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## **Women in the War: A Gendered Analysis of Media Coverage of the Russian-Ukraine War**

By Ayo Oyeleye<sup>1</sup> and Shujun Jiang<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

In recent years several commentators have observed the trend of mainstream media ignoring and distorting women's perspectives and experiences in armed conflicts. Both in the reporting and the wider discourse about conflicts, women tend to be cast less as political actors and more as helpless victims, often paired with children in accounts of war incidents. Carolina Marques de Mesquita (2016), in her study of media coverage of recent wars and conflicts, observed that while major media outlets tend to represent the scale of violence in a conflict through the harm and death inflicted on women, they are otherwise often neglected. This contention sets the backdrop for our study that aims to explore the Russian-Ukraine War from a gendered lens. We examine the coverage of the ongoing conflict in four news outlets to see whether or not they reflect the established pattern of gendered representations of war. Our analysis reveals, by and large, persistence in the pattern of coverage of the war that corroborates the charge that media reportage of conflict tends to underrepresent women and distort their involvement in wars through narrow role characterizations.

*Keywords:* Femininity, Hypermasculinity, War, Gender hierarchy, Media representation of women

### **Introduction**

The Russian-Ukraine War started on February 24, 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine after months of threatening military manoeuvres and negotiations. Several commentators have observed that the conflict has become Europe's worst security crisis since the end of the Second World War. The war has resulted in the death and injury of thousands of Ukrainian civilians and destroyed parts of entire cities. In the global security order, Ukraine has played an important but often overlooked role for a long time. Currently, the country is facing a renewed rivalry between great powers that many analysts believe will dominate international relations for years to come. The eight-year-old confrontation between the two nations was dramatically escalated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and this event marked a pivotal moment in European security history. Many commentators believe that there is little chance of a diplomatic settlement in the months to come and instead recognize the possibility of a deadly escalation, which may involve the use of nuclear weapons by Russia. In the face of the latest

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move by Russia, Ukraine's efforts to join Western political organizations, such as the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, (NATO) have accelerated.

This paper is structured as follows: In the first section, we explore attempts to explain the causes and origin of the Russian-Ukraine War by a few key commentators and link this to the long-running question about why nations go to war given its destructive outcome through the concept of the war puzzle. Next, we explore the subject of gender and war, looking at the interconnections between the two and the contention that many mainstream studies of war and conflict have tended to elide this important connection. After this, we present our findings from the empirical analysis of media coverage of the Russian-Ukraine War that we conducted to explore some of the key issues about the underrepresentation of women and the roles ascribed to women in war news reporting. In the final section of the paper, we draw some conclusions about the insights from the study.

### **Perspectives on the Causes of the Russian-Ukraine War**

Jonathan Masters (2022) explains why Ukraine is a geopolitical flash point when he wrote that during the Cold War, the Soviet Union, the United States' main adversary, viewed Ukraine as one of its pillars. Ukraine was the second-most populous and powerful of the fifteen Soviet republics, following Russia, and it was where the Black Sea Fleet and some of the nuclear weapons, as well as a large portion of the Soviet Union's agricultural and defence sectors, were based. Because Ukraine was so essential to the union, its choice to become an independent state in 1991 was devastating to Russia. Since Ukraine became independent in 1991, the country has followed its own path as a sovereign state while aligning itself more closely with Western institutions. Despite this, Ukraine struggled to balance its foreign relations and bridge internal divisions. While most of the Russian-speaking people in the east preferred tighter connections with Russia, the more nationalist, Ukrainian-speaking population in the western regions of the country usually backed deeper integration with Europe. The current crisis can be traced back to 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and began arming and instigating separatists in the Donbas region in the south. The annexation of Crimea by Russia marked the first time since World War II that a European state had annexed another country's territory. Over 14,000 people died in the Donbas fighting between 2014 and 2021, the bloodiest conflict in Europe since the Balkan Wars. As a result of the hostilities, the global security environment transitioned from a period of unipolar U.S. dominance to one of renewed competition among great powers. In February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine with the aim of toppling the Western-aligned government of Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Attempting to structure the various debates about the factors that led to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Joseph Nye Jr. (2022) has distinguished between what he identifies as "deep," "intermediate," and "immediate" causes. He noted that while each of these causes is important respectively, their presence, even collectively, should not make war an inevitable outcome. Nye deployed the metaphor of bonfire construction to explain the three-level causes of war. In the bonfire metaphor, stacking up the logs represents the deep cause, adding kindling and paper is the intermediate cause, and lighting a match is the immediate or triggering cause. Nye added that a bonfire is not unavoidable. It's possible that a powerful breeze could put out the match or that an unexpected downpour could saturate the wood. Applying this metaphor to the Russian-Ukraine War, Nye argued that Putin started the fire in Ukraine when he gave the order for Russian forces to enter on February 24. He likely thought it would be a short, sharp battle with a swift triumph, like the Soviet Union occupying Budapest in 1956 or Prague in 1968. Putin told the Russian people he was conducting a "special military operation" to "denazify" Ukraine and prevent NATO from expanding into Russia's territory. In Nye's view, Putin seems to have seriously misjudged the situation in hoping for a swift accomplishment of his goals. Citing Putin's own writings and several biographers like Philip Short (2022), Nye

infers that the intermediate cause of the war was a refusal to see Ukraine as a legitimate state. Nye contended that due to the deep cultural links between Russia and Ukraine, Putin rued the dissolution of the Soviet Union, in which he had served as a KGB officer. Putin also thought of Ukraine as a fake state. Moreover, Ukraine was considered ungrateful, inciting Russia with its Maidan revolution in 2014, which deposed a pro-Russian administration, as well as developing business links with the EU. Furthermore, Putin is believed to nurse a revanchist ambition to restore what he terms the “Russian world.” Considering the weakness of Western sanctions following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, Putin may have supposed that he could take things one step further. Nye considers that the prospect of NATO expansion was a minor intermediate cause. Nye traced the deep causes of the current crisis back to the end of the Cold War when both Russia and the West were optimistic that the Soviet Union’s collapse would lead to democratization and a market economy in the country. However, after seven decades of central planning, a quick shift to a thriving market economy proved daunting. Attempts to drive such quick changes resulted in massive disruptions, corruption, and excessive inequality. A rapid privatization of state-owned assets resulted in some oligarchs and politicians becoming enormously wealthy, yet most Russians’ standard of living declined. Amidst such social and economic quagmires, Boris Yeltsin, whose health was rapidly failing, turned to Putin to help him to restore order.

