

THE ROLE OF A SOCIAL WORK MANAGER IN THE LITHUANIAN ARMED FORCES

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ABSTRACT

The Lithuanian Armed Forces operate in a complex and demanding security environment, where military personnel are exposed to prolonged stress, organisational pressure, family separation, and potential crises. Contemporary military effectiveness increasingly depends not only on tactical and technical capabilities but also on psychosocial stability, organisational cohesion, and long-term personnel sustainability. In this context, social work management plays an essential role in maintaining soldiers' psychosocial well-being and supporting operational readiness.

This article analyses the role, functions, challenges, and strategic significance of social work managers in the Lithuanian Armed Forces, drawing on a review of contemporary scientific literature. Research Objectives:

1. To analyse the role and main functions of social work managers in the armed forces.
2. To examine the contribution of social work management to soldiers' psychosocial well-being and organisational functioning within military institutions.
3. To identify the main challenges, ethical dilemmas, and development directions for strengthening social work management in the Lithuanian Armed Forces.

A narrative literature analysis was conducted using peer-reviewed international publications published between 2011 and 2025. The analysis focuses on military social work, psychosocial support systems, leadership processes, ethical dilemmas, organisational resilience, and adaptation to military culture.

The results demonstrate that social work managers perform multifunctional roles, including psychosocial counselling, crisis intervention, preventive support, mediation between soldiers and command structures and civilian institutions, and coordination of multidisciplinary support services. Effective social work management contributes to improved psychosocial adaptation, reduced stress-related difficulties, enhanced morale, strengthened organisational trust, and increased institutional resilience. At the same time, the findings reveal persistent challenges such as limited institutional resources, role ambiguity, ethical tensions, professional isolation, and stigma related to psychosocial support within military culture.

Keywords: *military social work; social work management; Lithuanian Armed Forces; psychosocial support; soldier well-being.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the understanding of military effectiveness has expanded beyond traditional concepts of physical readiness and tactical capability to encompass psychosocial and organisational dimensions. Modern armed forces increasingly recognise that human factors - including psychological resilience, social stability, and emotional well-being - play a decisive role in sustaining long-term operational readiness. This shift is particularly significant in professional armed forces, where service members are expected to maintain consistently high performance levels over extended periods.

The Lithuanian Armed Forces operate within a complex geopolitical and security environment shaped by regional instability, NATO commitments, and heightened readiness requirements. These conditions impose sustained psychological and social demands on military personnel. Soldiers are required not only to master technical and

tactical skills but also to cope with chronic stress, uncertainty, role strain, and prolonged separation from family members. Scientific research indicates that prolonged exposure to such stressors, if insufficiently addressed, may result in decreased performance, burnout, family dysfunction, and increased attrition rates [1].

Military social work has emerged as a structured, professional response to these challenges, providing institutionalised psychosocial support within military organisations. Social work managers occupy a particularly important position, operating at the intersection of individual support and organisational systems. Their responsibilities extend beyond direct counselling to include coordination, mediation, preventive programming, strategic consultation, and participation in policy-related processes. In smaller NATO member states such as Lithuania, where institutional resources may be comparatively limited, the effectiveness of social work management becomes especially significant.

Despite the growing body of international literature on military social work, empirical and conceptual analyses specifically addressing social work management within the Lithuanian Armed Forces remain limited. This article seeks to address this gap by offering a comprehensive literature-based analysis of the role, functions, challenges, and strategic importance of social work managers in the Lithuanian military context.

In addition to operational demands, contemporary military organisations face increasing societal expectations regarding transparency, ethical governance, and personnel welfare. Armed forces are no longer evaluated solely on battlefield performance but also on their capacity to safeguard the dignity, mental health, and long-term well-being of their personnel. Research demonstrates that perceived organisational support significantly influences soldiers' trust in leadership, institutional commitment, and long-term service retention [2]. Therefore, social work management should be understood not only as an internal support mechanism but also as a contributor to institutional legitimacy in democratic societies.

