



Women's motivations for and barriers to voluntary military service – Key findings of the study (2023/2025)

Context: Despite its mandatory conscription only for men, the Swiss Armed Forces wants to be for everyone. An Armed Forces in which all individuals can realise their potential and contribute their unique skills and talents to fulfilling the mandates. For several years, the Swiss Armed Forces has been pursuing the explicit goal of increasing the proportion of women. Women who serve voluntarily can gain valuable experiences and make a personal contribution to Switzerland's security. The Swiss Armed Forces can benefit from new perspectives and ways of thinking, as mixed teams are more successful than homogeneous ones. They are more adaptable and innovative, manage conflicts more effectively, and take a more balanced approach to risk. This is true not only for gender-diverse teams, but for diverse teams in general. Diverse teams enhance collective resilience and strengthen the defence capabilities of the Swiss Armed Forces.

In order to increase the proportion of women, the Swiss Armed Forces needs to know and understand young Swiss women's perceptions and attitudes towards voluntary military service. To this end, 1,317 young Swiss women aged between 15 and 25 were surveyed in summer 2023.¹

Key finding: The openness of Swiss women aged between 15 and 25 towards voluntary military service stands at 26%. There are no significant differences between groups in terms of age, language region, political views, education or urban/rural location. Consequently, there is potential for a significantly higher proportion of women in the Armed Forces than the current 1.6%.

Conceptions of military service

- The majority of young women view military service as demanding, but overall with a positive effect: 50% think that military service is demanding, but that one can benefit from it, 44% imagine that one can prove oneself in the military and discover one's own limits, 30% think that one becomes physically fit, and 26% think that one learns to organise oneself.
- Almost half imagine military service as being controlled by others: 48% think that the military is strict and that one is told what to do.
- Negative images are in the minority: 17% think that there is a lot of shouting in the military, 15% find the military pointless and a waste of time, and 12% believe that the military is mainly boring.
- Only 6% have never thought about what military service would be like.

Motives for women's voluntary military service

- The most important factor is personal growth: military service is challenging and offers opportunities for personal development.
- In second place is broadening horizons: the opportunity to learn something completely new through military service is a strong motivation for voluntary military service.
- The third most important reason is equality: women and men have the same abilities and/or should have the same rights and obligations. Furthermore, the Armed Forces should not remain a male-dominated field.
- Personal benefits come in fourth and fifth place: these include the added value that military service can bring to a person's profession or career, and the opportunity to gain leadership experience.

¹ A total of 4,461 Swiss women (gross sample) were invited to participate in the survey. They were selected at random from the sample register of the Federal Statistical Office (FSO) according to the criteria of age and language region (Art. 13c para. 2 (SR 431.012.1) of the Statistical Survey Ordinance). The data was collected between June and July 2023 using an anonymous online questionnaire in the three official languages (German, French and Italian) by YouGov Switzerland (formerly LINK).



Reasons against women's voluntary military service

- The most important argument against military service is the time commitment without option to withdraw.
- Secondly, they are worried about sexism and/or personal safety.
- The third biggest obstacle is concern about overly demanding physical and/or mental requirements. Among the youngest respondents (aged 15–17), these worries even rank first.
- Gender equality is the fourth most important counterargument against military service: respondents disapprove of women serving in the Swiss Armed Forces because women are still disadvantaged in Switzerland and/or already do enough work for society.
- Only then follows the argument that women are not legally obliged to perform military service.
- In addition, the lack of privacy in shared dormitories and showers would be uncomfortable for almost two-thirds of the study participants.

Sources of information and information requirements

- Only 38% of young Swiss women are at least “somewhat well” informed about voluntary military service (self-assessment).
- The most important source of information about the Armed Forces is family and friends (59%), followed by traditional media (26%), social media (22%) and school (18%).
- A good quarter (26%) do not inform themselves about the Swiss Armed Forces.
- Most young Swiss women would like to see information about women in the Armed Forces summarised on a website (28%). 24% would like more information at school, and 22% via social media. 16% would like to receive information on orientation day.
- Many women who use existing information channels would like to see more information about voluntary military service for women on these same channels (e.g., Armed Forces website: 42%, orientation day: 37%, social media: 34%). This suggests that the information currently available does not meet the needs of young women.

Arguments that the participants find convincing

- 40% of participating women consider it important that the meaning behind military tasks and activities is made clearer and communicated to the target group with reference to the overall context of the Armed Forces' mandate.
- The opportunity to perform military service alongside other women appeals to 36%.
- 33% consider the recognition of military training for occupational training/further training or a university degree to be a beneficial measure.
- 33% consider try-out opportunities in the Swiss Armed Forces to be interesting.
- Flexible start and end dates for military service, including freely allocable vacation days, are convincing factors for 32%.
- A further 32% think it is important to give space and time to women-specific issues and topics during military service.

The study demonstrates a surprisingly high level of openness among young Swiss women towards voluntary military service. Many aspects that are important to women also apply to male conscripts (see study on transfers from military to civilian service). These include aspects such as a greater sense of purpose, the promotion of a culture of inclusion and better compatibility with civilian life. If suitable measures are implemented, this could improve the overall conditions of military service for all genders and help to secure sufficient troop levels of the Armed Forces in the medium and long term.