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## Peripheral and Gender Perspectives: The Russia-Ukraine War and Africa's Response and Impact

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## **Peripheral and Gender Perspectives: The Russia-Ukraine War and Africa's Response and Impact**

By Osman Antwi-Boateng<sup>1</sup> and Mohammed Huwaishel Al Nuaimi<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, most African countries avoided open alignment with either Russia or Ukraine, favoring a wait-and-see approach until the situation's consequences for African households, energy security, and the agricultural sector became more evident. Using the nexus between world systems and dependency theories as an analytical tool, this study examines how African governments have responded to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and how the continent has been affected by the war. This examination is accomplished via a qualitative analysis of primary data such as reports issued by independent international organizations, think tanks, and media houses. Furthermore, the analysis is complemented by secondary sources such as media reports and expert crisis analysis. This study argues that although Africa as a continent and African women in particular, by virtue of occupying the periphery of world politics, have been marginalized in decision-making regarding the war, they have nevertheless been negatively impacted by the war. Lacking agency in world affairs, the continent has responded to the war in a disjointed way without considering the voices and input of African women, who are increasingly bearing the brunt of the global impact of the war. Consequently, Africa, led by patriarchal leadership via the African Union (AU), has struggled to abide by its continental charter principles of noninterference and remain committed to its tradition of nonalignment in international affairs. The continent has not been impervious to the negative impact of the conflict because of its structural dependence on countries in the global core. Politically, the war has resulted in further marginalization of the continent and its women due to the continent's lack of agency. Economically, the conflict has led to rising energy costs, inflation, and food insecurity, all of which disproportionately affect African women. Socially, the conflict has disrupted the academic life of African students in Ukraine, with women students particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence. The research calls for the inclusion of more African women's voices in decision-making at the AU, as African women and girls bear the brunt of most global crises such as war.

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## **Introduction**

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has disrupted the world's economy, politics, diplomacy, and marketplaces. While many factors may have influenced the conflict, its primary cause is the chronic tensions that have dominated relations between Moscow and Kyiv since the fall of the erstwhile Soviet Union. Unfortunately, most assessments have not thoroughly examined the history of the neighboring countries' relationship. Consequently, the conflict is occasionally viewed merely as a current event resulting from immediate causes, such as Vladimir Putin's goals of demilitarizing and de-Nazifying Ukraine, ensuring its neutrality, and preventing Ukraine from joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Moreover, while the Ukrainian government's recent tilt toward the West might serve as the main reason, recent work on Ukraine–Russia conflict has also suggested remote factors, such as Russia's goal of geopolitical expansion and the Russian government's imperial aspiration to be not merely a state but a civilization that extends far past Russian territory (Kuzio & D'Anieri, 2018).

Although the global focus has been on the Russia-Ukraine War's economic aspect and how countries worldwide are dealing with its security ramifications, for Africa and its marginalized women and girls in particular the war has exposed the continent's lack of agency and capacity to influence the actors involved, which, so far, have appeared impervious to the consequences of the war. Even though the African Union (AU) has demanded that Russia comply with international law and recognize Ukraine's sovereignty, several African states have adopted a cautious approach to navigating the Russia–Ukraine conflict due to their dependence on Russia and Western powers. Furthermore, although it might be early to gauge the war's comprehensive influence on Africa, the ramifications will undoubtedly be multi-dimensional. However, as noted by the African Union Development Agency (2022), little effort has been made to understand why African states vote the way they have and how the conflict will comprehensively impact Africa.

This research is significant because it examines how African governments have responded to Russia's assault on Ukraine and how the conflict has impacted Africa and its increasingly marginalized women, thereby filling the previously noted gap in the literature. This study first presents a literature review and the theoretical framework and methodology. Then, we discuss Africa's response to the crisis and analyze the impact of the war on Africa and its women and girls.

## **Literature Review: The USSR, Russia, and Ukraine's Ties with Africa**

Over the second half of the twentieth century, the bond between Russia, Ukraine (formerly part of the USSR), and African countries was characterized by interactions in all sectors, from politics and socialist policies to military mechanics and the supply of arms as well as finance, education, and social connections, such as sending Soviet educators and medics to Africa and accepting African students in Soviet institutes (Bodjoko, 2022). Throughout the Cold War, the USSR was an important player in Africa. To gain an advantage in its ideological conflict with the West, the Soviet Union supported various African postcolonial independence movements (Vayez, 2021). Bilateral ties with independent countries benefited primarily from Moscow's genuine anti-colonial stance at the United Nations (UN) and the significant material assistance provided to liberation movements (Olivier & Suchkov, 2020). Furthermore, the USSR funded significant military, social, and educational initiatives throughout the continent to foster close ties with the continent's political, economic, and academic elites. The Soviets also sponsored several

infrastructural, medical, security, and agricultural development cooperation initiatives in emerging African states by allocating funds (Vayez, 2021).

In addition to the political and economic ties, the USSR instructed its universities to welcome African exchange students to provide academic benefits and Soviet indoctrination, and to train a new generation of pro-Soviet African elites (Stronski, 2019). Between 1949 and 1991, around 60,000 Africans studied in the Soviet Union (Yegorov, 2019). The most prominent university to welcome them was the UDN, People's Friendship University, named after Patrice Lumumba, Congo's pro-Marxist leader who was assassinated in the 1960s. After graduating from Soviet institutes, African exchange students influenced their states' elites, mainly in industry and health (Yegorov, 2019). In addition, scholarships were offered in engineering, medicine, and filmmaking.

