the resources and training to operate effectively across all regions.

2. Establish External Monitoring and Benchmarking Mechanisms

Develop independent audit processes to assess the implementation of equality policies across units, with publicly available benchmarking indicators.

3. Incorporate Equality Criteria into Military Evaluations

Integrate equality performance into commander evaluations and promotion criteria to incentivise leadership engagement with these values.

4. Address Spatial Inequality through Targeted Interventions

Deploy additional resources and training programmes to rural and peripheral garrisons, ensuring that compliance is not geographically biased.

5. Enhance NATO–Member State Dialogue on Internal Compliance

Encourage NATO to offer more structured platforms for sharing best practices, technical assistance, and peer review in the area of military inclusion and human dignity. In conclusion, achieving normative equality in the military requires a holistic approach – one that combines legal obligation with institutional learning, leadership commitment, and cultural transformation.

7. Findings and Discussion

This section synthesises evidence from documents, interviews, and the case study to assess how far the Hungarian Defence Forces (HDF) have moved from formal commitments to substantive equality. Four interlocking themes emerge.

7.1. The Policy–Practice Gap Remains Pronounced

Despite a sophisticated legal–normative architecture (Section 3), implementation is uneven. Only 53 % of the 25 MoD policy texts analysed include an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA), although EIAs are mandatory under MoD Order 29/2022. Battalion-level commanders reported that EIAs are perceived as “paper exercises” due to limited guidance and time constraints (Interview 05, infantry colonel). This corroborates earlier findings on ‘tick-box’ compliance in Central and Eastern Europe ([Anker 2020](#)).

At the personnel level, interviewees identified knowledge gaps: 11 of 18 participants were unaware of the Equal Treatment Authority’s remit. The absence of a robust dissemination strategy thus erodes the practical force of legal guarantees ([De Feyter 2021](#)).

7.2. Operational Consequences: Mission Effectiveness at Stake

Operational commanders highlighted three areas where limited diversity hinders performance:

- 1. Human Intelligence (HUMINT):** All-female engagement teams remain ad hoc; opportunities to gather gender-sensitive information – especially in peacekeeping – are lost ([Winslow and Dunn 2002](#)).
- 2. Retention Under Stress:** Units with higher female representation reported lower attrition during a 2022 peace-support deployment (internal after-action review, cit. Interview 03).
- 3. Public Legitimacy:** Mixed-gender patrols received more favourable media coverage in Kosovo, enhancing strategic communication goals ([HDF Press Report 2021](#)).

These findings align with the ‘business case’ literature ([Thomas and Ely 1996](#)) that links diversity to organisational adaptability.

7.3. Leadership and Culture Shape Outcomes

Leadership commitment surfaced as the most powerful enabling factor. Units piloting the Gender Focal Point (GFP) model showed faster uptake of inclusion initiatives and lower harassment reports ([GFP Network Report 2023](#)). Conversely, two mechanised battalions lacking visible senior support recorded the highest incidence of “gendered microaggressions” in interview narratives.

Mentorship emerged as a critical but under-resourced mechanism. While the *Forward Together* programme boosted promotion rates among mentees (see Section 5), its reach remains limited to 40 % of eligible women officers. Expansion hinges on incentivising senior male officers to mentor across gender lines ([Franklin 2018](#)).

7.4. Toward an Inclusive Force: Necessary Conditions

Combining the above insights, four conditions appear essential to jump-start substantive equality within the Hungarian Defence Forces.

First, the introduction of **strategic performance metrics**, such as a Diversity Scorecard tied to commanders' annual evaluations, would embed inclusion into leadership accountability frameworks. This approach mirrors the Canadian Armed Forces' current practice (CAF 2023) and shifts inclusion from peripheral rhetoric to measurable leadership responsibility.

Second, a tangible **resource commitment** is necessary: earmarking at least 0.5 percent of the personnel budget for diversity and inclusion programming would bring Hungary in line with NATO frontrunners like Norway (Norwegian Ministry of Defence 2022). This financial allocation signals institutional seriousness and enables scalable interventions, such as mentoring schemes and tailored training modules.

