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FROM SECURITY TO INCLUSIVITY – ANALYSING THE NORM EVOLUTION OF  
ESTONIA’S GENDER-CENTRED DEFENCE POLICIES IN RESPONSE TO NATO WPS  
GENDER AGENDA

Bachelor’s thesis

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### ***Authorship Declaration***

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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## **Abstract**

As a post-Soviet state emphasising territorial defence, Estonia represents a “least likely” case for internalising gender norms promoted by NATO’s Women, Peace and Security agenda. Drawing on Finnemore and Sikkink’s Norm Life Cycle theory, the study investigates how and to what extent WPS norms, particularly women’s participation, gender-based violence and material capacity building, have been internalised in Estonia’s strategic documents. Thus, the research question is: What effect do NATO WPS gender norms have on Estonia’s armed forces? To answer the question, a qualitative thematic analysis was conducted on various NATO and Estonian-level policy documents. The study revealed partial and selective norm internalisation, primarily influenced by the strength of coercive language used by NATO. Marking a correlation between stronger normative pressure from NATO and deeper national adoption suggests that NATO is a successful norm socialiser.

## **Abbreviations**

CEDAW – Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

CEE – Central and Eastern Europe

CRSV – Conflict-related sexual violence

ENDDP – Estonian National Defence Development Plan

ENSC – Estonian National Security Concept

GBV – Gender-based violence

NAP – National Action Plan

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

WPS – Women, Peace and Security

NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation

UN – United Nations

UNSCR – United Nations Security Council

R2P – Responsibility to Protect

TFGBV – Technology-facilitated gender-based violence

# Table of Contents

Introduction.....	6
2. Theoretical Framework: The Diffusion of Gender Norms by International Organisations .	10
2.1 Conceptualisation of Norms in IR .....	10
2.2 WPS as a Bundle of Gender Norms.....	11
2.3 The Norm Life Cycle Model.....	12
2.3.1 Norm Cascade and Diffusion.....	13
2.3.2 Norm Internalisation .....	13
2.4 Norm Socialisation.....	14
3. Methodology .....	16
3.1 Research Design.....	16
3.2 Case Selection.....	16
3.3 Operationalisation .....	17
3.4 Sources.....	19
4. Analysis: NATO’s Adoption of WPS and Change in Gender Norms in Estonia’s Armed Forces.....	23
4.1 The Emergence of WPS as a set of Gender Norms Inside NATO.....	23
4.1.1 Women’s Participation .....	23
4.1.2 Gender-Based Violence.....	25
4.1.3 Material Capacity Building.....	27
4.2 Norms in Estonia’s Armed Forces from 2001 to 2004 .....	28
4.3 Situation After NATO WPS .....	30
5. Conclusions and Discussion .....	36
6. Bibliography .....	39
7. Appendices.....	44

## Introduction

Since regaining its independence in 1991, Estonia has undergone significant changes in its defence and security policies, shaped by its geopolitical realities. Having experienced the Soviet occupation, it prioritised territorial defence and military readiness as fundamental pillars of its national security strategy. Since joining NATO in 2004, Estonia has shifted from seeking security independently to doing so through collective defence, where NATO is perceived as the cornerstone of hard security guarantees.

However, joining NATO was not solely a matter of benefitting from its military capabilities, but also about embracing NATO's normative framework, including democratic governance and peaceful relations (Epstein, 2006). Among these norms are also those that concern gender in the military. The focus of this study is precisely NATO's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. WPS represents an exciting normative case for Estonia. Unlike military standards and power bolstering, gender-related norms were not among Estonia's primary considerations when joining the Alliance. Its security policy was dominated by conventional territorial defence against potential Russian aggression, rendering WPS implementation peripheral to its core security interests. Nevertheless, this seemingly secondary norm has gradually seeped into Estonia's defence policies and practices, as seen through various initiatives such as "Women in Uniforms" and references to women in strategy documents. The interplay between a traditionally militarised security stance and gender normative pressure from NATO makes Estonia a compelling case to study. This tension between Estonia's security imperatives and the diffusion of gender norms from NATO constitutes the research problem of this thesis.

During the 1990s, discussing women's issues and gender-based violence was quite unthinkable, especially on an international level. Even within the United Nations, such topics received little attention, making the integration into NATO, a military organisation, appear unthinkable. Violence against women was discussed, at best, at the state level (MacKinnon, 2012). This changed with the adoption of UNSCR 1325 in 2000, the foundational resolution for the Women, Peace and Security framework. NATO followed suit by adopting the first policy on WPS in 2007 (NATO, 2024). While normative change in international institutions is usually slow, the diffusion of WPS has been unexpectedly rapid. UNSCR 1325 emphasised the critical importance of gender equality in peace and security, urging states to ensure the equal participation of women in peacebuilding, security, and policing. The agenda is structured around four key pillars: prevention, participation, protection, and relief and

recovery (UNDP, 2019: 5). As outlined in the WPS Handbook, the agenda also serves as a practical tool offering guidance for parliaments on meaningful domestic action (UNDP, 2019: 2). Moreover, the WPS agenda draws attention to the gendered nature of conflicts, particularly highlighting the issue of sexual violence in armed conflicts. NATO has demonstrated its formal commitment by integrating the language of Resolution 1325 into summit declarations, annual reports, and policy documents (von Hlatky, 2019: 364). For example, during the Warsaw Summit, NATO explicitly acknowledged that incorporating gender perspectives would help to build a more modern, ready, and responsive Alliance (*ibid.*).

With this, NATO has undertaken systemic reforms to reshape its policies and practices to reflect gender inclusivity better. These efforts aim to enhance the participation of women across peace and security sectors and to promote the value of inclusivity in conflict prevention. Key to this is the mainstreaming of gender perspectives in military operations and the encouragement of member states to re-evaluate defence policies through a gender-inclusive lens. This not only shifts the role and status of women within the armed forces but also broadens the conceptualisation of security. An example of concrete initiatives under this framework include the promotion of women's participation in peace support operations (WPS, 2007) and efforts to enhance their role in cyber defence, particularly through the Cyber Defence Pledge (NATO WPS, 2018: 22). By increasing the number of women in cybersecurity and developing gender in the military, NATO aims to strengthen its security framework. The influence of such policies is evident, since their influence has spread to the member-state level. To ensure the durability of these reforms, NATO applies normative pressure on member states to adopt gender-related norms and rethink their existing policies. Though informal, member states are encouraged to develop National Action Plans (NAPs). These plans outline a member's long-term commitment to UNSCR 1325 and WPS. It is an important aspect of membership obligations, which is periodically monitored. Alongside its allies, Estonia has created NAPs to show its commitment to NATO and gender equality.

Against this backdrop, this thesis contributes to the ongoing debate in feminist security studies regarding the limitations and effectiveness of the NATO WPS agenda. It focuses specifically on the diffusion of the WPS from the international (NATO) to the national (Estonia) level. WPS aims to advance women's inclusion and integrate gender perspectives across NATO's work (WPS, 2024). There is a rich and expanding literature on the implementation of WPS (Tryggestad, 2014; Malheiro et. al., 2024; Shepherd, 2016, etc.), on

how NATO has incorporated it into its framework (Wright, 2023; O’Sullivan, 2024; von Hlatky, 2019, etc.), and the influence of international organisations on member state adoption, whose literature widely overlaps with how NATO adopted the agenda (von Hlatky, 2019; Wright, 2016; Wright, 2023; Shepherd, 2016). However, much of this literature has focused on Western countries like Norway, the Netherlands, and Canada. In contrast, the Central and Eastern European region, including Estonia, remains relatively understudied. Thus, this thesis seeks to address a gap in the literature on WPS implementation and the CEE region, particularly the Baltic states by providing an understanding of the evolution of Estonia’s defence policies from 2001 to 2025, focusing on how gender equality norms from NATO’s WPS have been integrated into the national framework, which was introduced in 2007.

Using literature on norms, normative change, and norm diffusion in international relations, along with thematic analysis, the research highlights how Estonia has adopted the WPS norms at the national level, through National Security Concepts (NSC), National Defence Development Plans (NDDP) and National Action Plans (NAP).

### **The Primary Research Question Guiding the Thesis:**

What effect do NATO WPS gender norms have on Estonia’s armed forces?