With the demise of the USSR, the ideology-driven special bond between Russia/Ukraine and various African nations came to an end, and Russia withdrew significantly from Africa in 1992 (Bodjoko, 2022). For most African countries, the collapse of the socialist model also signified a shift in their approach to their economies, thereby bringing new impetus to bilateral cooperation between African nations and Russia. New circumstances appeared, and the void was apparent in nearly all of them. Russia attempted to establish ties with the West and distance itself from African countries in the early 1990s (Vayez, 2021). However, after failing in this endeavor, Russia developed a large-scale and multifaceted foreign policy that included reestablishing relations with former Soviet allies such as China, Africa, and Latin America. The consolidation and implementation of this policy gained traction during President Putin's first term in office in the early 2000s and has continued to evolve with the rise of globalization and oil prices, Russia's growing economy, expanding foreign trade possibilities, and shifting geopolitical priorities (Vayez, 2021).

Russia gradually reestablished a small foothold in Africa as its political situation and the economy improved, and the government's foreign policy interests broadened. In the mid-2000s, the Russian government focused on forming relationships with South Africa and the AU, hoping they would support Russia's idea of a multicentric world with several centers of power rather than just one dominant power (Stronski, 2019). Since 2014, security has become essential in Russia's African policy and is now its dominant theme (Bodjoko, 2022). Russia has signed military treaties with over 20 African states in recent years. The agreements cover weapons sales, access to African seaports and air bases, mentoring African officers in Russian military academies, counterterrorism, peacekeeping, and the presence of Russian military consultants (Pichon & Russell, 2019).

Ukraine's connections with Africa also have a long history dating back to the Soviet era (Veselovsky, 2021). In the 1960s, the Soviet government instructed Ukraine to send various goods to Africa, including grain, sugar, vegetable oil, metal, and heavy industry products, and to train young Africans in medicine, engineering, and military skills. Additionally, Ukrainian experts in irrigation, metallurgy, and army affairs worked in African countries allied with the Soviet Union (Veselovsky, 2021).

The former close ties between Ukraine and Africa were severed with the fall of the Soviet Union and Ukrainian independence. More recently, however, relations have gradually strengthened. At first glance, the situation appears to be quite positive. According to Veselovsky (2021), Ukrainian exports to Africa have steadily grown from USD 210 million in 1996 to USD 1.75 billion in 2005 and over USD 4 billion by 2020. Unfortunately, imports have not kept pace, which has been beneficial for Ukraine's treasury: imports were USD 141 million in 1996, USD 426 million in 2005, and USD 810 million in 2020 (Veselovsky, 2021).

Despite these developments, Ukraine still positively interacts with Africa in various fields. In terms of education, Ukraine had long been an appealing destination for international students, which can also be traced back to the Soviet era when there was considerable investment in higher education and a concerted effort to bring in students from newly independent African states (Ali, 2022). According to government figures, over 80,000 international students were enrolled in Ukraine in 2020. Africans accounted for over 20% of international students in Ukraine, including over 8,000 Moroccans, 4,000 Nigerians, and 3,500 Egyptians studying in various towns and cities throughout the country (Fröhlich, 2022). The data also indicate that 183 Kenyan students were enrolled in Ukrainian universities, approximately 100 from Uganda and 11 from Tanzania (Erudera News, 2022).

Ukraine's trade with Africa mainly revolves around dairy goods, poultry, flour, canned meat products, military–technical cooperation, and various mechanical equipment and steel products (Veselovsky, 2021). In 2020, Ukraine exported approximately USD 2.9 billion worth of agricultural commodities to Africa (Sihlobo, 2022). Wheat comprised about 48% of these exports, whereas maize accounted for 31%. The rest involved sunflower oil, barley, and soybeans. The volume of agricultural exports to African states increased by 43% in 2020, representing 14.2% of Ukraine's total exports, valued at approximately USD 3.3 billion in 2019 (Kholoshyn et al., 2021).

Ukraine is also a leading food supplier to low- and middle-income countries. For example, reports by the S&P Global Market Intelligence GTAS reveal that 40.7% of Ukrainian wheat was exported to African countries north and south of the Sahara in 2021, with Egypt being the leading importer (Markit, 2022). African states depend on imports to satisfy their need for wheat because although wheat is widely utilized in Africa, crop yields are lower than in the chief wheat-making regions, especially in the northern hemisphere. This is due to various factors, including extreme weather, insufficient water, bad soil conditions, and inefficient irrigation systems.

### **Core-Periphery and Dependency Theory**

This research is rooted in the nexus between world systems and dependency theories. Originally propounded by Wallerstein (1974), world-systems theory is defined as “a multicultural division of labor...in which the production and trade of normal goods and raw substances are essential for the daily life of people living in different territories” (Martínez-Vela, 2001). This division of labor reflects the mechanisms and production relations of the global economy and leads to the formation of two interconnected regions: the core and periphery. These regions have different geographic and cultural characteristics; the periphery specializes in labor-intensive production, and the core specializes in capital-intensive production (Martínez-Vela, 2001). The core–periphery connection is structural and inherent to the global economy's structure. Semi-peripheral states occupy a middle position between the core and periphery, with a combination of actions and organizations that exploit peripheral states in the same way that core states exploit semi-peripheral and peripheral states. In this regard, African countries in the world system's peripheral realm are structurally disadvantaged and heavily depend politically and economically on the core realm.

According to dependency theory, economic power follows north–south geoeconomic designs. However, Russia's financial and business dealings with Africa do not align with the theory's assumption of a leading core country or the standard of peripheral states. According to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (Dizolele, 2022), although Russia has an economy comparable in volume to that of South Korea or Spain and a small share of manufacturing goods that are popular in African markets, it still maintains a modest business level with Africa, which

totals around USD 20 billion per year. Russia does not have a solid ideological or social appeal for many Africans; however, it has recently gained significant influence through its strategic actions. Russia has used mercenaries and disinformation intervention strategies to support isolated leaders to achieve power (Dizolele, 2022). This research argues that Africa has been unable to exercise agency in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine by virtue of its peripheral status in world affairs and increasing dependency on the core states for survival. This is further aggravated by the fact that African women and girls face double marginalization in world politics by virtue of their gender and location in the periphery continent of Africa. The double marginalization of African women is evident internationally and domestically, where they are often excluded in decision-making by patriarchal power structures even though they are the most negatively impacted by such patriarchal decisions.

