PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN PEACE AND SECURITY PROCESSES IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN PEACE AND SECURITY PROCESSES IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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INTRODUCTION

The study **"Perceptions and Attitudes on the Role of Women in Peace and Security Processes in the Republic of Moldova"** aims at analysing perceptions and attitudes regarding the role of women in peace and security processes in the Republic of Moldova, with a focus on identifying the main barriers and stereotypes that hinder their full integration into the security sector.

The document will examine societal attitudes towards women's participation in these areas. In the context of the war in Ukraine, it will analyse public perceptions of the conflict, the acceptance of refugees and the impact of the war on social cohesion, and propose recommendations for policy makers and stakeholders in the security and defence sector to promote more effectively gender inclusion, eliminate stereotypes and strengthen social resilience in times of conflict.

The methodology used for this analysis includes data collection through online questionnaires. The questionnaires were sent to central public authorities[1], and the research team received 539 completed questionnaires. Moreover, a focus group consisting of representatives of state institutions in the security and defence sector[2] was organized, and a literature review and evaluation of relevant sociological surveys[3] were conducted.

The study on *"Perceptions and Attitudes on the Role of Women in Peace and Security Processes in the Republic of Moldova"* was developed by the *"Advancing Women, Peace and Security Agenda: Tackling Misinformation and Stereotypes"* Project, implemented by the Platform for Security and Defence Initiatives (PISA) with the support of UN Women and funded by the Women's Fund for Peace and Humanitarian Assistance.

BACKGROUND

In the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine and heightened regional tensions, the Republic of Moldova faces significant security challenges, with significant consequences for Moldova and the whole of Europe. Its geographical position and economic, social, and political interdependencies place it in a vulnerable situation, requiring complex approaches and integrated strategies to maintain stability.

One of the main dimensions of these challenges are military and strategic risks. Repeated violations of airspace increase uncertainty and undermine national security. At the same time, the Transnistrian region remains a pressure point, raising concerns about potential escalations or the exploitation of this area as a destabilization vector.

Beyond conventional risks, Moldova is facing a wave of hybrid threats, including gender-based disinformation campaigns designed to polarize the public opinion as

well as cyberattacks. The energy crisis, amplified by dependence on external resources, has become a tool for exerting pressure on the country, directly affecting its population and economy.

The hybrid war waged by the Russian Federation exploits Moldova's structural vulnerabilities, such as poverty and corruption, but also social and ethnic constructs, low education levels, persistent patriarchal norms and stereotypes, and strong religious affiliations.

On a social and economic level, the continuous influx of refugees from Ukraine has tested the Republic of Moldova's capacity to manage humanitarian crises. Limited resources and underdeveloped infrastructure are used to their limits, generating additional tensions. At the same time, the economic crisis triggered by regional instability exacerbates inequalities and creates a fertile ground for social discontent.

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1   The questionnaires were sent to the official emails of the following institutions: Ministry of Internal Affairs, National Anti-Corruption Centre, Intelligence and Security Service, General Police Inspectorate, Customs Service, General Border Police Inspectorate, Ministry of Defence, State Protection and Guard Service, Ministry of Education and Research, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Completed questionnaires were returned to the official email of the Platform for Security and Defence Initiatives.

2   The Focus Group was organized within the framework of the workshop "Strategic Communication Planning to Promote the Women, Peace and Security Agenda" on 11 November 2024, and attended by representatives of the following government institutions: Ministry of Internal Affairs, National Anti-Corruption Centre, Intelligence and Security Service, General Inspectorate for Emergency Situations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, General Police Inspectorate, General Border Police Inspectorate, Customs Service, Ministry of Defence, State Protection and Security Service, Ministry of Education and Research.

3   The statistical portrait of women and men in the Republic of Moldova. https://statistica.gov.md/index.php/ro/portretul-statistic-al-femeilor-si-barbatilor-in-republica-moldova-9617_61008.html. https://www.equalfuture-eurasia.org/womens-representation-in-politics-and-public-administration/moldova. The Gender Equality Index 2024 Stagnation in the Fight for Gender Equality: What is Stopping us from Moving Forward? https://progen.md/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/CPD_IEG-2024.pdf, Facts and Figures Women, Peace and Security: https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/peace-and-security/facts-and-figures. OSCE-led survey on Violence against Women: Main report https://eeca.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/413237.pdf. Study on Men's Perceptions of Gender Norms and Domestic Violence: https://antiviolenta.md/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Perceptiile-barbatilor-ROM-Prewiu.pdf?fbclid=IwY2xjawHD2kFleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHZ4oqs56G3lVdUucBrlcFVIy8F1sMV9lq0NcaH0kEDzbJd1oV1vPwxJ9qw_aem_3J16xZF22Wf5NSn_jwmaWw. Women Peace and Security Index 2023/24: https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/WPS-Index-executive-summary.pdf

Political polarization within society represents another major challenge. Ideological divisions and tensions between major political forces not only weaken governance but also undermine the ability to respond cohesively to both external and internal challenges.

These complex circumstances not only test the resilience of the Republic of Moldova but also require adjustments in its security policies. An integrated approach, including strengthening cybersecurity infrastructure, diversifying energy sources, effectively managing refugee flows, and promoting internal cohesion, is essential to overcoming this time of heightened uncertainty and risk.

In the Republic of Moldova, national security and defence policies have traditionally been formulated from the perspective of conventional threats to the country's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. These state-centreed policies have often overlooked human security and fundamental human rights aspects, including the rights of underrepresented or marginalized social groups. The lack of a human-centred approach in the security and defence sector affects women in particular, who are frequently excluded from decision-making processes related to peace, security, and defence. This ignores the unique experiences and perspectives of women and results in policies that fail to address their specific needs and do not fully utilize their critical contributions, especially, in the context of enhanced relations with the European Union and the initiation of accession negotiations.[4]

In the context of regional conflicts and the war in Ukraine, the impact on the security of the Republic of Moldova must be analysed from a gender perspective, as throughout history, women and girls are most severely affected by war and conflict. Promoting the belief that the safety and fundamental rights of women and girls will become the last priority amid violence[5] poses a critical danger.

Women in the Republic of Moldova have faced significant barriers in their participation and access to leadership positions in the economic, social and political areas. Although important progress has been made in recent years towards gender equality in education, politics, the economy, and political participation, women continue to face multiple challenges such as discrimination, domestic violence and sexual abuse. Despite their high education level and active presence in the labor market, their access to leadership positions is still hampered. These problems are compounded by widespread patriarchal attitudes, which limit women's role in public and political life.

One of the main obstacles is the persistence of gender stereotypes, which determine the perception of women's ability to hold leadership roles. In addition, family responsibilities continue to fall largely on women, which makes it difficult for them to participate actively in professional and political life. Moreover, access to economic and financial resources is often limited, making it difficult for women entrepreneurs to get the support they need to develop their businesses.

Despite the widespread use of technology, women are underrepresented in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) areas, where gender barriers in education and employment persist. The institutions and policies supporting women in political and professional careers are still insufficient. Many women in politics and administration face harassment, which discourages their active participation in decision-making.

Although Moldova has taken important steps to promote gender equality, gender mainstreaming in public policies remains fragmented. Without better-defined strategies and effective support mechanisms, progress will remain limited.

According to the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Index[6] which offers a perspective[7] into women's well-being and empowerment through three key dimensions—inclusion, justice, and security—the Republic of Moldova ranks 53rd out of 177 countries, with an overall score of 0.758. Compared to 30 other countries in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, this result indicates a moderate level of inclusion, justice, and security for women, highlighting both progress and remaining challenges in achieving full and sustainable gender equality.

In terms of inclusion, women in the Republic of Moldova benefit from a relatively high level of access to education, with an average of 11.9 years of schooling. Additionally, 62.9% of them have access to financial services, and 79.1% are employed—showing an active presence in the labor market. Technology plays an important role in women's lives, with 86% using mobile phones, which facilitates connectivity and access to information. In the political sector, women occupy 38.6% of Paliament seats—a significant percentage reflecting considerable progress toward gender representation. The Republic of Moldova has adopted measures to support women's political participation, such as the double quota system reintroduced in 2019, which led to an increase in women's representation in Parliament to 40.6% in 2021. In the 2023 local elections, women obtained 33.3% of

4 The Strategic Communication Plan on the Women, Peace and Security Agenda is available on www.pisa.md

5 Male Warriors and Worried Women? Understanding Gender and Perceptions of Security Threats. https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/european-journal-of-international-security/article/male-warriors-and-worried-women-understanding-gender-and-perceptions-of-security-threats/5E8758ADACDB39C756F7D3181D01F916

6 Women Peace and Security Index 2023/24.https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/WPS-Index-executive-summary.pdf

7 The WPS Index aims to highlight where countries are performing well and where improvements are needed to enhance women's well-being and empowerment. It serves as a valuable tool for policymakers, researchers and advocates working on gender equality and women's rights.

the seats in district and municipal councils and 24.1% of mayoral positions. The positive experience of women-led communities suggests that these advancements can change public perceptions and stimulate a gender-sensitive agenda[8].