In a speech delivered at the European University Institute in June 2022, John Mearsheimer charged that the United States and its NATO allies have played a crucial role in the events leading up to the Ukraine war. He laid out two interlocking arguments for making this claim: first, he argued that while not denying that Putin started the war and should be held into account for Russia’s conduct of the war, it is the United States that must be held responsible as the key cause of the Russia-Ukraine War. In this regard, Mearsheimer’s central claim is that the United States has pursued policies toward Ukraine that Putin and other Russian leaders perceive as an existential threat, stressing what he sees as America’s obsession with making Ukraine a Western bulwark on Russia’s border by bringing it into NATO. Secondly, Mearsheimer argued that the Biden administration has responded to the onset of conflict by increasing pressure on Russia. The United States and its Western allies are dedicated to crushing Russia in Ukraine and have vowed to use severe sanctions to severely debilitate the Russian economy and military. Mearsheimer challenged the conventional wisdom in the West often expressed in mainstream media and by political leaders that the Ukraine crisis had been the result of Putin’s imperial ambitions. He argued that while this narrative is often expressed in the mainstream media by Western leaders there was no evidence to back it up. It is important, Mearsheimer contended, to show that Putin believed annexing all of Ukraine and fusing it with Russia was a desirable goal, that he believed achieving that goal was possible, and that he had plans to do so to support this claim. He added that when Putin launched his soldiers into Ukraine on February 24, there is no evidence to suggest that he was considering, much less intending, to eliminate Ukraine’s status as an independent state and integrate it into larger Russia.

### **Gender, the War Puzzle, and the War System**

In 1993, Vasquez published *The War Puzzle* in which he enunciated what is widely regarded as one of the most salient scientific analyses of the causes of war in modern times. In 2009, this ground-breaking work was updated and extended in *The War Puzzle Revisited* with an analysis of recent research on the onset and expansion of wars, as well as conditions that can engender peace. The central thesis in Vasquez’s study of wars is that around 70 percent of wars happen due to territorial proximity and disagreements. Vasquez claims that the route to war follows an algorithm, with phases including military misunderstandings and inept foreign policy measures (among other things), but in the end, his study indicates that wars are about

territorial propinquity. However, in his review of Vasquez's book Othon Leon (2020) observed several limitations, particularly that his hypothesis fails to consider the possibility that humans fight wars for other reasons that may include pride, affirmation of power, auto-destruction, "machismo," passion, or even just because war is considered an easy option. The focus here is not so much a review of Vasquez's work but rather to set it as a context and exemplar of the long-running debate about the perplexity of war and why humans continue to embark on this destructive behavior despite its evidently ruinous outcomes. Within this broader discursive context of scholarly efforts to unravel the mystery of war and its myriad causes, this paper focuses on the role of gender in systems of war and how a gendered perspective constitutes an important missing part of the war puzzle. Such a focus, as a few scholars and commentators have pointed out, has been often elided in the various attempts to grapple with the war puzzle. Scholars, politicians, policymakers, civil society, and many more have attempted to grapple with this fundamental but complex question—why do people wage war against each other?

In a more recent critique, Sjoberg (2013) noted that the scholarly community in International Relations (IR) and security studies have long been curious about why states and other actors in global politics continue to start wars, despite the catastrophic repercussions that such enterprises entail. The perplexity of war has exercised the minds of scholars for a very long time and has been studied through the prism of many theoretical approaches to world politics such as realism, liberalism, and constructivism, just to name a few. Despite the various attempts to unravel the mysteries of wars and their causes, there has been no consensus among the various theoretical approaches on these two primary issues about war. Suganami (1996) explains the lack of consensus amongst pundits on the nature and causes of war by advancing the notion that war must be understood as a multi-causal enigma not just in the usual understanding that multiple factors can lead to an outbreak of war, but also in the less obvious sense that there are manifold paths that can lead to a war. He suggests that some clarification can be achieved by distinguishing among three questions: What conditions are required for wars to take place? What circumstances make war more or less likely? How did a specific war come to take place?

Within this broader discourse about the enigma of war and its possible causes, feminist scholars like Enloe (2010), Mackenzie (2010), and Sjoberg (2013) have observed that there has been a systematic omission of gender analysis in the context of war despite the continuous presence of women in conflicts and war. After outlining the major traditions of enquiry into the phenomenon of war in IR scholarship, Sjoberg concludes that while the key theoretical approaches (Liberal, Realist, Constructivist, Critical, etc.) offer a varied and important piece of the war puzzle, traditional work on the nature, causes, and consequences of war have individually and collectively ignored gender analysis. She contended that such omission is a grave error because the meanings, causes, and consequences of war cannot be understood without reference to gender, and that the deployment of gender as a category of analysis has a transformative outcome in the study of war. Furthermore, Sjoberg notes how the feminist tradition in IR has shown that the theory and practice of war have been gendered throughout modern history and that gendered elements are important causal and constitutive factors in a fuller apprehension of the war puzzle.

Along the same line of argument, Katharine Wright (2022), in her critique of NATO which she describes as operating as an "institution of international hegemonic masculinity," has commented on how Russia's invasion of Ukraine represents a return to "realpolitik" which will (re)focus attention on the state as the primary referent point of international politics. She noted, however, that even though feminist IR scholars have recently made significant strides in the field, it remains the case that feminist perspectives are marginalized from mainstream discussion of the war and its effects. She argued that feminist scholarship in IR can add many valuable insights to the ongoing discussion that will enhance our understanding of the gendered

implications of the current war. She cites examples such as the ways that masculinities and femininities are invoked in the construction of Russia and Ukraine in geopolitical thoughts, the absence of women from the negotiation teams from both countries, and “the gendered silences of just who is seen to fight/be protected in Western media coverage,” among others.

In a similar vein, Carolina Marques de Mesquita (2016) observed that while major media outlets tend to represent the scale of violence in a conflict through the harm and death inflicted on women, they otherwise often neglect them. From her analysis of the patterns of coverage of conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and South Sudan in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal* in 2016, Mesquita observed a pattern of representation that constructs women as perpetual victims. Her research revealed how women are persistently underrepresented as political actors in journalism focusing on international conflict in these places. She further observed that women are frequently portrayed as casualties or victims of sexual violence, calling into question the success of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda (WPS), which was introduced by the United Nations in 2000 as a commitment to elevating women’s roles in future peacekeeping and negotiation.