To find out how NATO WPS has influenced Estonian gender norms in the military, the theoretical framework centres around norm socialisation diffusion and norm internalisation, as presented in the *Norm Life Cycle* theory by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998). The theoretical framework provides a lens through which to anticipate potential outcomes of NATO WPS’s influence on Estonia’s policies. Norm cascade and internalisation could manifest in varying degrees, where on one end of the spectrum, there is no change at all, which indicates Estonia’s failure to be socialised by NATO to accept WPS norms. Alternatively, there is partial, selective, and superficial implementation, suggesting the adoption of certain aspects of WPS without substantial normative changes. On the other end of the spectrum, there is full internalisation of norms, which means that Estonia has fully adopted gender norms into its security policies, demonstrating its commitment. Thus, the focus is on identifying the impact so that further research can study the factors that explain the degrees of internalisation.

Although norm diffusion is a complex and broad concept to measure, this study contains it by looking at WPS norms through various documents, like Defence Policies and National Action

Plans. Empirically, the study focuses on changes in the gender norms in the Estonian armed forces and policies as they materialised around the time of NATO's adoption and promotion of WPS. The study does so from a qualitative analysis perspective, primarily using thematic analysis to identify key topics and patterns related to WPS norms.

This thesis consists of three parts. Part two introduces the theoretical approach. The study will further use a brief overview of the theoretical and methodological framework in that part. Part three shows the methodology, followed by the analysis, and lastly comes the conclusion.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: The Diffusion of Gender Norms by International Organisations**

### **2.1 Conceptualisation of Norms in IR**

While normative ideas have always been tied to international relations (Sikkink, 1998), they started to be more prominent when Stephen Krasner (1983) introduced his ideas about regimes, which challenged materialist understanding of neorealist international interactions., which linked regimes and norms to material interests of dominant states (Ikenberry & Kupchan, 1990). The regime's scholarship paved the path to understanding the roles of ideas, norms and social construction processes in IR to provide new explanations for state behaviour (Sikkink 1998: 518). Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink's work on the *Norm Life Cycle* (1998) further explored the theoretical understanding, proposing a dynamic model of how normative changes occur through a three-stage process of emergence, cascade and eventual internalisation.

Norms are elusive and context dependent, which means they have numerous definitions, depending on the context (Björkdahl, 2002: 13). Axelrod explains (1986: 1096) in his article that norms are commonly based on and defined through expectations, shared values and behaviour. He clearly defines that: *Norms exist in given social setting to the extent that individuals usually act in a certain way and are often punished when seen not to be acting this way*" (Axelrod, 1986: 1097). Raymond (1997: 128) defines international norms as: *"Generalised standards of conduct that delineate the scope of a state's entitlements, the extent of its obligations, and the range of its jurisdiction,"* elaborating that norms are the medium through which commonly held expectations about what is appropriate in specific situations are conveyed to system members. Similarly, NATO is conveying its norms to its member states. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: 891) follow the definition that norms are a standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity. Nevertheless, norms are also important to identity formation, since the norms someone adheres to are part of how someone identifies themselves (Agius, 2022: 76).

In academia and research, international norms can be divided into three phases (Caglar et al. 2013: 8-9). In the first phase, scholars recognised that states' material interests and power are tied to international norms and ideas. In the second phase, institutions were introduced, and agenda setting was no longer solely tied to states (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Joachim, 2007; Keck & Sikkink, 1998). The third phase synthesises the first two, with scholars

becoming more critical of the premise that institutions create norms that cascade onto member states. In this phase, it is acknowledged that norms can emerge in various places, from various sources and are multifaceted (Acharya, 2004; Coleman, 2011; Elgström, 2000).

It has yet to be agreed upon which approach to theorise about norms is the most convincing. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) developed an influential study on norms titled “*Norm Life Cycle Theory*”, a central framework for researching international norms. While its primary focus was examining how human rights norms emerged and diffused, this work also presents a valuable framework for examining gender norms.

## **2.2 WPS as a Bundle of Gender Norms**

One of the aspects of norms is “*gender norms*”, which guide the WPS agenda. “*Gender norm*” is a slippery concept that consists of two constructivist parts (gender and norm), which are highly contested. Carpenter (2003: 671) defines gender norms as: *Appropriate relations between and among men and women*”. In sociological terms, gender norms are defined as the spoken and unspoken rules of societies about the acceptable behaviours of women and men and how they should act, look, think or feel (Weber *et al.*, 2019). According to proposed definitions, gender norms will be defined as a relationship between men and women through appropriate behaviour. In the context of the military and armed forces, this usually reinforces traditionally masculine traits, such as aggression, physical strength, and authority, which are seen as the traits of an ideal soldier (Eichler, 2014). On the contrary, traits associated with femininity, such as vulnerability, cooperation, empathy, and peace, are regarded as the other and ultimately threaten military effectiveness (Gilder, 2019: 158-159), making this relationship asymmetrical.

Women, peace, and Security (WPS) agenda challenges this traditional militaristic gender norm and proposes an alternative that focuses on women, proposing a normative logic and a judicial and institutional framework (Keck & Sikkink: 1998: 98). Initially led by the United Nations, the agenda has since been recognised and embraced by various international organisations, including NATO (Rushchenko, 2022: 1). At its core, the WPS agenda sets clear normative expectations for integrating gender equality and gender perspectives within security institutions. WPS norms challenge the traditionally male-dominated military cultures, which have historically overlooked women’s experiences and contributions in security and defence. In doing so, WPS aims to transform traditional gendered notions of NATO’s military structures and its member states.

## 2.3 The Norm Life Cycle Model

Having established the nature of the international gender norms promoted by the WPS agenda, the focus now turns to how such norms spread – a process known as norm diffusion. Of particular interest is how a norm that emerges in one context can influence norms in another place. To examine this dynamic, this thesis draws on Finnemore and Sikkink’s (1998) *Norm Life Cycle* model, which explains how international norms influence state behaviour through a three-stage process: first, the norm emerges; second, it gains broad acceptance (norm cascade); and finally, the norm becomes fully internalised (norm internalisation).

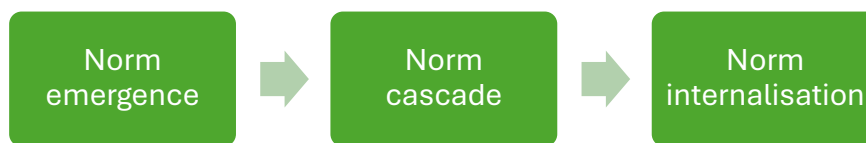


Figure 1. Norm Life Cycle inspired by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998)

Norms typically emerge to fill gaps in current practices. At times, international society lacks an adequate response to new problems, and there is a need to fill a normative gap in the current practices of IR, where WPS can be seen as an example of this (*ibid.*). Changes in the structure of the international system can alter perceptions of security, since the definition of a threat continues to evolve. Non-state actors like the UN and NATO are pivotal in creating new solutions or re-framing existing frameworks. This was particularly evident in the early to mid-1990s, with significant normative shifts, resulting in the rise of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine and the reconceptualisation of security (Bellamy, 2009; Lau, 2023).

From a constructivist perspective, the norms cycle arises from “norm entrepreneurs”, who can be NGOs, IOs or states (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998: 893). This differs from the realist perspective, which argues that a hegemonic state has to implement the norms and integrate them into practical policies (Ikenberry & Kupchan, 1990). These actors pursue new norms primarily based on moral values and persuade other actors to follow suit by peer pressure. Other actors, for example, states, conform to the pressure because they seek legitimacy (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998: 903). The previously mentioned Responsibility to Protect doctrine aligns with constructivist norm theory, since it emerged through the efforts of non-state actors and gained acceptance due to socialisation and pressure (Hofman, 2015). The study of norms demonstrates that many international norms have been raised due to strong moral convictions about right and wrong, and the wish to project them onto others. This was evident with the case of human rights, where a few key individuals pioneered the norm to

succeed. That and collaboration with government officials and IOs ultimately led to the emergence of those rights (Sikkink, 1998: 518-519).

### **2.3.1 Norm Cascade and Diffusion**

From a constructivist perspective diffusion is defined as a process through which international norms are transferred of objects, processes, ideas and information from one population or region to another and enter domestic spaces, primarily through socialisation by IOs (Checkel, 1999: 85). If diffusion encompasses the broader process of socialisation and helps to analyse how certain norms reach nation states, then cascade explains why and when norms gain wider acceptance.

