

# WOMEN AND MILITARY IN UKRAINE: VOICES OF THE INVISIBLE BATTALION

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***This article presents the results of sociological research that has a metaphorical title, “Invisible Battalion”, and demonstrates that women in the armed forces and in volunteer battalions were not given equal to their male colleagues treatment; their contributions were rarely recognized. The study was conducted in the summer and autumn of 2015. Forty-two interviews were taken with women (aged 20-47) and nine with men who were or are participating in the so-called Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) in the East of Ukraine. Women in the Ukrainian military face gender segregation problems, both vertical and horizontal ones. The state regulates work conditions of military women via paternalist (protective) approach.***

Recent events in Ukraine connected with the Euromaidan protests of 2013-2014 and later the military conflict in Donbas brought changes into women's lives and their roles in both the society and their families. On one hand, the threat of violence makes women more vulnerable to socio-economic situation. On the other hand, during these turbulent events, Ukrainian women managed to challenge traditional gender roles (as caretakers and victims of a conflict) and reclaimed visibility, recognition, and respect as revolutionaries and volunteers.

Women were actively participating in all forms of activities in the protest space of the Maidan. Besides cooking, cleaning,

and entertaining, women were fighting on barricades, doing negotiations, and participating in peace-keeping, providing medical support, maintaining information support, participating in legislative work and logistics, and providing education for protesters and organizational support. When the protests turned violent, women were excluded from much of the protest zone activities<sup>1</sup>. As a response to this exclusion, women organized both military and non-military Women's Sotnyas (or hundreds)<sup>2</sup>.

Later, when the so-called Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) started, women joined the front lines of Donbas war as volunteers, journalists, medical staff, and military. But

<sup>1</sup> O. Onuch, T. Martsenyuk, Mothers and Daughters of the Maidan: Gender, Repertoires of Violence, and the Division of Labour in Ukrainian Protests, “Social, Health, and Communication Studies Journal, Contemporary Ukraine: A Case of Euromaidan”, 1(1) 2014, pp. 80-101.

<sup>2</sup> T. Martsenyuk, Gender and Revolution in Ukraine: Women's Participation in Euromaidan Protests of 2013-2014, “Perspectives on Europe”, 44(2) 2014, pp. 15-22.



## **women joined the front lines of Donbas war as volunteers, journalists, medical staff, and military**

female fighters as well as women in the Ukrainian army in general face gender discrimination, recognition and visibility problems.

### **Women's Participation in the Military**

In the military sociology, discussions on women's participation in the armed forces are based on the opportunities for women to be professional soldiers. The main dilemma in discussing gender integration is a question of what a modern army should be like. Should it be a professionally closed group, or must it also respond to social changes in society and to a changing role of women in society, in particular?

American scholar Mady Segal singled out three groups of factors that promote women's integration in the army: changes in the armed forces, in the social structure of society, and in culture<sup>3</sup>. The researcher understands changes in the armed forces as the changing concept of national security, military technology, organizational structure of the army, purpose of the armed forces, and military recruitment policy. A change in the social structure lies in the fact that women have actively entered the labour market and the public sphere in recent decades. Mady Segal defines cultural factors as changing cultural values in relation to the role of women in the Western societies and

popularity of the liberal principle of equal rights and opportunities.

According to different feminist approaches, there are two major opinions on women's integration into the armed forces. Liberal feminists claim that women's involvement in military service is an important part of equal rights and, ultimately, leads to obtaining the full citizenship in their countries. Radical feminists see women's service as a reification of martial citizenship and cooperation with hierarchal and sexist institutions.

### **Ukrainian Women in the Military**

Nataliya Dubchak wrote in 2008 that traditionally, the Armed Forces of Ukraine used to be the most conservative social institution on the issue of women in the military, whereas currently, almost 10% in the Armed Forces of Ukraine are women<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, representation of women in defence has been increasing, which is consistent with global development trends. However, the growing number of female soldiers, especially the contract ones, is not associated with the prestige of the service but rather with the reluctance of men to hold low-paid positions. In fact, women mostly have so-called "feminized" professions such as nurses, finance, logistics, and communications jobs. The situation did not change radically.

In October 2015, the head of the Communications and Press at the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, Oksana Gavrylyuk reported at a briefing in Kyiv<sup>5</sup> that 938 women had participated in the ATO. Statistical information was also received

<sup>3</sup> M. W. Segal, Women's Military Roles Cross-Nationality: Past? Present? And Future, "Gender & Society", 9(6) 1995, p. 760.