In the area of justice, the Republic of Moldova scores 87.5 out of 100 for the absence of legal discrimination, indicating favorable legislation for gender equality. However, access to justice remains partially limited, with a score of 2.75 out of 4. In the health sector, the maternal mortality rate is 12.3 deaths per 100,000 live births, reflecting significant progress but still requiring continuous improvement.

Women's security is an important dimension of the WPS Index. In the Republic of Moldova, 9% of women report domestic violence by an intimate partner, highlighting the need for additional measures to protect victims and prevent violence. Only 59% of women feel safe in their communities, emphasizing the need to strengthen trust in the social environment. The incidence of violence against women is low in the political medium, with 0.058 reported incidents per 100,000 women.

The analysis of data on the representation of women in law enforcement, security and defence institutions in the Republic of Moldova shows a modest presence of women in managerial positions as opposed to a more significant representation in executive roles:

Ministry of Defence	Women occupy between 37% and 37.1% of managerial positions and between 62.9% to 63% of operational roles.
Customs Service	There were 60 women in managerial positions and 422 in executive positions, with insignificant variations in the first six months of 2024.
National Penitentiary Authority (ANP)	Women account for 20.88% of leadership roles and 27.77% of operational roles, showing a slight increase.
Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA)	The Ministry: The number of women in executive positions increased from 52 to 55. **General Inspectorate for Emergency Situations (IGSU):** There has been an increase to 69 women in management positions and 186 in executive positions. **General Police Inspectorate (IGP):** The number of women in managerial positions remains constant at 113 and in executive positions at 1,654, with no significant upward trend.[9]
National Anti-Corruption Centre (CNA)	Out of 313 employees, 97 are women.
State Protection and Guard Service (SPPS)	Around 6% of special status staff are women.[10]

This under-representation of women in leadership positions in the security and defence sector underlines the need for more effective policies and measures to promote gender equality and ensure women's equal participation at all levels of decision-making. Gender mainstreaming in these areas would better represent the interests of all citizens, make the institutions responsible for national security more effective, and strengthen their legitimacy. To address these inequities, it is essential to implement policies and programmes that promote gender equality, encourage the active participation of women at all levels and ensure an inclusive and equitable work environment.

The Transnistrian conflict settlement process has been dominated by formal and informal diplomatic initiatives in which women's participation has been limited. Since 2005, only three women have served as chief negotiators on both sides and female representation in the working groups is low. Women are predominantly present in areas considered "feminine", such as health, education and social protection. In 2023, only 28.5% of working group leaders were women, a modest increase as compared to previous years. This under-representation reflects deep-rooted political and cultural barriers[11].

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8   *Local Elections 2023: Between Perceptions and Realities.* An Analysis of Local Elections in the Republic of Moldova from a Gender Equality Perspective. https://www.undp.org/moldova/publications/local-elections-2023-between-perceptions-and-realities-analysis-local-elections-republic-moldova-gender-equality-perspective

9   Benchmark data for progress in 2023. According to data published on Empowering Women - Strengthening Peace and Security: Promoting Gender Equality by Advancing the Implementation of UN Resolution 1325. https://mai.gov.md/ro/node/8798

10   Empowering Women - Strengthening Peace and Security: Promoting Gender Equality by Advancing the Implementation of UN Resolution 1325. https://mai.gov.md/ro/node/8798

11   Women's Inclusion in Peace Processes: Global Lessons for Moldova. https://moldova.un.org/en/276106-womens-inclusion-peace-processes-global-lessons-moldova

According to the first National Programme for the Implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security implemented since 2018, the Republic of Moldova is "supporting women's equal participation in all stages of decision-making and conflict resolution". The second National Programme for 2023-2027 aims to strengthen women's representation in the security and defence sector and mainstream the response to the refugee crisis into local development.

This unequal distribution highlights the persistence of gender barriers and stereotypes in the security and defence sector that limit women's access to decision-making positions. To address these inequities, it's essential to implement policies and programmes that promote gender equality, encourage the active participation of women at all levels of the hierarchy and ensure an inclusive and equitable work environment.

The goals of the National Programme for the Implementation of Resolution 1325[12] is to increase the participation and representation of women in the security and defence sector and to ensure an inclusive and effective sector. These goals aim at reducing barriers and stereotypes re-lated to the role of women and promoting gender equality in decision-making processes.

According to the studies and reports on security and defence policies, the main problems in ensuring equal opportunities and gender mainstreaming can be addressed at the level of organisational culture:

■ existing stereotypes regarding confidence in women's capabilities, particularly in the military sector;

■ lack of recognition of women's potential as agents of change or as providers of security, especially due to the war in the neighbouring country;

■ insufficient recognition of how more inclusive processes lead to increased operational effectiveness; and

■ the combination of mismanagement and gender stereotypes limits the implementation of commitments)[13].

In this regard, it's important that relevant institutions take proactive measures to facilitate women's access to leadership positions, provide equal opportunities for professional development and eliminate discriminatory practices in order to fully realize the potential of women in the security and defence fields.

I. ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL VIEWS ON WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES RELATED TO PEACE AND SECURITY

Traditional gender roles and stereotypes continue to influence the distribution of responsibilities between men and women in families, workplaces, and society. Although Republic of Moldova has made significant progress in ensuring gender equality in various areas, stereotypical perceptions persist in the national culture.

According to the 2024 Gender Equality Index Study "Stagnation in the Fight for Gender Equality: What Stops us from Advancing?", perceptions regarding women participation in decision-making have deteriorated since 2021, despite the fact that during the same period, the number of women holding elected and decision-making positions has significantly increased. Around 27% of citizens believe that women have no place in politics, and 18.4% think that women are less capable and cannot hold leadership positions. This trend can be explained by:

■ the persistence of gender stereotypes and traditional social expectations, which dictate that women should be primarily responsible for family care and household management. Women's involvement in politics is perceived as a deviation or threat to these roles;

■ the multiple crises faced by Republic of Moldova, which have contributed to a more critical perception of women in leadership positions.

Since 2020, women hold the highest decision making positions[14] in the country. At the same time, between 2020 and 2022, Republic of Moldova experienced multiple crises, which decreased the population's standard of living. Even though these crises were global, national authorities were judged and blamed for their impact. Failures and/or difficulties were compounded with the general perception that women are not capable or competent enough to hold leadership positions. This worsening of perceptions reflects a regression in efforts to promote gender equality and women's participation in politics.[15]

The 2023 study "Men's Perceptions of Gender Norms and Domestic Violence"[16] provides a detailed perspective on how gender norms and stereotypes influence men's

12   DECISION No. 152/2023 for the approval of the National Programme for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security for 2023-2027. https://gov.md/sites/default/files/document/attachments/subiect-14-nu-85-mai-2023_0.pdf

13   Security Sector Governance in Moldova. Chisinau, 2024. Independent report. https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/Independent_Report_SSG_Moldova_ROM.pdf, p. 249

14   Maia Sandu - President of the Republic of Moldova (the first woman elected to this position since 2020), Natalia Gavrilița- Prime Minister (2021-2023), the first woman to lead a pro-European government after independence),Veronica Dragalin - Head of the Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office (2022-2024), a key institution in the fight against corruption in Moldova, Doina Gherman - Deputy Speaker of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, Ana Revenco - Minister of Interior Affairs (2021-2023) and Daniela Misail-Nichitina - Minister of Interior (2024-present) etc.

15   Gender Equality Index 2024. Stagnation in the Fight for Gender Equality: What's Holding us Back? https://progen.md/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/CPD_IEG-2024.pdf
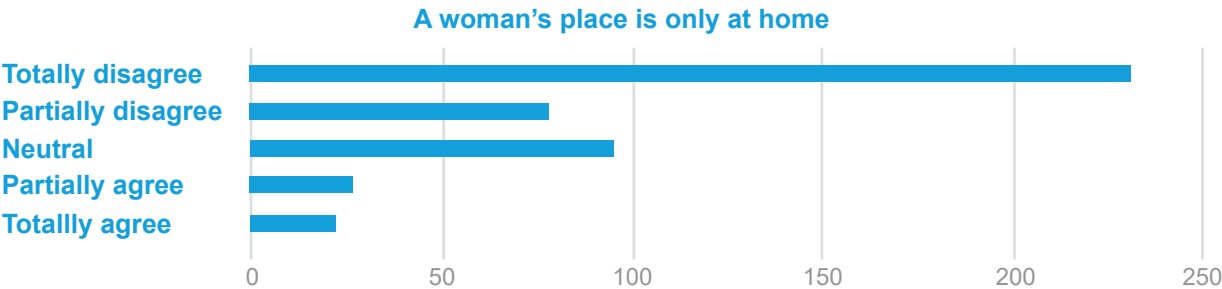
16   Survey: Men's Perceptions of Gender Norms and Domestic Violence. https://antiviolenta.md/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Perceptiile-barbatilor-ROM-Prewiu.pdf?fbclid=IwY2xjawHD2kFleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHZ4oqs56G3lVdUucBrIcFVIy8F1sMV9lq0NcaH0kEDzbJd1oV-1vPwxJ9qw_aem_3J16xZF22Wf5NSn_jwmaWw

behaviours and attitudes in the Republic of Moldova. The data reveal a mix of persistent traditional mindsets and signs of change toward gender equality. Approximately 53.26% of men believe that women are not capable of achieving the same things as men, suggesting a limited perception of women's potential. However, only 9.44% of respondents agreed with the statement that "a woman's place is exclusively at home." These stereotypes are often used to discourage women at the beginning of their careers or those who have achieved professional success, attempting to "put them in their place". It is important to note that 69.21% of respondents disagreed with this statement. However, a significant share (21.35%) remained neutral, especially among young men in rural areas, reflecting a lack of interest or engagement in gender equality issues.

