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Surviving Patriarchy: Ukrainian Women and the Russia-Ukraine War

By Suaad Al Orami¹ and Osman Antwi-Boateng²

Abstract

The conventional narrative about war and women, normalized by patriarchy, is that war is men's business and that it requires specific masculine characteristics that women do not possess, and as such, women ought to be exempt from direct combat for their own good. So pervasive is this narrative that women are often portrayed in the media coverage of war as hapless and dependent victims in need of rescue and protection. Focusing on the case of Ukrainian women in the ongoing war against Russia, this study debunks the conventional narrative by positing that Ukrainian women have demonstrated agency in the face of unimaginable adversity, serving as diplomats and journalists calling attention to the war, as frontline fighters, as heads of households, and as anti-war activists, among other roles. Further, they have been instrumental in maintaining children's education and facilitating the delivery of humanitarian aid. This is despite the fact that women have endured political exclusion from the decision-making process on the conduct and end of the war, as well as social exclusion through sexual violence, human trafficking, internal displacement, and refugeehood. Furthermore, they have borne increased economic burdens in the form of energy poverty, food insecurity, unemployment, and poverty. Ignoring the pain, suffering, and diverse sacrifices of Ukrainian women amounts to an insidious form of patriarchy that is bound to further prolong the war and worsen their suffering. Any future negotiations aimed toward ending the war, providing post-war humanitarian assistance, and developing reconstruction plans must involve all parties who fought and bore the brunt of the war, especially women.

Keywords: Women victims of war, Patriarchy, Russia-Ukraine War, sexual violence, war crimes, Donbas, NATO

Introduction

This research is based on the reality of women's existence under a patriarchal international system that sidelines them in decision-making regarding international security issues, such as war and peace. Nevertheless, they are the biggest victims of war because of their exclusion from decision-making pertaining to war, peace negotiations, and humanitarian planning and delivery. This study challenges the prevailing assumptions about women and war by focusing on Ukrainian women's roles in the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine and the war's impact on them. The

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literature on the role of Soviet women (which includes Russian and Ukrainian women) in WWI and WWII is rich. Russians and Ukrainians are engaged in a bloody conflict as adversaries for the first time in the modern era. Therefore, examining the role of women in the war and its impact on one of the states involved is a significant topic of research.

To achieve the objectives of this study, two research questions were framed: 1) What is the role of Ukrainian women in the Russia-Ukraine War? and 2) What is the impact of the war on Ukrainian women? The study presents a review of the literature, analyzes Ukrainian women's role in the war and its impact on the women, and lists the conclusions based on its findings.

Literature Review

The conventional narrative about women's participation in war is rooted in patriarchal stereotypes, such as the idea that war is men's business because it is men who decide to go to war, plan for war, fight and die in wars, negotiate the end to wars, and make postwar plans for everyone. They do all this to protect the nation and its hapless women and children (Cohn, 2013); hence, women should be excluded from combat for their own good. Buttressing this point, Weuger (2011) argues that our historical conception of war has been exclusively from a male perspective.

Weuger (2011) represents contemporary feminist scholars who reject this conventional narrative on a number of grounds. They argue that the nature of war today has changed in terms of those who fight the war; increasingly, poorly trained nonstate actors with varied motivations and complete disregard for international norms of war are inciting conflict instead of traditional armies. These nonstate actors deliberately target civilians, resulting in a civilian casualty rate of over 90 percent, made up mostly of women and children. Citing a 2009 Peace Research Institute study, Weuger (2011) points out that men are likely to die as a direct consequence of war, while women's deaths are by-products of war. She cautions that patriarchal misconceptions about women's role in war undermine efforts at finding lasting solutions to wars.

Although women have historically been involved in wars, WWII was a watershed moment for women's participation in war in different capacities, and Ukrainian women were no exception. According to Spiti (2022), the first wave of women's involvement in WWII started gradually. Their roles were limited to community service, such as family care and social work. They also supported the war effort by sewing uniforms, raising money for charities such as the Red Cross, and writing letters for soldiers in the ditches. After men of different ages went to war, women had to protect their families and secure their livelihoods. As the rigid division between masculine and feminine activities declined, women became part of combat missions. They provided logistics services, cooked for soldiers, and cleaned their quarters.

During the second wave, women took advanced steps toward the war zone as they got involved in war operations. In the former Soviet Union, women joined the war either by choice or by force, and most were recruited for health services, treating wounded soldiers and performing other nursing duties. This was a watershed stage in women's involvement on the battlefield and was the beginning of the formal emergence of work in the health and nursing sectors. Further, because of the loss of male labor, the war forced women to work in arms factories and on railways, engage in policing duties, and carry out factory work. In the past, Russian and Ukrainian women were forced to join the military against their will, working as fighters and aircraft pilots (Spiti, 2022).