<sup>4</sup> N. Dubchak, Жінки у збройних силах України: проблеми гендерної політики (Women in the Armed Forces of Ukraine: Problems of Gender Politics), "Стратегічні пріоритети" ("Strategical Priorities"), 9(4) 2008, pp. 187-188.

<sup>5</sup> UNIAN, Майже тисяча українок взяли участь в АТО (Almost One Thousand of Ukrainian Women Participated in ATO), 9 October 2015, [<http://www.unian.ua/war/1147650-mayje-tisyacha-jinok-viyskovoslujbovtsiv-vzjali-uchast-v-ato.html> access: 25 September 2016].

from the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Internal Affairs<sup>6</sup>. As of October 2015, about 14,500 female soldiers and 30,500 employees of the Armed Forces of Ukraine were in the service. Almost 2,000 are officers with 35 women holding managing positions at the Ministry of Defence, General Staff and various corps of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. In summer 2015 the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine indicated that the total number of the National Guard of Ukraine is about 14,000 people, including 21 women (positions: doctors, nurses), for the ATO duration. In 2014-2015, about 22,000 National Guard of Ukraine troops, including 500 women, stayed in the zone of hostilities.

According to a report on discrimination and gender inequality in Ukraine, there is evidence of employment discrimination against women, particularly in the armed forces<sup>7</sup>. The number of positions that women can occupy in the Ukrainian army is small. In addition, there is evidence of sexist remarks by military commanders.

## Gender Politics in Ukraine

The issue of equal rights and opportunities for women and men in the Ukrainian society is governed by both general and special legislation. Discrimination on the basis of gender is prohibited by both the Constitution of Ukraine and the Law on Principles of Prevention and Combating Discrimination in Ukraine (2012). Ukraine also has specific legislation designed to promote gender equality: the Law on Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities of Women and Men (2005).

Ukrainian legislation (such as the Code of Labour Laws of Ukraine), in its effort to become gender-specific, still tries to protect women, family, and children, thus perpetuating traditional gender roles<sup>8</sup>. De jure gender equality is supported by national institutional mechanisms and legislation. At the same time, de facto, it could be argued that despite different legislative attempts, not much has been implemented in terms of tangible policies.

The Ukrainian labour market is characterized by a high rate of female participation and regulation that is relatively gender neutral, apart from some protective regulation for women workers in mines and other parts of the heavy industry. Women do not have the right to do any work or to have one of the professions that are included in the "List of Heavy Jobs and Work in Harmful/Dangerous Conditions" approved by the Ministry of Health in 1993. According to the Labour Code of Ukraine, women may not be employed for hard work or dangerous jobs; they may not be involved in lifting and moving items whose weight exceeds specifically established limits. Indeed, over 450 professions are prohibited by law for women in Ukraine today. Also, women may not be involved in work at night, except for the sectors and types of work with the maximum night hours for women, approved by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. These paternalist regulations also do not allow official employment of women in a majority of professions in the military sector.

Gender politics of the Armed Forces of Ukraine is a part of the overall gender policy,

<sup>6</sup> T. Martsenyuk, G. Grytsenko, A. Kvit, "Invisible Battalion": Women's Participation in ATO Military Operations (Sociological Research), Kyiv 2016.

<sup>7</sup> In the Crosscurrents: Addressing Discrimination and Inequality in Ukraine, The Equal Rights Trust Country Report Series: 5, London, August 2015, p. 53, [[http://www.gay.org.ua/publications/antidi\\_report2015-e.pdf](http://www.gay.org.ua/publications/antidi_report2015-e.pdf) access: 25 September 2016].

<sup>8</sup> T. Martsenyuk, Gender Equality Situation in Ukraine: Challenges and Opportunities, "Gender Equality Policies and EU Integration - Experience of Visegrad for EaP Countries", 2016, p. 203-225.

the function of military administration bodies that regulates the processes of social interaction between military men and women in the army, improvement and development of their social status and relationships, taking into account military cultural traditions and stereotypes. Nataliya Dubchak, an expert with 18 years of experience with the Armed Forces of Ukraine, described some of the mechanisms of gender policy implementation in the armed forces. In particular, in 2010, she was an advisor to the minister of defence on gender issues as a volunteer. Natalya Dubchak also occupied a special position, which was introduced by a decision of the minister of defence in 2008. Her position was called the gender policy officer. But this position lasted only for two years.