On the other hand, there are clear signs of progress regarding family responsibilities. Latest policies such as paternal leave have encouraged an increase in acceptance of active fatherhood and shared responsibilities in child rearing. This phenomenon reflects a positive shift in the traditional perception of gender roles within families.

Another important aspect is the impact of toxic masculinity. Stereotypes such as "real men don't cry" continue to affect men's emotional development. However, almost half of the respondents (49.21%) reject this idea, signaling a growing openness toward redefining masculinity in a way that encourages emotional expression.

A woman's place is only at home

Source: Men's Perceptions of Gender Norms and Domestic Violence[17] Survey

To better understand the complexity of gender norms and roles in the current security environment, the Platform for Security and Defence Initiatives developed a questionnaire aimed at investigating how citizens of Republic of Moldova perceive women's involvement in the security and defence sectors. The questionnaires18 present a comprehensive picture of this matter. Although the sample was diverse, the predominance of urban participants (71.3%) indicates a possible under-representation of rural perspectives, where traditional norms may have a stronger influence on perceptions. The gender distribution was relatively balanced: with 51.2% women and 47.7% men, which allows for a relevant comparative analysis between the views of the two categories.

From a demographic perspective, the majority of respondents were between the ages of 35 and 44 (45.7%), followed by those aged 25-34 (22.2%).[19]

This context provides a relevant framework for interpreting survey results and understanding the challenges that hinder the integration of women into peace and security processes, while also highlighting the need for a more balanced representation in future research.

Age

Gender

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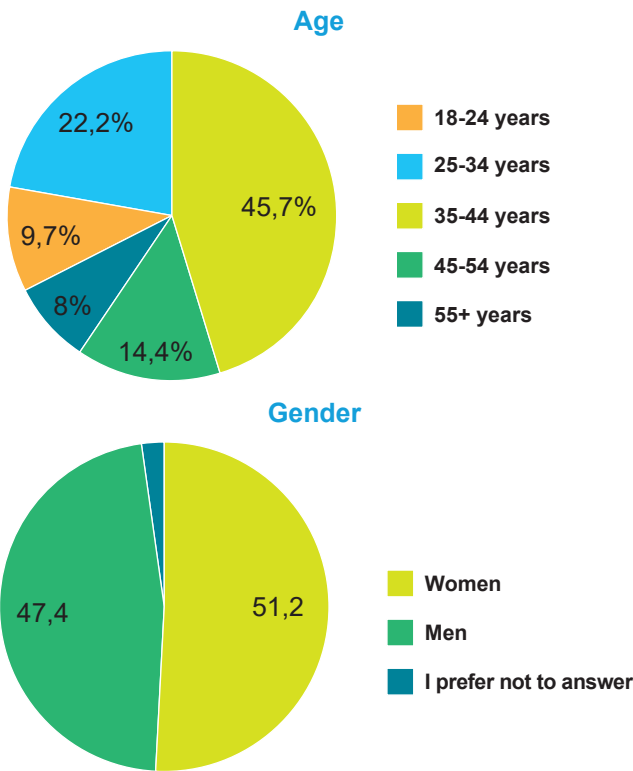
17 Study: Men's Perceptions of Gender Norms and Domestic Violence. https://antiviolenta.md/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Perceptiile-bar-batilor-ROM-Prewiu.pdf?fbclid=IwY2xjawHD2kFleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHZ4oqs56G3lVdUucBrlcFVIy8F1sMV9lq0NcaH0kEDzbJd1oV-1vPwxJ9qw_aem_3J16xZF22Wf5NSn_jwmaWw

18 Developed by the Platform for Security and Defence Initiatives (PISA) as part of the project "Advancing the Women, Peace and Security Agenda: Combating Misinformation and Stereotypes", implemented by PISA with the support of UN Women, and funded by the Women's Fund for Peace and Humanitarian Assistance. For details, see Introduction

19 The lower representation of young people (9.7%) and people over 55 (8%) raises questions about age diversity and how this might influence the findings as well as may limit the completeness of the analysis.
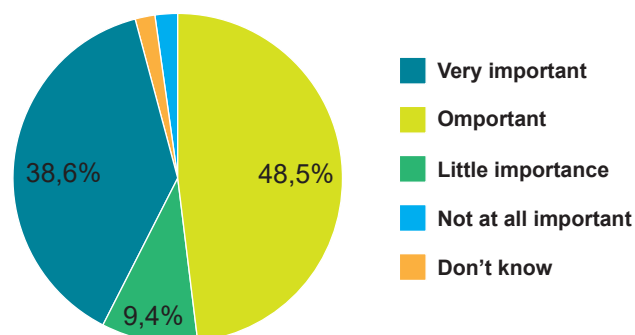
The responses collected in the survey highlight a predominantly positive perception regarding the role of women in peace and security processes. Nearly half of the respondents (48.5%) consider this role to be "very important," while another 38.6% describe it as "important." In contrast, only 9.4% perceive it as "less important," which may reflect more conservative attitudes or a lack of exposure to concrete examples demonstrating the significant contributions of women in these fields. This general tendency to recognize the value women bring to the security sector is an encouraging signal for the promotion of gender equality.

Nearly half of the participants (49.3%) fully support women's involvement in peace negotiations and security-related decision-making, indicating a strong belief in the necessity of equal participation. **However, a considerable percentage (39.6%) is in favor of women's involvement but with certain limitations on their role. This ambivalence suggests the existence of subtle barriers perpetuated by biases that undermine full equality of access and influence.**
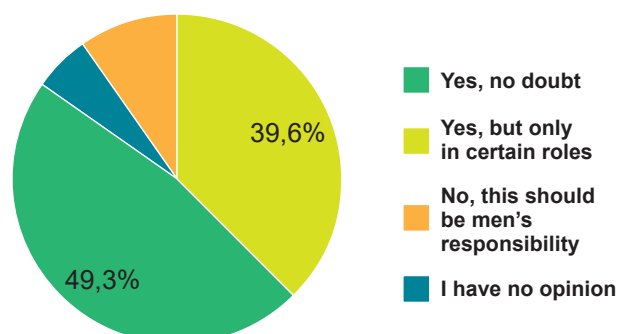
Women are often perceived as having unique and indispensable qualities in promoting peace and security, contributing with skills that distinguish them in these fields. Negotiation and mediation are the most appreciated skills, mentioned by 64.6% of respondents, who believe that women have the ability to facilitate dialogue and reduce tensions constructively.

Empathy and compassion are other essential qualities highlighted by 47.8% of participants. These traits are considered significant advantages in conflict management and in fostering a cooperative climate.

**How important do you think the role of women is in peace and security processes?**

- Very important
- Omportant
- Little importance
- Not at all important
- Don't know

38,6% 48,5% 9,4%

Do you think women should be more involved in peace negotiations and security decisions?

- Yes, no doubt
- Yes, but only in certain roles
- No, this should be men's responsibility
- I have no opinion

39,6% 49,3%

Similarly, 47.7% of respondents recognize women's ability to build social cohesion, emphasizing their role in strengthening interpersonal relationships and community bonds. Strategic leadership skills are valued by 25.7% of respondents, reflecting a growing recognition of women's potential to occupy leadership positions and influence major decisions.

What skills do you think women bring to peace and security processes? (select all that apply)
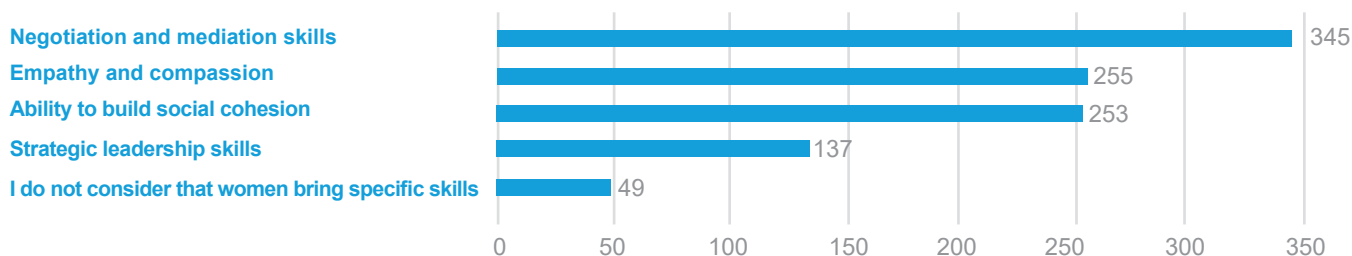
A small percentage (9.2%) believe that women do not bring any specific contributions to these processes, signaling the persistence of a skeptical or even misogynistic perception. **This observation underscores the importance of continuing educational and awareness-raising efforts to counter such attitudes and promote a deeper understanding of the benefit women bring to the security sector.**

Negative stereotypes remain a persistent obstacle for women in the security sector, affecting their progress. Approximately 39.7% of respondents consider these biases to "appear occasionally," while 23.4% perceive them as "very frequent." In contrast, only 16.1% of participants believe that stereotypes are "rare," highlighting their significant prevalence in the workplace.