Meanwhile, authors such as Thurston and Bonwetsch (2000) have observed that in the early stages of war, women played multiple roles. They establish that women volunteered to join the army to defend the homeland and preserve soldiers' lives. Equally, propaganda greatly impacted

women because they were recruited to what was called the “Great Patriotic War.” Hence, women were pushed into WWII by emotional appeals, publicity, and mobilization. As a result, 800,000 women served in the armed forces in different capacities, including as artillery and auxiliary officers (Thurston & Bonwetsch, 2000). When Germany attacked the Soviet Union, the German army was defeated by women’s persistence; thousands of women played crucial roles in the battlefield. They worked as military communicators, tank drivers, and snipers and commanded tanks and machine guns. For example, the Ukrainian sniper Lyudmila Pavlichenko killed more than 300 German soldiers (Thurston & Bonwetsch, 2000).

Ukrainian women have had a long history of serving in combat missions from the beginning of WWI to WWII and in the Red Army. A factor that enabled this feat is the Bolshevik/Communist ideology of promoting equality among men and women in all spheres of life, including the military. The 2014 Russian invasion of Eastern Ukraine triggered the mass enlistment of women into the Ukrainian armed forces. Since then, women have officially been recognized as combat veterans and awarded military pensions. Even before the 2014 invasion, a quarter of the Ukrainian military were women. Women’s role in the military has further been cemented by iconic images featuring women combatants in war propaganda posters and on social media for the ongoing war (Frayer, 2022).

Most of the available literature on the war participation of Ukrainian women in contemporary times focuses heavily on their motivations. Indeed, one research study on the motivations of Ukrainian women participating in the war references the historical precedent of Ukrainian women joining nationalist organizations and gallantly fighting in WWII (Darden et al., 2019).

Although the current Russia-Ukraine War is still new and ongoing, and, as such, very little academic research has been published on the role of Ukrainian women in the war, some notable studies predated the February 2022 invasion by Russia. These publications focused on the motivations of Ukrainian women in participating in arms resistance against Russia’s 2014 invasion of Eastern Ukraine. According to Malyarenko and Galbreath (2016), ideological reasons such as being pro-nationalist were the primary motivation for Ukrainian women to join paramilitary groups against Russia. A study by Prykhodko et al. (2020) on the motivation of Ukrainian women in joining the Ukrainian National Guard revealed institutional and pragmatic reasons such as patriotism and the need for employment. Khromeychuk (2018) cites the obligation to support the army and to show solidarity with family and friends who joined the fight as the motivation for Ukrainian women to join anti-Russia protests and, eventually, the war in the Maidan and Donbas regions. Prykhodko et al. (2020) also noted the spirit of patriotism that drives Ukrainian women’s resistance to Russian aggression and their choice to engage in military services. Further studies have also revealed that women are inclined to participate in the war because of the attraction of the military profession, their aim of self-actualization, and the material and social benefits that the military provides (Lapènitè, 2021).

Furthermore, the debate about Ukrainian women’s participation in the war effort is being led by human right groups advocating for gender equality in military services. They cite concrete benefits for including women in all sociopolitical processes in Ukraine while identifying structural impediments to be overcome (Lapènitè, 2021). O’Sullivan (2019) pointed to the evidence of progress for Ukrainian women serving in the military by arguing that although feminists have been battling oppressive patriarchal norms, their demands have been incorporated in the country’s nationalist discourse and were on display during the Euromaidan protests and during Russia’s invasion in 2014.

Lapénaité (2021) reported that Ukrainian women are motivated by patriotism and a desire to protect their country against a hostile foreign force that seeks to end their country's sovereign existence. The study also revealed that the militaristic evolution of Ukrainian women who participated in the Euromaidan protests eventually led them to become armed fighters (Lapénaité, 2021). Powell (2001) notes that women are always victims of war and that men have created conflicts throughout history and across cultures, initiating wars and changing the course of history. She posits that women are not involved in conflict but are affected by its consequences and pay the price. In WWI, men dominated the armed forces as soldiers, pilots, and sailors, while women took care of the family and community. In WWII, women played major roles in the agricultural, community service, factory, and medical sectors. By the second phase of WWII, however, women were working in the arms industry and as fighters in the armed forces. At the end of the war, all women had been impacted by the war, whether in the war zone or within the community (Powell, 2001).