Finnemore and Sikkink's (1998) *Norm Life Cycle* explains that norm cascade is the second stage in the norm diffusion process, which occurs when a critical mass of states adopts a norm due to socialisation by the norm spreader (*ibid.*: 902). Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: 906-907) propose three characteristics to judge norms' domestic influence and understand why some norms get internalised, while others do not.

1. Legitimation, which indicates domestic turmoil, where the legitimacy of elites is threatened, and norms are adopted to preserve reputation.
2. Prominence, which implies that some norms are of higher quality and are widely held by states viewed as successful.
3. Intrinsic characteristic of a norm, implying that norms which are more precise, rather than ambiguous, have been around for a while and have survived challenges, are more likely to be effective.

### **2.3.2 Norm Internalisation**

Norm internalisation is described as a culmination of the diffusion process, where norms are no longer questioned and are taken for granted. At this stage, internalised norms' behaviour is unquestioned and usually automatically adhered to, giving it power. On a domestic level, professionals are key agents for internalisation among actors. They transfer knowledge and socialise people and institutions to prioritise specific values above others. The policies advocated by professionals often have normative biases, which reflect the values they are promoting (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998: 904-905). Thus, norm internalisation is not uniform and occurs along a spectrum. The discussion of norm spectrum has not been explicit, but drawing on various norm researchers, the discussion certainly exists. Acharya (2004: 244) explains the concept of localisation, which claims that Southeast Asian societies were not

passive recipients of foreign cultural and political ideas but instead fitted foreign ideas about authority and legitimacy into their traditions and practices, much like Estonia would fit NATO ideas to its practices. Further, Cortell & Davis (2000: 70-71) write that not all norms will resonate in domestic debates. The first sign of domestic impact is its appearance in domestic discourse, followed by changes in national institutions, such as changes in domestic laws, and the analysis of the state's policies.

Thereby, the spectrum of internalisation is multidimensional, varying from the extent of how much of the initial norm has been internalised to how deeply the internalisation has reached on a domestic level, which can also be classified as the degree of norm adoption. The key stages of internalisation are absence of internalisation – the norm is not adopted rhetorically or institutionally; followed by partial internalisation, where a norm has been adopted in policy frameworks but lacks implementation; and finally total internalisation, where the norm has been adopted in policy frameworks and then embedded in practice. This spectrum will be used as an analytical tool to later measure the IOs' norm impact on the member state level.

## **2.4 Norm Socialisation**

Socialisation differs from learning, as it assumes that the learnt behaviour is already practised by another actor (Flockhart, 2004: 366). It resembles a mentor and mentee relationship, where an unequal dynamic exists, as the goal is to induct the new member into behaving and adopting thought patterns preferred by the socialiser (*ibid.*). Gheciu (2005: 979) argues that successful socialisation occurs when actors operate within Habermas' "*Common Lifeworld*" theory, which consists of collective interpretations of the world and a shared system of rules perceived as legitimate. Habermas elaborates on this theory in depth in "*The Theory of Communicative Action: Vol II*" (1987).

The subject of socialisation adapts norms strategically, where internal organisations calculate the cost-benefit of compliance (Checkel, 2005: 805; Schimmelfennig, 2005; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005). The benefits of compliance may include material incentives, such as economic or non-material incentives like inclusion into a community or a mixture of both (Flockhart, 2006). Socialisation is regarded as a deeper form of norm internalisation, which seeks institutional change, rather than mere superficial norm adoption to meet the membership criteria. By interacting with the socialiser, the socialised internalises new preferences, which would be Estonia taking up NATO WPS norms in this study.

Taking part in an IO as a value-based community, a state is theoretically expected to identify with the organisation and internalise its norms gradually. Once these norms become institutionalised, it becomes unlikely that a state will reverse its process, because the cost of deviation will be too high. In other words, the state succumbs to path dependency (Pierson, 2000: 252). In this case, socialisation is understood as a top-down process, where the socialised is rather a passive recipient of norms (Krasnodębska, 2014: 11). This ultimately makes socialisation the dominant mechanism of norm cascading (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998: 902) and further internalisation on the member state level. Thus, the theoretical expectation is that norms promoted by IOs (e.g., gender norms within the WPS agenda) will be diffused to varying degrees of internalisation at the member state level. This framework is used to study the effect of WPS norm diffusion and socialisation on Estonian national defence policies.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Research Design**

This study employs a single case study design, focusing on the degree to which NATO WPS adoption has influenced Estonia's gender norms in the armed forces over time. A single case study was chosen since it allows an intensive study of a single unit, shedding light on a question which pertains to a broader class of units (Gerring, 2004: 344). A case study separates one case from many others. It can demonstrate clear causal relationships between an intervention event and how it changes the behaviour of a state. Using a diachronic approach, the analysis compares gender norms in Estonia's armed forces before and after NATO WPS adoption, tracking formal policy changes and adoptions, such as increasing women's participation in the military. What makes this study diachronic is the emphasis on how Estonia's military gender norms have evolved through the WPS agenda. The research focuses on identifying norm adoption through key milestones (e.g., NAPs, ENSC, etc.) and comparing them to pre- and post-NATO WPS adoption periods, thereby tracking the evolution of gender norms in policies.

### **3.2 Case Selection**

Estonia's gender norms in the armed forces were chosen for analysis since, as a NATO member, it is expected to be influenced by the Alliance's policies. However, Estonia presents a fascinating "least likely" case for examining WPS norm internalisation. Unlike Western allies with longer histories of gender equality initiatives, Estonia joined NATO primarily for hard military functions, emphasising collective defence against Russia over normative commitments to gender-related norms. Nevertheless, to show its commitment to NATO values it had to engage with WPS framework, despite WPS agenda posing a challenge for Soviet era gender norms, which emphasises military masculinity and ultimately stigmatising women's armed participation in defence (Merridale, 2012), a legacy which has been carried over to contemporary inequalities, including wage-gap (Eurostat, 2023) and underrepresentation of women in the parliament and security institutions (EIGE, 2024). Acknowledging these domestic barriers, any significant progress of gender integration within Estonia's military is unlikely to happen from domestic pressures alone. Instead, it would be plausible to attribute these changes to external factors like adopted WPS framework, which ultimately shows that Estonia is a rather curious case for analysing norm diffusion in norm resistant context and to demonstrate the theoretical argument that the emergence of a norm in

an IO does lead to changes in norms among member states, even if seems unlikely due to domestic reasons and legacy.

Due to various policy documents, it is possible to assess the extent to which WPS norms have been institutionalised and then further serve as a benchmark to understand broader WPS norm diffusion in the Baltic region, bridging the literature gap of Baltic states and offering a unique perspective of a geopolitically vulnerable small state.

### **3.3 Operationalisation**

To trace the cascade and internalisation of NATO WPS norms to Estonia's national policies. This study assesses both the independent variable (NATO adopting WPS – emergence of a set of norms in an IO) and the dependent variable (Gender norms internalisation on the domestic level), which is operationalised as follows:

#### *Input variable – NATO adopting WPS*

To determine whether a norm has emerged by an IO, the study will identify expressions of appropriate relationships between men and women and their roles in the context of domestic and international peace and security. The input measurement draws from Finnemore and Sikkink's (1998) norm emergence criteria, establishing NATO WPS as an institutionalised international standard against which member state WPS adoption could be measured. The primary source for this will be NATO WPS 2007, the first institutional expression of the WPS agenda within the alliance. This will be complemented with NATO WPS 2018 and 2024, which will be included as additional help to trace how the norms introduced in 2007 have since pertained to NATO's normative baggage. To assess this, the document analysis addresses three points:

1. Framing of the norm – The analysis of WPS documents captures how the WPS norm is framed in the documents: as a strategic necessity or ethical obligation that member states should adopt. This is necessary to determine the justification of norm socialisation by NATO.
2. Specification of member state responsibilities – Furthermore, the analysis will focus on what is portrayed as appropriate behaviour for the organisation and its members in the documents, meaning specific policies and expectations that NATO advises member states to take. This includes assessing whether NATO has provided clear guidelines or if it is more of a general recommendation on where to implement WPS.

For example, being more gender inclusive is a broad term, but developing a National Action Plan to institutionalise practices is rather concrete.

3. Normative language and frequency – The study will code the strength of normative language, e.g. “must” and “should”, and determine the frequency of WPS norms proposed for this study (defined below).

