

# Women's Participation in Defending Ukraine in Russia's War

Tamara Martsenyuk

The Euromaidan protests in 2013–2014 inspired women in Ukraine to fight more actively for their rights, especially in the military sphere. An analysis of women's participation in the 'Revolution of Dignity', how the protests are metaphorically called, and the war in Donbas that started in 2014, helps to understand why and how Ukrainian society has so fiercely resisted the Russian invasion since 24 February 2022. Ukrainians have been fighting for their independence and recognition for many decades and women have always been an active part of this fight. When Ukraine became independent in 1991, women actively participated in the state-building and democratization of the country.

Since 2014, women emerged as more visible actors in the public space and became eager to raise issues of inequality and claim gender justice (Channell-Justice et al. 2021; Martsenyuk 2014). Ukrainian women managed to challenge traditional gender roles (as caretakers and victims of conflict) and reclaimed visibility, recognition, and respect as revolutionaries and volunteers (Martsenyuk and Troian 2018: 151). When the ATO started in 2014, women joined the front lines of the Donbas war as volunteers, journalists, medical staff, and military staff, including in combat positions. Since 2014, Ukrainian women have also been fighting gender discrimination in the armed forces of Ukraine and managed to succeed (Martsenyuk et al. 2016).

## Gender equality, peace, and security in the Ukrainian society

Since 1991, Ukraine has achieved considerable progress in establishing gender equality in the different spheres of Ukrainian society, among them the military. In Article 24 of the Constitution of Ukraine citizens are guaranteed equal constitutional rights and freedoms. In 2005 and 2017 respectively, the Verkhovna Rada, the Parliament of Ukraine, adopted laws on ensuring equal rights and opportunities for women and men, as well as on preventing and combating domestic violence, following the four pillars of the Istanbul Convention (prevention, protection, prosecution, and coordinated policies) (Ukraine CEDAW 2021: 18).

### About the Author

Tamara Martsenyuk holds a Ph.D. in Sociology and is an Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology, University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. Her research interest relates to gender and social structure, among them women's access to the military. In 2015–2021 Tamara (with her research team) conducted sociological studies called 'Invisible Battalion' that demonstrate the successes and challenges of gender equality implementation in the Ukrainian armed forces, the status of female veterans, and the problem of sexual harassment within the military. After her evacuation from Kyiv, Tamara is hosted by the Free University of Berlin.

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| Visual from the Invisible Battalion's website at <https://invisiblebattalion.org/en/home-2/>.

In 2015, a sociological study titled 'Invisible Battalion: Women's Participation in ATO' was conducted. The metaphorical title 'Invisible Battalion' was used as the research specifically focused on the women who fight (being mobilized or as volunteers), but whose interests and needs are quite often ignored by the state. In particular, it showed that the Armed Forces of Ukraine, just as the labour market in general, are characterized by vertical and horizontal gender segregation (Martsenyuk et al. 2016). In total, three large sociological studies called 'Invisible Battalion' demonstrate the successes and challenges of gender equality implementation in the Ukrainian armed forces, the status of female veterans, and the problem of sexual harassment in the military. In this way, '[Invisible Battalion](#)' became a global advocacy campaign researching and documenting women's participation in defending Ukraine against Russia's war.

According to the [December 2021 data](#) of the Personnel Center of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the total number of servicewomen is around 33,000 (or [around 20 per cent](#)). Since 2014, around 17,000 women became veterans of the war in Donbas. 9 women from the Armed Forces of Ukraine died during the 2014–2021 war. In 2018, the first Ukrainian woman obtained the military status of general – [Lyudmyla Shuhaley](#). In [2018](#), the President of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, signed a law on equal rights for women and men while serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine and other military formations. The law provides equal opportunities for men and women to commit to military service, equal access to positions and military ranks, and equal responsibilities in the performance of military service.

Ukraine ratified a major worldwide women's rights document – the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and reports on its implementation. In the ninth periodic report submitted by Ukraine in 2021 there is a chapter on Women, Peace, and Security. The security and defence sector of Ukraine has undergone a number of significant systemic changes since the adoption of the first National Action Plan in the Women, Peace, and Security agenda: access of women to military occupations (including positions that are directly engaging in combat); recognition of female veterans; gender equality in military legislation; improved protection of women from gender-based violence; access to military education at all levels has been opened for girls; gender training and education for staff; sociological research on different aspects of gender equality implementation, etc. Two women participated in negotiations within the Trilateral Contact Group on the peaceful settlement of the situation in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine during the period from 2014 to 2019 (Ukraine CEDAW 2021: 5–6).