### **Methodology**

The methodology of this study is centered on the qualitative analysis of primary and secondary sources from the last eight to nine years to answer the following research questions: How have African governments responded to Russia's invasion of Ukraine? How has the Russia-Ukraine War impacted Africa? The primary data used in this study include government reports, records that came to the fore after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and firsthand research conducted by independent organizations. In addition, this research utilized secondary data that scrutinized existing data and examined various research studies, newspaper articles, and other media sources on Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its relation to Africa. Hence, all the sources address one or more aspects of the issue under consideration. Scrutinizing online media sources and the significant literature published on the Russia-Ukraine War and its relation to Africa saved valuable research time, labor, and money (Wickham, 2019).

After accumulating data from primary and secondary sources, similar themes were grouped based on their relevance to the topic and analyzed. The primary themes identified included the relationship between Africa and the USSR, Russia, and Ukraine. Additionally, we analyzed the diplomacy adopted by African governments following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the impact of the war on Africa, with several subthemes, including the political, economic, social, and military implications. Finally, the principal research outcomes are presented in the response and impact sections.

### **Africa's Response to the Russian Invasion**

Politically, Africa's response to conflict has been through the patriarchal structure of the African Union (AU), where its membership is overwhelmingly male. The result is that African women's voices have been shut out from the decision-making process about the continent's response to the conflict even though they bear the brunt of the impact. African women face double marginalization because they are part of the periphery that the continent occupies in world politics and also because of their marginalization as women. Like their counterparts worldwide, African women occupy few political leadership roles to make their impact felt in world politics, but they bear the brunt of poor decisions often made by patriarchy. Buttressing this point, Nobel Laureate and former President of Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, has observed that "women still only occupy 25.7 percent of the available parliamentary positions, 7.2 percent of head-of-state positions, 6.2 percent of head-of-government positions, and 21.3 percent of cabinet positions" (Sirleaf, 2022). The result is that the voices of African women have been absent in the continent's response to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. According to a study by UN Women (2023) on factors

that lead to successful gender response in times of international crisis, countries that have more women in all spheres of political leadership as well as robust gender-conscious social protection systems are likely to be more successful in dealing with crises than those that engage in adhoc gender-based responses.

### *The African Union's Official Response*

Africa's response to Russia's invasion has been mixed and is typical of countries in the Global South lacking agency in global affairs. On February 22, 2022, Macky Sall, the chairperson of the AU, and Moussa Faki Mahamat, the chairperson of the AU Commission, called on Russia to respect international law and Ukraine's territorial integrity and national sovereignty (Dizolele, 2022). This statement aligns with the AU's charter, which had upheld the colonial boundaries of its member states since its establishment in 1963 (when it was known as the Organization of African Unity). Although the AU has publicly condemned the Russian military invasion, the absence of a consensus among leaders suggests significant divisions within the organization's leadership regarding the meaning and sanctity of international law (Gbadamosi, 2022). African votes at UN meetings have varied. For example, when a vote was taken on suspending Russia from the UN's Human Rights Council, only 11 African countries voted in favor, 9 voted against it, 23 abstained, and 11 did not vote (Cocks, 2022).

On May 22, 2022, Senegal's president, Macky Sall, announced his visit to Moscow and Kyiv as the chairperson of the AU during a joint meeting with the German Chancellor. He stated that he wanted to promote peace through dialogue between the conflicting parties and emphasized that the AU did not wish to align with either side of the conflict. Additionally, Sall stated that they were working toward de-escalation and ceasefire in the conflict and that their efforts reflected the overall African position. However, it is crucial to examine African leaders' actions rather than their statements alone to determine whether the AU is truly neutral regarding the situation and if their efforts to facilitate dialogue could potentially lead to peace.

