



Professional development and its health implications in military women from the gender perspective

El desarrollo profesional y sus implicaciones para la salud de las mujeres militares desde la perspectiva de género

Yesbeiny Lixyelih Muñoz Abreu¹  

José Niazoa¹  

Misael Ron¹  

¹ Instituto de Altos Estudios "Dr. Arnoldo Gabaldon". Venezuela.

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: the purpose of this research will be to unravel the ontological intricacies of professional development that emerges from the daily work praxis of Venezuelan female military officers. Method: it is framed within the post-positivist paradigm, qualitative approach, using the hermeneutic phenomenological method. Results: the voices of 4 female military officers were recorded and once the speech was refined, categorized and analyzed, they were established as final reflections regarding the benefits and challenges of work. The ability to transform obstacles into opportunities and to turn adversity into strength is evident. In their family and emotional life, they tend to blame themselves for not having enough time to be with their children. However, they tend to instill values in them and show them their affection. Finally, the manifestations regarding health indicate that remaining exposed for long periods to stressful situations is associated with other physical alterations. Conclusion: finally, considering that female military officers face a path of dualities, where the construction of their professional identity is intertwined with challenges and opportunities marked by psychosocial risk factors that manifest themselves in their health. Therefore, occupational health in the military field requires a paradigmatic transformation.

Keywords: Professional Development; Human Health; Work.

RESUMEN

Introducción: la presente investigación tuvo como propósito desentrañar las intrincadas ontológicas del desarrollo profesional que emerge de la praxis laboral cotidiana en mujeres oficiales militares venezolanas. Método: estuvo enmarcada dentro del paradigma post-positivista, enfoque cualitativo, utilizando el método fenomenológico hermenéutico. Resultados: las voces de 4 mujeres oficiales militares, se grabaron y una vez depurado, categorizado y analizado el discurso se establecen como reflexiones finales en cuanto a las Bondades y desafíos laborales se evidencia la capacidad para transformar los obstáculos en oportunidades y para convertir la adversidad en fortaleza, por su parte en su vida familiar y afectiva tienden a culparse por no disponer de tiempo suficiente para estar con sus hijos, sin embargo, tienden a inculcarles valores y manifestarles su afecto finalmente las manifestaciones a la salud indican que mantenerse expuesto por largos periodos a situaciones de estrés, se asocia a otras alteraciones físicas. Conclusión: considerando finalmente que las mujeres oficiales militares se enfrentan a un camino de dualidades, donde la construcción de su identidad profesional se entrelaza con desafíos y oportunidades marcados por factores de riesgo psicosociales que se manifiestan en su salud. Por lo que la salud ocupacional en el ámbito castrense exige una transformación paradigmática.

Palabras clave: Desarrollo Profesional; Salud Humana; Trabajo.

INTRODUCTION

For years, the contribution of various international organizations has been fundamental in promoting gender equality since the middle of the 20th century. This principle, recognized in numerous countries, seeks to eradicate discrimination against women and guarantee their equality before the law set out by the International Labour Organisation(1)(ILO). This historical milestone marked a turning point in contemporary history, demonstrating that the participation of women enriched the military institution with new perspectives in the service of the homeland, defining the military career in article 87 of the constitutional law of the Bolivarian National Armed Force(2) (LCFANB) as the exercise of the profession of arms, through the knowledge of military sciences and arts, with discipline, obedience, and subordination as its fundamental pillars.

In other words, by defining the military career as a profession accessible to all citizens, without gender distinction, the principle and guarantee of equal opportunities for men and women in the military sphere is consolidated. Thus, the 1970s witnessed a paradigmatic change in the Venezuelan armed forces, where a ministerial resolution opened the doors of the military institutes to women, who, like seeds planted in fertile soil, began to cultivate new specialties and responsibilities within the organization.

As time went by, three categories of officers were consolidated, mainly command officers, where women were integrated for the first time in the Venezuelan Air Force in 1978, followed closely by the Bolivarian navy, where women were trained to lead military operations for military defense, the category of non-commissioned officer was vindicated when their vision was reformulated. They were considered technical officers in 2008, where women graduates played a fundamental role in the optimal functioning of the different military units. Finally, the assimilated officers developed within the military institution in other areas of specialization according to their basic professional activity.

