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Paths for the Development of Female Leaders in NATO's NAVAL Forces

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Abstract. Considerable change has been witnessed in the integration of women into leadership positions within NATO Navies over the last three decades. This paper explores the evolution and growing mechanisms that enable women to rise through the ranks in command structures of the Naval Forces of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Historical progress and the commitment of the Alliance to pursue a gender-inclusive policy are also emphasized in the research. The study uses qualitative analysis methodology, including NATO policy documents, official reports, and academic literature. The results provide in-depth knowledge and understanding of the environment of inclusivity and equality that NATO creates for the women in the Navy.

Keywords: Naval Leadership; NATO; Gender-Inclusive Leadership; Career Development.

1. Introduction

NATO's naval forces are leading the way in broadening the role of women in military leadership, reflecting broader changes toward gender inclusivity in defense. Today, diverse leadership is understood to enhance operational effectiveness in keeping with NATO core principles and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) (NATO, 2020; The White House, 2024). More recently, NATO and its member states have adopted policies and programs to increase women's roles in security, recognizing that boosting female leaders can serve as a "force multiplier" regarding military strength.

Purpose – This article explores the opportunities for female leaders in NATO naval forces, considering developments in the post-2020 period but situating them in a historical context. It examines the role of policy frameworks, leadership development programs, and actual advances in operational and strategic roles that have enabled the emergence of women leaders and continued challenges that hold up progress in this area. The analysis focuses on the broader NATO environment, not specific countries, noting trends across the Alliance emphasizing individual female leaders who have made notable advances. By examining operational command opportunities and strategic appointments, the study provides insight into just how far NATO navies have progressed in supporting gender-inclusive leadership and what work is still required to complete the transition.

Literature review – Recent studies demonstrate that gender-inclusive leadership enhances military effectiveness and cohesion in multinational forces such as NATO (NATO, 2020, 2021, 2022a, 2022b, 2024a, 2024b, 2025; NATO Maritime Command, 2023; NATO Allied Maritime Command, 2023a). Research highlights the importance of mentorship, institutional support, and cultural change in

challenging ongoing obstacles for women in the Navy (Shaner, 2024; Spijkers et al., 2024). It is not that policies do not exist, what scholars highlight is how new forms of inclusion should be aimed at pushing up against deep cultural and organizational norms and ensuring continued support for female careers (Trochowska-Sviderok, Masakowski, McFate, & Holohan, 2024).

2. Materials and methods

The design of our analysis is qualitative, with a documentary character as the primary method. Drawing on a review of official NATO documents, national defense white papers, gender policy frameworks, and peer-reviewed academic literature available after 2020, the findings are explored. Data sources include NATO's annual Summary of the National Reports, national action plans on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), publicly available data on leaderships from NATO member states, and academic literature on gender integration in military structures. We chose these articles because of the importance that they imply, their credibility, and their consistency regarding the objective of this study, namely the assessment of the career paths of the female leaders in the naval force sustainers of NATO. Results were thematically synthesized to identify patterns, policy influence, and leadership development process.

3. Results and discussions

Examining post-2020 NATO and national policy suggests a marked trend toward institutionalizing gender-inclusive leadership in naval forces. The levels of ambition in NATO member states vary as reflected in the implementation of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda – some of this can be quantified, such as the number of women in command roles, the creation of mentorship networks and the appointments of women to strategic positions, including flag officers and commanders of multinational task forces.

Key events in the development of maritime women include the announcement of Vice Admiral Louise Dedichen (Norway) as Norway's representative to the NATO Military Committee, the appointment of Rear Admiral Jude Terry (UK) as the 1st female admiral in the Royal Navy, and the assumption of command of the U.S. Navy by Admiral Lisa Franchetti (USA). These achievements evidence the success of investments in targeted development programs, such as leadership training and inclusive talent management, and policy reforms aimed at retention and family-work balance.

To illustrate the current landscape, Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the policy implementation across NATO member states and offers comparisons of the member states according to key gender-inclusive policies such as mentorship programs, anti-harassment policies, and female facial representation as strategic naval leaders.