*Output variable – Gender norms internalisation on a domestic level*

To assess the degree of WPS norms cascade and internalisation in Estonia, this study employs an analytical framework that measures norm internalisation on the domestic level as an output variable across three levels: *fully internalised*, *partially internalised* or *absent*. This framework categorises the extent of norm change and identifies what has changed due to WPS. The degrees of internalisation have been created drawing from previously discussed norm literature.

1. To categorise WPS as fully internalised, NATO WPS gender norms replace previously held gender norms in Estonia’s military. The WPS gender norms must be present through all documents, reaching the Estonian National Defence Development Plan (ENDDP) level, meaning there is a concrete incentive to adopt WPS in the future security agenda. The ENDDP represents the end point of policy planning as it determines where resources are allocated and the future of Estonia’s security planning. When WPS norms reach this level, they are on the brink of moving past rhetorical internalisation, since concrete implementation plans have been made.
2. To classify a norm partially adopted, NATO WPS gender norms must be present either in ENSC or absent from ENDDP level, meaning there is a policy framework developed, but no mention of them in practical strategy documents. This would mean that the norm has been formally acknowledged on policy levels, but no further commitments have been made to move it past the rhetorical level. Partially internalised norms remain peripheral to defence planning, but there is a chance that they could move further and be fully internalised.
3. Finally, to categorise WPS norms as absent, they must be present in official NATO WPS documents but absent from all levels of the Estonian security framework or mentioned superficially. In this case, Estonia continues to operate under traditional gender norms that embrace military masculinity in defence.

To have a precise analytical framework, gender norms in the armed forces have been categorised into three parts, which will be traced throughout Estonian documents. These three categories were created due to their clear semantic distinction from one another, which will be discussed below.

1. *Women's participation dimension* in security institutions involves including women in various roles, particularly in the military and decision-making processes. This norm semantically focuses on active agency and representation, marking women as active subjects, rather than policy recipients. Complete internalisation would be present at the ENDDP level, for example, by offering a fixed percentage of how many women should take up leadership positions in the military.
2. *Gender based violence (GBV) dimension* focuses on spreading awareness about the issue in Estonian security institutions, but also on a broader scale in conflict situations. This would include norms regarding prevention issues and response protocols. Besides prevention, this norm is about the mitigation of the effects on victims of GBV. Unlike the participation norm, this norm centres around harm mitigation and safeguarding, framing violence as a gendered phenomenon. Complete internalisation on the ENDDP scale would, for example, entail creating pre-deployment GBV training for personnel and spreading awareness in military institutions.
3. *The material capacity building dimension* would concern creating necessary material conditions to facilitate women's full participation in defence institutions by addressing physical and environmental barriers. This norm would require concrete institutional adaptations rather than symbolic commitments. For example, women should be given gender-appropriate equipment, such as properly fitted gear, separate sanitary facilities, private quarters, or healthcare services within military structures. This norm focuses on infrastructure modifications and resource allocation as prerequisites for meaningful integration, rather than abstract concepts of inclusivity and protection. Complete internalisation on the ENDDP scale would mean planned infrastructure modifications or budgetary allocations towards gender adaptive equipment.

### **3.4 Sources**

The study relies on various official NATO policies and Estonian national defence documents to measure the internalisation of Women, Peace and Security (WPS) norms within the

Estonian national defence framework. This study uses documents from multiple sources to establish a normative framework and its systematic implementation across three analytical levels (see Figure 3).

First, to establish NATO WPS as a normative condition, the study employs NATO WPS 2007, which serves as a guideline for member states. Moving on to the domestic level, National Action Plans (NAP) from three consecutive periods (2010-2014, 2015-2020, and 2020-2025) will be looked at to assess the degree of norm internalisation on an extensive level. These plans represent initial insight into how Estonia translates WPS to domestic policy commitments. The second stage of internalisation in defence practices will entail looking at National Security Concepts (ENSC) (2001, 2004, 2010, 2017 and 2023), which represent how the norms first introduced in NAPs are being integrated into broader security ideas. Last set of documents would be Estonian National Defence Development Plans (ENDDP) (2001-2005, 2009-2018, 2013-2022, 2017-2026, 2022-2031), which are the last step in the process of internalising a norm, meaning if a WPS norm reaches this stage it is counted as the most internalised. Since prior to joining NATO, no NAPs have been created. UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) documents will be utilised to assess the form of gender norms previously reflected in the country. Thus, to address the prevailing gender norms in the armed forces in Estonia prior to and after NATO WPS adoption, ENSC 2001 and 2004, ENDDP 2001-2005, and CEDAW 539 and 548 documents will be contrasted with post-NATO adoption documents.

Despite being chosen, the sources have different constraints. Since the thesis is looking at norms, which are broad, legally non-binding and aspirational, it makes it challenging to trace clear signs of norm internalisation on the member-state level, meaning that the author could subjectively interpret as something being internalised or not. Besides norm ambiguity, some documents are in Estonian, others in English, and some are translations from Estonian to English, meaning some nuance due to linguistic barriers could have been lost, e.g. some use of language could be interpreted as coercive measures. However, in reality, they are rather recommendatory. Despite those limitations, some of which are inherent to norm analysis, the documents were deemed the best for analysing WPS norm internalisation from IO to member states.

To collect the data on norm cascade and internalisation, primary sources and additions will be subjected to thematic analysis to determine the emergence of a norm and the degree of internalisation. According to Braun and Clarke (2012: 2), thematic analysis is a: “*Method for*

*systematically identifying, organising and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset. Through focusing on meaning across a dataset, thematic analysis allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences.*” The aim will be to identify which portrayals of appropriate behaviours concerning gender roles overlap between different documents or if they reach those documents at all. The aforementioned documents will be systematically coded to identify the gender norms promoted by NATO WPS (see Figure 8). A deductive coding approach will be used, meaning that a series of concepts will be brought to the data to interpret and code it (*ibid.*: 3). The approach to thematic analysis will consist of six phases:

The first phase of the analysis is to familiarise oneself with the data. This part aims to begin noticing relevant things to the research question. The second phase of analysis is generating initial codes. Codes are the building blocks of analysis, which help to provide a label to a feature of data, which is relevant to the research question (*ibid.*: 6). The Third phase is where the analysis will start to shape as there is a shift from narrow codes to broader themes. While a code does not have a pattern, a theme represents a patterned response to the data (*ibid.*: 7). Themes do not emerge independently and are usually not discovered; searching for themes and generating them is an active process. This means that the codes found are reviewed to identify areas of similarity and overlap. Fourth stage is reviewing potential themes about the entire dataset, which will ensure analytical quality (*ibid.*: 9). Fifthly, each theme will be further defined, to bring out its uniqueness and so that they could help provide a coherent story about the data (*ibid.*). Lastly, relying on codes, a report will showcase the relationship between NATO WPS and national documents (*ibid.*, Lagerspetz, 2017: 205). For example, if codes in national-level documents portray gender norms according to NATO WPS, this would suggest some degree of internalisation, depending on which national document the code was identified from (see Figure 8).