Indeed, during their military service, women paid the most difficult price as victims of war crimes, such as rape and human trafficking in WWI and WWII. O'Brien and Quenivet (2022) have posited that because wars are gendered, sexual violence against women in the armed forces is inevitable. Further, they posit that gender contrast is based on the cultural division of labor—men go to work and women stay home. Likewise, in the case of war, men and women play different roles; men must join the military and women take responsibility for the community. If women are recruited into the armed forces, their role in the frontlines should be limited to that of health service providers, such as physicians and nurses.

According to Lamb (2020), most cultures look at rape as being shameful for the victims more so than the offenders, so societies turn a blind eye to it. Because of this cultural principle, most victims refuse to mention it, even during wars. Rape during war is as old as war itself, but such incidents are rarely brought to light and the survivor almost never comes out in public to avoid shame. Lamb (2020) has condemned the shameful silence of rape crimes against women in the war arena. According to her, despite being a common tactic on the battlefield, rape has been largely ignored in historical accounts.

The literature reveals that warfare does not differ across time or place; it has taken place throughout history and across cultures. The mechanisms of grinding conflicts have changed in preparation and implementation. Whatever the motives for wars are, the cost is extremely high. Conflict and struggle are fueled by decision-makers and enhanced by the expansion of economic and political interests. Women pay the price of war at all levels.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of patriarchy is central to this research. Patriarchy is defined as a “system of political, social, and economic relations and institutions structured around the gender inequality of socially defined men and women. Within patriarchal relations, women are collectively excluded from full participation in political and economic life” (Nash, 2009, p. 102). Both the private and public spheres have patriarchal structures, whereby characteristics considered feminine are desired less and those deemed masculine are desirable, valued, and mainstreamed. This system has led to the dominance of men in all spheres of private and public life (Nash, 2009).

In the midst of the ongoing war in Ukraine, the mainstreaming of patriarchal norms led to a gender system that has further been codified in law. Such gendered laws determine who stays to fight and who leaves, who lives or dies, and who the heroes and villains are (Cohn, 2013). In wartime Ukraine, the gender system and patriarchy has been further entrenched through the

unequal gender obligations for the war, as evidenced by the presidential mobilization order, which required all men aged between 18 and 60 years to report for military service without a similar requirement for women.

Despite the structural patriarchal system and exclusion, Ukrainian women, in times of great danger, have demonstrated female agency, defined as the “capacity of women and girls to take purposeful action and pursue goals, free from the threat of violence or retribution. The three core expressions of agency are: decision-making, leadership, and collective action” (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2022). Many have voluntarily decided to enlist in the army in combat roles, have assumed leadership of their households, and are presenting the human cost of the war in the international court of public opinion via their collective activism. These aspects are explored further in this study.

Methodology

This study is rooted in qualitative methodology involving analysis of primary and secondary data on the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. Most of the data sources are between February 24, 2022, the launch of the Russian invasion against Ukraine, and December 2022, when the research was completed. The primary sources analyzed include open-source data on war casualties and consequences of the war collected from the theater of war by international organizations such as the United Nations, the European Union, and global NGOs such as Care International and Save the Children International as well as international media houses. Further, secondary data including reports and commentaries from analysts from reputable international think tanks, global NGOs, and international organizations were analyzed and used to support the research. Secondary data is particularly vital for this research because the dangers associated with the war preclude the researcher from directly collecting primary data from the war front. According to Tate and Happ (2018, p. 3), “in conducting original primary research, practical concerns arise when participants are difficult to locate or reluctant to divulge sensitive details to a researcher.”

Thematic analysis was used to assess the data. This involved categorizing relevant themes from the assembled data based on similarities and repeated patterns and flagging the most dominant or recurring themes pertinent to the research questions or goals. According to Bryman (2012), the advantages of thematic analysis are that it enables the analysis of different types of qualitative data and is flexible because it can be applied in different contexts. However, a major drawback of thematic analysis is the absence of a uniformed approach in its execution. To avoid bias in data analysis, this study relies on various sources, considering that this war is generally viewed as a war between the Western countries and their allies against Russia and its allies. Therefore, we avoided solely relying on Western or Russian sources, and statements and data from the two antagonists were included only after corroborating with third-party neutrals.