Moreover, NATO-aligned armed forces, including Lithuania, increasingly operate within multinational frameworks. Participation in international missions exposes soldiers to intercultural environments, coalition command systems, and diverse operational stressors. These dynamics require adaptive psychosocial competencies and structured support mechanisms that can respond to complex stress patterns. Through coordination, advisory functions, and systemic intervention, social work managers contribute to strengthening institutional preparedness for such multidimensional operational demands.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This article is based on a narrative review of the scientific literature on military social work, social work management, psychosocial support in the armed forces, and organisational well-being. The literature search was conducted using international academic databases, including Scopus and Web of Science.

The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- peer-reviewed scientific articles and academic book chapters;
- publications in English;
- studies published between 2011 and 2025;
- research focusing on military social work, leadership, psychosocial support, or soldier well-being.

The following keywords were used in various combinations: “military social work”, “social work manager”, “armed forces psychosocial support”, “soldier well-being”, and “military organisations”.

Selected sources were analysed thematically, with particular attention to the roles, functions, challenges, and institutional impact of social work managers in military contexts. As the study relies exclusively on secondary data, ethical approval was not required. Generative artificial intelligence tools were used solely for language editing and structural refinement; all analytical decisions and interpretative processes were carried out independently by the author.

The narrative review methodology was selected due to the exploratory and interdisciplinary nature of the research topic. Military social work management remains a relatively under-theorised field, and existing studies vary considerably in their methodological designs, disciplinary orientations, and national contexts. A narrative approach, therefore, allows for the integration of diverse theoretical and empirical perspectives.

The literature search was conducted in several stages. Initially, database searches were performed using predefined keywords and combinations. Subsequently, titles and abstracts were screened to assess relevance to military social work, psychosocial support, leadership, and organisational well-being. Finally, full-text articles were reviewed to ensure conceptual alignment and scientific rigour.

Thematic analysis enabled the organisation of findings into core analytical categories: functional roles of social work managers; psychosocial well-being; leadership and organisational relevance; ethical and structural challenges; adaptation to military culture; and strategic development directions. This analytical framework facilitated the identification of recurring conceptual patterns and interrelationships across studies.

The reliance on secondary data constitutes a methodological limitation, as the study lacks original empirical evidence from the Lithuanian Armed Forces. Nevertheless, the review provides a necessary theoretical foundation for future empirical investigations and contributes to the conceptual consolidation of military social work management as a distinct professional domain.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The role and functions of a social work manager in the military

Military social work is defined as a specialised professional practice aimed at addressing the psychosocial, organisational, and family-related needs of service members within hierarchical, disciplined institutions [3,1]. Within this framework, the role of a social work manager integrates direct psychosocial assistance with organisational coordination and strategic advisory responsibilities.

At the individual level, social work managers conduct psychosocial assessments, provide counselling, implement crisis intervention, and facilitate referrals to internal or external support services. Military personnel are exposed to prolonged stress, intensive training cycles, deployment-related uncertainty, and family separation, all of which may negatively affect psychological functioning. Early identification of psychosocial risk factors enables preventive intervention and supports adaptive functioning.

Preventive work represents an equally important dimension of professional practice. Social work managers organise psychoeducational activities, stress-management programs, and adaptation support initiatives to strengthen long-term resilience. In professional armed forces, where sustained service requires continuous psychological stability, preventive measures are essential.

At the organisational level, social work managers serve as mediators between soldiers, command structures, and civilian institutions. As emphasised by [4], such

mediation enhances access to social and health services while reducing institutional barriers. Consequently, social work management becomes an integral component of broader military personnel support systems rather than a purely auxiliary service.

The role further includes continuous assessment of psychosocial needs across different stages of military service: initial adaptation, intensive training, deployment, post-deployment reintegration, and long-term career development. Each stage presents specific psychosocial challenges that require targeted and context-sensitive interventions.

In addition, social work managers contribute to institutional learning processes. Through documenting recurring issues, preparing reports, and participating in interdisciplinary consultations, they provide leadership with feedback on systemic risk factors. This function connects individual-level experiences with organisational decision-making processes and policy development.

Recent empirical evidence reinforces the multidimensional nature of this role. Grover et al. identify perceived social support as a central determinant of long-term psychological adjustment [2]. Although their findings are primarily focused on individual outcomes, they underscore the structural importance of professionals who strengthen institutional support networks. Similarly, methodological flexibility in military social work is emphasised [5].