Do you believe that women face negative stereotypes when trying to work in the security sector?

- Yes, very often
- Yes, occasionally
- No, rarely
- No, not at all
- Don't know

39,7% 23,4% 16,1% 15%
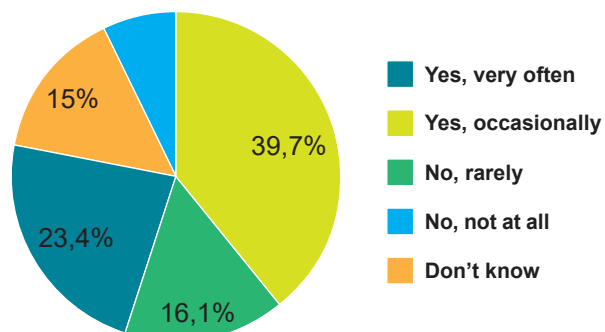
These data indicate that despite progress in promoting gender equality, women in the security sector continue to face discriminatory attitudes. These stereotypes not only limit women's access to decision-making positions, but also underestimate their competences, creating a less favorable professional climate for them. The persistence of such biases highlights the need for stronger measures to combat stereotypes and promote gender inclusion in the sector.

Gender stereotypes also remain a barrier to emotional and behavioural development, especially for men. Concepts of toxic masculinity limit emotional expression, but the fact that nearly half of respondents reject these stereotypes is a promising sign of a shift in mindset.

The study "Local Elections 2023: Between Perceptions and Ralities. An Analysis of Local Elections in the Republic of Moldova from a Gender Equality Perspective" shows that a large part of the population continues to be influenced by traditional stereotypes. More than 50% of respondents believe that housework is mainly women's responsibility, and more than 60% believe that men's duty is to bring income into the household. In 2023, public opinion on the role of women in politics has worsened, with 27% of respondents saying that women have no place in politics and 18% believing that women are less capable of holding leadership positions. The low turnout of women in the 2023 elections could be explained by social pressure[20].

Political parties, often dominated by strong male leaders, offer few opportunities for women. Additionally, household responsibilities, lack of family support, and low self-confidence are the main obstacles discouraging women from entering politics.

Gender stereotypes regarding women's participation in political life and decision-making processes are widely shared by men and individuals with lower levels of education, whichThe analysis aimed to identify the profile of social groups that tend to hold stereotypical views based on socio-demographic characteristics. The data suggest that men and individuals with lower levels of education are the most likely to support stereotypes related to women's roles in the family and decision-making processes[21].

This phenomenon can be explained by cultural, social and educational influences that promote certain behaviours and ignore the diversity and individuality of each person. These groups also show little support for gender equality in both public and private life, preferring 'traditional' gender roles.

People with low affect their understanding and exposure to gender equality debates and concepts. Lack of access to information and resources, along with cultural perspectives, contribute to the perpetuation of stereotypes.

Most common gender based stereotypes in Republic of Moldova[22]

Women are more suited for support roles and lack the technical skills required in the security and defence sector.

These biases perpetuate the idea that women are better suited for healthcare, administration, or communication and less suitable for positions requiring advanced technical skills, such as cybersecurity or military engineering. It is also believed that women's natural empathy makes them more appropriate for humanitarian roles, thus neglecting their potential in other critical security areas. These stereotypes not only restrict women's professional opportunities but also affect the overall efficiency of security institutions by limiting diversity of perspectives and essential skills needed to address complex security challenges.

Women are only involved in the "soft aspects" of security.

Women are often perceived as more suitable for the "soft" aspects of security, such as violence prevention, peace education, refugee protection, and social reconstruction, rather than the "hard" aspects like military interventions or national security strategy. This reduces women's contributions to "gentler" areas instead of recognizing their skills and potential across all security domains, including high-level decision-making and planning.

Women are victims, not actors of change.

One of the most widespread stereotypes is that women are considered victims of armed conflicts rather than actors who can contribute to conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction. This stereotype emphasizes women's suffering and vulnerability while ignoring their ability to influence peace and security processes. For instance, in many conflicts, women are often seen as victims of sexual and gender-based violence but not as active agents in reconstruction or peace negotiations.

Women are too emotional to make rational decisions on security.

Another stereotype is that women are too emotional and therefore, incapable of making rational and strategic decisions in areas related to security and defence. This

20 Local Elections 2023: Between Perceptions and Realities an Analysis of Local Elections in the Republic of Moldova from Gender Equality Perspective. https://moldova.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/monitoring_elections_report.pdf

21 Local Elections 2023: Between Perceptions and Realities an Analysis of Local Elections in the Republic of Moldova from Gender Equality Perspective. https://moldova.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/monitoring_elections_report.pdf

22 Stereotypes were identified based on questionnaires, opern source analysis and media analysis

perception underestimates their intellectual competences and leadership skills. In reality, women have often demonstrated negotiation and mediation skills, being able to manage conflicts in a more diplomatic way and adopt sustainable solutions.

Women are unsuitable for defence or combat roles.

A common stereotype is that women are not fit for active roles in security, such as military combat or leading security forces. This belief is based on traditional gender roles, where men are seen as more suited for combat missions. Despite women playing significant roles in armies and security forces worldwide, this stereotype persists and continues to limit women's opportunities in the defence sector.

Women are not "physically strong enough."

This stereotype is based on the mistaken assumption that the defence and security sector relies solely on physical strength, thus considering women naturally disadvantaged. While some security roles may have physical requirements, most positions require a combination of intellectual competencies, technical skills, and strategic qualities, where women excel just as much as men. Moreover, advanced technologies and specializations have significantly reduced the exclusive reliance on physical strength in this sector.

Women have proven they can perform the same missions and duties in the armed forces, meeting the same standards under equally challenging conditions as men.

Women have no authority in the security sector.

Another stereotype is that women lack the necessary authority to participate in security discussions or peace negotiations. It is assumed that men, having more experience in the military or security fields, are better qualified to make fundamental decisions. This stereotype disregards the achievements of women who have led peace processes. Women leaders worldwide play a crucial role in strengthening international security, making remarkable contributions in various geopolitical and economic contexts.

Sanna Marin, Finland's Prime Minister, prioritized the country's NATO integration and national security in response to regional threats arising from the war in Ukraine. Kristalina Georgieva, Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, supports global economic stability by providing crucial aid to crisis-affected countries. In Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Africa's first female president, rebuilt the nation after civil war and promoted regional peace.

In New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern demonstrated exemplary leadership, handling crises such as the Christchurch terrorist attack and the COVID-19 pandemic. At the European level, Federica Mogherini facilitated security strategies and diplomatic agreements, including the Iran nuclear deal. Zainab Bangura from Sierra Leone dedicated herself to combating sexual violence in conflicts, while Iraqi activist and Nobel laureate Nadia Murad continues to advocate for the rights of Yazidi genocide victims. In NATO, Rose Gottemoeller promoted defence modernization and deterrence against emerging threats. In the Republic of Moldova, President Maia Sandu has contributed to maintaining peace and security in a volatile security environment.

Women are not "prepared" for leadership positions in the security sector.

Another prevalent stereotype is that women lack the training or authority needed to become security leaders. These beliefs stem from the assumption that leadership roles in security are reserved for men, who are perceived as having "natural" leadership traits such as aggression and physical strength. These stereotypes ignore the success of many female leaders in international organisations, such as Angela Merkel or Madeleine Albright, as well as the leaders of EU institutions who have significantly influenced international security policies.

Women should dedicate their time to children, not their careers, while men are natural leaders.

This stereotype suggests that a woman cannot have a successful career while also caring for her family, limiting women's aspirations and promoting an unequal division of responsibilities between genders. At the same time, it assumes that leadership skills are inherent to men, while women supposedly lack these abilities naturally. Women can excel in both their careers and family roles if they receive support from their partners, communities, and dedicated institutions. Leadership skills are not determined by gender but by experience, competence, and personal development. Women have demonstrated exceptional leadership abilities across multiple fields, contributing to innovation, conflict resolution, and strategic decision-making.

Women weaken traditional culture in security institutions.