Despite these changes, problems remain: In December 2018, Lieutenant Valeria Sikal filed a complaint with the Military Prosecutor's Office against her commander regarding sexual harassment. As the investigation of the case was delayed, Amnesty International Ukraine took it up, including her case in the annual Letter-Writing Marathon in December 2020 and demanding justice for the servicewoman.

Thus, despite some other problems (lack of resources and time, gender stereotypes, and challenges of the ongoing war), Ukrainian women are in general actively involved in building peace and security. Women's involvement in war could be analysed from two major perspectives – agency and victimhood. First of all, they are victims of the situation, who suffer from war and belong to vulnerable groups. Secondly, they are also actors of resistance, who have agency and participate actively in different activities.

### **Ukrainian women as victims of the war**

Starting with the first aspect, a Rapid Gender Analysis carried out by UN Women and CARE International in spring 2022 found that women are playing a key role in the humanitarian response (especially on the local level) but that they are not fully involved in decision-making. The crisis is largely exacerbating pre-existing gender and intersectional inequalities and discrimination. Women's care burden has increased due to three major reasons: the lack of access to education due to security risks, women's engagement in volunteering activities and men's absence due to engagement in the armed forces. Ukrainian women are disproportionately affected by the

multisectoral and compounded impact of the crisis (UN Women and CARE International 2022: 6–8).



| Ukrainian soldiers liberated from Russian captivity, posted by Iryna Vereshchuk on 2nd April 2022 and commented by Marta Havryshko on the same day (her comment cited below).

As a result of the Russian invasion, Ukrainian women are among the majority of internally and internationally displaced persons: they are those who care for kids, the elderly, the disabled, etc. According to UN Women estimations (as of 29 April 2022), women and children constitute 90 per cent of 5.5 million refugees who have already fled Ukraine (UN Women and CARE International 2022: 6). This is also due to military legislation, which requires most Ukrainian men aged 18–60 to stay in the country. Being the majority of displaced within and outside of the country, women face significantly increased safety and protection risks. Incidents of gender-based violence, particularly domestic violence and conflict-related sexual violence, are reportedly increasing, but services for the survivors are not provided in full (UN Women 2021: 8). Women who hid in bunkers during the shelling of the cities [reported](#) a lack of hygiene products and clean water at the start of the war. Female refugees find themselves in a vulnerable position, some also [face the risks](#) of human trafficking and sexual exploitation. The women fleeing to Poland after being raped have problems with proper health care ([including abortion](#)).

Women had already become a visible group of internally displaced persons (IDPs) when the war started in 2014. According to the Unified Information Database on IDPs, almost 1.5 million displaced persons from the temporarily occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea were registered as of November 2020. Women constituted 59 per cent of IDPs (Ukraine CEDAW 2021: 8).

Women in the military may suffer from gender-based violence. On 2 April 2022, Iryna Vereshchuk, Minister for Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine, published on her Facebook a photo of Ukrainian soldiers liberated from Russian captivity. There were 15 women among them, all with shaved heads. Of course, it is a relief to see the female soldiers alive – but at the same time, they are survivors of gender-based violence. The scholar of sexual violence and war Marta Havryshko [comments](#) on this phenomenon:

It's a cruel attack on women's bodily integrity and intimacy because of the cultural meaning of hair for women. Hair is in strong conjunction with femininity, women's self-perception, and dignity. Cutting off and shaving the hair of vulnerable women in detention in different contexts (in the Nazi concentration camps and the Gulag) was perceived by many women as sexualized violence.

Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights Lyudmyla Denisova reported on [Russia's war crimes in Ukraine](#) during her speech in Davos: Every day 700–800 citizens fall victim to war crimes, often times rape. 'Mass sexual crimes are tactics of the Russian war', Denisova explains, [illustrating](#) her statement with the example of 25 teenagers who were kept and gang-raped in a basement in Bucha; nine of whom are now pregnant. As in many other wars, sexual violence is used as a

weapon. Human rights activists and authorities are doing their best to collect testimonies and punish offenders.