Francoise Thébaud (2014) has noted that efforts to develop gender-based approaches to the study of wars have both changed and complicated our understanding of particular wars as well as the general phenomenon of war. In her historiographical study of twentieth-century wars which sought to understand wars through the perspectives of women and gender, Thébaud (2014) observed that a lot of seminal studies of war were conducted in the 1970s and 1980s that can be described as “the study of war through women’s eyes” (p. 155). These studies were concerned with exploring questions such as the whereabouts and role of women during a war, the physical and emotional experiences of women, the impact of war on the lives of individuals, and the place of women in society. Thébaud notes that looking at war through women’s eyes implies, first, prioritizing the visibility of female participants, as well as analyzing the roles that they play in wartimes, including the extent of their involvement both in the battlefield and in the home, their everyday life in terms of both material and cultural aspects, and the difficulties that they have to put up with such as bereavement, loneliness, poverty, overwork, and the strains of responsibility they have to bear. Thébaud delineates four thematic approaches which, she argues, facilitate a structured way of exploring and understanding the history of women in wartime and shows the range of women’s wartime experiences. These are women’s hardships: women’s involvement in paid work or other types of work, women’s political involvement or choices, and how female metaphors and allegories are deployed in the propaganda efforts of the warring states. Thébaud observes further that women may suffer the most grief during one war, while another may offer new opportunities for employment. Furthermore, the situation may fluctuate based on location and period, even within a single nation, with some areas being occupied or fought over while others are in better circumstances. She notes that historians have been asking questions about what war does to gender since at least the 1980s, examining gender in relation to mobilization, involvement, suffering in battle, and societies’ mythologies and knowledge of themselves. In addition, questions have also been posed regarding what gender does to war, entailing inquiries into the sexual politics of war and policymaking. Broadly, a gendered analysis of war indicates that men and women tend to experience war in different ways and at different rhythms according to Thébaud. Furthermore, despite public disagreement over how to interpret women’s experiences such as the mobilization of women into war factories and their participation in resistance, women’s roles are always subordinate to men’s roles.

In concert with a growing critical understanding of the concept of gender, Thébaud noted that the analysis of gender, by implication, means that women are not the only ones with a gendered identity and that masculinity, like femininity, is a cultural and social construct that varies through time and place. In this regard, she cites examples of how societies at war deploy

the term virility: men are urged to be brave, to safeguard the lives of women and children, and to defend a nation and its territory. Moreover, the practice of gendering has also been found to be commonly used in all forms of propaganda efforts, especially in speech and images. Physical and mental anguish endured on the front lines, such as wounds, fear of pain and death, illnesses with “feminine” symptoms like shell shock identified during World War I, or identity crises produced by the gap between the ideal and the reality of war can all take a toll on men and their virility.

In an earlier study of the subject, Joshua Goldstein (2001), in a comprehensive study of the interconnections between war and gender, observed that although there had been a surge of interest in understanding the roles of women in war from both academic and political communities, these had not necessarily produced a comprehensive account of the subject matter. He noted that a key challenge to developing a comprehensive account of the interconnections between war and gender is that the subject of inquiry spreads over multiple levels of analysis. Goldstein begins his exploration of the topic by setting out his position with regard to key conceptual issues relating to the subject matter. First, Goldstein states his objection to the way many scholars use the terms “sex” and “gender,” arguing that this common usage is impractical. He refers here to the popular notion that sex is biological, and gender is cultural. In this common usage, we acquire or embody gender roles that are not tightly bound to our biological sex even though we have been assigned to a certain sex. In this way, gender is arbitrary, fluid, and based on culture whereas sex is immutable and rooted in nature. Goldstein argues that while this usage aids in separating gender differences from any ostensibly inherent or natural foundation, the difficulty with this sex-gender discourse is that it creates a false distinction between biology and culture, which are in reality profoundly intertwined. More specifically, it is incorrect, he argued, to think of biology as immutable and culture as malleable. For him, biology gives us many different possibilities, but culture limits, chooses, and channels them. Also, culture has a direct effect on how genes are expressed and, by extension, on how our bodies work. Goldstein argues that sex has no universal biological essence, but rather is a system of potentials which are activated by both internal and external factors, concluding that the orthodox practice of treating sex and gender as separate is not particularly useful. Goldstein argues for an approach that uses the term gender to encompass both masculine and feminine roles and bodies in all their facets, including the biological and cultural structures, dynamics, roles, and scripts associated with each gender group. For him, the term sex should be used in reference to sexual acts, noting the lack of precision even in this respect.

Another conceptual issue offered by Goldstein that is pertinent to this paper is his view of “the war system,” which he explains as the interconnected ways in which societies organize themselves to engage in prospective and actual conflicts. In this view, war is more of a system with continuity across time than a sequence of incidents. In addition to standing military personnel and actual warfare, this system incorporates military budget and attitudes toward war. Furthermore, Goldstein noted that the likelihood of war is more significant than the actual outbreak of wars for understanding the ways that war roles are gendered. Goldstein’s expansive view about warfare allows for a more complete understanding of war, as well as the role that gender plays in it, beyond a focus on the actual outbreak of war. It draws our attention to the need to explore the various ways that gender is entangled with the entire system of warfare. Goldstein’s central argument is that gender and the war system shape each other. He contended that there is a universal dichotomy that prevails in the framing of gender roles between the masculine aggressor and the feminine peacemaker. It is worth noting here that the distinction is between masculine and feminine typology rather than male and female. Nevertheless, he pointed out that despite shifting and varied perspectives on both war and gender as independent socio-political factors, this simplistic dichotomy persists (Goldstein, 2001, p. 3-4).

In her seminal study on the gendering of war, Sjoberg (2013) contended that the absence of a specific gender analysis of war in many studies of the subject is a significant flaw because the meanings, causes, and effects of conflict cannot be comprehended without referring to gender. She stressed the transformative potential of war study when gender is deployed as a category of analysis, because gender is one of the missing pieces in the war puzzle. One of the major contributions of the feminist tradition to IR has been to draw attention to the long history of the gendered nature of the practice of war, features of which are crucial causal and constitutive factors. Sjoberg pointed out that the feminist tradition had long questioned the gender “neutrality” of the field of inquiry, arguing that this merely served to veil gender oppression rather than work towards gender equality. Sjoberg contends that understanding war requires the use of gender as a fundamental analytical category and that a distinctively feminist approach to studying war is critical to know more about the war problem.