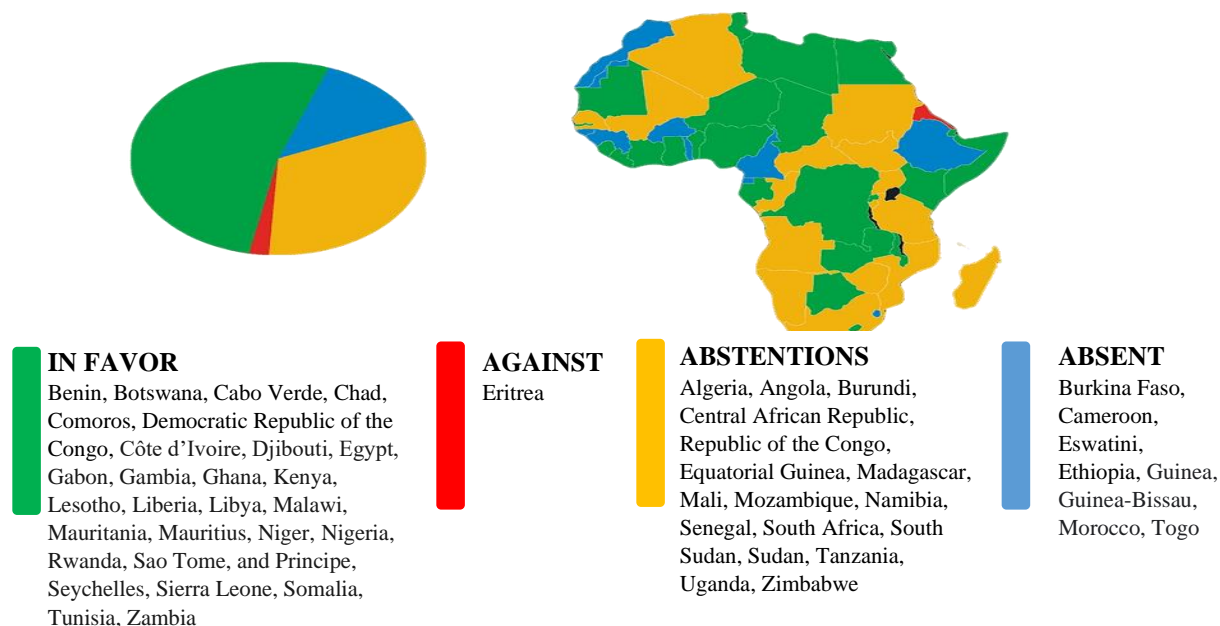
On April 12, 2022, Zelenskyy requested a meeting with the heads of state of the AU during a phone call with President Macky Sall. However, this gathering did not occur. Later in the month, the chairperson of the AU Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, revealed that the Ukrainian president had also asked for an opportunity to address the AU through Ukraine's Foreign Minister, Dmytro Kuleba, but this effort did not result in any concrete outcomes either. Sall subsequently promised to bring together AU heads of state interested in meeting with Zelenskyy at some point. However, the chairperson of the AU admitted that some African leaders were unwilling to meet with or gather information from the Ukrainian leader, thereby suggesting that the AU was afraid of offending Russia and would not attempt to organize a meeting of all African leaders. These actions are inconsistent with the stated AU goal of promoting peace from a position of neutrality, which raises questions about the genuine impartiality of the continental body.

### *Africa's Silence*

Although the UN General Assembly resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine received widespread support from UN members, who condemned the invasion as a flagrant violation of critical norms, there was a divide among African states in their votes on the resolution, as shown in Figure 1. While a bare majority (51%) of African countries (28 of 54) represented at the UN voted in favor of the resolution, it is significant that a higher percentage of non-African countries (81.29%) voted in favor. In contrast, 17 (48.6%) of the 35 countries that chose to abstain from the vote were from Africa, including Algeria and South Africa. Additionally, eight African

countries did not vote, including Cameroon and Morocco. Given the number of African countries that abstained from the vote, these voting patterns surprised some. However, they follow a logic based on recent and historical precedent, according to analyst Aanu Adeoye (Bagnetto, 2022).

**Figure 1: African Countries' Votes on the UN Ukraine Declaration**



*Source: Moffat, 2022*

Voting patterns have historically been shaped by significant contemporary issues (Tawat, 2022). For example, in the 1950s, colonialism caused tensions among European, Asian, and African states. The Cold War and the split between the Eastern and Western coalitions also influenced voting patterns from the 1960s to the 1980s. More recently, developing countries' interest in guaranteeing aid from developed countries and the divide between democratic and authoritarian governments has resulted in corresponding voting patterns. In addition, a country's relationship with the West or Russia may influence its voting behavior. These factors were all present at the emergency General Assembly meeting on the invasion of Ukraine and may have influenced the voting patterns at that meeting.

According to Busari (2022), a prevalent African diplomatic school of thought espouses noninterference, and Busari believes that countries in Africa should adhere to this principle and avoid becoming entangled in proxy wars between great powers. Nevertheless, the decision adopted by several African states to remain non-aligned and not criticize Russia for its invasion of Ukraine was primarily based on two factors: Russia's Cold War-era solidarity with the continent and the perceived double standards and hypocrisy of the West regarding the Ukrainian issue compared with other conflicts. Other factors include issues directly related to the conflict, skepticism of NATO, and fear of upsetting China.

As Cilliers pointed out, one of the primary reasons why most African countries remained silent was South Africa's and several other Southern African states' nostalgia for the Soviet Union's support of their liberation struggles (Fabricius, 2022). In March 2022, a newspaper



meticulously aligned with UK intelligence groups, *The Guardian*, grudgingly recognized that many African states remembered Russia's help in their liberation from colonial rule and that strong anti-imperial feelings remain (Norton, 2022). It admitted that countries such as Angola, South Africa, and Mozambique have so far been governed by factions that Russia reinforced when they were struggling for liberation from former colonial forces (Norton, 2022).

Although South Africa's abstention was inevitable, its vote was closely watched because it was joined by the other five Southern African nations of the Nation Liberation Movement, whose default position is nonalignment (Adeoye, 2022). Therefore, the historical reference point for Africa is when the USSR supported calls for liberation from Western powers during the Cold War.

Justifying the abstentions, the continent's observers emphasize the unmatched media coverage that Ukraine received compared with other issues. There has been much hypocrisy in imposing sanctions that harm Africa, while Europe has paid Moscow around USD 38 billion for energy since the conflict's opening (Blattman, 2022). Africans contend that this is not their issue and that the West has been two-faced by backing their interventions in Iraq and Libya but opposing Russia's activities. Africans are also wondering why Ukraine's sorrows should be prioritized over Ethiopia's misery, which has not received similar attention from the West (Westcott, 2022).

### *Africa's Condemnation of Russia*

Many African countries initially condemned Russia because of the surprising event. Most of the 27 states in Africa that were in favor of the condemnation were democratic, Western-styled countries, such as Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Mauritius, and Nigeria (Tawat, 2022). However, this condemnation was not limited to these countries and consisted of nondemocratic or hybrid governments, such as Gabon, Libya, Egypt, and Rwanda. Nevertheless, all African countries that voted in favor of the March 2022 UN General Assembly resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine had something in common: they were all allies of the West with established military connections, including military bases and cooperative military strategies countering jihadists (Tawat, 2022). Therefore, being close to the West, their condemnation of Russia was expected.