Within the Lithuanian Armed Forces, social support mechanisms are institutionally established and operationalised. Social work managers coordinate assistance for soldiers affected by service-related trauma, injury, or health complications. Their responsibilities include psychosocial consultations, support in preparing documentation for compensation and insurance procedures, mediation with medical and rehabilitation institutions, and representation in relevant commissions. Support often extends throughout rehabilitation and post-service reintegration processes, ensuring continuity of care.

In cases of illness, social work managers provide guidance regarding healthcare access, social guarantees, temporary incapacity procedures, and financial entitlements. By assisting soldiers in navigating administrative systems, they reduce bureaucratic burden and secondary stress during vulnerable periods.

Structured assistance is also provided throughout deployment cycles. Prior to international operations, social work managers offer consultations concerning social guarantees, family preparedness, and potential psychosocial risks. During deployment, they may serve as contact persons for families experiencing difficulties. Post-deployment support includes reintegration counselling and mediation in cases of relational or emotional strain. Such continuity strengthens both individual resilience and institutional stability.

Family-related assistance constitutes another essential area of practice. Services include mediation in cases of family conflict, counselling regarding children's educational challenges, support during bereavement, and assistance with administrative procedures following the loss of a family member. Recognising the direct relationship between family stability and operational readiness, social work managers incorporate family systems into broader support strategies.

Targeted interventions are also available for soldiers experiencing material hardship, addiction-related problems, or other complex social circumstances. Through comprehensive needs assessment, coordinated referrals, and follow-up monitoring, social work managers adopt a preventive, systemic approach to reduce long-term psychosocial risks.

Additional guarantees are ensured for conscripts and soldiers with officially recognised service-related disabilities. Social work managers facilitate access to rehabilitation programs, compensation mechanisms, and social integration measures, thereby safeguarding legal entitlements and human dignity.

Collectively, these institutional practices demonstrate that social work managers within the Lithuanian Armed Forces operate simultaneously as case coordinators, mediators, advocates, and strategic advisors. Their role integrates individual counselling with institutional navigation and systemic coordination, thereby contributing to psychosocial well-being and organisational resilience [10].

3.2. Contribution to soldiers' psychosocial well-being

Psychosocial well-being encompasses emotional stability, perceived social support, and the capacity to cope effectively with stressors. In military settings, it is closely linked to operational readiness, ethical conduct, and long-term retention. Research indicates that soldiers who receive timely psychosocial support demonstrate improved adaptation and lower levels of stress-related symptoms [3].

Accessibility and confidentiality are central to effective support. In military culture, stigma associated with mental health difficulties may discourage help-seeking behaviour. When social work services are perceived as trustworthy, independent, and non-punitive, soldiers are more likely to seek assistance at an early stage [1].

Family-related factors significantly influence psychosocial stability. Military service often entails frequent relocations, prolonged absences, and uncertainty. Indirectly supporting military families strengthens service members' emotional stability and job satisfaction [4].

Social work managers play a particularly important role during crises, including exposure to traumatic events or personal loss. Timely psychosocial intervention reduces the likelihood of long-term psychological consequences and facilitates recovery, thereby supporting both individual well-being and unit cohesion [6].

Psychosocial well-being should be conceptualised as a dynamic process rather than a static condition. It fluctuates in response to operational tempo, leadership practices, and personal circumstances. Social work managers contribute to stability through ongoing monitoring, follow-up interventions, and relational continuity.

Contemporary empirical findings further highlight that social support significantly mediates the relationship between psychological capital and subjective well-being [7]. Similarly, higher perceived support is associated with reduced depressive symptoms, lower post-traumatic stress indicators, and improved functional outcomes [2].

Structured psychosocial support programs encompassing both service members and their families improve reintegration outcomes and reduce long-term stress effects [8]. These findings collectively reinforce the importance of comprehensive, relationally oriented psychosocial management within military institutions.

3.3. Organisational significance and leadership aspects

Beyond individual assistance, social work managers play a substantial organisational role by contributing to leadership processes and the organisational climate. Military effectiveness depends not only on discipline and operational structure but also on trust, morale, and cohesion.

Social work managers advise commanders on psychosocial risks, including chronic stress, family-related difficulties, and declining morale. Integrating social work perspectives into leadership decision-making enhances institutional adaptability and resilience [5].

Leadership endorsement significantly influences the effectiveness of psychosocial programs. Awareness and leadership support directly affect participation rates. Even well-developed programs remain underutilised in the absence of cultural normalisation of help-seeking [9].