In her account of the relevance and importance of a gender perspective to understanding war, Sjoberg starts by engaging with the concept of gender, noting that it is not merely a box that we tick on the usual forms that ask for our biological sex categories. Rather gender is here understood as a social construct. Essentially, it is an institution or artifact of a social system that exists because people agree to behave as if it exists or follows certain conventional rules. The concept of gender is a socially constructed expectation that certain characteristics will be associated with those who belong to a biological sex group. Furthermore, Sjoberg points out that gender as a social construct is both complex and intersubjective. Its complexity derives from the fact that it is a relative and changeable phenomenon rather than a fixed or generic one. Different gender constructions may be found in many contexts throughout time, space, culture, and societies. It is intersubjective because genderings represent a shared perception and consensus vital in shaping our thoughts and relationships, even if we are ignorant of their function in our thoughts, behaviors, and actions. Sjoberg noted that the intersubjective element of gendering suggests that gender is no less real just because it is a social construction and that genders are experienced and enacted in daily lives and global politics. There is a self-reinforcing power imbalance that is created by the perceived differences between people who are understood to be male and those who are understood to be female. This power imbalance exists between people who are assigned to these groups as well as the characteristics associated with these groups. Thus, throughout society and in global politics, traits associated with masculinity are valued more highly than those associated with femininity. Sjoberg notes that every scholarly tradition of inquiry has a lens that makes visible certain issues whilst relegating others to the background in order to facilitate the conceptual and empirical feasibility of the subject matter, Sjoberg points out that a gender lens prioritizes issues of gender in its engagements with the subject matter of war. A similar point was made by Jill Steans (1998) when she argued that to see the world through a gender lens, one must identify how gender plays a particular role in power relations, or how gender plays a central role in international relations. Consequently, feminism’s approaches to international politics give visibility to the ways that matters of power, experiences, knowledge, and ideals are all gendered. Sjoberg contends that a gendered perspective on war shows that there can be no definition, analysis, or explanation of war without referencing gender and gender roles. She notes that many contemporary theoretical approaches to war have insufficiently understood what constitutes a war, who the players in war are, and the gendered values expressed in the formation and waging of conflicts due to the absence of a gendered perspective. Gender, Sjoberg argues, is theoretically fundamental for defining security and war, vital in understanding causes and forecasting outcomes, and critical to global political solutions to violent conflict.

In another comprehensive study of the subject, Ní Aoláin et al. (2018) observed that the various and overlapping experiences of men and women in times of armed conflict have been receiving a lot of worldwide attention. They further wrote that these attentions are the outcome



of a number of converging factors, including increased awareness of the rights violations experienced by women during times of war; a calculating focus by some states on gendered abuses as a rationalization for humanitarian and/or military interventions; increased exposure of the wider social, economic, and cultural effects of inter-state and intrastate armed conflict on women; and increased awareness of the vulnerability of men in such conflict. Also, as the involvement of women in conflicts gains increased visibility, partly aided by increased media attention, this is having an impact on institutional attention and policy directions. Because of this growing political and legal movement, those involved in conflict-resolution processes have been urged to take into consideration the experience of women and ensure that they are fully included in peace negotiations and agreements. Due to this, women's plight after war is more widely examined, resulting in a better understanding of the transformational potential and adverse economic and political effects of war on women. Using the concept of hegemonic masculinity as the basis for the difference in the value of gender-associated characteristics, Connell (2018) describes this difference as the dominance of an ideal type of masculinity in society and politics, to which all other masculinities should aspire, but to which femininities will, by definition, fall short.

Over the past few decades, feminists and gender theorists have endeavored to make sense of war from a gender and power relations perspective. At the heart of the feminist intervention in the discourse about war is their disagreement with the common notion that war is a function of masculinity. Feminists such as Sjoberg (2013) point to the deficiencies of conventional IR theorizing that renders it myopic, masculine, and incomplete. Feminists and gender theorists argue that it is imperative to examine gender both as a category of analysis and as a tool for positive change and transformation in the twenty-first century if we are to understand and effectively address the current wave of armed conflict. Moreover, feminists and gender theorists aim to understand and analyze war through the lens of gender hierarchies in global politics. Gender hierarchy is the idea that gender does not always determine the gender of a person; men can be feminine and women can be masculine, according to Sjoberg (2013). Depending on societal perceptions of gender-based characteristics, both men and women can be gendered as well as organizations and systems. Numerous studies of war have revealed that it is often associated with masculinity. As such, feminists and gender theorists use gender hierarchy to demonstrate that gender is fundamentally a social construct and an expression of power as well as a tool for organizing war.

Catherine MacKinnon (1994) observed that the words "gender" and "women" are commonly used as if they mean the same; such unwitting conflation results in a gender hierarchy that leaves men as the unmarked, default category with which others are compared. In their introductory chapter to a special handbook focusing on gender and conflict, Ní Aoláin et al. (2018) flagged this concern, noting that one of the intersecting themes of the various contributions to the volume involves the analysis of the political implications, both positive and negative, of the persistent equation of gender and women. They note further that this equation appears to be inherent in many of the international conventions and norms that frame conflict and post-conflict regulation. Noting that the volume did not exclude considerations of men's experiences in war and conflict situations, they conceded that the emphasis of the volume was to provide more material that addresses the extent to which women's needs and experiences are met or not met during and after conflict because there has been so little formal recognition of women's status and experiences in these contexts.

## **Beyond Helpless Victims? An Empirical Analysis of Media Coverage of Women in the Russia-Ukraine War**

In this study, we set out to explore these observations about the gendered nature of conflict, with an emphasis on investigating the existence or otherwise of patterns of gendered representations in the media coverage of the Russian-Ukraine War that may reveal or validate the persistence of such gendered practices.

To conduct a gender analysis, we analyzed news articles published in four media outlets using the keywords search “women Ukraine war.” We took our cue from the contention of Ní Aoláin et al. (2018) and similar feminist theorists that while gender as a social construct entails considerations of issues relating to both men and women, the historical neglect of accounts of women’s experiences in wars necessitates a rebalancing of analytical focus. The Nexis Uni database was used to collect the news articles from Feb. 24, 2022, the start of the Russian-Ukraine war, until Oct. 31, 2022, the time of data collection of this research. Four media outlets were selected: *Ukrinform English*, *The Moscow Times English*, *The New York Times International Edition*, and *United Nations News*.