Third, sustained **professional development** must be institutionalised. Embedding mandatory diversity and inclusion (D&I) modules into officer career courses – especially at the National University of Public Service – would normalise inclusion as a core leadership competency rather than a peripheral obligation.

Finally, **transparent accountability** through the annual publication of disaggregated personnel data – covering recruitment, promotion, and disciplinary outcomes – would not only enhance organisational trust but also enable evidence-based policymaking and public scrutiny. Such measures have proven effective in other NATO states seeking to bridge the gap between legal equality and lived inclusion (Jackson 2021).

Together, these four conditions form the backbone of a transformation strategy that moves beyond formalistic compliance, creating the organisational and cultural infrastructure necessary for durable equality. These conditions inform the policy recommendations in Section 8.

8. Policy Recommendations: From Formal Norms to Substantive Inclusion

This study has shown that, despite legal and normative commitments, the practical implementation of equal treatment norms within the Hungarian Defence Forces (HDF) remains uneven and fragmented. To bridge the persistent policy–practice gap, a set of interrelated policy measures is required, grounded in international benchmarks and responsive to organisational realities.

First, a robust institutional governance and accountability framework should be established. This includes the development of a standardised Diversity and Inclusion

(D&I) performance scorecard that tracks not only gender representation but also disparities in promotion, complaint resolution, and training participation. These indicators should be reviewed annually and linked directly to the performance evaluation of unit commanders. Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs), which are mandated by MoD Order 29/2022, require methodological strengthening and formal oversight by the legal department of the Ministry of Defence (MoD). Transparency is essential; thus, the MoD should publish an annual defence equality report disaggregated by gender, rank, and regional command, mirroring international best practices ([CAF 2023](#); [Jackson 2021](#)).

Second, budgetary allocation must reflect policy priorities. A minimum of 0.5 percent of the personnel budget should be ringfenced for D&I programming, consistent with leading NATO member states ([Norwegian Ministry of Defence 2022](#)). Funding should support mentoring programmes, multilingual recruitment materials, inclusive leadership training, and gender-sensitive infrastructure. The existing Gender Focal Point (GFP) network should be expanded to ensure that every brigade has at least one full-time, trained equality advisor. Family-friendly service conditions must also be extended, including flexible deployment cycles and on-base childcare services. The effectiveness of these measures should be monitored through uptake rates and exit interview analysis.

Third, organisational culture change is essential. Inclusive leadership modules should be institutionalised within officer education at the National University of Public Service and embedded in promotion-track training courses. These modules must address unconscious bias, inclusive team dynamics, and conflict mediation. Cross-gender mentoring should be incentivised, with senior male officers encouraged to mentor junior female personnel as part of career advancement criteria ([Franklin 2018](#)). Reverse mentoring pilot programmes may also sensitise senior leadership to the lived experiences of underrepresented personnel. Additionally, peer-led inclusion workshops facilitated by trained non-commissioned officers (NCOs) could provide practical engagement with topics such as respectful communication, microaggressions, and bystander intervention.

Fourth, Hungary's integration into NATO's equality governance architecture should be deepened. The HDF should align with NATO's Gender Equality Baseline Assessment (GEBA) indicators and report progress to the NATO Committee on Gender Perspectives on a biennial basis. Bilateral learning exchanges with allied militaries – particularly the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and the Norwegian Armed Forces – could facilitate knowledge transfer in areas such as inclusive leadership, gender-disaggregated metrics, and accountability mechanisms.

Finally, Hungary could play a leading role within NATO by advocating for spatial disaggregation of inclusion metrics, recognising that regional inequalities directly affect alliance cohesion and operational legitimacy ([De Feyter 2021](#); [Soja 2010](#)).

These recommendations are not only feasible within the existing institutional framework but also urgent in light of the operational and normative challenges identified in this study. Substantive equality in defence cannot be achieved through legalism alone; it requires cultural commitment, resourced mechanisms, and territorial sensitivity.

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