Agency: Ukrainian Women’s Roles in the War

Ukrainian women’s roles and experiences in the ongoing war are diverse and defy the stereotype of women being victims during war. Cohn (2013, p. 1) notes that women instigate and end wars. They support and join militaries and armed groups and are also victims of war. For instance, during war times, some women stay at home to sustain their families, but some are also displaced and forced to rebuild communities after war; many women also face family and community rejection for being raped during wars. Although the processes and decisions that led to the Russia-Ukraine War were the result of patriarchal forces with little input from Ukrainian women who have been the most negatively impacted, these women have shown the capacity to

exercise agency beyond victimhood. The role of Ukrainian women in the war is summed up by the clarion call of the First Lady of Ukraine, Olena Zelenska, who has posited that “our resistance, as our future victory, has taken on a particularly feminine face,” and has praised Ukraine’s women for serving in the military, raising their children in wartime, and providing essential services (Willsher, 2022). Ukrainian women have served in the war as international diplomats, frontline soldiers, humanitarians, anti-war activists, journalists, educators, and heads of households.

Politics and Diplomacy

Although Ukrainian women are underrepresented in political leadership and international diplomacy compared to their Western counterparts, they highlight their country’s plight to the international community in various ways. Regionally, a group of women Ukrainian MPs visited the British House of Commons in March 2022. During the visit, Lesia Vasylenko of the Holos Party appealed to NATO to impose a no-fly zone over Ukraine, something the British government ruled out to avoid confrontation with Russia. Summing up the role of Ukrainian women in diplomacy, the MP said, “Only the women are allowed out of the country...Male MPs are staying back and fighting....We, the women, do the international fight” (Parkinson, 2022).

Internationally, the first lady of the country, Olena Zelenska, is the face of Ukrainian women’s international diplomacy. She is highly active in the international media, highlighting her country’s plight in the ongoing war. Further, she has met U.S. President Joe Biden and her counterpart, First Lady Jill Biden, as well as a bipartisan group of congressional members to whom she forcefully appealed for support. However, her most audacious move yet was when she did a photoshoot and appeared on the cover of *Vogue* magazine in what has been dubbed as “vogue diplomacy” (Dickson, 2022). This has drawn mixed reactions, with some praising her cover appearance for keeping the invasion in the global spotlight while others feeling that the photoshoot was self-serving and inappropriate during the war period.

Frontline Workers

Just as the previous generations of Ukrainian women actively served in the Red Army during WW2, the current generation of women have enlisted and are actively serving in the war against Russia. According to official Ukrainian government figures, the number of Ukrainian women currently serving in the military stands at approximately 50,000, marking an increase from the pre-invasion number of 32,000. Out of the 50,000, about 10,000 are serving on the frontlines as combatants or in capacities that place them in the frontlines in the line of fire (Elizondo, 2022). Even before the 2022 Russian invasion, Ukrainian women were playing vital roles in the resistance against Russia in the Donbas region ever since its capture by Russia in 2014. Currently, 15% of Ukraine’s military personnel are women in different combat roles. The increase in the proportion of women can be traced to a 2017 law that officially gave women equal rights as men to engage in combat missions (Akyol, 2022). Although women were not mandated to report for combat duties like men aged 18–60 years under the mobilization order that was enforced in the aftermath of Russia’s February 24, 2022 invasion, a national poll conducted in March 2022 indicated that 59% of Ukrainian women were willing to volunteer to fight the Russians in combat (Martsenyuk, 2022). Although the Ukrainian government has legally expanded the pool of women eligible for noncombat-related conscription, the overwhelming response from women volunteers has led to a waiting list of women, thereby eliminating the need for conscription (Frayer, 2022).

A major feature of Ukrainian women’s participation in the war is that they are venturing into combat roles that patriarchy has traditionally reserved for men, skipping over their traditional

roles as surgeons and nurses. According to Kateryna Pryimak, co-founder of the Veteran Women's Movement, there has been a notable increase in the number of women joining the Ukrainian military since the Russian invasion in February 2022. In addition, medical physician Hanna Khurava, has observed that there has been a significant rise in the participation of women in frontline units as drivers, paramedics, and machine-gunners. This marks a departure from the past when their roles were limited to support functions such as cooks and nurses (Hendrix & Korolchuk, 2022). The various roles played by Ukrainian women in the ongoing war and their voluntary enlisting in the military is a testament to their agency and evidence that women willingly demand equity in sacrificing for defense of the homeland in times of crises.

Ellner (2022) laments that in spite of the diverse roles being played by Ukrainian women in the war, similar to numerous others, women are often stereotypically portrayed as mothers, while men are typically depicted as fighters. Refugees escaping from military operations often conform to traditional gender and age stereotypes, with women, children, and the elderly being guided to safety by younger or middle-aged men (Ellner, 2022). Ukrainian women, like women reporters, confront specific challenges to safety, work, and living during war, but we rarely hear their stories. 23% of experts, protagonists, and sources quoted in worldwide digital news concerning the Ukraine war are women. Ukrainian war coverage is more gender biased than worldwide coverage. Only 18% of news media voices and 23% internationally are women experts, sources, or protagonists (Kassova & Scharff, 2022).