In addition, countries that voted in favor of the resolution did so despite being members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which champions neutrality in world affairs. They voted because they respect the code of self-determination, especially because they have been victims of similar historical injustices during the colonial period and will generally support that cause (Ryder, 2022). Kenya and Ghana, two countries that stand out in this regard, favored the condemnation and issued pronouncements regarding Article 2 of the UN Charter, which rejects any breach of a country's sovereignty. Martin Kimani, Kenya's ambassador to the UN, stated in a widely praised speech on February 22, 2022, that Kenya and nearly all countries in Africa were established by an empire's demise (Ryder, 2022). Furthermore, he stated that the boundaries of African countries were not designed by them, thereby emphasizing the importance of preserving Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty (Ryder, 2022). Before the General Assembly emergency meeting and during his remarks to the Security Council, Ghana's ambassador to the UN, Harold Adlai Agyeman, also stressed the need for member states to fulfill their solemn obligation and comply with the organization's charter to protect and uphold international peace and prosperity, thereby criticizing Moscow's actions as a violation of the charter's articles (Ryder, 2022).

### *Africa's Support of Russia*

In contrast, many of the 17 African states that abstained or opposed the condemnation have authoritarian governments, including Eritrea, Algeria, the Central African Republic, the Congo,

Sudan, and Zimbabwe (Tawat, 2022). Many of these nations, such as Angola, Mali, and the Central African Republic, have long-standing defense and ideological relations with Moscow that date back to the Cold War (Tawat, 2022). These African countries have long had considerable trade, cultural, political, and military relations with Moscow and are interested in preserving these ties. Others believe that Russia had legitimate security concerns when it chose to invade Ukraine, issues that were neglected in the UN condemnation (Ryder, 2022). Eritrea, for example, was the only African country to vote against the resolution. Frequently isolated and regarded as a pariah nation by many developed states, Eritrea voiced its opposition to the UN Security Council, especially regarding the levying of obligatory sanctions. Eritrea's opposition to the resolution was intended to demonstrate sympathy and support for Russia and opposition to the status quo (Ryder, 2022).

Despite the fact that only a few African leaders have expressed their support for Russia, no African nation has endorsed the sanctions mandated by the US and Europe against Russia. As a result, Russia's foreign minister, Lavrov, praised African leaders for not succumbing to Western pressure to impose sanctions on Moscow (Troianovski et al., 2022).

### **The African Union's Questioned Solidarity**

African countries' decisions have been based on strategic calculations about how the conflict will affect them rather than the humanitarian disaster caused by the conflict. In contrast, the European Union (EU) has been able to adopt a unified stance on the conflict (Ajala, 2022). According to the AU's Constitutive Act, one of the organization's goals is to promote joint action in the continent and with the rest of the globe. However, the lack of a unified position among Africans on the Russia-Ukraine conflict has harmed the sincerity of their pan-African commitment. Over the course of two non-binding rulings, they were unable to come to an agreement. In the first ruling calling on Russia to adhere to the UN's principles, half of the AU members refrained from voting (Stremlau, 2022).

Notwithstanding that human rights are considered a fundamental goal of the AU, African disunity persisted after about three weeks when insisting on ending the humanitarian disaster. Given the lack of unity among African countries, it seems unlikely that they will be able to cooperate to achieve the ambitious goals of African growth and development as outlined in the AU's Agenda 2063. Instead, based on the current situation, one can conclude that the AU is not operating at the level of efficiency it aspires to.

### **Impact of the War on Africa**

#### *Political Impact*

The Russia-Ukraine war has caused a political divide among African states. A few governments have adopted a careful stance, thereby avoiding taking sides in a rapidly changing situation and seeking to maintain a neutral position. Although this suggests that Russia's efforts to increase its presence in Africa have begun bearing fruit, more importantly, it suggests that Africa continues to lack influence in global affairs. The continent appears scarred by Cold War divisions and remains a battleground for great powers to engage in rivalries, as demonstrated by Russia's recently increased presence in Africa (Kedem, 2022). Russian engagement in Africa may expand as new powers exploit Africa as a staging ground for proxy warfare, according to Kedem (2022). Russia has entered the fray and will likely strive to enhance its influence. Thus, the UN and other multilateral institutions will be disrupted, eroding Africa's fragile multilateral successes (Kedem, 2022).

Rising food and energy prices could also spark violent protests in the short term if governments do not take steps to protect the population from the effects of rising prices. In addition, rising food prices raise concerns about the repercussions of increasing inequality, growing social tensions, and potential political destabilization, all of which have been observed in recent years (Ragazzi, 2022). The Arab Spring is a stark reminder of what is at stake. In 2011, the rapidly deteriorating financial state of affairs and ensuing social turmoil precipitated protests that led to substantial home displacements around the region and Europe as well as the overthrow of several regimes (Bilger & Brahim, 2022). Historically, in such moments of political unrest, African women and girls are disproportionately and negatively impacted because of their structurally disadvantaged position in society.