Perceived organisational support increases trust and morale [2]. Through advisory and consultative roles, social work managers contribute to shaping this perception at both structural and cultural levels.

Their advisory function becomes particularly critical during organisational change, including restructuring, heightened readiness states, or extended deployments. By assessing potential psychosocial implications of strategic decisions, social work managers help leadership balance operational demands with human capacity.

In this sense, social work management contributes to the “human sustainability” of military institutions, ensuring that operational effectiveness is aligned with ethical responsibility and long-term personnel stability.

3.4. Challenges in social work management within the armed forces

Despite their institutional importance, social work managers encounter multiple structural, cultural, and professional challenges within military environments. Limited financial and human resources, high caseloads, and insufficient staffing levels frequently constrain the scope of psychosocial support and reduce opportunities for preventive programming [6]. When operational demands intensify without proportional expansion of support structures, systemic vulnerability may emerge.

Role ambiguity represents an additional challenge. Social work managers must reconcile professional ethical standards with organisational accountability within hierarchical command systems. Unclear expectations regarding authority, confidentiality, and reporting obligations may weaken professional autonomy and undermine trust among service members. Clear institutional role definitions are therefore essential for effective practice [3].

Stigma associated with mental health and psychosocial support remains a persistent barrier. Soldiers may perceive engagement with social work services as potentially detrimental to career progression or as an indication of weakness. Even in well-developed military systems, awareness of available services does not automatically translate into utilisation if cultural barriers remain unaddressed [9]. Consequently, social work managers operate not only as service providers but also as agents of cultural change within military institutions.

Professional isolation further complicates practice. In certain units, social work managers may represent the only professionals from their discipline, limiting opportunities for peer consultation and supervision. Such isolation can increase professional strain and heighten ethical risk. Continuous training, structured supervision, and institutional recognition are therefore necessary to sustain professional competence and prevent burnout.

Escalating geopolitical tensions and prolonged readiness conditions intensify these challenges. Environments characterised by heightened military conflict increase psychosocial strain while simultaneously amplifying organisational pressure [6]. Under such conditions, the demand for support services rises significantly, requiring adaptive capacity and institutional resilience within social work management structures.

3.5. Social work management and adaptation to military culture

Adaptation to military culture is a complex psychosocial process, particularly during the initial stages of service and during periods of organisational transformation. Military culture is characterised by hierarchy, discipline, collective identity, and strong mission orientation. While these elements are essential for operational effectiveness, they may generate psychological tension when individual needs conflict with institutional expectations.

Social work managers facilitate adaptive integration by supporting identity development, coping strategies, and constructive engagement with hierarchical structures. Adaptation should not be reduced to passive compliance but understood as an active negotiation between personal values and organisational norms [5]. Social work managers assist service members in navigating this process while maintaining psychological integrity.

In the Lithuanian Armed Forces, adaptation challenges may be intensified by participation in multinational NATO missions, sustained readiness requirements, and exposure to high-intensity operational contexts. Soldiers are expected to perform under uncertainty and potential threat, conditions that may exacerbate role conflict and moral dilemmas. Social work managers address these challenges through psychoeducation, stress management support, and counselling focused on work–life balance and ethical reflection.

Research associates inadequate adaptation with increased disciplinary issues, emotional distress, and early attrition [1]. Preventive identification of maladaptive patterns allows timely intervention, benefiting both the individual and the institution. Retention of experienced personnel is strategically significant in professional armed forces; therefore, early psychosocial support directly contributes to organisational sustainability.

Perceived social support within units further influences adaptation outcomes. Strong peer and institutional support enhances psychological adjustment following combat exposure [2]. By strengthening relational networks through mediation, group interventions, and preventive programming, social work managers foster collective cohesion and facilitate successful cultural integration.

3.6. Ethical challenges and professional dilemmas in military social work management

Ethical complexity is inherent in military social work management. Professionals operate at the intersection of social work ethics, organisational loyalty, and hierarchical authority. One of the most significant dilemmas concerns confidentiality. While professional standards prioritise client privacy and trust, military contexts may necessitate information sharing to ensure operational safety and discipline.