Heads of Household

The war is upending traditional gender roles in Ukraine, where men are viewed as heads of the household. This is because the war has caused high unemployment among men, the traditional breadwinners, and led to the absence of many men from their families because of conscription into the army to fight on the frontlines. This has led to a vacuum in Ukrainian homes, which has been filled by women stepping in to sustain family units. Hence, Ukrainian women play multiple roles in the battlefield and in the community.

According to a UN report (UN Women, 2022c), most women have increasingly become heads of households as men have been recruited into the armed forces. Despite the fact that Ukrainian women have become leaders in combat and the related humanitarian arena, they are excluded from formal decision-making processes. The report strongly recommends the involvement of women in the decision-making process and actions for governments, the international community, and other actors implementing humanitarian responses (UN Women, 2022c).

Humanitarian Roles

Ukrainian women are actively playing vital roles in delivering humanitarian assistance to alleviate the suffering caused by the war. In this regard, the efforts of local and national women's rights organizations and women-led organizations are at the forefront of ongoing humanitarian delivery both within Ukraine and in refugee shelters in neighboring countries. These women are well suited for their roles because of the long history of advocacy for Ukrainian women and their familiarity with needs. However, these organizations speak of marginalization by international agencies in making humanitarian assistance decisions (Care International, 2022a). Consequently, Care International has called on all actors in the response and recovery phases to do more to ensure that women are provided the support they need and the recognition they deserve and are brought to the center-stage in decision-making (Care International, 2022a).

Millions of Ukrainian women have voluntarily mobilized to support the war effort in non-combat roles, providing vital medical services to soldiers in capacities such as medical doctors, nurses, and paramedics and offering logistical support. These women have dubbed themselves the “rear front line,” meaning that the back operations in the military support those in the front lines (Ferris-Rotman, 2022).

Education

The onset of the war has disrupted the entire educational system of Ukraine as the Russian military has targeted social infrastructure, including schools. It is also unsafe now for school children to go outside, let alone enter school buildings that could be targeted by a missile or bomb anytime. Citing Save the Children and Ukrainian government data, Dasey (2022) notes that the education of 5.5 million children has been truncated by Russia’s relentless assault on school buildings daily. As of April 2022, about 6% of Ukrainian schools had been damaged, and 83 were wholly destroyed, with the remaining classrooms being used for emergency purposes (Dasey, 2022). As a result of the above challenges and because most men are away fighting, women have disproportionately assumed the role of homeschooling teachers along with the duties of raising children and taking care of the household.

Anti-War Activism and Documenting War Atrocities

Russia’s deliberate and indiscriminate bombardment of heavily populated areas and civilian infrastructure has led to accusations of war crimes and denials from Moscow. To hold Russia accountable for its actions throughout the war, the Ukrainian government has made the documentation of cases of war crimes a major priority. Complementing this ongoing initiative is a group of 120 women volunteers called the “Battalion.” This group visits dangerous war zones to capture images and videos of war atrocities and reviews them in-house; the data are stored at an open database before being shared with the Ukrainian government and the international community (Ferris-Rotman, 2022). This initiative is necessary because it is therapeutic for those who have lost loved ones to know their fate and ensure Russia’s accountability for war crimes for posterity or the post-war prosecution of war crimes. Further, female Ukrainian journalists risk their lives covering hotspots in the war, thereby aiding in the agenda-setting regarding the war’s coverage. For example, in March 2022, a Ukrainian journalist, Oleksandra “Sasha” Kuvshynova, working as a freelancer with Fox News, was killed together with her cameraman while covering the war.

However, Ukrainian war coverage by women has been subjected to patriarchal stereotyping. According to the Permanent Delegate of Romania to UNESCO, Sasha Koulaeva, “Traditionally in Ukraine and Russia, the people covering war have often been women. It is paradoxical because women tend to cover human tragedy and losses and men mainly cover military operations.” However, she believes that women have been stereotyped as being more emotional and apt at covering victims of war, while men are more apt at covering the technical operations of war (SciencesPo, 2022).

Furthermore, Ukrainian women demonstrate agency by actively building a cross-national anti-war movement. In this regard, Ukrainian women have partnered with their counterparts from Russia and Belarus in a show of solidarity against the war to counter propaganda, lies, and misinformation about the war. These women have also called for the implementation of UN Resolution 1325 and sanctions against non-compliant countries and parties (Popova et al., 2022). UN Resolution 1325 seeks to address the impact of war on women and demands the equitable

participation of women in conflict resolution, peace agreements, peacebuilding, and postwar reconstruction (UN PeaceMaker, 2000).