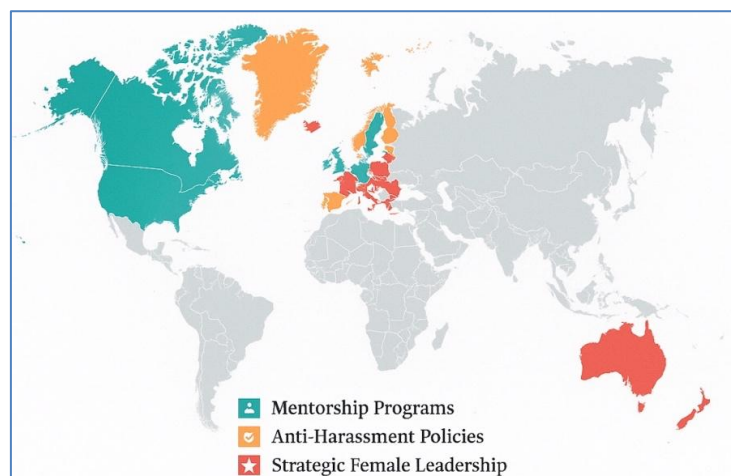


Figure 1. NATO Member States – Comparative Implementation of Gender Policies in Naval Forces. Color-coded indicators reflect national efforts in mentorship development, anti-harassment legislation, and the appointment of women in senior naval leadership positions.

This comparative perspective demonstrates the progress, as well as the unevenness, in the overall Alliance. Some NATO countries demonstrate robust policy and a strong pipeline of female leaders, while others are emerging, and there is relatively little transparency. These discrepancies highlight the importance of strengthening alliance-wide coordination, peer learning, and monitoring systems to support all member states to progress equitably toward common gender inclusion objectives.

But obstacles persist. Senior roles remain dominated by men, and there are cultural obstacles – among them masculine norms, few opportunities for mentorship, and unequal access to critical operational roles – that still prevent career advancement. Additionally, contradictions between NATO members on gender policies demonstrate the necessity of real alliance-wide accountability and transparency in data collection.

In summary, these findings suggest that although significant headways have been made to broaden the avenues for female leadership in NATO Navies, continued political will, cultural transformation, and support structures are vital to narrow the remaining gaps.

3.1. Post-2020 Policy Frameworks for Gender-Inclusive Leadership

Since 2020, NATO and Member States have this, focusing on increasing the number of females in military leadership positions through policy and action plans. At the level of NATO, one of the most important steps was the approval by Defence Ministers in 2021 of a new NATO Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2021–2025. This action plan reinforced previous WPS commitments and afforded a framework for incorporating gender perspectives throughout NATO's key functions. It highlights the need for full and effective participation of women in defense and security. Its key target areas include leadership development, recruitment, and retention of women in this field and their protection. At the same time, NATO reviewed its WPS policy in general by adjusting the 2018 policy to adapt to new realities. The revised NATO WPS policy – officially agreed at the Alliance's 5th anniversary summit in 2024 – broadens NATO's attention to address emerging security challenges (including cyber-enabled gender-based violence, sexual violence in conflict, and the gendered impacts of climate change). Such top-level policies indicate that gender inclusion is no longer something on the margins but something the Alliance considers central to its effectiveness and values (The White House, 2024).

National Action Plans/Reforms: On the national level, NATO nations have also developed policy frameworks for gender-inclusive leadership. By 2021, 72% of NATO countries (and partner countries) have developed National Action Plans on WPS to facilitate the integration of gender equality in their armed forces. Many of these plans involve particular programs to enhance women's recruitment, retention, and promotion, based on the understanding that a better supply of female talent is the key to boosting the pathways for women to top positions. During 2020–2021, more than half of NATO members implemented a new gender policy or program in their military, indicating a broad commitment to change. Among reforms across the Allied navies are changes in promotion procedures to guard against bias, creating mentorship networks, and adoption quotas or goals for female representation. For example, some countries have established ambitious female recruitment targets – Albania's defense strategy, for instance, has a long-term target of 50% female recruitment for all positions, with a mid-term goal of not less than 10% in the armed forces (NATO, 2024). While these numbers are pie in the sky, they show that people are thinking along the right lines here about balancing the force.