The presence of women in security institutions is often perceived as a threat to solidarity or male-dominated traditions. This stereotype assumes that the inclusion of women could alter team dynamics and complicate the way these organisations function. Studies show that gender-mixed teams perform better, are more innovative and more resilient in the face of challenges. Instead of being a threat, the presence of women can help create more inclusive and balanced work environments. In the Republic of Moldova, initiatives to promote gender equality in security institutions demonstrate that women can bring new and valuable perspectives, contributing to organisational effectiveness and strengthening public confidence in these structures.

Combating these stereotypes requires changes in education and training, as well as modifications in cultural and institutional norms that underestimate women as active agents. Implementing policies that support gender diversity and encourage women's participation in all aspects of security is essential for ensuring their fair and effective representation in peace and security processes. In the recruitment process, these stereotypes discourage women from joining security organizations, creating an initial barrier that is difficult to overcome. In terms of promotion, women face obstacles in accessing leadership positions, often being undervalued or excluded from decision-making processes. Furthermore, stereotypes contribute to perpetuating a male-dominated organisational culture that can marginalize women's contributions and limit their active and equal participation in this sector.

Which of the following do you consider to be the main barriers for women who want to work in the security sector?

Barrier	Value
Gender discrimination	164
Lack of training opportunities	90
Male-dominated institutional culture	197
Stereotypes on women's skills	269
Lack of institutional support for work-life balance	161
Don't think there are specific barriers	145
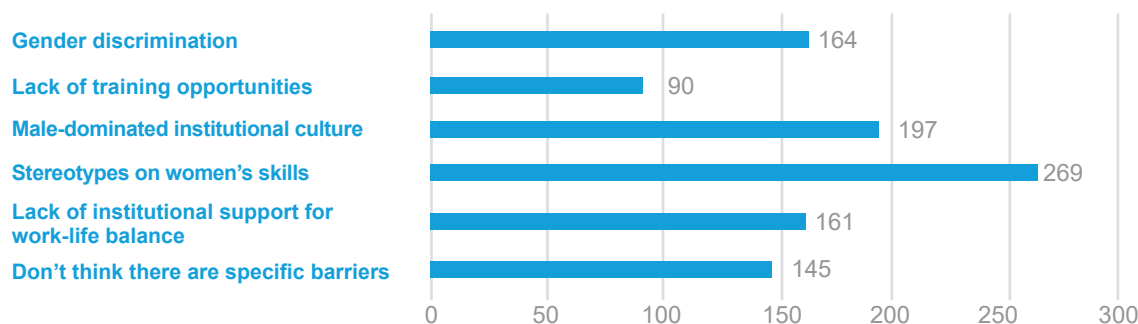
Another important aspect addressed in the research conducted by the Platform for Security and Defence Initiatives was the identification of obstacles limiting women's access to the security sector. The results revealed several significant barriers that reflect persistent challenges in a traditionally male-dominated field.

The most frequently mentioned barrier is the stereotypes about women's skills identified by 50.3% of respondents. At the same time, the male-dominated institutional culture, indicated by 36.8% of participants, suggests that work environments are often exclusive, with norms and values that discourage equal participation of women and frequently resist change.

The lack of institutional support for work-life balance was mentioned by 30.1% of respondents, underlining the need for tailored policies, especially for women with family responsibilities. In addition, 16.8% highlighted the lack of training opportunities as a significant barrier, limiting women's access to the training needed for career advancement and leadership positions.

At the same time, 27.1% of respondents stated that they do not see any major barriers. This perspective may reflect either optimism regarding recent developments or a lack of awareness of the challenges women face. Despite the fact that the 1325 Programme aims to increase women's participation in these sectors, these cultural and social barriers directly impact the full integration of women and the overall progress of the implementation of the 1325 Programme, limiting opportunities for gender equality in the national security sector.

These cultural and social barriers have a direct impact on the full integration of women and on the overall progress of the implementation of the 1325 Programme. Despite the efforts to promote gender equality in the security and defence sector in the Republic of Moldova, multiple structural and cultural barriers prevent the full integration of women in this sector.

In conclusion, gender stereotyping, which perpetuates male domination in the security sector, discourages women from aspiring to careers in the security sector and limits their opportunities for advancement. The difficulty of reconciling work and family life is also a significant barrier. Often inflexible working hours and the stringent requirements of the security sector make it difficult for employees of either gender to maintain a healthy balance between work and family responsibilities. In addition, there is insufficient capacity to prevent and combat gender-based discrimination, harassment and violence within security and defence institutions. The lack of effective mechanisms to report and sanction inappropriate behaviour contributes to a hostile work environment for women.

Limited transparency and participation of civil society organizations, women's organisations and citizens is another barrier. Without the active involvement of these actors, security sector policies and practices do not reflect the needs and perspectives of the entire population. Finally, limited policies on ensuring equal participation in peacebuilding processes and peacekeeping missions undermine women's potential to contribute to national and international stability and security[23].

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23 Conclusions based on the Evaluation Report on the National Programme for the Implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security for 2018-2021 and the Action Plan on its implementation (UN Women Moldova, 2021) and the First Monitoring Report on the National Programme for the Implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security for 2018-2021 (UN Women Moldova, 2021) and the First Monitoring Report on the National Programme for the Implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security for 2018-2021 (UN Women Moldova, 2021) Security for 2023-2027. Monitoring Report for 2023-2024 (one year and 6 months), prepared by the Platform for Security and Defence Initiatives and available on www.pisa.md

Another dangerous phenomenon is gender-based disinformation, which has become a strategic weapon used to undermine trust in female political leaders and influence public opinion. According to evidence presented in the technical document developed by EU DisinfoLab and #ShePersisted, entitled "Gender-based Disinformation 101: Theory, Examples, and Need for Regulation" gender-based disinformation refers to the practice of spreading misleading or inaccurate content that disproportionately targets and harasses women, gender non-conforming people, and marginalized groups such as LGBTQI+ people. This form of misinformation can include various techniques, such as misogynistic comments that reinforce gender stereotypes, sexualization and dissemination of graphic content, online harassment, including threats of violence and even cyber attacks[24].

Gender-based misinformation is a complex and pervasive phenomenon in the Republic of Moldova that exploits deep-rooted traditional beliefs and behaviours, polarizing social and economic insecurities, and a fragile educational and communication system. For example, in October 2024, in the context of the presidential elections, the Platform for Security and Defence Initiatives noted gender-based misinformation in the online space, particularly on Telegram, where posts targeted women leaders in the Republic of Moldova and questioned their competence and integrity[25].
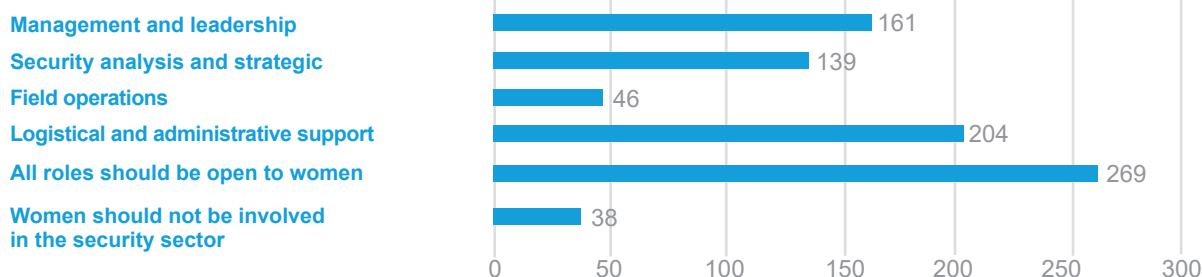
A notable example is the disinformation campaign against the country's first female President. These attacks exploit traditional gender norms in a society where the majority of the population believes that women should be "cherished and protected by men"[26].

Social networks are a fertile ground for misinformation. Existing algorithms encourage and amplify inflammatory content and deeply ingrained gender stereotypes. In countries like the Republic of Moldova, which is at the crossroads of influence between Russia and the West, gender misinformation is often a tactic of geopolitical warfare. This type of propaganda effectively frames attacks on women's leadership in an "us versus them" narrative. Calling feminist values "Western", propagandists call on people to take action to defend Republic of Moldova from a non-existing foreign invasion and to justify vile rhetoric against women leaders[27].

These findings underline the need to identify ways to counter existing stereotypes and promote policies that support diversity and gender equality in the security sector, as well as to ensure transparency and active participation of civil society in the security and defence sector policy-making process. A comprehensive, systemic and robust approach is required, involving collaboration and joint response by governmental, international, civic and private stakeholders. This collective effort should include measures to prevent and combat gender-based discrimination, harassment and violence, as well as to promote gender equality in all sectors of society.

In your opinion, what roles are best suited for women in the security sector?

Role	Value
Management and leadership	161
Security analysis and strategic	139
Field operations	46
Logistical and administrative support	204
All roles should be open to women	269
Women should not be involved in the security sector	38

The research conducted by the Platform for Security and Defence Initiatives has highlighted that almost half of the respondents (50.1%) believe that women should have access to all roles in this sector, emphasizing significant support for the full integration of women into traditionally male-dominated areas. However, a fairly widespread opinion is that women's involvement should be limited to certain functions. Thus, 38.2% of respondents believe that women should focus on logistical and administrative support, while 26% think they should be involved in security analysis and strategy. 8.6% support women's participation in field operations, indicating less openness to their direct involvement in physical security activities.