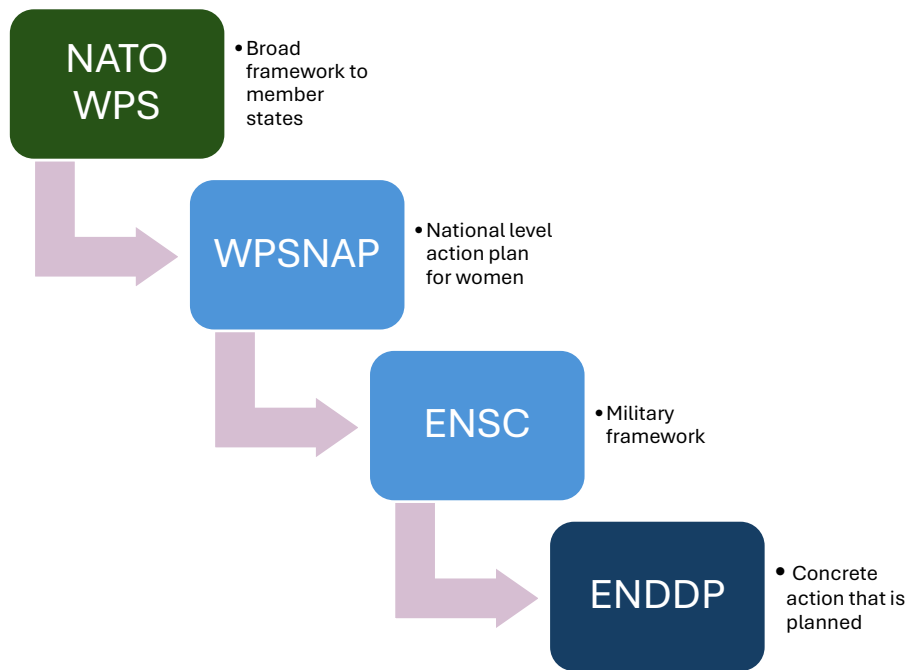


Figure 2. Document categorisation from broad to narrow

## **4. Analysis: NATO's Adoption of WPS and Change in Gender Norms in Estonia's Armed Forces**

### **4.1 The Emergence of WPS as a set of Gender Norms Inside NATO**

The NATO policy documents on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) represent the Alliance's initial commitment to implementing United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. These documents outline the expectations for member states and reflect an evolving framework to enhance women's meaningful participation in armed forces. Analysing these policy texts is essential for understanding what gender norms they contain, what these norms say in terms of appropriate behaviour, the scope and nature of NATO's normative agenda, as well as the degree of pressure exerted on member states to align with it. This section, therefore, focuses on three key policy documents: NATO WPS 2007, which serves as the basis for WPS norms, followed by NATO WPS 2018 and NATO WPS 2024 documents, which complement the initial agenda. The central task is to assess how specific gender-related norms being advanced are evaluated, the intensity of normative pressure applied, and secondarily, how the agenda has developed in both depth and ambition over time.

#### **4.1.1 Women's Participation**

The norm of women's participation has consistently served as the central pillar of NATO's WPS agenda, undergoing progressive development in scope, clarity, and normative pressure across the 2007, 2018, and 2024 policies. In the 2007 WPS document, participation is introduced frequently and prominently, appearing explicitly seven times, more than any other normative category. This reflects its foundational status within the policy's framework. One of the initial commitments highlights the importance of enhancing female involvement in conflict-related processes, stating: "*Aims to increase understanding of the impact of armed conflict on women [...] and to increase women's participation in the various phases before, during and after armed conflicts,*" (NATO, 2007: 1). While this statement remains broad, the document does extend its focus to participation at decision-making levels, although this responsibility is directed primarily toward the NATO Secretary-General and its cabinet, rather than member states (NATO, 2007: 2). The concept of representation, which also falls under women's participation dimension is referenced twice. This time also targeting member-states, meaning that in terms of expectations of appropriate behaviour, NATO WPS: "*Urges Member States to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and*

*resolution of conflict,*” (NATO, 2007: 3). The strength of the language used here suggests a higher degree of normative pressure than elsewhere in the policy, yet the absence of binding obligations places participation within a space of moderate norm adoption pressure, driven more by rhetorical emphasis than enforceable mechanisms (see Figure 3).

The 2018 policy builds upon this foundation, significantly expanding the scope of the participation dimension. While the 2007 document largely framed participation within a conflict and post-conflict context, the 2018 policy repositions it within NATO’s institutional structures. It emphasises not just the inclusion of more women in peace and security efforts, but also the need for structural transformation through the revision of training protocols and educational curricula within both military and civilian institutions (NATO, 2018: 13). This indicates an intent to embed gender inclusivity into the internal fabric of NATO, rather than limiting it to external missions. Participation is treated as both a standalone objective and a wider practice that is sought to be embedded into all practices of NATO, such as operational effectiveness, integrity, and monitoring. The document reiterates the importance of active involvement: *“The WPS resolutions reaffirm the important role of women in conflict and post-conflict situations and promote women’s active and meaningful participation in decision-making and the integration of gender perspectives into all peace and security efforts. The adoption of the resolution indicated a shift in thinking about women and the role of women in fostering peace and engaging in security,”* (ibid.: 10). It also places renewed emphasis on institutional reform: *“Representation of women across NATO and in national forces is necessary to enhance operational effectiveness and success. NATO will seek to increase the participation of women in all tasks throughout the International Military Staff and International Staff at all levels, including in meetings, training opportunities, and public engagement,”* (ibid.: 11). Given the policy’s assertive language and the introduction of specific implementation goals, women’s participation in the 2018 WPS can be categorised as fully adopted, indicating high normative pressure on both NATO structures and member states alike (see Figure 4).

This trajectory continues similarly in the 2024 WPS policy, where the norm of women’s participation remains central but is now framed in even more directive and institutionalised terms. There is a substantial shift in tone, moving away from general recommendations towards explicit obligations. The policy affirms: *“Their [women’s] full, equal, safe, and meaningful participation in decision-making is critical to the achievement of NATO’s mandate and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area,”* (NATO, 2024: 9). Unlike

previous documents, this policy directly addresses member states, making their responsibility unambiguous: *“Troop-contributing nations will work to increase the participation and representation of women in NATO-led forces at all levels through their force generation process. This necessitates gender-responsive leadership and accountability in addressing barriers to the recruitment, retention, and career advancement of women,”* (ibid.: 13). The use of prescriptive language alongside accountability mechanisms reaffirms a stance from aspirational framing to enforceable expectations. Participation is no longer positioned as a desirable outcome but as a core requirement for operational credibility and effectiveness. This transition signifies the consolidation of women’s participation as a fully institutionalised norm, which could be successfully socialised to member-states (see Figure 5).

#### **4.1.2 Gender-Based Violence**

The norm of preventing gender-based violence (GBV) has evolved significantly across NATO’s WPS policy documents, though its trajectory has not been without limitations. In the 2007 policy, GBV is explicitly acknowledged as a critical issue in the context of armed conflicts that requires mitigation, portraying it as a norm for member states to participate in. The introductory section underlines the necessity of incorporating gender-sensitive measures into peace agreements as a means of preventing further violence against women and girls (NATO, 2007: 1-1). The majority of references to GBV are situated within conflict zones and military missions abroad. For instance, the document: *“Calls on all parties to armed conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, and all other forms of violence in situations of armed conflict,”* (ibid.: 3). However, there is a notable absence of attention to GBV within NATO’s organisational structures and at the level of member states, which reveals a constrained view of violence as something external and far, rather than embedded within institutional frameworks. GBV is mentioned explicitly five times, which is fewer than references to women’s participation. The language used is mainly recommendatory. Rather than mandating or urging direct action, the policy “calls on” actors to respond, suggesting a relatively low level of normative pressure. As such, GBV prevention in the 2007 policy falls within the soft recommendations category, with limited expectation on implementation (see Figure 3).

By 2018, the GBV dimension had transitioned from general awareness-raising to a more institutionalised framework of obligations and accountability. The policy addresses GBV extensively, not only through rhetorical commitments but also through the development of mechanisms for prevention, response, and monitoring (NATO, 2018: 14). A dedicated section

on Integrity marks a significant shift, framing GBV – especially sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) – not just as a human rights concern but as a threat to NATO’s legitimacy and operational credibility. The language is more assertive: “*All troops in NATO-led operations and missions must live up to the highest standard of professionalism. In line with international norms and standards, the Alliance should develop specific mechanisms to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) as it causes disproportionate harm to women and girls and undermines NATO’s credibility and operational effectiveness,*” (ibid.). The policy outlines NATO’s institutional responsibility while assigning clear expectations to member states, accompanied by oversight and compliance mechanisms. In contrast to the externally focused framing of 2007, the 2018 document internalises GBV as a systemic issue that must be addressed internally. Given the strong language, precise accountability mechanisms, and broader scope, GBV prevention in the 2018 policy is categorised under intense normative pressure (see Figure 4).

The 2024 NATO WPS policy demonstrates a further refinement and intensification of this approach. The typology of violence is expanded, incorporating conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), and other manifestations of violence (NATO, 2024). The clear and directive language reflects NATO’s full institutional commitment and reaffirms a zero-tolerance approach. One of the most assertive passages highlights this accordingly: “*Sexual exploitation and abuse runs counter to NATO’s principles and core values, undermines the effectiveness and credibility of the Alliance, risks mission success, and can be a barrier for the full, equal, safe, and meaningful participation of women. NATO will continue to implement its zero-tolerance approach to all acts of sexual exploitation and abuse, as outlined in NATO’s Policy on Preventing and Responding to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA). Allies’ commitment to addressing SEA by implementing this priority through national structures, including within national military forces, in collaboration with NATO is essential,*” (NATO, 2024: 16). The emphasis on rhetorical clarity and concrete accountability mechanisms reflects a fully developed normative stance. As in the 2018 policy, the document makes it clear that gendered violence not only harms women but also undermines the legitimacy and efficacy of the Alliance as a whole. The combination of a broadened scope, accountability mechanisms, and prescriptive tone all indicate that GBV prevention is subject to intense normative pressure (see Figure 5), continuing its intense normative pressure.