Institutional Mechanisms of Support: NATO has reinforced its institutional mechanisms to guarantee that these policies result in practical actions. A solid structure of Gender Advisors (GENADs) and Gender Focal Points has been institutionalized at the strategic and operational levels of NATO's command structure. These advisers advise military authorities on integrating gender considerations in planning, operations, and training. NATO has constantly generated and shared gender data within the forces – the Summary of National Reports on gender perspectives (an annual report produced by NATO) fosters transparency on figures and best practices in all countries to promote accountability and mutual learning. Via NATO-endorsed training, such as the New Key Leaders' Seminar on Gender in Military Operations, senior military personnel are trained on the importance of gender-sensitive leadership, even

more mainstreaming the idea. Allied governments, too, have implemented internal programs dedicated to developing women's leadership. For example, in 2024, the U.S. Navy set up a Navy Women's Initiatives Team (NWIT) to "study and remove" obstacles to women's career advancement. The NWIT is responsible for seeking impact and policy changes to improve the recruiting and retention of servicewomen and convening senior leadership regularly to tackle issues affecting women's advancement (U.S. Navy, 2024). Similar working groups/mentorship programs are in other member navies attempting to foster a more congenial working environment where females can excel. These post-2020 frameworks – from NATO-level policies to local initiatives – offer a structure to support more women moving into leadership roles in navies.

3.2. Leadership Development Paths in Naval Forces

Operational Command Roles: The opportunities for women to lead at sea in operational commands have grown significantly in recent years. In the past, commanding warships, submarines, and naval task groups had been nearly exclusively the reserve of men in NATO nations' navies. But more than ever, women are now in charge – as ship captains and heads of multinational naval fleets. All NATO navies now permit women to serve as officers in combat, and many have actively prepared female officers to take command at sea. As a consequence, women are taking on the roles of commanding officers (CO) of naval vessels throughout the Alliance. For example, Türkiye marked its first female warship commander when then-Captain Gökçen Fırat was appointed to the captaincy of a Turkish navy training ship, becoming the first woman to captain a ship in her Navy's history. Fırat's milestone, reached in the latter half of the 2010s, broke a glass ceiling in the Turkish Naval Forces and put her on a career trajectory to higher rank. In 2023, she was a senior staff officer in NATO's Allied Maritime Command and was on the promotion list to become a rear admiral — the first woman in Turkish naval history to reach that rank. Her case epitomizes the new road: women who show their mettle in command at sea can now climb to the top ranks, which used to be men-only.

By their example, female officers serving in NATO's integrated military structure have also taken on leadership roles at sea in operations. A prominent case is the command of Standing NATO Maritime Groups (SNMGs)— the Alliance's offshore ready forces. Well, this changed in 2019 when the first woman officer took command of one such multinational squadron as a Canadian officer of NATO naval operations. Others have since come along. In 2022, SNMG1 was commanded by Commodore Jeroen Morang of the Royal Netherlands Navy, who led a task group of Allied warships deployed in the North Sea and the Baltic (NATO, 2020; NATO, 2023). As the Commandant, Commodore Morang proved that women could adeptly command naval forces in a complex operational environment during high tension following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. That several women have successfully led NATO naval task groups now reflects a more regular, rather than exceptional, pattern of appointments. Women also work as deputies and chiefs of staff in combined maritime headquarters, providing leadership at the theater level in operational planning and execution. It is worth noting that U.S. Navy Admiral Lisa Franchetti, before becoming a service chief, was the commander of the U.S. Sixth Fleet and the commander of Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO while Acting both billets, the latter post had her serving as the operational lead for NATO maritime exercises and contingency plans in Europe. In those posts, she had authority over carrier strike groups and joint naval operations, cementing the presence of women in the highest operational command job.

A greater cohort of women commanders on shore and sea derived from mentorship, career development, and attitude changes. Several navies have established programs for under-represented groups specifically to support and train female officers of potential for command. When they see senior officers such as Commodore Morang or Admiral Franchetti visibly doing well in their jobs, they see possible role models for junior women officers. That kind of visibility, in turn, chips away at remaining skepticism over women in combat leadership. Operational assessments have concluded that mixed-gender command teams can be compared in effectiveness to single-gender teams. NATO says diversity in leadership teams brings better decision-making and situational awareness (NATO, 2020). The operational career path – a path from junior officer to warship captain to fleet commander – has, in other

words, been demonstrated to be open to women in NATO navies. As more women acquire the experience and the gender-sensitive leadership at sea becomes ingrained in NATO's operational culture, the positive momentum should continue on this trajectory.