The political repercussions of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian conflict for African women and girls are that it has impeded global gender equality initiatives and led to negative impacts. Focusing on a European conflict has diverted attention and resources away from vital gender equality programs in Africa, thereby undermining the continent's progress toward women's empowerment (UN Women, 2022). In addition, due to the intensifying situation in Europe, global focus and resources are being reallocated from existing crises in Africa, thus leaving these vulnerable areas and populations, including women and girls, with less assistance. For example, key donors such as Denmark and Sweden have significantly reduced their aid contributions to critically impacted African nations like Burkina Faso and Mali in order to support the refugee influx resulting from the conflict in Ukraine. Denmark announced a 50% reduction in aid to Burkina Faso, with a similar 40% cut to Mali, both of which are grappling with a severe Islamist insurgency. Meanwhile, Sweden plans to redirect \$1 billion from its aid budget to manage the cost of accommodating Ukrainian refugees (McCallister, 2022). Also, with the world's focus on the escalating conflict in Ukraine, African women's potential contributions to international diplomacy are being overshadowed. This shift in global attention is impacting Africa significantly, as it limits the ability of African women to engage in peace-building initiatives and diplomatic processes. This reduced emphasis on Africa also risks undermining the broader aims of international development strategies that are aligned with African-informed priorities such as Agenda 2063 (APRI, 2023). Moreover, it has also hampered the successful execution of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda in the African continent, which endeavors to ensure women's involvement in peace processes (UN Women, 2021).

### *Economic Impact*

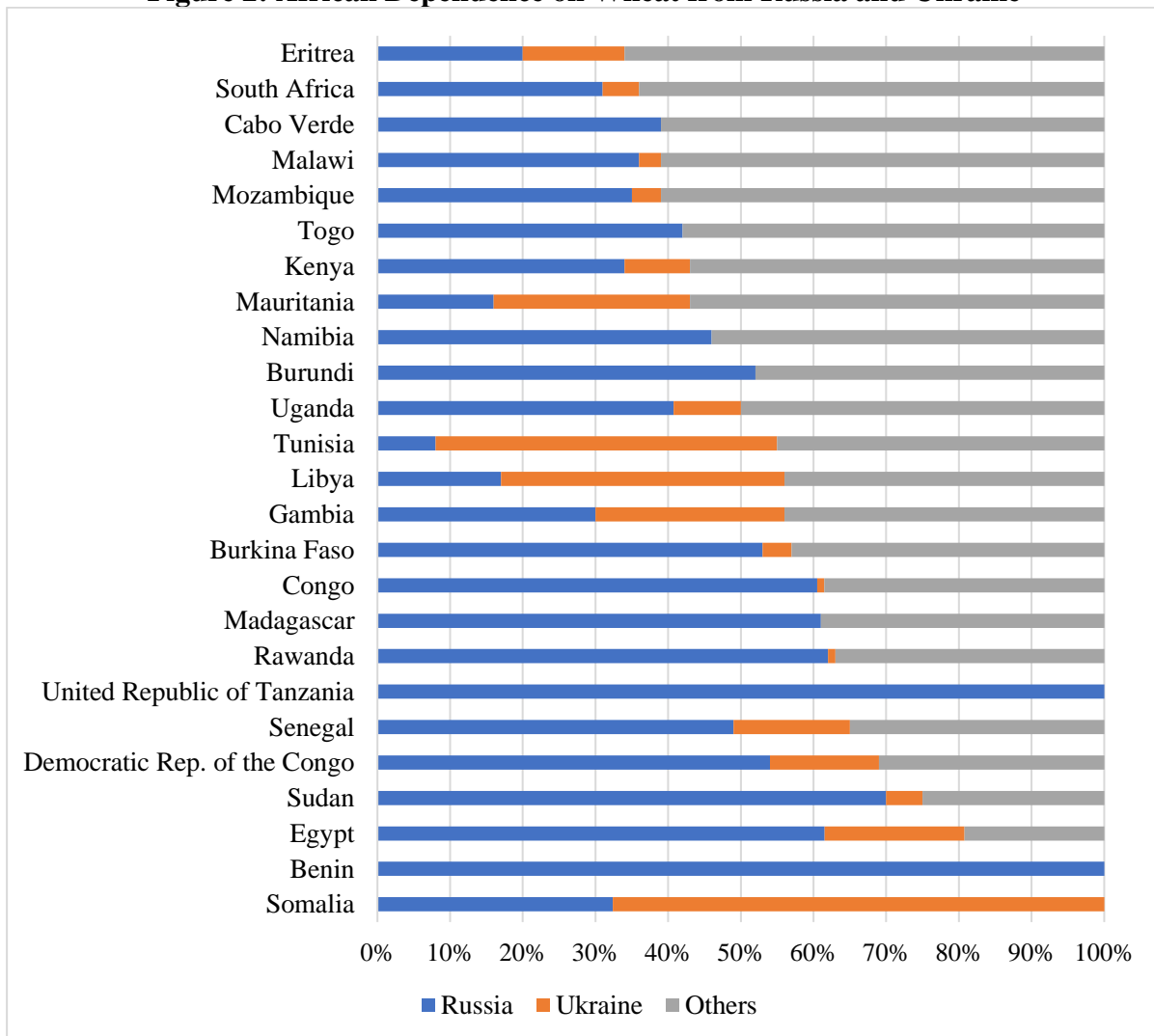
The Russian-Ukrainian war has profoundly affected the global economy, and African women and girls have been disproportionately affected by this conflict because they are more susceptible to economic disruptions due to existing gender inequality and economic marginalization (BBC News, 2022). The war has compounded Africa's food insecurity, as Figure 2 illustrates the continent's heavy dependence on both Russian and Ukrainian for food imports (UNCTAD, 2022). In many African countries, inflation was already high due to supply chain disruptions caused by the pandemic. For example, Ghana's top inflation rate in January 2022 was 13.9%, with food-related inflation at 17.4% and higher regional inflation in Accra than in rural regions (McNair, 2022).

Economically, women and children are the hardest hit by the twin impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. According to a 2022 Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations report, there is a widening gender gap regarding food insecurity. The gender food insecurity gap has increased from less than 2 percent in 2019 to more

than 4 percent in 2021. In addition, the report indicates that 32 percent of women were considered food insecure compared to 28 percent of men. Women are disproportionately struggling with food insecurity because they face a myriad of pre-existing structural challenges that are exacerbated by international crises such as wars and pandemics.