In contrast to these more favorable opinions, a small percentage (7.1%) of respondents believe that women should not be involved in the security sector at all. **This perception reflects deeply traditionalist or discriminatory attitudes that persist in a significant minority, underlining the need for educational campaigns and cultural changes to combat such biases.**

24   Gender-based Disinformation 101: Theory, Examples, and Need for Regulation. https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/monitoring-disinformation-around-elections-key-takeaways-from-the-german-federal-elections-in-2021-2/

25   Disinformation Monitor on Social Media. Using AI powered tools to assess the scale and impact of disinformation. https://pisa.md/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Disinformation-Report_octombrie.pdf

26   Fight for Moldova's Future: Gender-based Disinformation is Russia's Secret Weapon. https://www.puterea.ro/lupta-pentru-viitorul-moldovei-dezinformarea-bazata-pe-gen-este-arma-secreta-a-rusiei/

27   When women leaders are framed as security risks. https://www.rappler.com/technology/decoded-when-women-leaders-framed-security-risks-threats/

This diversity of opinions suggests that while there is broad recognition of the potential value of women in the security field, ther is resistance to change regarding their acceptance in certain roles. **These findings indicate the need for continuous dialogue and policies that support the equitable participation of women in all aspects of the security and defence sector.**

Additionally, the research revealed a broad consensus on implementing measures to improve women's participation in the security sector. Thus, 61.6% of participants consider training and mentorship programmes essential for supporting women's involvement. Other proposed measures include increasing the visibility of female leaders in the security sector (44.4%), campaigning to combat gender stereotypes (42.4%), and introducing gender quotas (28.2%).

Regarding the promotion of broader gender inclusion in peace and security processes, respondents highlight that education and public awareness are key factors in changing perceptions (30.1%). They also consider policies and legislation promoting gender equality important (19.4%), while financial support for inclusion promoting organisations is equally significant (8.5%). Another important measure is the collaboration between government institutions and women's rights organisations (24.4%), which could facilitate the implementation of these measures and contribute to faster progress in integrating women into the security sector.

Respondents' comments emphasized the need to direct awareness efforts towards both women and men to create a shared understanding and achieve lasting results. Inter alia, respondents suggested creating a training centre for women to help them develop the necessary skills for leadership positions. Other important recommendations include lowering the retirement age for women in the security sector, continuous monitoring of the National Action Plan to adapt it to current needs, and promoting women into leadership positions based on merit.

Despite widespread support for women's involvement in the security sector, the survey also revealed significant reservations regarding gender equality in this field. Some voices argue that women's participation in this sector is necessary for stability and the promotion of peace, while others believe their involvement in security is not appropriate. These opinions reflect both growing optimism about the role of women and persistent cultural and structural barriers.

Overall, the survey highlights a positive trend in recognizing women's contributions to peace and security. Most respondents appreciate their unique qualities and support their active involvement, but significant barriers remain, including gender stereotypes and an exclusionary organisational culture. These barriers must be overcome to ensure a more complete and equitable integration of women into this sector, which is essential for national security.

The survey results reflect a society at the crossroads of progress and resistance to change. Respondents' attitudes reveal significant ambivalence, with a large proportion displaying neutral positions, which may indicate a lack of interest or a passive attitude toward gender equality, particularly among young people. Although the Republic of Moldova has made significant strides toward gender equality, traditional stereotypes persist, especially in rural areas, where patriarchal norms are more pronounced.

At household level, positive changes are evident, such as the growing acceptance of shared responsibilities, including fathers' involvement in children's education. These developments result from policies such as paternity leave, which have begun to influence perceptions of gender roles in households.

Economic tensions related to couples' incomes suggest that economic equality remains a sensitive issue. However, the low level of explicit disagreement reflects a gradual trend toward accepting a fair distribution of financial power.

These findings underline the importance of continuing educational, legislative, and social efforts to combat gender stereotypes and promote equality. Special emphasis should be placed on younger generations and rural communities, where change is slower.

II. THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT

The Republic of Moldova faces a wide range of security challenges in the context of regional conflicts, particularly due to the war in Ukraine. These challenges not only affect national security and internal stability but also have profound implications for different segments of the population, including from a gender perspective.

Women in the Republic of Moldova have shown remarkable involvement in managing recent crises through concrete initiatives that reflect not only their leadership but also community solidarity. Recent crises - Russia's invasion of Ukraine, economic hardship and the energy crisis - have underlined the need for a more inclusive and gender-sensitive policy.

Examples of managed crises:

The Refugee Crisis:

The war in Ukraine has generated a massive influx of refugees into the Republic of Moldova, the majority of whom are women and children. Women in Moldova have actively engaged in supporting them, either through volunteering

in refugee centres or providing material, emotional, and logistical assistance. They have organized food, clothing, and medicine collections, significantly contributing to the temporary integration of refugees into local communities.

The Pandemic Crisis:

During the COVID-19 pandemic, women were at the forefront of the fight against the health crisis. They held the majority of positions in healthcare and education and were the ones who ensured the continuity of children's education during lockdowns while simultaneously managing households and their careers.

Combating Disinformation and Promoting Social Cohesion:

In the face of hybrid threats, women in Moldova have been involved in community initiatives and civil society organisations to promote accurate information and media literacy. These efforts have helped reduce social tensions and strengthen community resilience.

Supporting Emotional and Psychological Stability:

Women play a central role in maintaining psychological stability in families and communities, especially during times of crisis. They provide emotional support not only to their family members but also to other affected individuals, strengthening social cohesion in the face of uncertainty and fear.

In the Republic of Moldova, women political leaders have demonstrated remarkable involvement in crisis management, significantly contributing to mitigating their impact on the population. They have shown that, through vision, empathy, and coordinated actions, women can be a driving force for change and resilience in the face of crises.

III. THE CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN IN MANAGING THE REFUGEE CRISIS, ARMED CONFLICTS, AND STRENGTHENING SOCIAL COHESION

Another area of research focused on the impact of the war in Ukraine on the Republic of Moldova, highlighting both the vulnerabilities of social cohesion and the significant potential of women in maintaining stability in communities. According to the results of a survey conducted by the Platform for Security and Defence Initiatives, 44.4% of respondents believe that this conflict has deepened existing social divisions, reflecting the difficulties Moldovan society confronts during a major regional crisis. On the other hand, only 22.2% of respondents note a strengthening of social cohesion, emphasizing the complexity and volatility of the social situation in the Republic of Moldova during this period of instability.

The conflict in Ukraine and the influx of refugees have raised concerns about their impact on social stability. Public opinion is divided between solidarity and fears regarding limited resources. Ethnic diversity deepens these divisions, with greater reluctance towards refugees in regions with cultural ties to Russia and stronger support in pro-European regions. A report by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) highlights that the war has led to significant displacements of people, including Moldovan migrants returning from abroad, particularly from Ukraine and Russia. These movements may influence migration dynamics and have long-term effects on the economy and social cohesion in the Republic of Moldova [28].

Additionally, a study published in the journal "Intertext" explores social representations of the war in Ukraine among the Moldovan population, revealing negative emotions such as fear and insecurity, which can affect social perceptions and community cohesion. Respondents depict the war as a destabilizing event, perceived through the lense of human vulnerability, distrust towards the motives behind the conflict, and the difficulty of fully understanding the complexity of the situation. The resulting social representation highlights how the war affects daily life and people's ability to process and make sense of a contradictory and fragmented reality.[29]

Moreover, mass-media analyses[30] draw attention to the dramatic social impact of the war on the Republic of Moldova, mentioning the increase in poverty rates, especially in rural areas, and the economic challenges the country faces. The consensus is that the war in Ukraine constitutes a human tragedy, associated with the death and suffering of innocent people. This perception correlates with the fear of the war expanding and the strong desire for peace, which could be achieved through negotiation and concessions between the warring parties.

The conflict in Ukraine has significantly deepened ideological and political divisions. Geopolitical tensions have polarized public opinion between supporters of European values and pro-Russian sympathizers. Closer to the European Union border, there is stronger support for European integration and for assisting Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression. However, in the East and South, citizens tend to be more skeptical about involvement in Western alliances and about providing support to Ukraine.

28   Republic of Moldova - The Impact of the War in Ukraine on Moldovans Returning from Abroad (Feb-Jun 2023). https://dtm.iom.int/reports/republica-moldova-impactul-razboiului-din-ucraina-asupra-moldovenilor-reveniti-din

29   Petru Negură, Lilian Negură. The Social Representation of the War in Ukraine among Moldovans: Beyond Pros and Cons. https://doi.org/10.59295/crs2024.09

30   War in Ukraine: Dramatic Social Impact on Moldova. https://www.dw.com/ro/r%C4%83zboiul-din-ucraina-are-un-impact-social-dramatic-asupra-moldovei/a-67028517

The Republic of Moldova has faced challenges in managing the influx of Ukrainian refugees, and perceptions of them vary, being more favorable in pro-European regions (West, Centre, North) and more hesitant in areas with Russian, Gagauz, and Bulgarian ethnic populations. Geopolitical tensions, solidarity towards the refugee community, and ideological differences between European integration supporters and pro-Russian sympathizers are the central themes that have marked this period.