In this way, all-female military officers can develop according to the different categories, as command, technical, or assimilated officers, who throughout their career will be governed by different professional standards, with varying levels of demand, commitment, and military control, as described in the book ontology of the Bolivarian military career of Aguana (3) and the professional profiles of the governing body of the armed forces, to guarantee their employment, promotion and professional development. However, together, they are all women with an evident vision to take command and lead, being able to demonstrate that years of hard education and intense training forge in these women true warriors, ready to face any challenge with professional character and thus be able to defend the ideals of the nation. Therefore, the military woman can be defined as a figure that defies traditional norms by actively participating in the military sphere and remaining in a space dominated by men because, beyond stereotypes, the military woman is a mosaic of roles: leader, strategist, companion, as her presence enriches the armed forces, contributing a unique and valuable perspective, defending the values of freedom and integral justice. However, for women, this path is bifurcated, as in addition to academic preparation and physical performance, there is the need to balance roles, which means reconciling work and family life, as this double burden often delays their development, as reconciliation is established as an additional challenge, where their tenacity drives them to continue advancing, demonstrating that parity is an achievable goal.

This is why the military institutionality is governed by the principles and values expressed in the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (4) (CRBV), which seeks to build a fairer and more equitable society so that all people have the same opportunities as stated in articles 75 - 78 on the recognition of the role played by the family in society, with military women playing a leading role in this regard.

In this way, the balance between work and family is an essential part of the biopsychosocial development of military women. Briceño and Vargas (5) consider that nowadays, it is not only the military profession that influences the family, but also the family that has a significant influence on the career of military professionals; this dominance can be so great that the army woman can limit her career projection due to family demands. In addition to this element, there are other significant findings since women who work double shifts are more likely to experience symptoms of anxiety and depression compared to those who do not have simultaneous work and domestic responsibilities, according to Leal.(6)

However, in Venezuela, article 53 of the Organic Law On Prevention, Conditions And Working Environment (7) (LOPCYMAT) stipulates that workers have the right to carry out their work in an adequate working environment that is conducive to the whole exercise of their physical and mental faculties. In the case of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces, guaranteeing these conditions is fundamental to ensure the operational readiness and well-being of military personnel, who face

various high-risk and physically and mentally demanding working conditions.

Today, women are present in every corner of the armed forces, as their presence is a testimony to the evolution and reflection of women's ability to adapt. In this sense, several publications have studied this phenomenon; one of them brilliantly analyzed the unification of women, mothers, and active military personnel in the Spanish Armed Forces, where Hossain-Lopez (8) showed how maternity tends to be a turning point in women's professional lives, where restrictions during pregnancy, maternity leave and the difficulty of reconciling work and family life significantly limit their professional development, so many feel that the opportunities lost during this period, whether by choice or by decisions of their superiors, will affect their professional development in the long term.

Thus, the façade of discipline and strength that characterizes military women hides a complex and fascinating reality, where the intersection of these elements with professional development, health, and family seems to be unexplored territory, which is why it is imperative to enter into this labyrinth and unravel how the social process of work shapes the experience of these women, and how their professional trajectories influence their physical and emotional well-being. It is essential to understand how the particularities of each military category affect their professional development, family life, and health to make visible the unique realities of each woman.

METHOD

The research was carried out within the postpositivist paradigm, using a qualitative approach and an exploratory-descriptive approach. The hermeneutic phenomenological method directed this research. This study was carried out in the state of Aragua, Venezuela, between 2024 and the beginning of 2025.

The procedure that allowed the achievement of the objectives was developed as follows: once the individual interviews were carried out, the raw notes were transcribed verbatim without omitting any of the information obtained. Cleaning or sweeping was the next stage since once the concepts began to accumulate, the process of grouping them under explanatory terms in categories began.

Axial coding took place around a central axis (professional development and how it has impacted their family life and health); the thematic corpus was developed from this central axis that was traced in the discourses. The data were then categorized and analyzed, triangulated with the research background, the contributions of the key informants, and the researcher's participation as a fundamental axis in the research development to issue the final considerations.

The bioethical considerations of the special degree project were complied with through the written invitation to participate in the research; once the doubts had been clarified by the key informants, and with the assurance of their interest in the study, they proceeded to provide the document called informed consent, with which they were guaranteed the confidentiality of the data provided. Additionally, a coding process guaranteed the secrecy of the military professional.