### 4.1.3 Material Capacity Building

Material capacity building, which refers to the material and structural conditions that enable the meaningful integration of women into defence institutions, remains the least developed normative category in NATO's WPS policy trajectory. Unlike the more conceptual dimensions of participation and GBV prevention, material capacity building requires tangible institutional changes, such as appropriate infrastructure, equipment, and support mechanisms. In the 2007 policy, this category receives minimal attention. The only indirect reference is found in the advocacy of increased support: "*Urges Member States to increase their voluntary financial, technical and logistical support for gender-sensitive training efforts, including those undertaken by relevant funds and programmes,*" (NATO, 2007: 4). This statement is vague and open to interpretation, potentially referring to gender awareness training or broader capacity-building measures. There is no explicit mention of addressing physical or environmental barriers that hinder women's full participation in military settings, such as gender-appropriate equipment or facilities. The absence of specific commitments, paired with voluntary and non-binding language, places the norm of material capacity building firmly within the lowest tier of normative pressure, which is characterised by weak, general recommendations rather than concrete expectations from allies.

In contrast, the 2018 policy explicitly references material capacity building: "*Defence and related capacity building efforts will aim at developing institutions that are accessible and responsive to the needs of both women and men, and include the promotion of women's participation in national armed forces,*" (ibid.: 13). Capacity building is mentioned repeatedly throughout the document, often alongside the need for adequate resource allocation. Although there is no direct mention of material resources or specific funding, these efforts are presumed to fall under the broader capacity-building strategy, potentially encompassing equipment and other material resources. The policy signals an awareness of the structural adjustments necessary to integrate women fully and meaningfully into defence structures. Given the strong language around capacity building and the implied inclusion of material support, the norm can be classified as under moderate pressure.

However, among the three normative categories, material capacity building regresses in the 2024 WPS policy. Despite the overall strengthening of normative language across the policy, capacity building lacks a concrete framework for promoting the material conditions necessary for women's full participation in peace and defence structures. As in the 2007 document, only one broadly worded reference to resource allocation remains open to interpretation: "*The*

*Alliance will ensure adequate personnel and financial resources are allocated to implement this Policy and the Action Plan. In addition to internal review processes, independent assessments and civil society consultations, including through the CSAP, will be beneficial to provide recommendations on the implementation of the Action Plan and help identify whether actions and resources are enabling NATO to meet its objectives,”* (NATO, 2024: 16). While in the 2018 document there was mention of various capacity building efforts, the 2024 WPS talks about the category instead in an information-gathering manner. While the language reflects a more formalised commitment to policy implementation, it does not specify material incentives such as gender-adaptive infrastructure or equipment. Thus, *the material-capacity building dimension* remains within the recommendation category, lacking the precise description of plans and necessary obligation to elevate it to a higher level of normative pressure.

In sum, there are strong normative frameworks for women’s participation and gender-based violence dimensions, which indicates an emergence of gender norms in NATO, considering these dimensions as norms. Based on the theory above, a further diffusion could be expected at the member-state level, including Estonia. Since the material capacity building dimension has not been articulated or appropriately enforced, it is unlikely that further impact will be seen. Having established the non-linear trajectory of NATO’s WPS policy and its increasing normative pressure on member states, attention now turns to the national level. While NATO’s institutional commitment has deepened, the effectiveness of norm diffusion ultimately depends on the degree to which member states adopt, adapt, or resist these expectations. The following section analyses Estonia’s security and defence policy documents to assess the extent of formal uptake of NATO WPS norms and to evaluate the depth of internalisation within the Estonian national context.

## **4.2 Norms in Estonia’s Armed Forces from 2001 to 2004**

To establish a baseline for evaluating normative change following the introduction of NATO’s WPS agenda, this subsection examines gender norms in the armed forces as they can be retrieved from Estonia’s core security documents adopted prior to both NATO accession and the institutionalisation of the WPS framework in 2007. Specifically, the documents analysed include the *Estonian National Security Concept* (ENSC) from 2001 and 2004 and the *Estonian National Defence Development Plans* (ENDDP) for 2001-2005 and 2005-2009. Although the latter overlaps with adopting the NATO WPS agenda, it is treated here as a pre-WPS document, as its development and formulation preceded 2007.

Across all four documents, there is a complete absence of references to women or gender-related considerations in security or defence. The only marginally relevant reference appears in the ENSC 2001 (pg. 8), which affirms Estonia's commitment to democracy and the protection of human rights. Principles that could, in theory, provide an entry point for normative change. Similarly, the ENSC 2004 (pg. 8) reaffirms Estonia's alignment with NATO's Strategic Concept, stating: "*Estonia's approach to the matter of national security is in full accord with the principles of NATO's Strategic Concept*". However, the referenced 1999 NATO Strategic Concept offers only limited and general mentions of human rights, with no direct engagement with gender issues (NATO, 1999). While ENSCs had various mentions of democracy and human rights, the ENDDP of 2001-2005 briefly mentions democracy, while the 2005-2009 document does not mention either and solely focuses on the militaristic aspects of national security.

Absence of WPS-like gender norms does not inherently mean that there are no gender norms. Estonia joined the UN in 1991, an IO which created the gender norms which WPS follows. Thus, to seek earlier discussions of gender norms, the study turns to UN documents, particularly the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Reports I-III were submitted to the UN in 1994, 1998, and 2002 before joining NATO. In the three CEDAW summary records there was one mention of "military" when it comes to women: "*In the past women had been excluded from the military and aviation professions, but that was no longer the case; as a result Estonia had its first women aircraft captains,*" (CEDAW, 2002b: 6). Showing that women's participation in the military has started to shift from complete exclusion to possible inclusion. The mention of GBV was quite remarkable across the 548<sup>th</sup> and 539<sup>th</sup> meeting documents (I-II), which mentioned domestic and workplace violence towards women as a serious issue, offering prevention and mitigation (CEDAW, 2002a; CEDAW, 2002b). The dimension of material capacity building has not yet been addressed because it is specific to military infrastructure and concerns women. However, Estonia is considering gender, although not initially in military aspects. After adopting NATO WPS, Estonia may be socialised into further focusing its attention on reforming gender norms within the armed forces.

While such a focus may lay the groundwork for future norm internalisation, it does not reflect a meaningful engagement with WPS principles, which is the focus. Instead, it underscores the necessity of external normative influence (e.g, NATO) for any meaningful change in Estonia's gender-related defence policies. Thus, all the dimensions can be positioned in the

absent category of internalisation, since military gender norms socialisation has not happened yet.

### **4.3 Situation After NATO WPS**

This section analyses Estonia's key security and defence policy documents following NATO's adoption of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in 2007 to evaluate how its gender norms have changed Estonia's norms. Following the theoretical framework of *Norm Life Cycle theory*, internalisation is assessed through the formal presence of WPS-related language, commitments, and priorities in Estonia's *National Action Plans* (NAPs), *National Security Concepts* (ENSCs), and *National Defence Development Plans* (ENDDPs). Special attention is given to whether increased normative pressure from NATO correlates with deeper adoption of WPS principles across these strategic documents.

#### ***National Action Plans (NAPs)***

Developing a National Action Plan (NAP) is a formal response by member states to adopting the WPS agenda. It represents a first layer of norm internalisation. Although developing a NAP is not obligatory, it is strongly encouraged. While NAPs do not legally bind states to implement the principles of WPS, they serve as reference points for defence frameworks and related developments.

Estonia's first NAP (2010-2014), developed according to the 2007 WPS agenda, is structured into four implementation chapters:

1. Political and diplomatic activities in international organisations.
2. Cooperation and assistance to improve the conditions of women in post-conflict settings;
3. Raising awareness of women's roles in peace and security;
4. Expanding opportunities for women's participation in operations.