*Ukrinform* is the only national news agency in Ukraine. Founded in 1918, the agency has the largest network of regional and foreign news bureaus. *Ukrinform* correspondents work in most regions of Ukraine and ten countries: the United States (Washington, D.C., and New York), Canada, Belgium, France, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Poland, Latvia, and Turkey. *Ukrinform* is Ukraine’s sole representative and member of the European Alliance of News Agencies (EANA) and the Black Sea Association of National News Agencies (BSANNA). News stories are delivered in Ukrainian, Russian, English, German, Spanish, French, Chinese, Japanese, and Polish (*Ukrinform*, 2022a). The English version is chosen for this study as English is the most used language worldwide. *Ukrinform* represents the official news source from one of the countries of conflict, Ukraine. From the above specified period, the search engine produced 223 results with the keywords “women Ukraine War” compared to 4533 news articles without the keyword “women.” Therefore, among all the *Ukrinform* news related to the war, only 5% mentioned women. After manual identification, 207 news articles were valid for our research, excluding those that mentioned women that are unrelated to the Russian-Ukraine War, such as the word women in the name of some organizations such as Women’s Day, etc.

*The Moscow Times* is the only Russian news media that is available in the Nexis Uni database. It was chosen for the study as it represents the other country of the conflict, Russia. *The Moscow Times* is Russia’s leading, independent English-language media outlet. The team of Russian and English journalists provides readers across the world with breaking news, engaging stories, and balanced reporting about the largest country on Earth. According to the organization, all editorial decisions are made independently by their team of editors and reporters, a practice that has been in place since *The Moscow Times* was founded in 1992. It was in print in Russia from 1992 until 2017 and was distributed free of charge at places frequented by English-speaking tourists and expatriates such as hotels, cafés, embassies, and airlines, and also by subscription. The newspaper was popular among foreign citizens residing in Moscow and English-speaking Russians. In November 2015 the newspaper changed its design and type from daily to weekly (released every Thursday) and increased the number of pages to 24. The newspaper became online-only in July 2017 and launched its Russian-language service in 2020. As a result of legislation on “fake news” passed by the Russian parliament in March 2022 after the invasion of Ukraine, *The Moscow Times* relocated its journalists abroad and opened a temporary newsroom in Yerevan, Armenia.

The English version of *The Moscow Times* was used for this study. From the start of the war till the end of October 2022, 70 news articles were found that contained the keyword “Women Ukraine War.” When the word “women” was removed from the search, there were

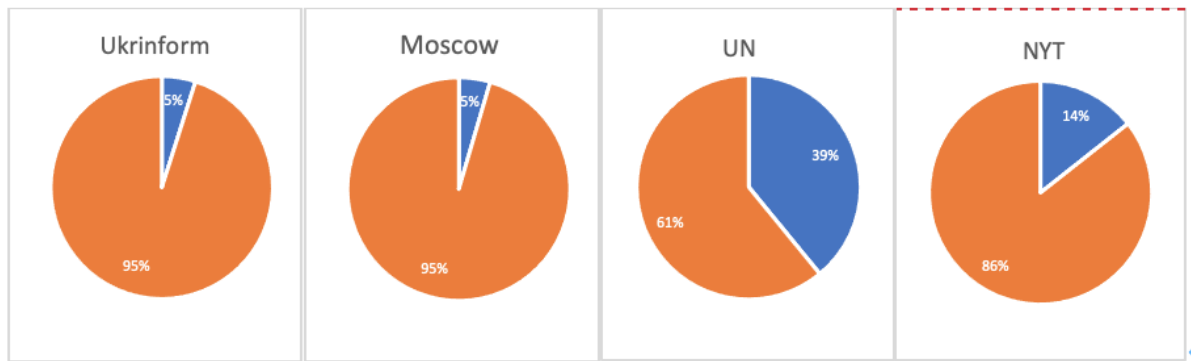
1540 results; thus only 4% of the news of the war mentioned women. Among them, 65 were valid for the study.

*United Nations News* is the United Nations multilingual news portal, a one-stop shop for multimedia news coverage and in-depth information on UN-related issues. The products and services developed and maintained by UN News include daily news updates and videos, features, photo essays, thematic focus pages, and interviews with UN officials and advocates who have lent their voices to UN causes. It produces a wealth of audio programming, ranging from podcasts to sound bites and raw audio for reporters, to digitally remastered archival programs dating back to 1948. UN News provides multimedia content in eight languages. In this study, the English version was also chosen for the same reason as other media outlets. 132 articles were retrieved using the keyword “women Ukraine War” compared to 338 when the word “women” was eliminated from the keyword search. Thus 39% of the coverage mentioned women. Among them, 122 turned out to be valid for the study.

*The New York Times International Edition* is an English-language daily newspaper distributed internationally by the New York Times Company. It has been published in two separate periods, one from 1943 to 1967 and one from 2013 to the present. The international edition began in WWII in 1943 to keep the American troops informed and give them more awareness of how their efforts fit into the overall war effort. Starting as the eight-page tabloid-sized *Overseas Weekly*, the edition was popular and soon spread, and at its height during the war, the *Overseas Weekly* was being printed in more than twenty locations around the globe. This news outlet has gone through several name changes over the years. It changed its name to *International Air Edition* in 1949, the *International Edition* in 1960, the *International Herald Tribune* in 1967, the *International New York Times* in 2013, and in 2016, it was renamed *The New York Times International Edition*. It retains a print newspaper as well as refreshed digital web experience for an audience outside of the United States. It features more international news, an increased focus on deep, analytical reporting, enterprise stories, and a broader selection of coverage from *The New York Times* including culture, technology, travel, and other topics relevant to international audiences. Highlights of *The New York Times International Edition* include feature coverage intended specifically for a global audience from a non-American perspective, as well as more opinion pieces from a variety of global voices (The New York Times, 2022). The selection of *The New York Times International Edition* in our study is based on the premium quality and depth of their news reporting, global reach, and impact. Altogether 195 news were retrieved using keywords “women Ukraine War,” while 1355 turned out by eliminating “women” in the keyword search, so about 14% of the Ukraine war news mentioned women. After manual coding, 123 were valid for the study.

Among the four media outlets, *United Nations News* has the highest percentage of coverage of women in the Ukraine War, which is 39%. *The New York Times International Edition* followed with 14%. The two media outlets from the two countries of the war have only 5% of news mentioning women in overall news coverage (see Figure 1). The UN has a tradition emphasizing women’s rights and women’s situations, while *The New York Times* also puts great effort into reporting women’s situations. There is a lack of focus on women in the media of both war-torn countries. Such wide disparities in the search terms across the different news outlets immediately indicate the persistence of comparatively limited coverage of issues about women in media coverage of wars and conflicts and vindicates the argument of feminists and gender theory scholars on this score. Table 1 and Figure 2 show the number of new pieces published in the four media outlets selected for the study.