### Ukrainian women as agents of resistance

When Russia attacked Ukraine on 24 February 2022, women were taking an active part in the resistance and volunteering activities. According to an all-Ukrainian nationally representative poll conducted by [InfoSapiens](#) for the British Research Agency ORB on 3–4 March 2022, 59 per cent of women are ready to personally participate in the armed resistance to end the Russian occupation of Ukraine.

According to the results of a sociological survey conducted by InfoSapiens in April 2022 and supported by [the Peace Research Institute Oslo](#), 65 per cent of Ukrainian women reported intentions to help the Ukrainian victims of war in terms of caring for injured civilians and soldiers. 27 per cent of women reported intending to join the Ukrainian forces in some type of combat role (for example in fortified defence positions or on the frontline). Finally, 69 per cent of women intended to help the resistance by providing non-military support to the Ukrainian forces (delivering food, information, or ammunition).

In international and local media coverage, women are visible as participants of territorial self-defence units and Armed Forces of Ukraine. For example, reservist and market researcher Maryana Zhaglo told [the Washington Post](#) that her training prepared her well for the battles she faced. [Yaryna Chornohuz](#) has been serving under contract in the Armed Forces of Ukraine as a combat medic for two years: 'In January 2020, it turned out that [...] my boyfriend, who served in the eighth battalion of the 10th Brigade of the Armed Forces, died on the spot, and I decided to enlist in his memory' (translation by the author). [Grandmothers](#) are using their sewing machines to manufacture flak jackets and military uniforms. Women of different ages participate in a variety of volunteering activities: cooking meals; crafting clothes, medicines, or protective gear; delivering fuel; identifying and helping vulnerable individuals; providing logistics or information; supporting the documentation of war crimes, etc.

Despite the common notion that women ask for peace and are against militarization, Ukrainian women (among them also feminists) ask for heavy weapons to protect Ukraine against Russia. Veteran, volunteer, and women's rights advocate Maria Berlinska [explains](#) why it is feasible and necessary to arm Ukraine. Among the 12 reasons, Maria mentions that 'Ukrainians do not ask foreign armies to fight by their side. Ukrainian men and women enlisted *en masse* and voluntarily in the first days of the war. Most are still waiting for active service, as there is not enough place for everyone in the army'. Another famous woman, [Oleksandra Matviichuk](#), who is a human rights defender and coordinator of the 'Tribunal for Putin' coalition, also stresses the need of heavy weapons for Ukraine.

Feminist editor of the webpage 'Gender in Details' [Tamara Zlobina](#) supports #ArmUkraineNow. In a [Facebook statement](#) she explains why peace is connected with victory in the war: 'When you live the war on TV, it is very easy to assume that "there are no winners in the war." And in reality, war always ends in someone's victory – overt or covert. Only after the victory of one side and the defeat of the other comes peace' (translation by the author). Russian conceptions of 'Russkij mir' are essentially [against gender equality and LGBT rights](#). This war is also about a so-called

civilizational choice between Western values of democracy, equal rights, freedom of speech, and the idea of so-called 'traditional values' that the Russian government has been promoting, grounded in '[encompassing patriotism, spirituality, rootedness in history, respect for authority, and adherence to heteronormative and patriarchal ideals of family and gender.](#)'

Other feminists like Iryna Zamuruieva and Darya Tsymbalyuk [underline](#) that in Ukraine pacifism kills: 'Calling for military support has not come as an easy decision for us. Yet, at this point, a pacifist stance perpetuates ongoing violence. Pacifism kills. Inaction kills. Each day of this war means more and more lives are lost – and not only human lives'.

Women who were forced to become refugees have organized a number of protests abroad to attract the attention of the international community to the importance of #SupportUkraine, #StandwithUkraine, and #SaveUkraineNow. [The Marches of Mothers](#) to support Ukrainian children took place in different cities abroad. Women organized [demonstrations](#) and [performances](#) against rape during war. Women [demand](#) an embargo on Russian gas and oil in front of the European Council. These are some examples of what women activists demand to stop the fighting and win this terrible war.

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