Strategic and High-Level Leadership Roles: Alongside seagoing commands, women are beginning to take up key leadership and strategic roles throughout the NATO naval forces and defense agencies. Strategic roles mean the top military leadership and policymaking positions: admirals commanding national naval staffs or joint commands, senior planners with NATO at its headquarters, and representatives making alliance strategy. The post-2020 era has also marked firsts and a slow normalization of women's place onsite.

Nationwide, some NATO navies have appointed women as flag officers for the first time in their histories (since 2020). The United Kingdom has had female admirals, including the late Jane Thornton. It was a historic and symbolic breakthrough in a centuries-old male-dominated naval institution — as the Royal Navy itself announced, the first time a woman had achieved flag rank in that service (Royal Navy, 2021). Rear Admiral Terry was appointed Naval Secretary and Director of People and Training, responsible for the careers management of all personnel. Her promotion was echoed by public comments from the top ranks of the Royal Navy, who said that she was part of a "cohort of trailblazers" and that the Navy is an equal-opportunity employer where gender does not determine one's career. In the U.S., it would not be until 2023 when Adm Lisa Franchetti was appointed the Head of the United States Navy and, thus, the first woman to lead the NATO navy, which was by far the largest. Mil. As CNO — a post that also made her the first woman among the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (U.S. Navy, 2023). Admiral Franchetti ascended to the highest strategic plane that any woman in uniform has ever reached, a prospect almost unthinkable even a generation ago. Other navies of the 30-member North Atlantic Treaty Organization are on similar paths: Spain and Italy have in recent years elevated their first women to admiralty (albeit in supporting roles or the medical service), and Norway's Vice Admiral Dedichen, as mentioned, has been in senior posts since 2020. Türkiye's advancement of Rear Admiral Fırat in 2023 forms another NATO member nation that has women in their flag ranks. While the total number of female flag officers across NATO is still relatively low, they are increasing in number, and each new appointment erodes the historic disparity.

At the strategic level, women have achieved leadership positions in NATO's multinational command structure. Vice Admiral Louise Dedichen not only broke the ground by joining the Military Committee, but on 15 December 2023, she also chaired a session of the NATO Military Committee in her capacity as temporary Chairperson of the Chiefs of Defence sessions — marking a historic first for the Alliance's top military NATO (Army Recognition, 2023). The International Staff and agencies of NATO have also experienced increased leadership by women: the holder of the NATO Secretary General's Special Representative for Women, Peace, and Security (a senior advisory post) has been a series of women who serve as coordinators for gender-related activities across the Alliance. Furthermore, women are in charge of crucial directorates and are deputy commanders in some NATO joint commands. The correlation in paragraph (2) above was perhaps best expressed by Air Chief Marshal Stuart Peach in 2020-type-price16; women in national high-level positions means women in NATO military high-level positions" (NATO, 2020) — seems to be coming to fruition. As more female senior officers are being produced in the member states, NATO benefits from an increased number of eligible candidates for its necessary international appointments. This is a matter of alliance decision-making: with diverse thanks to the multiple voices around its council table, our common defense alliance has a diverse range of perspectives that reflect the societies that it is protecting — and, possibly, more comprehensive and creative strategies.

Formal and informal processes have supported the strategic development of women as leaders. Many other states have executive training programs for high-ranking officers (men and women) for higher command and staff positions. We make an effort to avoid the exclusion of women from these talent pipelines. Since then, NATO and EU forums have frequently conducted seminars on leadership and gender for general and flag officers where they can be sensitized to the principles of inclusive leadership. When women leaders are active in a strategic capacity, this also kind of demystifies the domain of

military authority with the domain of masculinity. If a female admiral heads a NATO committee or delivers a briefing to a coalition staff, the message is clear: Leadership has nothing to do with gender. Women are slowly growing at that level, so that such events will become commonplace. For example, by the end of 2024, several women flag officers and panel experts had served as national delegates at NATO maritime strategy conferences – an almost unheard-of event in the past. This strategic normalization is significant – it shows junior women that the top is within reach and reminds everybody that leadership is meritocratic. While NATO consistently advocates for a "gender-balanced military" (NATO, 2020) at the strategic level, the Alliances set an example that echoes throughout all echelons.