Additional chapters on communications and monitoring the agenda contribute to a holistic action plan. The primary focus is promoting women's participation, which is addressed in all chapters, with Chapter 4 specifically dedicated to increasing women's opportunities. Although there is no dedicated chapter on gender-based violence (GBV), the plan includes several references to assisting women in conflict areas. For example, it states: "*The inclusion of women in peace operations enables better communication with women in need of assistance due to gender-based and sexual violence*" (NAP, 2010: 12). This illustrates the

link between women's inclusion in defence and addressing GBV in conflict zones. However, the plan remains externally focused, with no mention of a zero-tolerance policy for GBV within national military structures. Additionally, material capacity building is absent since the emphasis is placed on judicial and administrative development.

The second NAP (2015-2019) maintains the outward focus on conflict regions, aiming to raise international and national awareness about women affected by conflicts, while further enhancing women's participation. It essentially reiterates the goals of the first NAP but introduces a more explicit emphasis on raising awareness around mitigating GBV in conflict zones (NAP, 2015: 10). Despite this progression, material capacity building at the national level remains unaddressed. However, Estonia reaffirms its commitment to supporting international projects that promote access to education and healthcare, including information on sexual and reproductive health (*ibid.*: 7).

The third NAP (2020-2025) highlights clear advancements around promoting WPS gender norms. The document brings up clear initiatives that have taken place around gender equality: "*Policy for Increasing the Opportunities for Women's Participation in the Defence Forces*" and "*Women in Uniform*", combining a direct approach to increasing participation with raising awareness. Further, the Ministry of Defence has created a dedicated position to address WPS-related issues, indicating a potentially deeper internalisation of WPS norms (NAP, 2020: 4). While GBV continues to be a prominent theme, this NAP shifts the focus from conflict areas to addressing violence within the national context. The document references Estonia's 2017 ratification of the Istanbul Convention, which prioritises victim protection and prohibits victim-blaming. Alongside these developments, the NAP also follows previous ideas. There is continued support for improving access to education and healthcare for women in conflict zones, incorporating the impacts of COVID-19 (*ibid.*: 11).

Overall, Estonia's NAPs closely reflect the category balance established by the WPS agenda. Since women's participation has consistently been at the core of WPS, Estonia has mirrored this normative focus in its national plans. The minimal references to material capacity building in the original WPS documents most likely contributed to its weak norm socialisation at the member-state level. As a result, this aspect has not been internalised, even at the initial policy-making level.

### ***Estonian National Security Concepts (ENSC)***

The Estonian National Security Concept (ENSC) 2010 was adopted following NATO's 2007 WPS policy. However, like earlier ENSC documents, it focused primarily on alignment with democratic principles, human rights, and Estonia's active involvement in NATO. Though other social issues like minority integration are mentioned, there were no visible signs of WPS norm internalisation at this stage. ENSC 2017 continued along the same trajectory, stressing: "*Estonia's approach is based on the conviction that security is generated to protect human rights, fundamental freedoms and basic human values,*" (ENSC 2017: 2). While the document references Estonia's contributions to international peace operations, which includes civil crisis management, humanitarian aid, and peacebuilding, there is no explicit mention of gendered perspectives or WPS-related principles.

In contrast, ENSC 2023 demonstrates a significant shift, reflecting a more profound impact of WPS norms internalisation. It explicitly emphasises the goal of ensuring equality of opportunity and living environment (ENSC 2023: 5). Notably, for the first time, the document mentions women in the context of national defence and conscription: "*Estonia's defence capability is enhanced by boosting the attractiveness of conscription and reserve service, and a greater participation of women,*" (ibid.: 14). This acknowledgement of women's role in strengthening defence capacity signals a progress in security thinking. The increased focus on women's participation may stem from the influence of NATO's 2018 coercive WPS measures and the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022, both of which brought heightened attention to gender dynamics in security contexts.

### ***Estonian National Defence Development Plans (ENDDP)***

The Estonian National Defence Development Plans (ENDDPs) represent the final stage of norm internalisation, as they build on the foundations set by the National Security Concepts (ENSCs) to enhance the country's strategic defence planning. The evolution of the ENDDPs has been notable. Until the 2017-2026 plan, these documents focused almost exclusively on militaristic approaches, with little to no reference to social norms. However, more recent ENDDPs reflect a significant shift in perspective. The 2017-2026 plan marked a turning point by recognising that national security extends beyond the number of deployed weapons or military readiness. It began to adopt a more holistic approach, acknowledging the importance of non-military dimensions in ensuring national security (ENDDP, 2017: 2). This broader understanding is further emphasised in the 2022-2031 ENDDP, which states that narrowly

focused military planning is unsustainable, as modern threats often arise in non-militaristic forms (ENDDP, 2021: 3).

The ENDDP 2009-2018 is the first strategic document issued after NATO adopted the WPS. As previously noted, the 2007 WPS policy lacked enforcement mechanisms to coerce allies, nor did it establish clear accountability structures to monitor member-state compliance. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the ENDDP 2009-2018 does not mention women or human rights. While the dimension of material capacity building is present, it is framed through a distinctly male-centred lens, implying that male conscripts need better infrastructure to perform their duties (ENDDP, 2009: 13). “*The infrastructure of the Defence Forces – such as barracks, warehouses, headquarters, and training grounds – must be designed to enable service members to focus fully on their primary task: preparing for national defence in times of war and conducting unit training [Kaitseväe infrastruktuur – kasarmud, laod, staabid, harjutus väljad– peavad olema sellised, et kaitseväelased saaksid maksimaalselt keskenduda põhilisele ülesandele – sõjaliseks riigikaitseks valmistumisele ning üksuste väljaõppele],*” (ibid.: 11).

A shift in focus began in 2013, when military conscription was officially made available to women in Estonia. Interestingly, this development was not reflected in the 2010-2014 NAP or the 2010 ENSC, both of which made no mention of extending conscription to women. Instead, the 2013-2022 ENDDP marks the first acknowledgement of women in this context, noting that Estonian female citizens are permitted to complete military service from April 1, 2013 (ENDDP, 2013: 9). This discrepancy suggests that the top-down cascading model of policy development may not be entirely synchronised. It implies that the National Defence documents may receive input on gender-related matters from sources other than the NAPs, potentially pointing to alternative influences.

The 2017-2026 ENDDP introduces a significant normative shift from conceptualising national security through militaristic means to a more inclusive framework. While no mention of women specifically, there is mention of equality. The document states that everyone must have equal opportunities to contribute to national security, reflecting an underlying norm of participation. Moreover, the plan underlines prioritising socio-economically vulnerable groups and focusing on them when planning and implementing various activities, showing that the focus is above traditional militaristic means (ENDDP, 2017: 23). The plan proposes a list of various other development plans used to compose the

document, varying from health to sport politics, but no mention of NAPs, suggesting a gap in integrating WPS gender norms in peacebuilding and defence.

The 2017-2026 ENDDP introduces a significant shift from a narrowly militaristic approach to a broader, more inclusive understanding of national security. Although the document does not explicitly reference women, it does introduce the principle of equality, stating that all individuals must have equal opportunities to contribute to national defence. Notably, it highlights the importance of addressing the needs of socio-economically vulnerable groups, emphasising that development planning and implementation should account for the fact that crises disproportionately affect these populations (ENDDP, 2017: 23). The plan outlines a range of other strategic documents utilised, from health to sports policy. However, it makes no mention of the NAPs.

The final ENDDP 2022-2031, similarly to the previous document, does not directly address the issue of women's participation. However, it presents equality in a way that suggests the matter of women has been resolved, shifting the focus toward broader principles of equal treatment among people. The document contains a dedicated subchapter stating: *“The development plan measures are based on the principle of equal treatment, which means that all residents of Estonia have the opportunity to contribute to national defence. Similarly, the measures planned for the protection of the population are intended for all residents of Estonia, regardless of their origin, religion, race, age, or gender”* (ENDDP, 2021: 21). This framing indicates a move toward universal inclusion, where participation and protection are guaranteed to all without specific reference to gender. This shift from integrating women to embracing a generalised notion of equality may stem from earlier initiatives such as the 2017 campaigns (*“Women in Uniforms”* etc.). These campaigns may have been perceived as having fulfilled the necessary steps to promote women's involvement, and the focus should be on equality in a broader aspect.