Impact of the War on Ukrainian Women

Despite the demonstrated agency of Ukrainian women in the face of adversity, they have not escaped the predictable consequences of war by the same patriarchal structures that launched the war. These consequences include sexual violence, human trafficking, psychological trauma, educational crisis, increased marginalization of minority females and the LGBTQ community, increased poverty, unemployment, and political marginalization, which are discussed in detail below.

Social Impact

1. Sexual Violence

Russia has been accused of deliberately using sexual violence as an instrument of war against Ukraine. Making this case in April 2002, former UK Foreign Minister Liz Truss and her Canadian counterpart Mélanie Joly argued that rape has been used by invading Russian forces as “a systematic weapon to exert control and exercise power over women,” even though rape, like chemical weapons and landmines, has been banned by international conventions (Paas-Lang, 2022). This observation was further corroborated by Pramila Patten, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict in October 2022, citing the testimonies of Ukrainian women about their encounter with Russian soldiers equipped with Viagra, as evidence of a premeditated strategy of sexual warfare (Wang et al., 2022). A UN report further warns of “an alarming increase in gender-based violence, transactional sex for food and survival, sexual exploitation, and trafficking, not only in Ukraine but worldwide, amid worsening living conditions” (UN News, 2022).

Olesia Bondar, Director of the Ukrainian Women’s Fund stated, “The war in Ukraine may be changing the women’s movement, but it’s not stopping it” (UN Women, 2022a). In her interview with the UN Trust Fund, she declared that women were compelled to leave their homes under the risk of getting killed, raped, or trafficked. Although women living in shelters face similar problems, these women are trying to stand on their feet and overcome challenges. According to Bondar, she needed to demonstrate the courage, strength, and sacrifice shown by Ukrainian women in the battlefield and the community by getting behind the wheel and showing everyone that a woman does not succumb to fear (UN Women, 2022a).

2. Psychological Trauma

The experiences of individuals in Russia and Ukraine during the war differ based on the level of shelling their towns experience. Based on existing research on civilian trauma in war zones that have suffered aerial bombardments (Safa, 2022), it can be inferred that war-related trauma is more prevalent among the general population in Ukraine compared to Russia. This claim is mainly based on the observation that a larger number of Ukrainian cities have experienced aerial bombardment compared to cities in Russian territory.

Chaaya et al. (2022) point to a long tradition of research that shows the long-lasting psychological and mental state of war and argue that women and children tend to be the most vulnerable. The Ukrainian government has announced that between 10,000–13,000 Ukrainian soldiers have been killed in the course of the war (Maishman & Lukiv, 2022). These dead soldiers have left behind thousands of widows and children battling with the psychological

trauma of losing their loved ones and struggling to cope with living without their primary income earners. According to Akyol (2022), in times of war and its aftermath, women and their children are often stigmatized and vulnerable to human rights abuses and gender-based discrimination. These vulnerabilities and abuses lead to heightened trauma because these widowed women and their children are left to fend for themselves with little or no support.

Historical trends show that widowhood resulting from war alters the social standing of women for the worst, and the Ukrainian case is no exception. According to Akyol (2022), under patriarchal systems, the loss of a husband is not only an economic loss for the widow and her children but also the loss of social status and influence. However, she notes that widowers' fate is often different because they are not defined solely in terms of marital status (Akyol, 2022).

Ukrainian women are also susceptible to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) because of targeted Russian warfare on heavily populated cities and civilian/social infrastructure. The frequency of such bombardments has put civilians on edge and in constant panic mode. Panos, a Ukrainian psychologist, estimates that there are about 7 million trauma victims in Ukraine, the majority of whom are people who have fled their original abodes; of this number, about 50 percent have PTSD (Koshiw, 2022). Considering that women constitute a sizable number of the internally displaced, they are bound to constitute a significant percentage of people suffering from PTSD.

The long-term traumatic experiences of WWII sexual violence predict a grim future for Ukrainian women victims of sexual crimes. According to Naimark (1995), every woman carries with her the effects of rape crimes until her death. Therefore, the collective anguish in war zones and the psychological and social impacts on women are unbearable. Because most women suffer from unpleasant experiences, they do not want to recount them. Indeed, the act of rape not only harms the individual woman but also runs painfully deep in the collective memory. Women have been victims of more than rape and torture during wars; they were taken as captives and worked as slaves in the armies of the enemy (Naimark, 1995).