3.3. Ongoing Challenges

Despite this visible progress, women remain under-represented at senior levels in NATO naval forces. While barriers to leading positions have been removed, few women in NATO are ship commanders, and the number of flag officers is few compared to their general number in the armed forces (NATO, 2022). This has contributed in part to a limited leadership pipeline—most NATO navies started allowing women into combat and command roles only in the 1990s or later, so fewer female officers have 20–30 years of experience they would need before they reach command level (NATO, 2021; Holohan, 2024). As a result, despite the greater numbers of credentialed women, it's a slow road to parity at the very top of the profession.

Cultural and institutional barriers obstruct even these gradual gains. Research has it that hegemonic masculine norms and implicit gender bias are still dictating how leadership is perceived, which in some cases limits the acceptance of women despite them having formal leadership positions (Spijkers et al., 2024). Many service women describe that they are required to prove their capability time and time again, subjected to skepticism their male counterparts are less likely to encounter (Willis-Frazier, 2024). Even when 83% of NATO nations have policies on harassment and discrimination (NATO, 2022), they can often fall flat in contributing to a genuinely inclusive space. The demands of naval service (e.g., deployments, frequent changes of station), intertwined with cultural norms relating to care provision, also pose specific obstacles regarding work-family balance, with negative implications for women's career continuity and retention (Holmberg & Alvinus, 2024).

Mentorship and support within NATO are widely available. As there are relatively few senior female leaders, young women often do not have access to gender-relevant role models or mentorship to support their career progression (NATO, 2024). In the NATO publication *Military Voices on the Gender Perspective* (2024), several contributors discuss the challenges posed by the scarcity of senior female leaders and the consequent lack of mentorship opportunities for junior women in the military. For instance, the publication emphasizes the importance of visible female role models and structured mentorship programs to support women's career advancement within NATO forces.

Efforts to identify and break down structural barriers, such as those pursued by the U.S. Navy Women's Initiatives Team (U.S. Navy, 2024), are lacking, in some cases, a standardized process and an all-encompassing effort across NATO. Second, the "first ladies" of challenging leadership positions are frequently subject to more intense scrutiny and performance expectations than otherwise (Duncanson & Woodward, 2016). To overcome these obstacles, NATO must sustain a strategic commitment to gender integration, strengthen accountability mechanisms, and foster learning among member states so that all navies can learn from inclusive leadership development.

4. Conclusions

This research adds to the growing body of academic literature on gender integration in defense by providing a concentrated and current assessment of the career routes of female leaders in NATO navies. Its novelty consists of combining and exploiting official NATO documents and post-2020 academic sources to grasp the most recent trends, policy shifts, and leadership results. Unlike many previous works focusing on individual countries or entire military services, the study focuses on a specific service – the navies of all NATO member states- and underlines successes on both the operational and strategic levels of women in command positions.

However, the research has been limited in some respects. The dependence on open-source documents and reports leaves out internal or classified projects that are not revealed in similar sources. Second, the study takes a NATO-wide viewpoint, but conflicting accounting, definitions, and characteristics can limit comparability among the member states. Finally, the qualitative approach may be appropriate for policy synthesis, but there are no field interviews or longitudinal follow-ups of the career histories for deeper understanding. These could be some of the limitations approaching this issue, and subsequent research could address them more, such as adopting a mixed-method, engaging-based approach to direct communication with female naval leaders and comparative case studies of selected NATO member states.

The implications of this study are practical. These results will help defense policymakers, military educators, and personnel managers develop more inclusive career development programs and break down barriers that prevent the advancement of women. The data highlights the value of long-term investment in mentorship, flexible career paths, and cultural change to enhance gender-diverse leadership. While NATO faces increasing security challenges, the whole military and strategic leadership potential of women in the naval forces will further strengthen the strategic resilience by increasing the operational capacities of the Alliance.

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