Overall, WPS gender norms have shown gradual but uneven internalisation at the national level since 2007. The highest degree of internalisation was reached in the dimension of *women's participation*, which has reached the ENDDP level through NAP and ENSC documents. Though not always linear in its detail, for example, women's conscription had not been referenced in NAP or ENSC but made its way to ENDDP, elements of the category appear across all levels. Therefore, the WPS participation norm has spread widely, though inconsistently. This is followed by GBV, which has been partially internalised as a domestic and international peacebuilding concern. Lastly, the *material-capacity building* dimension

remains absent from all national documents, indicating that resource-based shifts are yet to be addressed.

Considering that before NATO WPS 2007, there were no defence and security-related military norms in Estonia, NATO has successfully socialised Estonia. The post-NATO period shows a shift from civilian-focused gender norms to the military sector. This is best seen in NAP frameworks, in which *women's participation* and GBV are addressed internationally and domestically. Weaker internalisation has happened on the ENSC and ENDDP levels, showing that adoption has been partial (See figures 6-7). The lack of complete institutionalisation signals incomplete internalisation. Thus, NATO's WPS has started a normative change, but its deeper internalisation remains limited.

## 5. Conclusions and Discussion

The objective of the research was to trace the internalisation of WPS gender norms in Estonia, focusing on three dimensions: *women's participation*, *gender-based violence (GBV)* and *material-capacity building*. Tracing the periods from 2001 to 2025, the analysis aimed to evaluate pre- and post-NATO periods, assessing the extent to which Estonia has internalised WPS gender norms through NAPs, ENSCs and ENDDP documents. This study sought to bridge the gap in WPS knowledge in the CEE region and contribute to broader discussions within feminist security studies and norm internalisation literature.

The central question guiding the thesis was: What effect do NATO WPS gender norms have on Estonia's armed forces?

- The findings demonstrate that the NATO WPS agenda has had a partial and non-uniform effect on norm internalisation in Estonian armed forces.

This study shows that gender norms have emerged within NATO, namely through the WPS agenda. As such, NATO was expected to be a successful norm socialiser for member states like Estonia. This expectation is clearly met in *the women's participation* dimension, which demands more inclusion of women in military and decision-making positions. In Estonia, this norm has achieved complete formal internalisation, reaching the final stage of the *Norm Life Cycle*. This outcome can be attributed to multiple overlapping factors, such as strong and directive language from NATO WPS and earlier commitment to civil gender equality through the UN. Specific participation reforms included opening conscription to women and launching awareness campaigns like "Women in Uniform". This allowed Estonia to demonstrate compliance without fundamentally restructuring its defence institutions.

The second dimension: *Gender-based violence*, remains only partially internalised at the NAP level, showing that the norm has cascaded but not been fully internalised. Although GBV is mentioned in all the NAPs, it has not been systematically addressed within Estonia's defence structures; instead, it has been addressed in post-conflict situations. GBV is seen as a foreign issue rather than a domestic concern. Even though key conventions such as the Istanbul Convention have been ratified, their integration into defence policy remains superficial, reflecting weak GBV norm socialisation by NATO.

Finally, there is a complete absence of *a material capacity-building* dimension in national documents, which demands allocating funds or building gender-appropriate infrastructure.

The absence from the national level could come from the fact that the dimension has not emerged as a strong norm in WPS, which means there has not been enough incentive to socialise and internalise this norm.

Secondary findings were that the more coercive and directive the WPS language became, the more likely those norms were represented in national policies. This indicates that NATO is an effective socialiser of norms. However, the success of norm internalisation could also reflect Estonia's willingness to be socialised into a framework. Pre-NATO documents already demonstrated Estonia's rhetorical commitment to democracy and human rights, principles that are one of the reference points to the WPS agenda. Therefore, Estonia's norm internalisation can not only be attributed to NATO's socialisation but also to its domestic normative compatibility. The research has revealed that NATO's influence is not linear. Though NATO has strengthened its normative pressure over time, not all norms diffuse equally, and some advancements skip larger frameworks, like NAPs and show themselves in the end strategy documents. This finding contributes to understanding norm internalisation: WPS norms are not fully adopted but are seen as fragments. Estonia's selective adoption and norm fragmentation highlight that IO socialisation can be filtered through other priorities. Moreover, this study teaches that gender norms can be changed in "least likely" cases, such as Estonia and perhaps the rest of the CEE, but partially and more on the framework level. This shows that there are contenders to IO military gender norms, such as pragmatic defence, that hinder full internalisation.

While providing an answer, this study has several limitations, which make further research possible. First, the norm spectrum used to analyse norm internalisation at Estonia's level is highly subjective, and other authors could provide different frameworks to assess the degree of internalisation. Secondly, only formal documents were analysed to assess the norms, which do not fully capture women's practical implementation and personal experiences in the forces. Due to the progress of internalisation not being linear, alternative factors and documents have certainly influenced gender norms on a national level. However, due to limited space, only WPS has been looked into. Thus, avenues for future research could entail looking at different documents or variables influencing internalisation.

For example, it could be argued that coercive post-2018 NATO WPS socialisation was not the sole driver of internalising WPS norms in Estonia. Rather, it was the result of a combination of factors, particularly the presence of an external threat (Russia). This raises an important question: do major events such as wars or heightened security threats accelerate the

internalisation of certain norms, particularly those related to Women, Peace, and Security? Examining the internalisation of WPS during times of potential conflict challenges the traditional assumption that war is primarily a male domain. In contrast, modern militaries, such as Estonia's, appear to increasingly integrate women into defence structures, potentially drifting away from militarised masculinity. This evolution suggests that the presence of a significant threat may, in fact, serve as a catalyst for deeper WPS norm internalisation, as states seek to broaden their strategic capacities by including women more meaningfully in peace and security efforts. Thus, this creates a new question: Does a significant security threat promote the socialisation/internalisation of WPS norms?

To conclude, adopting the Women, Peace and Security agenda has reshaped Estonia's defence policies and shifted them from traditional to WPS-inclined norms, proving that traditionally hard security-focused states can be socialised into adopting international gender norms.

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## 7. Appendices

Norm pressure	Recommendation	Moderate pressure	Strong pressure
<b>Women's participation</b>		X	
<b>Gender based violence</b>	X		
<b>Material capacity building</b>	X		

Figure 3. NATO WPS 2007 norm pressure categorisation

Norm pressure	Recommendation	Moderate pressure	Strong pressure
<b>Women's participation</b>			X
<b>Gender based violence</b>			X
<b>Material capacity building</b>		X	

Figure 4. NATO WPS 2018 norm pressure categorisation

Norm pressure	Recommendation	Moderate pressure	Strong pressure
<b>Women's participation</b>			X
<b>Gender based violence</b>			X
<b>Material capacity building</b>	X		

Figure 5. NATO WPS 2024 norm pressure categorisation

Norm/state of norm	Absent	Partially internalised	Internalised
<b>Women's participation</b>	X		
<b>Gender based violence</b>	X		
<b>Material capacity building</b>	X		

Figure 6. WPS-like norm adoption before 2007

Norm/state of norm	Absent	Partially internalised	Internalised
<b>Women's participation</b>			X
<b>Gender based violence</b>		X	
<b>Material capacity building</b>	X		

Figure 7. WPS norm adoption after 2007

Category	Codes	Sub-codes	Examples
<b>Gender norms</b>	<b>Women's participation</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Representation</li> <li>2. Appointment</li> <li>3. Leadership</li> <li>4. Integrate</li> </ol>	<p>“NATO recognises the importance of increasing the number of women in the International Staff and International Military Staff, and will support efforts to increase the number of women at all levels, including in decision-making and leadership roles.” (WPS, 2018: 13)</p>
	<b>Gender-based violence</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Prevention</li> <li>2. Protection</li> <li>3. Medical attention</li> <li>4. Sexual violence</li> <li>5. Rape</li> </ol>	<p>“Leaders and Commanding Officers should be accountable for ensuring that personnel/troops are trained on preventing and responding to conflict-related sexual violence and take all possible measures to prevent it.” (WPS, 2018: 14)</p>
	<b>Material capacity building</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Infrastructure</li> <li>2. Funding</li> <li>3. Logistical support</li> <li>4. Adapt</li> <li>5. Allocate</li> <li>6. Material capacity</li> </ol>	<p>“Defence and related capacity building efforts will aim at developing institutions that are accessible and responsive to the needs of both women and men [...]” (WPS, 2018: 13)</p>

Figure 8. Code table

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