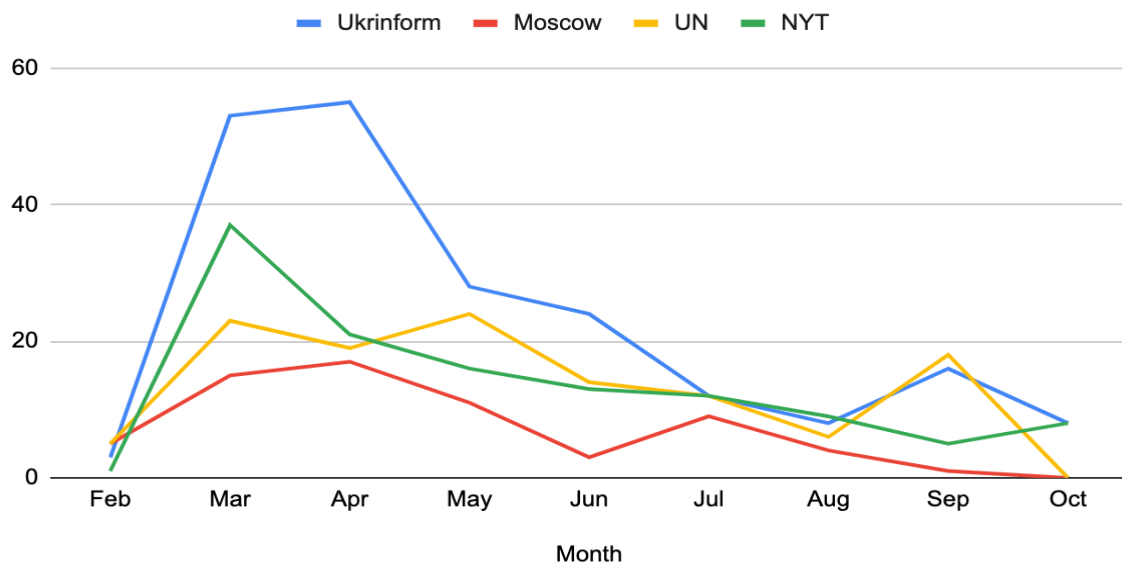
**Figure 1: Percentage of Ukraine War News on Women in the Four News Outlets**



**Table 1: Number of News Pieces in the Four Media Outlets**

| Months       | <i>Ukrinform</i> | <i>Moscow</i> | <i>UN</i> | <i>NYT</i> |
|--------------|------------------|---------------|-----------|------------|
| Feb          | 3                | 5             | 5         | 1          |
| Mar          | 53               | 15            | 23        | 37         |
| Apr          | 55               | 17            | 19        | 21         |
| May          | 28               | 11            | 24        | 16         |
| Jun          | 24               | 3             | 14        | 13         |
| Jul          | 12               | 9             | 12        | 12         |
| Aug          | 8                | 4             | 6         | 9          |
| Sep          | 16               | 1             | 18        | 5          |
| Oct          | 8                | 0             | 0         | 8          |
| <b>Total</b> | 207              | 65            | 121       | 122        |

**Figure 2: Number of News Pieces in the Four Media Outlets**



## Data Analysis

To understand how women were covered in the Ukraine War, we manually analyzed news articles collected from the four media outlets that mentioned women. The focus is on women's role, the related themes of the news, and whether other vulnerable groups of people such as children, the elderly, and disabled people were mentioned at the same time. In coding each news article, the roles of women were identified among the following categories: Ukrainian civilians, victims of sexual violence, Ukrainian refugees, defenders/fighters, political leaders, Ukrainian soldiers, activists, peacemakers, Russian civilians, Russian soldiers, and women/girls in other countries. If women were mentioned multiple times in one article, the dominant role was identified for analysis. The major news theme of each news article was also coded according to the following categories: death/killing, civilian targets, general suffering such as loss of life and property, home, security, etc., captivity/prisoner of war, pregnancy, and need of aid. Table 2 shows the number and percentage of news covering different women's roles in the four media outlets.

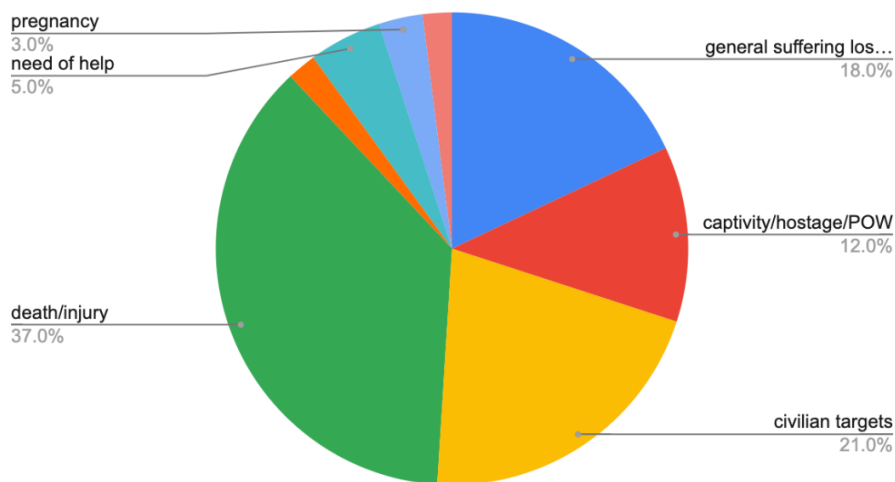
**Table 2: Women's Roles in the Four Media Outlets**