Ethical decision-making in military settings requires advanced professional judgment and institutional clarity [3]. Social work managers must carefully evaluate when disclosure is justified to prevent harm, while simultaneously preserving trust in support services. Inadequate management of this balance risks undermining the legitimacy of psychosocial assistance.

Dual loyalty represents another persistent challenge. Social work managers are expected to advocate for soldiers' well-being while remaining accountable to command structures. Tensions may arise in cases involving disciplinary procedures, deployment fitness evaluations, or organisational restructuring [4]. Navigating such

situations requires ethical sensitivity, transparency, and adherence to professional standards.

During periods of active conflict, ethical tensions may intensify. Psychological vulnerability can increase even among highly motivated soldiers under high-intensity operational conditions [7]. In such contexts, social work managers must reconcile operational imperatives with the protection of human dignity and psychological safety.

Addressing stigma constitutes an additional ethical responsibility. By promoting psychological literacy and normalising help-seeking behaviour, social work managers foster a culture of respect and support within military institutions.

3.7. Strategic importance of social work management for organisational resilience

Organisational resilience refers to an institution's capacity to withstand, adapt to, and recover from internal and external stressors. In military contexts, resilience encompasses not only logistical preparedness but also human sustainability. Psychological stability, morale, and social cohesion are central components of long-term operational effectiveness.

Social work managers contribute to resilience by identifying psychosocial risk factors, strengthening support networks, and facilitating recovery processes. Military social work should be viewed as a strategic investment rather than a supplementary service [1]. Effective psychosocial management reduces absenteeism, supports retention, and enhances ethical decision-making under pressure.

Perceived social support functions as a protective factor against long-term psychological distress among combat-exposed personnel [1]. Social support enhances the impact of psychological capital during conflict, amplifying resilience mechanisms [7]. Integrated support systems involving families, leadership, and health professionals generate more sustainable reintegration outcomes [8].

Within the Lithuanian Armed Forces, social work managers contribute to resilience during heightened readiness periods, post-deployment reintegration, and organisational change. By strengthening institutional feedback mechanisms and advising leadership on systemic issues, they support adaptive learning and long-term stability.

3.8. Future directions for social work management in the Lithuanian Armed Forces

The future development of social work management in the Lithuanian Armed Forces should prioritise institutional consolidation, professional capacity-building, and empirical evaluation.

First, formal clarification of roles within organisational structures would enhance cooperation with commanders and strengthen professional autonomy. Clearly defined responsibilities reduce ambiguity and improve interdisciplinary collaboration.

Second, continuous professional development is essential. Social work managers require advanced training in trauma-informed practice, crisis response, moral injury, organisational consulting, and culturally sensitive intervention in multinational contexts. Investment in specialised education ensures preparedness for evolving operational realities.

Third, interdisciplinary integration should be strengthened. Social work managers should collaborate closely with psychologists, medical personnel, chaplains, and leadership representatives within structured multidisciplinary teams. Coordinated

approaches have been shown to produce more sustainable outcomes than isolated interventions [1].

Finally, future research should focus on empirically assessing social work management outcomes within the Lithuanian Armed Forces. Mixed-method designs combining qualitative interviews with quantitative well-being indicators would provide valuable evidence for policy development and institutional planning.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of contemporary scientific literature demonstrates that social work managers play a multifaceted, strategically significant role within the Lithuanian Armed Forces. Their professional responsibilities include psychosocial counselling, crisis intervention, preventive programming, mediation, ethical decision-making, leadership consultation, and participation in organisational development.

At the individual level, social work managers contribute significantly to soldiers' psychosocial well-being by addressing stress-related challenges, facilitating adaptation to military culture, supporting military families, and responding to crises. At the organisational level, they enhance leadership awareness of human factors, strengthen institutional trust, and contribute to the resilience and sustainability of military organisations.

At the same time, the literature reveals several persistent challenges affecting social work management in military environments, including stigma related to psychosocial support, ethical dilemmas, professional isolation, limited institutional resources, and increasing operational pressures. Addressing these challenges requires clear role definitions, leadership support, and continuous professional development.

Therefore, strengthening social work management should be considered a strategic priority in the continued development of the Lithuanian Armed Forces. Institutional recognition and investment in psychosocial support systems can enhance not only soldiers' well-being but also long-term organisational resilience, ethical leadership, and operational readiness.

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