In this context, the Republic of Moldova should carefully navigate between maintaining internal social cohesion and diplomatically managing external challenges, considering the complexity of existing ethnic and political diversity. Before February 24, 2022, most Moldovan citizens did not differentiate between the terms "migrant" and "refugee." The distinction lies in the fact that a "migrant" leaves their country for business, studies, family reunification, or a better quality of life, while a "refugee" flees their country due to persecution, violence, or wars. In previous years, locals viewed refugees with skepticism, focusing on religion and culture. Predominantly, they came from Muslim countries with traditions and ideologies different from those of the Republic of Moldova.

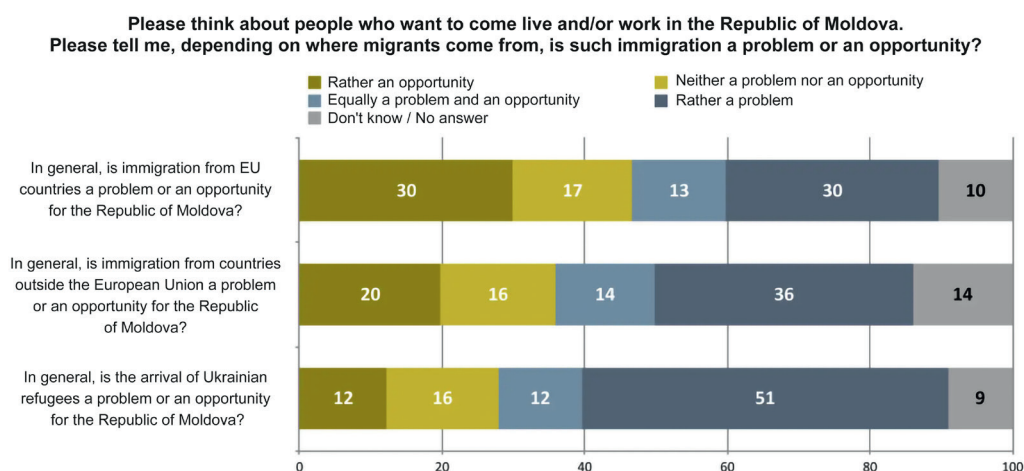Often, refugees faced demeaning words that undermined human dignity, despite the fact that most of them tried to integrate by officially entering the labor market, learning the Romanian language, attending university studies, and enrolling their children into schools and kindergartens. The mass media, by using incorrect terms, conveyed misleading information to the public, sometimes even inciting local hostility towards the refugee community.

How open do you think are Moldovans in general to accepting refugees?

- **Very open** — 22,2%
- **Open** — 63,7%
- **Indifferent** — 7%
- **Reluctant**
- **Very reluctant**
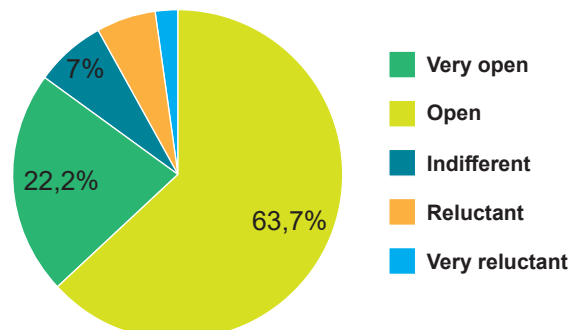
Despite these divisions, the attitude towards Ukrainian refugees remains generally positive. Almost two-thirds of respondents (63.7%) express a favorable attitude towards supporting them, while 22.2% describe this attitude as "very open." This positive reaction suggests not only a spirit of solidarity in the face of the crisis but also a general openness of the population to the needs of those affected by the conflict in Ukraine.

Opinions on immigration

Please think about people who want to come live and/or work in the Republic of Moldova. Please tell me, depending on where migrants come from, is such immigration a problem or an opportunity?

	Rather an opportunity	Neither a problem nor an opportunity	Equally a problem and an opportunity	Rather a problem	Don't know / No answer
In general, is immigration from EU countries a problem or an opportunity for the Republic of Moldova?	30	17	13	30	10
In general, is immigration from countries outside the European Union a problem or an opportunity for the Republic of Moldova?	20	16	14	36	14
In general, is the arrival of Ukrainian refugees a problem or an opportunity for the Republic of Moldova?	12	16	12	51	9

Source: https://www.slideshare.net/slideshow/studiul-privind-percep-iile-i-atitudinile-fa-a-de-egalitate-pentru-anul-2024/269895170

At the same time, according to data from the 2024 Study on Perceptions and Attitudes towards Equality, the arrival of Ukrainian refugees is perceived negatively by the majority of respondents, with 51% considering it "rather a problem," while only 12% see it as an opportunity[31]. The rest have mixed neutral opinions or did not provide an answer. Perceptions of immigration are influenced by context, with immigration from the EU being viewed more favorably than immigration from outside the EU or the arrival of refugees. In general, immigration is viewed with skepticism, being more often considered a problem than an opportunity, indicating both challenges and a lack of information or clarity on the subject.

Gender plays an important role in perceptions of refugees. Women and children are perceived and received with more empathy, while male refugees are viewed with a mix of compassion and skepticism, as they are often seen as those who should fight for their country. This leads to the stigmatization of men as cowards, even though the reality is more complex. Female refugees face additional challenges, such as limited access to services or risks of abuse, while young men may be perceived as a threat.

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31   Survey on perceptions and attitudes towards equality in 2024. https://www.slideshare.net/slideshow/studiul-privind-percep-iile-i-atitudinile-fa-a-de-egalitate-pentru-anul-2024/269895170

Security is a major concern due to regional risks and geopolitical instability. Concerns also include conflicts between refugees and citizens, especially in areas with limited resources. The influx of refugees puts pressure on economic resources, and fears about their integration into the labor market are high. Some people worry that refugees will deepen economic inequalities and compete for better jobs.

Although concerns about security and economic stability are important, effective solutions must include both support for refugees and information strategies to alleviate local population concerns.

A key element in developing social cohesion in the Republic of Moldova is respecting and promoting fundamental human rights, which are essential for creating an environment where each social group can freely express itself and address its concerns. In this context, promoting a legislative framework that protects minorities and combats discrimination is fundamental to ensuring social cohesion. The Republic of Moldova is a country with considerable ethnic diversity, where social cohesion can only be achieved by guaranteeing the cultural and linguistic rights of minorities, as well as encouraging their integration into the political and social life of the country. Protecting religious and cultural diversity and ensuring equitable access to economic and social resources are essential conditions for preventing marginalization and social exclusion.

An equitable distribution of resources and the development of social policies to support vulnerable groups are essential for strengthening social cohesion. Respecting democratic governance principles is crucial to building citizens' trust in state institutions and ensuring fair access to justice and the protection of basic rights. By promoting an inclusive society, the Republic of Moldova can create a framework of stability, prosperity, and harmony, capable of overcoming internal divisions and facing external challenges.

Moldovan women were among the first to help Ukrainian refugees, organizing fundraising campaigns, distributing supplies, and providing psychological and social assistance. Their active involvement reflects the ability to "build bridges" between communities. Through legal, material, and psychological assistance, women have created a safe environment for refugees, also contributing to strengthening solidarity in society. This has helped combat stereotypes and promote understanding among various groups.

Additionally, women have played an important role in promoting human rights and reducing prejudices, facilitating intercommunity dialogue. Their involvement in preventing political polarization helps promote a climate of unity and stability, even in a fragile political context.

How do you think the war in Ukraine has influenced social cohesion in Moldova?

- Strengthened social cohesion
- Created divisions between communities
- Had no significant impact
- Don't know
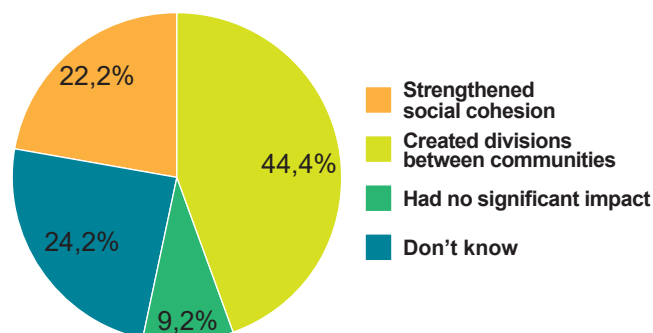
Over 77% of respondents believe that women have a "significant" or "very significant" role in supporting refugees, highlighting their contribution within communities. Their organisational skills, empathy, and willingness to actively engage in community initiatives are key factors that have contributed to the more efficient management of this crisis.

Do you think women play a significant role in supporting refugees and maintaining social cohesion in conflict-affected communities?