| Women's Roles                  | Ukrinform  |             | Moscow    |             | UN News    |             | NYT        |             |
|--------------------------------|------------|-------------|-----------|-------------|------------|-------------|------------|-------------|
|                                | N          | %           | N         | %           | N          | %           | N          | %           |
| Ukraine civilian               | 100        | 0.48        | 22        | 0.34        | 37         | 0.31        | 40         | 0.33        |
| victim of sexual violence      | 32         | 0.15        | 4         | 0.06        | 10         | 0.08        | 11         | 0.09        |
| Ukrainian refugees             | 32         | 0.15        | 15        | 0.23        | 23         | 0.18        | 34         | 0.28        |
| defenders/fighters             | 26         | 0.13        | 2         | 0.03        | 1          | 0.01        | 9          | 0.07        |
| political leaders              | 5          | 0.02        | 0         | 0           | 11         | 0.09        | 2          | 0.02        |
| Ukraine soldiers               | 4          | 0.02        | 0         | 0           | 0          | 0           | 0          | 0           |
| Activists                      | 4          | 0.02        | 19        | 0.29        | 2          | 0.02        | 6          | 0.05        |
| Russian civilian               | 2          | 0.01        | 0         | 0           | 0          | 0           | 9          | 0.07        |
| Peace maker                    | 2          | 0.01        | 0         | 0           | 0          | 0           | 3          | 0.02        |
| Brittney Griner                | 0          | 0           | 3         | 0.05        | 0          | 0           | 4          | 0.03        |
| Women/girls in other countries | 0          | 0           | 0         | 0           | 37         | 0.31        | 2          | 0.02        |
| Russian soldiers               | 0          | 0           | 0         | 0           | 0          | 0           | 2          | 0.02        |
| <b>Grand Total</b>             | <b>207</b> | <b>100%</b> | <b>65</b> | <b>100%</b> | <b>121</b> | <b>100%</b> | <b>122</b> | <b>100%</b> |

Specifically, in *Ukrinform*, the results show that about half of the women's roles are helpless civilians, 15% are victims of sexual violence, and another 15% are refugees. There are also over 20% of articles in which women were not perceived as vulnerable people. They are defenders, fighters, and war heroes, who rose to defend the country, serve in the army, work to

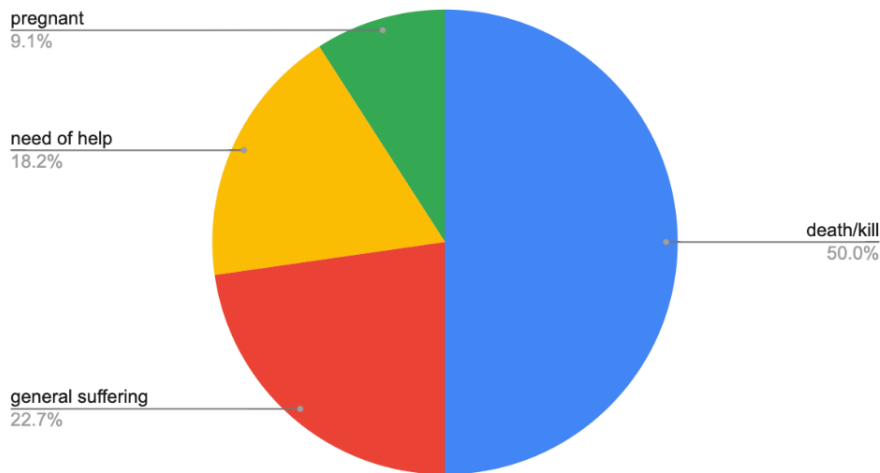
support the economy, and mothers of soldiers who turned into activists and peacemakers. The first lady of Ukraine, Olene Zelensky, was mentioned as the only woman politician who campaigned to emphasize women’s role in the war and seek international support. As she said, “Women are not just victims of war; they are an important part of resistance” (Ukrinform, 2022b). Women who are Russian civilians are briefly mentioned in *Ukrinform* as suffering loss. Furthermore, when we analyzed the news themes that portrayed women as helpless civilians (see Figure 3), the majority fell into the categories of death/injury, followed by civilian targets, general suffering of war, captivity/hostage, need of help, pregnancy, and deportation.

**Figure 3: News Themes of Women as Helpless Civilians in *Ukrinform***



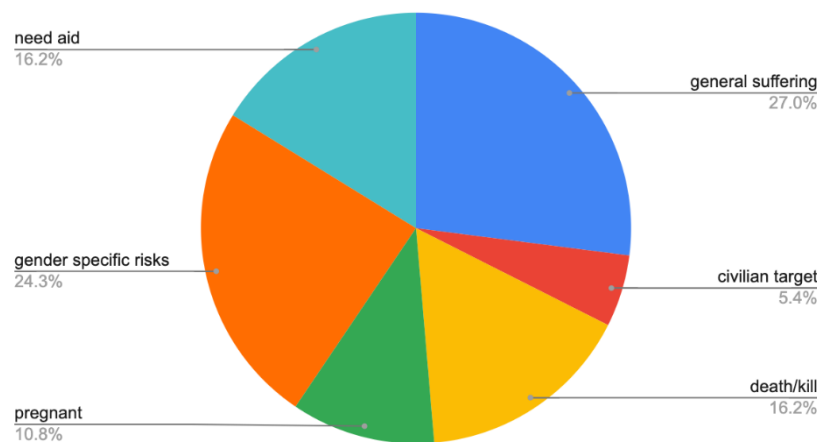
In *The Moscow Times* (Table 2), the number one women’s role is also as helpless civilians, which is related to news themes of being victims of death, the suffering of war, the need for help, and pregnancy (Figure 4). In this Russian media outlet, the second most covered women’s role is as activists, in which different Russian professionals including politicians, artists, filmmakers, journalists, and athletes articulated their anti-war opinion and action. Ukrainian refugees turned out to be one of the focuses as well. The research indicates that the media outlet has anti-war narratives in news reporting which explains why it was banned inside Russia when the war started.