In the opinion of Mariia Ionova, a member of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine and co-chair of the Inter-Fractional Caucus “Equal Opportunities”, the problem of improving women’s status in the military was a part of a broader issue – poor representation of women in the decision-making process. In the Ukrainian Parliament (Verkhovna Rada), women constitute only 12% of all 450 deputies.

The Armed Forces of Ukraine have developed gender politics that meets the national gender policy and provides for efficient gender mainstreaming in the military. However, there is a problem of resistance of the existing mechanisms and realistic implementation of the declared policy of equal rights and opportunities for women and men.

### **Voices of Women Fighting in ATO: Results of Sociological Study<sup>9</sup>**

The field part of our study included collection

of different data by various methods: in-depth semi-structured interviews with women who participated in the ATO, interviews with experts in military and / or gender equality spheres, content analysis of publications in Ukrainian mass media. Since our research of the topic of women in the military in Ukraine seems to be the first one, our aim was to get a general overview in order to discover more specific issues for future research. But as the idea of this research belonged to female ATO participants themselves, the most important focus of the study was the issue of the possibility to serve. These participants knew which problems they face, and the generalized

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evidence provided by the research was used later in a successful public campaign.

The feminist approach to the research made us provide as much space to the direct speech of women in the military as possible. The research was conducted in the summer and autumn of 2015. We asked 42 women in the military service at the forefront of the Anti-terrorist operation zone in Ukraine, including one woman activist providing self-imposed unpaid supply work for the army, to speak to us<sup>10</sup> on various aspects of women’s service. Respondents aged 20 to 47 were recruited by the snowball sampling technique. We made a guideline for the interviews including several units of questions, but the respondents had the possibility to talk as much as they wanted and to put emphasis where they wanted,

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<sup>9</sup> Sociological study “Invisible Battalion’: Women’s Participation in Military Operations in the ATO” inspired and organized by Maria Berlinska, volunteer and Head of the Center Air Reconnaissance. Maria Berlinska and Anna Kvit were co-authors of this study and helped with data and information for this article.

<sup>10</sup> Interviews were organized and taken by the project coordinator Maria Berlinska.

naming problems, which researchers might not even suggest.

The three units of questions in the guideline included: a legal aspect of participating in the ATO, living conditions during the service, as well as emotional and behavioural aspects of their stay on the front. The interview guide also included questions on motivation for service, on visions of development of the Ukrainian army and female service in particular, and on the respondents' approach to other women.

During the desk part of the study, we addressed the issue of labour division as it is enshrined in the Ukrainian law, in particular in legal documents related to the Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Social Policy, and Ministry of Health Care. (The detailed explanation of this issue was provided in the desk part of the study<sup>11</sup>.) They state that a large number of military positions are closed to women, mostly the combat ones but also such positions as a photographer or an interpreter. The labour division is based on gender stereotypes, where any prestigious work is "male" and any un-prestigious and service work is "female" and pays less.

Thus, while men are mostly officially mobilized and officially employed, most of our respondents (40 of the 42) are volunteers of the service. Our empirical results show that women are mostly not employed in formal positions. Only around 40% of the respondents (17 of the 42) managed to get a formal position. Speaking about actual roles and positions, 15 of the 42 of our respondents hold purely combat positions; the others are medical workers (19 of the 42) or have other supportive roles. Some respondents combine various responsibilities at the same time.

Even when a woman is formally employed in a position, the actual occupation may be different from the formal position. One respondent told us she was an accountant according to her documents, but actually served as a rocket operator. Another one is a doctor in fact and a bathhouse superior in papers (and actually, her military unit has no bathhouse at all).

This inconsistency leads to the situation when women cannot have a legal status of combat participants and subsequently to receive appropriate benefits, from salaries and awards to the list of privileges provided by the Law on Status of War Veterans, Guarantees of Their Social Protection – free sanatorium treatment, 75% discounts for utility services payment, and so on.

"What benefits are you talking about, if there is no information I was there. Well, maybe there is somewhere, but not in the right places" (Female respondent # 8).

These obstacles to serve are related to the motivation issues. We asked this question and found out that women in the ATO have quite different motivations for voluntary participation in the war – from generally civilian (to defend the territorial integrity of the state) to fully private (wanted to serve since childhood). One of the female respondents followed her adult son to the combat zone, another one – her female friend. Some respondents went after their husbands. Some women started as supply activists and then proceeded to direct participation in combat.