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict has also significantly disrupted global energy markets, resulting in higher prices for oil and natural gas (EIA, 2022). The Russian-Ukrainian conflict has also significantly disrupted global energy markets, resulting in higher prices for oil and natural gas (EIA, 2022). Since Russia is one of the world's largest natural gas and oil exporters, the economic sanctions and foreign policy directives issued by Western countries on Russia further impacted global energy supplies (GEP, 2022). As a result, the economies of Africa, which rely significantly on fossil fuels, have experienced rising energy costs, resulting in higher production costs and lower household incomes (Dabalen et al., 2022). African women and girls are disproportionately affected by the rising energy cost because they are responsible for gathering fuel and water for their households (UN Women, 2021). Rising energy prices have also led to higher food prices, exacerbating food insecurity and having a disproportionate impact on women and girls, who frequently consume less when resources are scarce, are responsible for feeding their families, and may experience increased financial strain (FAO, 2022; African Development Bank, 2022).

The war has disrupted international trade between Russia, Ukraine, and other nations, influencing global supply chains and economic growth (International Monetary Fund, 2022). As a result, many African economies, which rely heavily on trade with Europe and Russia, have witnessed a decline in exports and imports, resulting in slowed economic growth and employment losses (African Development Bank, 2022). Women and girls are more susceptible to these economic disruptions because they are frequently employed in informal and low-paying occupations, which are more prone to economic downturns (ILO, 2021). World Bank reports concur, highlighting that the economic disruption has significantly affected African economies, resulting in employment losses and diminished economic opportunities for women and girls (World Bank, 2023). In addition, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has resulted in an influx of refugees, some of whom have sought asylum in African nations (UNHCR, 2022). This migration has increased the strain on finite resources, such as food, water, and medical care. As a result, women and girls, who are frequently responsible for providing these resources in their households, have experienced increased competition and a heavier burden of domestic duties (Mbiyozo, 2022). Moreover, refugee women and girls are frequently more susceptible to gender-based violence (GBV), human trafficking, and exploitation, which can exacerbate their economic marginalization (UN Women, 2022).

**Figure 2: African Dependence on Wheat from Russia and Ukraine**

Source: UNCTAD, 2022, p. 5

### *Social and Humanitarian Impact*

Available data in 2020 indicated over 76,000 international students in Ukraine. Over 20% (over 16,000) of the country's international students were from Africa, mainly Nigeria, Morocco, and Egypt (Ray, 2022). As shown in Table 1, the number of international students enrolled in Ukrainian medical universities has increased since 2014. Although not free, education and living costs in Ukraine are considerably less expensive than in Europe, America, and Asia (Veselovsky, 2021). The Ukrainian government immediately closed its airspace to civilian flights and imposed martial law as soon as Russia launched its attacks in February 2022. This led to African student unions expressing concern for the safety of thousands of African students studying in Ukrainian universities (Niazi & Sawahel, 2022). While searching for an exit from Ukraine, many Asian and African students realized they had to depend on themselves to rescue each other, reach borders, guide people to shelters, and provide various kinds of assistance (Achiri & Sandilya, 2022). Undoubtedly, some international students may have died, among whom may be women.

**Table 1: Number of International Students Enrolled in Ukrainian Medical Universities**

#	Medical University	2014–2015	2019–2020	Programs
1	Kharkiv National Medical University	3296	2100	Medicine, Dentistry
2	Odessa National Medical University	2553	1000	Internal medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy
3	National Pirogov Memorial Medical University, Vinnytsya	1897	2080	Medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy
4	Zaporizhzhya State Medical University	1761	2850	Medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy
5	Ivan-Frankivsh National Medical University	1727	1594	Medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy
6	Dnipropetrovsk State Medical University	1673	5000	Medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy
7	Bogomolets National Medical University	1504	3160	Pharmacy, Dentistry, Medicine
8	National University of Pharmacy	1478	100	Pharmacy
9	I. Horbachevsky Ternopil National Medical University	1179	2000	Pharmacy, Dentistry, Medicine, Nursing
10	Danylo Halytsky Lviv National Medical University	1046	1334	General medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy
11	Bukovinian State Medical University	997	1800	Pharmacy, Dentistry, Medicine, Nursing
12	Ukrainian State Medical Dental Academy	862	1400	Pharmacy, Medicine, Pediatrics, Nursing
	<b>Total</b>	<b>19973</b>	<b>24418</b>	

*Source: Mospan & Slipchuk, 2020*

A UN gender-based report on the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine found that women and girls are disproportionately affected in terms of negative humanitarian consequences (UN Women, 2023). Hence, African women and girls are not impervious to the negative consequences of the war. The evacuation of students of color has been marred with racism, with women of color experiencing the double dose of racism and gender-based violence (GBV) due to inadequate enforcement of social protections established by international law. Ferris-Rotman (2023) has reported that women of color experienced two sources of racism during the evacuation process. During the evacuation from Ukraine, the military was reported to have segregated people fleeing to neighboring Poland into white and non-whites. The non-whites were allowed to board the last train after all the white-occupied trains had left. In addition, some people of color suffered physical abuse from the Ukrainian military when they demanded fairness or asked questions. Furthermore, the minority refugees, which constituted a sizable number of women of color, were also discriminated against when it came to the Ukrainian military delivering food and snacks after over 17 hours of journeying to the Polish border (Ferris-Rotman, 2023).