**Figure 4: News Themes of Women as Helpless Civilians in *The Moscow Times***



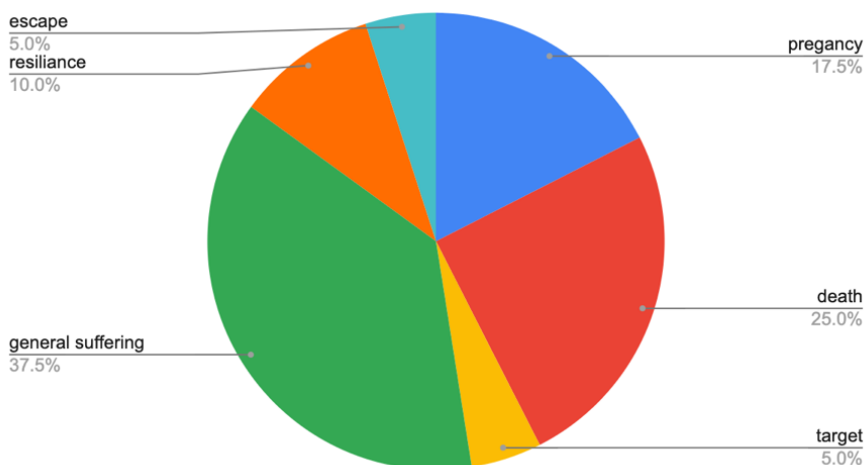
In the *United Nations News*, the coverage of women in the Ukraine war extended from Ukrainian civilians to other parts of the world, especially in the countries and regions of conflict, such as Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Niger, Nigeria, Palestine, Rohingya, Sri Lanka, Syria, and Yemen. The war in Ukraine has a ripple effect. It triggered a multidimensional crisis of an extraordinary scale with increased energy prices, food shortage and insecurity, record-high food prices, and inflation, which have all contributed to unprecedented humanitarian needs. It is also worth noting that, only in the *UN News* were women mentioned several times together with girls, with a specific emphasis on the war's disproportionate impact on women such as gender-based violence, human trafficking, deprivation of education, forced child marriage, and reproductive hardship (Figure 5). Women UN political leaders are also frequently mentioned as advocates of women's rights. Women are increasingly becoming heads of households and leaders in their communities as men are conscripted into the fighting. However, women remain largely excluded from formal decision-making processes related to humanitarian efforts, peace-making, and other areas that directly impact their lives.

**Figure 5: News Themes of Women as Helpless Civilians in *UN News***



Same as in the previous three news media, the top three women's roles in *The New York Times International Edition* are also helpless Ukrainian civilians, refugees, and victims of sexual violence. However, Russian civilians are mentioned the most in the *NYT* compared to the other three. They are Russian women who crowdfunded their army and who suffered the loss of husbands and sons in the war, and Russian athletes and artists whose careers are affected due to the international ban or hostility towards Russia. Russian women soldiers (fighter pilots) were mentioned for the first time in the *NYT*, who were depicted as feeling confused about the cause of war. The Ukrainian diaspora was also mentioned who lent their support through volunteering, donation, preserving, and promoting Ukrainian food and culture. The main themes of Ukrainian civilians' coverage also included death and killing, targets of attack, the suffering of loss and identity, and pregnancy (Figure 6). However, the *NYT* has more diversified themes covering detailed stories of civilian women amid the war, such as drug addicts who face a shortage of medicine and treatment, mothers' joy of having newborns, young people's relish of nightlife in Kyiv, and war dodgers.

**Figure 6: News Themes of Women as Helpless Civilians in the NYT**



**Table 3: Mention of Children, Elderly, Men, and Women in the Four Media Outlets**

| Groups          | Ukrinform |      | Moscow |      | UN News |      | NYT |      |
|-----------------|-----------|------|--------|------|---------|------|-----|------|
|                 | N         | %    | N      | %    | N       | %    | N   | %    |
| <b>Children</b> | 59        | 0.29 | 35     | 0.54 | 74      | 0.61 | 60  | 0.49 |
| <b>Elderly</b>  | 35        | 0.17 | 10     | 0.15 | 20      | 0.17 | 25  | 0.20 |
| <b>Men</b>      | 113       | 0.55 | 15     | 0.23 | 23      | 0.19 | 44  | 0.36 |
| <b>Women</b>    | 207       |      | 65     |      | 121     |      | 122 |      |

Table 3 shows how other vulnerable groups of people such as children and elderly people were mentioned together with women. The mentioning of men was also coded for comparison. The results show that in the media outside Ukraine, children are mostly mentioned together with women, 54% in *The Moscow Times*, 61% in *UN News*, and 49% in *The New York Times International Edition*. However, in *Ukrinform*, the media of Ukraine, men are mostly mentioned together with women on 55% of the occasions. This indicates that the fate of Ukrainian women and men are closely tied together in a time of war. They are fighting shoulder to shoulder in defending the country whether on the battlefield or in supporting the family, community, or nation.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

From the foregoing, the emerging picture from the coverage of the Russia-Ukraine War in these selected news outlets corroborates the charges that women generally tend to be underrepresented in news stories about war, and that when they do get mentioned it is usually in passive roles as helpless victims that need protecting. There is clearly a lot more ground to cover to shift prevailing views and established practices about the role of women in war and other related issues about the interconnections between gender and war that can afford a better understanding of the war puzzle. Kassova and Scharff (2022) working on the platform of the Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone project (GDELT) analyzed media coverage of the Russian-Ukraine War and commented that while Ukrainian women are on the front lines, they are not in the headlines. They observed that women’s voices amount to less than 23 percent of the total experts, protagonists, or sources that are quoted in global digital news about the



Ukraine War. In the same vein, Emma Boberg (2022) expressed her disappointment with the news coverage of the Ukraine War when she noted that although it may not be surprising that women's stories and perspectives in war times have been neglected, one would expect that by 2022 some degree of gender equality could have been achieved in news reporting. This, she charged, has not been the case with respect to the international media's coverage of conflict which has assumed the role of "promoting hypermasculine war narratives, gender stereotypes and manifestations of racism." Boberg opined that the ongoing war in Ukraine features three important leaders, each of whom approaches the situation differently and who also each exemplifies varying shades of masculinity. In contrast, women are conspicuously absent among top political leadership, and Boberg cites Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) data which portrays a world in which women are virtually invisible. Women are significantly underrepresented in the news, accounting for only 24% of subjects and sources of news (Boberg, 2022).

The problem with how the media cover war stories is not just about the underrepresentation of women; it is also about the framing of the stories and the focus or angle that is privileged in news writing. For instance, Boberg (2022) cited the example of the story of a blood-drenched pregnant woman and her unborn child that went viral, but which gave the usual impression of women as victims of war. She pointed out that while such stories are important and should be heard because they are invariably accounts of human rights violations, it is important to consider how they are told, the involvement of the subject, and the angle. Stories about women fleeing with their families should not always be framed as one about the plight of victims of war, but also about women being active agents in the protection of their families, communities, and nations, bringing them from fragility to stability. Moreover, women caught up in the war are not just refuge seekers. According to Boberg, women make up approximately 15% of total military personnel in Ukraine, with many serving on the frontlines. And there are also brave female journalists who choose to remain in Ukraine to provide vital information from the hotspots whose stories are seldom told. Boberg further contended that lack of inclusive coverage is not only fundamentally wrong and contrary to international norms, but it also lays the groundwork for additional unanticipated, adverse outcomes. Short-term, impartial media coverage assists policymakers in making informed judgments on military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine. When reporting is framed from a male perspective, it might amplify the pre-existing bias in a male-dominated government and global institutions.

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