DISCUSSION

Labor benefits and challenges: lights and shadows along the way

Since the second half of the 20th century, equality between men and women has been a legal principle recognized by many countries and international organizations, which refers to the abolition of laws and customs that discriminate against women and the right to equality between men and women before the ILO(1), which is one of the main benefits of the new form of integration within the armed forces. However, in her research, Farfán (9) states that women are still considered to be the weaker sex, incapable of taking on tasks, as it is erroneously thought that women do not have the strength to take on the role of command:

"I have only men in my charge... I felt that I was not measuring up as a boss or a leader of that group. I felt that they didn't trust me. I think it is because I am a woman and head nurse, so I can be head nurse, not physiologist". Medusa

"The recognition has been a massive challenge for me. To feel in some way or another, what would the word be? valued? valued in terms of the profession and both professions. Dulce

"The underestimation of superiority, hearing an example: what are you? because here it's not worth studies, it's worth the seniority and the degree".

Evolution these elements contrast with the results obtained in Ortigoza's research,(10) which

determined that the incorporation of women into the military sphere has been limited to certain areas, functions, and particular roles, designating officers to positions and promotions according to ties or commitments and not for professional merit, that is, contrary to what is structurally established, the voices of the informants reveal a reality in which the incorporation of women into the military sphere is confined to certain roles, certain areas and specific functions.

On the other hand, the experiences of military women reveal a duality in their professional development, since on the one hand, they may face challenges such as inequality in benefits and unequal treatment, which can affect their sense of belonging and their professional identity, against great opportunities for training and development of their specialties, which have contributed exponentially to their growth and strengthening of their self-confidence.

"Study opportunities have been given to me because I went to Brazil to train as a physiological training instructor. and I was also sent to Argentina to do evacuation and medical transfer". Medusa.

"The fact that they opened the doors for women to become pilots was one of the biggest or the most oversized doors that were opened... the opportunity to study and train as a fighter pilot. Ambassador

As stated in Aguana's book *Ontology Of The Bolivarian Military Career*,⁽³⁾ 'pedagogy underlies militancy, and makes possible the constitution of the military for the Venezuelan state'.

This means that education and training are the basis of the military institution, a process that involves not only the development of physical but also cognitive skills, which is reinforced by what is described in the work of Ortigoza (10), who states that the training of military officers is a process that does not stop once they graduate from the training schools but continues throughout their careers.

In this sense, these experiences, told with pride and passion, reveal the capacity of these women to transform obstacles into opportunities and to turn adversity into strength because it is not a simple coexistence of opposites but a dynamic interaction where shadow and light intertwine, mutually transform and complement each other.

As a researcher, I understand that on this path of dualities, military women build their professional identity, forge their character, and find their place in an environment that often challenges them, where their ability to navigate between inequity and opportunity usually allows them to transform obstacles into stepping stones, these testimonies are evidence of their resilient capacities, their strengths and their commitment to their chosen vocation. Ultimately, in this transformation process, military women adapt to their environment and transform it, opening new paths and challenging established limits.

Family and socio-emotional life: weaving ties across the distance

The family represents a sphere of great importance in the development of human beings; it is considered the primary group par excellence and the fundamental basis of society, which allows them to live and develop the experiences and skills that will serve as a basis for life in the different areas of their existence, considering that it is a dynamic structure that evolves with the society and culture of which it forms part. Carlosama et al.(11), in their testimonies, military women expressed the importance they give to the family.

'I sacrifice losing time with my son because we have to go to courses, deploy, carry out operational activities...'. Ambassador

"I have to leave my children alone. you're going to make me cry. Forgive me for being like this; I must leave my children alone. My children are often alone, and they sleep alone every time I have to come and stand guard. My children are alone all night. Sweet

"Sacrifices, yes, missing activities at my children's school because of work, not celebrating birthdays, among others. Evolution

On this element, the antecedents show that military women tend to blame themselves for not having enough time to spend with their children. However, they are attentive to instilling values in them, showing their affection, and demanding socially acceptable behavior from them, thus reinforcing their qualities and aptitudes. This is why military women tend to make significant sacrifices in their personal and family lives, as work responsibilities often lead them to leave their children alone for long hours, which generates a major family dilemma, which is reflected in the perception that their professional development involves a tangible effort and great sacrifices.

In relation to this difficult reconciliation for military women and their families, Briceño and Vargas (5) consider that military women's professional decisions are increasingly influenced by family dynamics. The need to balance family life and military careers can lead these women to limit their professional aspirations or even abandon the profession to prioritize the needs of their families.

As a researcher, I understand that these findings highlight the need to transcend the traditional view of work-family reconciliation in the military, as it is not enough to recognize the importance of the family. Still, it is essential to implement policies and practices that allow them to exercise their professional and maternal roles fully. Instead of normalizing guilt and burnout, it is necessary to promote a real balance between the personal and professional lives of these women-military mothers.