3. Human Trafficking

Related to sexual violence is the rising rate of human trafficking of Ukrainian women. Women fleeing Ukraine because of the war are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking because they lack the means to pay to travel outside the country and, as such, easily fall prey to unscrupulous human traffickers promising help but who end up exploiting them. The United Nations Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Pramila Patten, has warned that the rising incidence of human trafficking largely involving women and children, who constitute a majority of those fleeing the war, represents "a crisis within a crisis" (Sen, 2022).

4. Education

Schools have not been spared in Russia's deliberate assault on Ukrainian infrastructure. According to available data from Ukraine's Ministry of Education, over 1,800 educational facilities have been destroyed since the commencement of the war (Inter Press Service, 2022). School infrastructure has also been converted for military use, limiting education access for both boys and girls. However, the non-governmental organization Save the Children has observed that in conflict zones such as Ukraine, girls are 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than boys (Save the Children, n.d.).

Khullar (2022) argues that just as girls were disproportionately disadvantaged during the disruption of education due to COVID-19, Ukrainian girls are at risk of a similar fate because they are going to be disadvantaged by online school arrangements along with the burden of homecare

and limited access to information technology. Reduced female access to education will result in girls withdrawing from school and being pushed into marriage by families desperate to make ends meet (UN News, 2022). Furthermore, the insecurity caused by the war has created a shortage of teachers because women traditionally have made up the majority of teachers in Ukraine and many of them have fled as refugees to other countries (Dasey, 2022).

5. *Internal Displacement and Refugees*

The insecurity caused by Russia's indiscriminate bombardments has internally displaced thousands of Ukrainian women and forced others to migrate to neighboring countries as refugees. According to Care International, "Women and children make up 90 percent of Ukrainian refugees, and women and girls represent 65 percent of the internally displaced people in Ukraine" (Care International, 2022a). These women and girls are prone to being victims of sexual violence and exploitation.

The war has displaced more than 14 million Ukrainians in what the UN has described as "the fastest, largest displacement witnessed in decades" (AP, 2022). According to the International Organization for Migration, more than half of those internally displaced are women. Many are very vulnerable because they are pregnant, have young children, are disabled, and are victims of sexual violence (BBC, 2022). The data also suggest that as of July 2022, 65% of Ukrainian women were scrambling to find and move to safe places in Ukraine (Care International, 2022b).

6. *Reductions in Public Services*

Russia's deliberate targeting of social infrastructure as a war strategy has negatively affected the livelihoods of Ukrainian women, who are the biggest recipients of public services because of their disproportionate responsibilities as heads of households in Ukrainian society. The war has also reduced access to effective health care for Ukrainian women, with the absence of electricity limiting the delivery of effective healthcare to women, especially those in need of routine health care. It is estimated that 250,000 pregnant women required prenatal care prior to the outbreak of the war. Furthermore, available data indicate that two-thirds of recipients of social benefits and pensions are women. Hence, war-related disruptions in energy supply and access to finance disproportionately affect women (UN Women, 2022c, p. 12).

7. *LGBTQ and Minority Women*

The war threatens to upend the progress that Ukraine has made in safeguarding LGBTQ rights and liberties. Kottasová (2022) notes that although lagging behind its Western counterparts, Ukraine has adopted measures to support its LGBTQ community by passing sweeping anti-discrimination laws. These laws have been introduced owing to Ukraine's aspiration to join the EU, which requires prospective members to thwart discrimination against minorities (Kottasová, 2022). However, the war poses major challenges to transgender women. First, transwomen, assigned male on their birth certificates, face restrictions in traveling outside the country based on the mobilization order issued for all eligible adults to be conscripted into the army. Meanwhile, transgender males, assigned female on their birth certificates, are exempted from the conscription and allowed to flee. Second, the LGBTQ community is worried about seeking sanctuary in neighboring countries such as Hungary and Poland, which are less friendly to the community (Hunte, 2022.) Third, there is rising fear among the LGBTQ community in Ukraine and neighboring countries regarding Russia's anti-gay legislation passed in November, 2022. The bill prohibits the dissemination of LGBTQ "propaganda" through various forms of media, including

cinema, books, advertisements, and other channels as determined by authorities. The law also prohibits individuals in Russia from promoting or expressing approval of homosexual relationships, as well as publicly asserting their normalcy (Rajvanshi, 2022).

An underreported problem emanating from this war is the racial discrimination experienced by minority women fleeing the war to neighboring countries. Many female African immigrants spoke about mistreatment by the Ukrainian military who had separate queues for white and nonwhite people, where the latter were prevented from boarding trains to neighboring countries. According to a fleeing Congolese immigrant, Kass, “we entered the train last” and when snacks were being distributed to passengers on board, “they threw us the ends of stale bread” (Ferris-Rotman, 2022). Just as their transgender counterparts, minority women represent the invisible victims of the war whose voices are missing from the general narrative about the war.