- Yes, a very significant role
- Yes, a significant role
- No, a minor role
- No, not at all
- Don't know
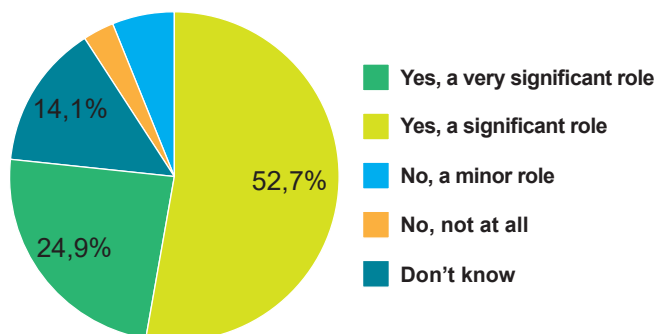
In conclusion, attitudes towards refugees in Moldova are characterized by solidarity but shaped by economic, cultural, and gender factors. It is essential that the support provided considers these differences and responds to the individual needs of refugees.

Anti-refugee narratives, which aim to misinform public opinion and discredit Ukrainian refugees, pose a significant threat to the informational security of the Republic of Moldova. Moreover, we must acknowledge that we have a very fragile media ecosystem that requires a solid, rapid, and strategic defence mechanism. In this context, guided by developments in information technologies and artificial intelligence, mass media and digital education are crucial for people to be able to distinguish between real and false news. This applies to both written news and video and photo productions. People, regardless of nationality or ethnic origin, should feel safe in the territory of the Republic of Moldova, and the authorities must take the necessary measures to comprehensively and systematically counter false information.[32]

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32 Anti-refugee Narratives - Elements of Misinformation and Promoting False Dangers. https://pisa.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/5_NA-RATIVELE-ANTIREFUGIATI-%E2%80%93-ELEMENTE-DE-DEZINFORMARE-SI-PROMOVARE-A-FALSELOR-PERICOLE-1.pdf

Gender stereotypes in times of war: A challenge for women's equality and security

The impact of gender stereotypes in the context of the war in Ukraine[33] is profound, shaping perceptions and social responses. Western media continues to promote a binary image of gender roles, in which women are predominantly portrayed as mothers or helpless victims and men are portrayed as brave fighters. Such narratives limit society's ability to understand the diversity of human experience and respond adequately to real needs.

In the war in Ukraine, women have played a multifaceted and complex role, going beyond the mere image of victims. They asserted themselves as central figures in humanitarian crisis management, organizing transport, logistics and direct support, as seen in the example of women in Lviv. However, these achievements are overshadowed by pre-existing inequalities. Women in Ukraine have long faced systemic violence, with 75% of them reporting experiencing violence as early as adolescence, according to a 2019 OSCE survey[34]. Recent advances in social and economic equality are also threatened by war-induced instability, jeopardizing the future of their rights.

Moreover, problematic media narratives amplify these challenges. The portrayal of women as passive victims or vengeful fighters ignores the complexity of their experiences. This kind of portrayal, perpetuated by social networks, reinforces stereotypes and can be used to manipulate public opinion. Thus, it is essential to recognize the diversity of women's involvement, such as community leaders, organizers and soldiers. Public policies and the social discourse must avoid reducing women to limiting stereotypes and make them visible in non-traditional contexts.

In conclusion, Ukrainian women exemplify remarkable resilience, playing active and diverse roles in this war. To support gender equality and develop sustainable policies, a public discourse reflecting this complexity and eliminating simplistic stereotypes is needed. At the same time, public concerns about security and economic stability, heightened by the influx of refugees, require achieving a balance between solidarity and policies that address fears regarding the regional crisis's impact on the Republic of Moldova.

CONCLUSIONS

Challenges and opportunities in security and defence	Data show a modest presence of women in leadership positions, in contrast to a higher involvement in executive roles. The security and defence sector in the Republic of Moldova remains male-dominated and women's access to leadership positions is limited by institutional barriers. Implementation of clear policies to increase their representation and promote gender equality can strengthen social cohesion and the effectiveness of security institutions.
Social perceptions and gender norms	Moldovan society is at the intersection between tradition and modernity, where conservative attitudes persist, but where there is also a growing openness to change. To accelerate this process, constant education and awareness programmes are necessary, especially in rural areas and among younger generations. Only through such measures can stereotypes be combated and a more inclusive and equitable society created.
Gender equality in governance and security	Despite persistent cultural and structural challenges, the Republic of Moldova is under transformation, with recent initiatives creating valuable opportunities for women to contribute to gender equality, governance, and peace processes. The active involvement of women in various crises and local initiatives increases the visibility of their positive influence on society, and collaboration between local communities, central authorities, and international actors plays an important role in turning these efforts into sustainable results. Although progress has been made in the political domain, public perceptions remain anchored in traditional gender roles, with resistance to seeing women as equal actors in peace and security processes. Promoting diversity, eliminating stereotypes and implementing inclusive policies are important to create a more equitable security sector.
The role of civil society and women's organisations	Women's rights and women-led organisations have played an important role in facilitating the dialogue at the local level, providing aid to refugees and promoting women's inclusion in security discussions. These initiatives demonstrate the potential of collaboration between local communities, international actors and support networks to generate sustainable change.

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33 Gender Stereotypes in the Media: Are Ukrainian Women Really only Helpless Victims? https://www.kcl.ac.uk/gender-stereotypes-in-the-media-are-ukrainian-women-really-only-helpless-victims

34 OSCE-led survey on violence against women: Main report https://eeca.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/413237.pdf

Strategic communication as a tool to promote gender equality	The lack of clear strategic communication on the role of women in peace and security processes amplifies gender stereotypes and inequalities, perpetuating the under-representation of women in the security and defence sector. Strategic communication is important for the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda and for raising awareness of the importance of women's involvement. It plays a significant role in coordinating narratives, strengthening societal resilience and building public trust in institutions.
Promoting gender inclusion	Transforming gender norms requires a constant effort from institutions, organisations and individuals. Women in the Republic of Moldova are at a historic moment with opportunities to advance their rights and contribute to negotiation and governance processes. Alliances with local communities, support networks and international actors are important to turn these opportunities into concrete results.
Impact of crises on gender roles	The war in Ukraine and associated crises have had a significant impact on social cohesion and have highlighted the important role of women in managing these challenges. The Republic of Moldova faced an influx of refugees, mostly women and children, in need of humanitarian support and temporary integration. Moldovan women have shown leadership and solidarity, actively providing assistance, maintaining emotional stability and strengthening social cohesion. However, economic and energy vulnerabilities disproportionately affect women, increasing the risk of absolute poverty.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations are addressed to the governmental institutions responsible for the implementation of the National Programme on the Implementation of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, as well as to the civil society, with the aim of supporting gender mainstreaming in the security and defence sectors.

Education and awareness. Combating gender stereotypes

▸ Implement a strategic communication plan to raise public awareness on women's contributions to peace and security, highlighting the benefits of gender equality.
▸ Increase awareness among the general public and decision-makers on the essential role of women in peace-building by promoting success stories and inspiring role models.
▸ Organize national campaigns to promote women's roles in security, targeting youth and vulnerable communities.
▸ Introduce mentoring and career support programmes for women in the security sector.

Promote inclusive security policies

▸ Adopt measures that facilitate the active participation of women in the security sector, including through programmes that support work-life balance.
▸ Create an inclusive organisational environment by allocating resources for diversity and equality.
▸ Promote and review legislation to ensure equal access to leadership positions.

Support women's participation in peace and security processes

▸ Implement the UNSCR 1325 National Programme on Women, Peace and Security for 2023-2027, with a focus on equal representation in peace negotiations.
▸ Encourage women's participation in all stages of decision-making processes in the security and defence sectors.

Strengthening social cohesion

▸ Develop integration policies that reduce social tensions and facilitate inter-ethnic dialogue.
▸ Organize round tables and community programmes to involve women in refugee and security issues.

Address discrimination

▸ Establish effective mechanisms to report and combat discrimination and harassment in the security sector.
▸ Consistent enforcement of safeguards against gender-based violence.

Enhance the role of the media

▸ Launch media campaigns to promote tolerance and respect for refugees and social inclusion.
▸ Train journalists in gender- and conflict-sensitive reporting for fair and balanced reflection of refugee and asylum issues.

Capacity building and training for security and defence sector institutions

▸ Mandatory introduction of gender-sensitive training programmes for security personnel.
▸ Ensure funding for mentoring initiatives for women in the sector.

Integration of refugees

▸ Develop integration policies that promote social cohesion and minimize discrimination.
▸ Create platforms for discussion between experts from different fields to strengthen economic and social stability.
▸ Educate the public through the media, ensuring that journalists promote accurate information, combat stereotypes and encourage tolerance.
▸ Organize educational programmes for young people, families and schools to promote respect, diversity and understanding that refugees are victims of war, not a threat.

Change perceptions about refugees

▶ Organize campaigns that highlight the positive contributions refugees make to their communities.

▶ Remove discriminatory terms from public discourse and promote an empathetic and inclusive narrative about refugees.

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