Manifestations to health: an act of resistance

There has been significant progress in the labor sphere on the importance of workers' health, especially in the industrial context. In Venezuela, the legal framework supports the protection of occupational health, with the LOPCYMAT (7) being a fundamental pillar in terms of health, since in its article 40, paragraph 2, this law establishes the obligation to guarantee the maximum possible biopsychosocial well-being of workers, which reflects the state's commitment to the integral health of its workforce. In their own words, key informants stated that.

"I am hypertensive, I have insulin resistance, I have hyperthyroidism. And all these are hormonal problems that are generated because of stress because of the pace of life I lead. Sweet

'I struggled for many years with anemia, with a giant uterine myxomatosis, a product of work stress, which severely affected my quality of life, especially socio-emotionally; I think that has been the most shocking thing.' Evolution

'The stress, because as I have increased in my position, the stress gets to me... because of the fulfillment of orders and the mission, I neglect myself'. Ambassador

In extracting the informants' discourses, it is necessary to relate their affectations to the work of Andrade et al. (12), who conclude that the studies reviewed in their research have shown that stress and overload are common characteristics in the behavior and manifestations of military personnel, Stoyanovich (13) states that although the relationship between stress and arterial hypertension has not been definitively demonstrated, the performance of work with high psychological demands may be associated with its early development. Similarly, the findings presented in the work of Cortez et al. (14) determined that the relationship between chronic stress, cortisol, and high food intake tends to visceral adiposity and insulin resistance as predisposing factors of metabolic disruption with significant consequences for the health status of human beings. In addition, a study by Dye et al. (15) found that psychological stress can alter the hormonal balance and, consequently, influence the growth of uterine fibroids because stress can increase levels of cortisol and other hormones that affect the reproductive system, which could facilitate the development of gynecological problems.

For this reason, ongoing research into mental health traits in military personnel has become a priority in the scientific community, as studies indicate that mental health in military personnel is directly related to stress, which influences the way they develop their social skills, learning abilities, and work efficiency within military units. (12)

As a researcher, and from an occupational health perspective, I understand that the experience of women in the military reveals a complex web of psychosocial factors that transcend the mere dichotomy of challenges and adaptations and that pressure and stress derived from the work demands inherent to the military profession, evidence suggests that the constant tension between work demands and the need for self-care becomes a central challenge for those seeking a balance that allows them to fully perform their professional role without compromising their health.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that female military officers face a path of dualities, where the construction of their professional identity is intertwined with challenges and opportunities that are marked by psychosocial risk factors that manifest themselves as critical determinants in their integral health, which, according to Rojas (16) 'constitute the main stressors in the work context, regardless of the nature of the work,' causing their harmful action to affect the body and mind. In this sense, when women work in non-traditional work roles, there is a convergence between productive and reproductive activities, which increases their vulnerability to psychosocial risks, which is why it is essential to introduce changes in organizational structures that reflect the reality of these workers.

These testimonies show that occupational health in the military sphere requires a paradigmatic transformation, as physical safety protocols are not enough; it is essential to redefine the military social contract, including the reproductive, emotional, and personal care dimensions, which

seeks to establish a new standard in occupational health, making it necessary to promote scientific studies in the military organization, focusing fundamentally on the protection of biopsychosocial factors, to generate effective coping strategies for their professional development.

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AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Yesbeiny Lixyelih Muñoz Abreu, José Niazoa, Misael Ron.

Data curation: Yesbeiny Lixyelih Muñoz Abreu, José Niazoa, Misael Ron.

Formal analysis: Yesbeiny Lixyelih Muñoz Abreu, José Niazoa, Misael Ron.

Research: Yesbeiny Lixyelih Muñoz Abreu, José Niazoa, Misael Ron.

Methodology: Yesbeiny Lixyelih Muñoz Abreu, José Niazoa, Misael Ron.

Validation: Yesbeiny Lixyelih Muñoz Abreu, José Niazoa, Misael Ron.

Visualization: Yesbeiny Lixyelih Muñoz Abreu, José Niazoa, Misael Ron.

Writing - original draft: Yesbeiny Lixyelih Muñoz Abreu, José Niazoa, Misael Ron.

Writing - proofreading and editing: Yesbeiny Lixyelih Muñoz Abreu, José Niazoa, Misael Ron.