Since legal problems lead to the situation that female combat is unawarded or underawarded, we make a conclusion that the respondents' motivation to serve is strong

<sup>11</sup> See Section 2.4.2. Prohibition of certain military occupations for women in T. Martsenyuk, G. Grytsenko, A. Kvit, "Invisible Battalion", p. 16-18.

enough. They do not see obtaining benefits as a critical motivation for themselves, and sometimes even clearly deny it.

"I don't count on that. That is, I originally didn't do it for that, not for the benefits" (Female respondent # 10); "It is my duty. There is no other way" (Female respondent # 38).

The problem above we call "legal invisibility". And it leads to another problem we call "infrastructural invisibility". If officially there are few women in the military, then there is little supply of uniforms and footwear. They have to either buy all of these, as well as female hygiene products, with their own money, or ask supply activists for help. No one told us that these things were supplied officially.

"People like me need custom tailoring. First, I am a woman; second, my figure is not standard. I need an individual approach" (Female respondent # 13); "There is nothing for women in the army. I have an impression there are no women in the army" (Female respondent # 36).

Separate accommodation for women is usually unavailable as well, though in some places it is organized by soldiers themselves. Another problem is that gender-sensitive health care is not provided at all. Though our respondents do not complain about the health care in general (in particular because many of them are paramedics themselves, and some even organized a comprehensive system of health care in their unit), they raise a question - what can paramedics do with gynaecological troubles, if any?

"I would like to have a better provision of medicines, including drugs that are specific for women. A lot of women have cystitis." (Female respondent # 17); "When we were at Schastya, there was a hospital, a clinic, where they can see women for some special cases. But of course, if we were somewhere in the field, with a standard hospital, I'm

not sure a problem could be resolved, if needed..." (Female respondent # 19).

So, women in the military can only rely on the national health care system, if ever available in proximity to the military unit location.

Another part of the research addressed psychological aspects of the female service. To some extent, we can confirm the assumptions of previous researchers that war emphasizes stereotypes and gender roles. While men think of war as of the serious, male business, women are perceived as not worthy enough to participate in a combat. They are believed to be on the frontline only to assist men. But the reality is different from the stereotypes, and our respondents do confront them. Generally, the female respondents confirm a friendly attitude towards them; their opinions - if they want to express them - are heard, and some respondents have an impact on decision-making in their units. But our respondents stated as well that they face the stereotypical attitude, protective and underestimative, and they have to prove that they can serve equally to men.

"I often heard: 'You are a woman, stay at home and cook some borscht'. I hated it, but it was motivating. Every time I heard that, I proved that I could, that my place was not in the kitchen" (Female respondent # 14); "Well, there were some narcissistic penguins, who believed that 'a woman has no place in the war, too weak creatures'. After that, I proved to them that those weak creatures are head and shoulders above them" (Female respondent # 28); "Their position is that a lady should stay at home, cook borscht, while the man has to fight. But we made it up. It was important that my commander was a woman, so they did not really pressure me" (Female respondent # 31).

Still, most of them say that men gradually change this attitude to a more egalitarian

one. The research team finds some optimism in this fact and believes this to be a positive impact on combating gender discrimination.

When asked to share their vision on perspectives of the Ukrainian army in terms of gender equality and women's integration, the respondents generally claimed they would like to see it, probably, similar to Israel Defence Forces, where, as they suppose, gender parity and justice are already achieved. One of our respondents even expressed her wish to become a minister of defence, as she has a vision for the necessary reforms.

Our respondents also would like to have some rest, social support, and, if necessary, psychological support after they finish their service. Two female respondents said that social services tried to take away their children because they allegedly failed to fulfil parental responsibilities.

We also interviewed nine male combatants. This was to see the service of women in the ATO through the eyes of men and to make a comparison with what women themselves say about their service in the army. As expected, men had no obstacles to serving in desired positions and easily received combatant status. They also showed little awareness about the troubles women face.

Male respondents felt very differently about women's participation in the ATO. Some were neutral/friendly; other expressed stereotypes themselves: For example, one respondent believed that military women are privileged, and another one considered female physiology to be better for documents checking<sup>12</sup>.

"An arbitrary decision might be needed any second. I think only a man can do that. Not

all positions can be given to ladies" (Male respondent # 5).