The second dose of racism and discrimination occurred once the people of color had crossed into Poland, where they faced a hostile reception from the Polish authorities and ordinary Poles. This mistreatment was compounded by the right-wing Polish government's hostility towards asylum seekers. This hostile policy even led to the tragic deaths of about twenty asylum seekers when they were pushed back to die in a forested area in Poland in freezing winter conditions, as reported by Medecins Sans Frontieres (Ferris-Rotman, 2022). The hostile reception accorded to African refugees starkly contrasted with Ukrainian refugees, who were received warmly by neighboring European countries. Daphne Panayotatos of Refugees International attributes the double standards in the reception and treatment of Africans and Ukrainians to the latter being "largely white, Christian Europeans rather than Middle Eastern and African individuals who are seeking safety" (Ferris-Rotman, 2023).

Thousands of African international students who fled the war, including women students, are now scattered throughout European countries, but their educational future remains in limbo. The conflict has caused disruptions in education systems, reducing African girls' ability to attend school (UNICEF, 2022). Schools in conflict-affected areas have been closed or damaged, and refugee women and girls frequently confront barriers to education in host countries, such as language barriers, discrimination, and a lack of resources (Plan International, 2023). Therefore, while education in conflict-affected zones is a critical aspect in ensuring the progression of girls' rights and mitigating the effects of violence and harmful practices such as early and forced marriage, this vital service is often woefully underfunded and under-prioritized, thereby exacerbating gender inequality and limiting the economic prospects of girls and women in these regions (Plan International, 2023).

Furthermore, Pietromarchi (2022) argues that the educational future of about 10,000 former African international students in Ukraine is in limbo because they face many immigration challenges across Europe. Legally, because they are considered third-country refugees and not citizens of the country at war, they are treated differently from their Ukrainian counterparts. The result is that they cannot afford the high tuition fees in the European countries they have fled to and are ineligible for scholarships restricted to Ukrainians (Pietromarchi, 2022). Returning to their home countries is not a viable option, as the families of these students have already spent a fortune on their education, and the latter do not want to be seen as failing or disappointing their families by returning without completing the mission. Moreover, just as the literature demonstrates, in moments of hardships and uncertainties such as these, women tend to be particularly vulnerable to

abuse and exploitation in the form of being sexually trafficked. Lamenting the poor treatment of African students, Enebechi Macaully Ebuka, the vice president of NIDO, an aid organization assisting African refugees in Europe, has observed that “European governments have been kind, but not kind enough to treat African students the same way Ukrainians have been treated” (Pietromarchi, 2022).

The Russian-Ukrainian war has increased the likelihood of gender-based violence (GBV) against African women and girls, both among refugees and in conflict-affected communities. The psychological and physical effects of GBV are long-lasting and can exacerbate existing gender disparities (UNHCR, 2022). Moreover, due to decreased foreign aid and investment in Africa, as foreign donors and investors redirect resources toward tackling the conflict and its consequences, development initiatives, including those centered on women’s empowerment and gender equality, have been negatively impacted (OECD, 2022). In addition, the war has increased migration and displacement as people escape conflict zones and seek refuge in other nations. Consequently, African nations, particularly those bordering conflict zones, have experienced an influx of refugees, straining already fragile systems and exacerbating existing social problems (UNHCR, 2022). Despite the gender-based violence (GBV) that African refugee students endure, there are hardly any legal avenues for them to seek redress in their third-party host countries. This is because most of these students live in legal limbo in third-party countries, know they have limited legal rights, and are unwelcome guests. Hence, they endure all forms of abuse in order to avoid the risk of deportation. Tan and Kuschminder (2022) have posited about the experiences of African refugees as follows: “the lack of pathways for these migrants to seek protection from GBV without fear of consequences such as deportation, detention, or ostracization from the community has a direct deterrence effect on the reporting of GBV experiences.”

Additionally, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has exhausted healthcare systems in affected regions and host countries, limiting access to essential healthcare services for African women and girls (WHO, 2022). This has significantly impacted sexual and reproductive health services, such as family planning and maternal care, putting the lives of women and girls at greater risk (UNFPA, 2023). In addition, mental health support is frequently inadequate in conflict situations, leaving traumatized women and girls without adequate care (UNHCR, 2022). The conflict has also increased the psychosocial stress of African women and girls, who often bear the burden of caregiving responsibilities and are exposed to greater levels of trauma (UN Women, 2021).

## **Conclusion**

The current conflict between Russia and Ukraine has made many African countries uncomfortable. Russia and Ukraine (formerly part of the USSR) have had various political, economic, military, and social relations with Africa since the 1950s. However, following the fall of the USSR, Russia, and Ukraine faced a decade-long social and economic crisis that deprioritized their African commitments. Although Russia has recently attempted to improve perceptions of its role and influence in Africa, it has not succeeded. In the literature on the conflict, little effort has been made to understand how these countries’ links to Africa and Moscow’s “core” activities and influence in Africa are connected to African governments’ responses to the Russian invasion as well as how the Russia–Ukraine conflict has affected Africa.

Although Africa is still recovering from the socioeconomic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has emerged as another massive threat to the international economy, which affects many African states. Russia’s violation of international



law in Ukraine prompted several African countries to condemn the attack, with only a few countries supporting Russia; most African states have managed to walk a tightrope without taking sides. The nuanced and disjointed positions of African states can be attributed to various factors, including the extent of their dependence and inclination toward Russia or Western powers, Soviet support for Africa during the Cold War, Western hypocrisy over the Ukrainian issue, and national interests. A glaring omission from the continent's response to the conflict is the lack of inclusion or consultation of female voices in political leadership or advocacy. This is despite the evidence that shows that women in the world's periphery disproportionately bear the brunt of patriarchal decisions made by patriarchy in the global core and the periphery. For Africa to be effective on the global stage, its continental body, the AU, must be reformed to represent all the interests of its member states as well as introduce a permanent institutional mechanism whereby the voices of female political leadership and advocacy groups on the continent can be heard and incorporated in foreign policy decisions. This will go a long way in closing the democracy deficit currently in the AU structure.

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