Economic Impact

Unemployment

Pre-invasion data in 2021 from the World Bank (2021) indicates that Ukrainian women constituted a sizable percentage (47.7%) of the Ukrainian labor force. However, this number is expected to fall drastically because of the nearly 5 million jobs lost since the beginning of the war with a future projection as high as 7 million as a direct consequence of the invasion (International Labor Organization, 2022). Although no available figures indicate the percentage of women facing unemployment, they are likely to be disproportionately affected. Furthermore, nearly half of the 5.23 million women and children reported to have fled the war to neighboring countries are of working age who previously held jobs (UN News, 2022).

Food Insecurity

The war has led to a global spike in food prices and shortages, exacerbating the global gender gap in food security to the disadvantage of women. As a result, globally, women have resorted to reducing their food intake in favor of their households (UN Women, 2022c). Ukrainian women are not impervious to this negative phenomenon as they are particularly vulnerable due to their proximity to the conflict.

Further, food insecurity is more severe among rural Ukrainian women because they are unable to engage in agricultural activities as a result of rising insecurity and the absence of resources required to engage in productive agriculture. This has been further compounded by the fact that they have to accommodate and cater for the arrival of more internally displaced people from other parts of Ukraine seeking help in the countryside (UN News, 2022). The UN reports that owing to food insecurity, there has been an increase in transactional sex for food and survival (UN Women, 2022c), worsening the sexual exploitation of Ukrainian women during war.

Energy Poverty

Russia is deliberately targeting Ukraine’s energy infrastructure, which has deprived millions of Ukrainians access to electricity, especially in the middle of a frigid winter, further exacerbating the ever-worsening conditions of Ukrainian citizens. According to a UN report titled *Global Gendered Impacts of the Ukrainian Crisis*, the absence of electricity has reduced access to water, information, and communication technology services to women. Further, many women have resorted to unsafe means of generating heat for their homes, cooking with biomass fuel, and fetching water from streams and rivers. Energy challenges have disproportionately affected Ukrainian women, 70% of whom are heads of households; further, women are predominantly

dependent on a single source of income. Research in Europe indicates that energy poverty disproportionately affects women and single-parent families because of limited income. In the case of Ukraine, women constitute 92.2 percent of single parents, further compounding their war-related hardships (UN Women, 2022c, p. 12).

Political Impact

Politically, there is a sense of frustration among Ukrainian women who feel marginalized in terms of decision-making involving the processes, conduct, and ending of the war. This is further heightened by the fact that Ukrainian women are heavily and negatively impacted by the war, as has been discussed throughout this study. Khullar (2022) has made the following observation:

Disregarding both their significant contributions and their additional burdens, decision-makers have largely kept women on the sidelines, whether on humanitarian efforts, peace-making, or other areas that directly impact their lives. At the formal decision-making level, the centralization of power and increased role of the military has only made it more difficult for women to exert influence in political and administrative decision-making processes. Women's lack of participation has further failed to ensure that their needs and priorities, including the most vulnerable and marginalized, are being given adequate attention and thereby mitigated against. (Khullar, 2022, p. 8)

Consequently, the UN report on the gendered impact of the war has recommended the immediate inclusion of women in decision-making on all aspects of the war, especially on the delivery of humanitarian aid because of the inordinate negative impact of the war on women and children (UN Women, 2022c).

Conclusion

Patriarchal forces will continue to dominate international relations, especially regarding the start of war, the conduct of war, and infliction of death and destruction. This is not because of their faulty preconceived assumptions about gender and masculinity but rather because institutional structures, both domestically and internationally, assure the continued dominance of the patriarchy and male advantage in decision-making over all other genders, rendering the latter subservient. However, the agency demonstrated by Ukrainian women in the ongoing war offers a rebuttal to patriarchal schemes in numerous ways.

First, the Ukrainian women's active involvement in the war shows that marginalization does not necessarily result in indifference or apathy. The record number of women enlisting and serving in non-stereotypical roles in the army is a demonstration of their agency against structural and professional adversity. Second, the overwhelming enlistment of women into the army in excess of patriarchal recruitment quotas is a further testament of their agency. Third, this study posits that women are more than hapless victims of war, as demonstrated by how Ukrainian women have responded in diverse ways to the devastation of war through their leadership of households, stepping up to continue their children's education, reporting from the war fronts as journalists, providing humanitarian assistance, and applying diplomatic pressure on the patriarchal forces of war. Thus, Ukrainian women are poised to lead future peace processes or post-conflict political settlement and reconstruction defying patriarchy and socially constructed norms.

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