### **Changes after the 'Invisible Battalion' Project**

As a result of the research and a public campaign, a large number of positions became open to women in Ukraine. Yet this is applied not to all branches of the armed forces (land forces are still officially all-male), and there is also known discrimination in terms of access to military education, not studied yet but expressed in informal talks with the stakeholders. This limits the possibilities for women to hold officer positions.

The issue of women's integration into the security and defence sector lies within a broader framework of the women peace and security agenda promoted by the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace

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and Security (UNSCR 1325) and subsequent resolutions since 2000. The resolution claims the important role of women in conflict resolution, prevention, peacebuilding, and peacekeeping. The document calls for integration of women into the security and defence sector and their involvement in the peace processes, as women's integration into the military is not only a matter of gender equality but also an issue of security at a country and global levels.

Ukraine has adopted the National Action Plan (NAP) on implementation of the UNSCR

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<sup>12</sup> T. Martsenyuk, G. Grytsenko, A. Kvit. "Invisible Battalion", p. 38.

1325 on Women, Peace and Security in February 2016. The country signed the resolution back in 2000, but the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine since 2014 has urged the government to undertake measures to protect women from negative consequences of the conflict and to promote their participation in the peace process only 15 years after the resolution was signed. The NAP on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) serves as a legal commitment of the state to implement recommendations of the UNSCR 1325 and provides a framework for the national and local government, civil society, and international organizations' activity within the WPS agenda in Ukraine.

Two goals of Ukraine's NAP on WPS target women in the military directly. The National Action Plan aims to increase the participation of women in peace building; to improve infrastructure and legal environment for women's participation in international peacekeeping operations, for their service in administrative and combat positions in the Armed Forces and other national security and defence institutions, to conduct prevention of gendered aspects of conflict prevention and resolution, and to promote women's role in peacebuilding, peacekeeping, and negotiation processes in the media; to provide assistance and rehabilitation to population affected by the conflict, including rehabilitation and reintegration of female ex-combatants and their families, social and medical assistance to victims of gender-based violence.

Nine ministries are responsible for the implementation of the NAP on WPS, among which the Ministry of Defence (MoD) demonstrates considerable achievements in implementation compared to others. The MoD has developed an internal plan on the NAP on WPS implementation and established a working group for coordination of activities on the women, peace, and security agenda. The Ministry of Defence has also appointed an internal gender focal point and hired an external gender expert, who works closely

with the ministry representatives in different structures.

In less than a year since the NAP adoption, the MoD has extended the list of available positions for women, conducted an assessment of women's infrastructural needs in the Armed Forces and in the zone of anti-terrorist operation, introduced gender-sensitivity trainings for military personnel, developed a new code of conduct for military personnel, which will have special provisions on gender-based violence and allow to bring to administrative and criminal liability for its violation, and plans to revise the curriculum of military education institutions.

However, there is still place for improvement. The Decree 292, issued in June 2016, opened 63 staff positions for private, sergeant, and sergeant-major positions to women undergoing military service under the contract (Ministry of Defence, 2016). Among them are combat positions: bomb aimer, assistant to bomb aimer and senior bomb aimer, commander of the military machinery, driver and senior driver, gunner, scout, including Special Forces units, shooter, sniper, and others. There is not only horizontal but also vertical empowerment of women in the armed forces.

## Conclusions

The issue of ensuring gender equality in the Ukrainian society is governed by both general and special legislation. However, although equal rights and opportunities for women and men are supported at the declarative level, they are not always enforced in practice. The Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) emphasizes the importance of changing the vision of women's role not only as a victim of conflict, but as a participant of conflict resolution and peacekeeping on an equal basis with men. Ukraine ratified this document and is supposed to follow its major expectations towards women's integration into the armed forces.

The phenomenon of vertical and horizontal gender segregation is as inherent in the Armed Forces of Ukraine as in the general labour market. The number of women in the military gradually increases following the global trends of nation development. Women in the ATO expressed a strong hope for gender equality and are establishing it by facing and breaking the stereotypes themselves. Most of their problems come from an archaic vision of female service by the Ukrainian government bodies; these include legal and infrastructural invisibility, which means suppression of their right to hold combat and officer positions, to get the appropriate payment and privileges, and to have appropriate conditions to serve. Stereotypes and unequal attitude from male combatants are also a problem now. However, currently the situation is changing for the better.

The 'Invisible Battalion' project is continuing its activities and searching for new possibilities to provide women in the armed forces with equal rights and opportunities to those of men.

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