

Where Are the Ukrainian Women?

Article by Míla O'Sullivan

May 4, 2022

From the peace talks in December 2021 to the international campaigns rallying support for Ukraine's defence, the face of the politics of war have so far been men. Meanwhile, daily reports from the frontlines tell harrowing stories of Ukrainian women and children. Mila O'Sullivan argues this contrasting image reveals the gendered nature of war and calls for a feminist foreign policy from the international community.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine tragically continues with brutal shelling of civilian targets, escalating into a humanitarian catastrophe. At the forefront of all this is the masculinity of war which caused these horrors in the first place, and which allows for ignoring the voices of Ukrainian women at all levels. Against this background, national security is gaining prominence in Europe as strengthening of the defence systems appears inevitable. Any new spending on Europe's hard security, however, should not go at the expense of but hand in hand with an immediate and long-term international support for human security, women's participation and socioeconomic security as pledged in the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. It is now most urgent to focus on Ukrainian women's understanding for the deeply gendered nature of the war and ensure their voices are heard now and in post-war times.

The absence of women in international politics amid the war rhetoric of recent weeks has been striking. Prior to the war, women's voices have been missing from the negotiations with Russia for a peaceful solution to the conflict with Ukraine. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, exclusion of female voices has deepened. It is as if there were no countries with feminist foreign policies or the WPS Action Plans and other instruments of the international community. Gendered silences are apparent also among security organisations, including NATO and the OSCE which have been among the key drivers of Ukraine's WPS agenda.

Our latest edition - Moving Targets: Geopolitics in a Warming World - is out now.

It is available to read online & order straight to your door.

[READ & Order](#)

Russia's hypermasculine war

Amid war and masculine power politics, voices of Ukrainian women are suddenly silenced. This silence is happening as Russia is sending rockets toward schools and kindergartens, children's and maternity hospitals, and any areas where women are overrepresented. The Ukrainian government continues to report civilian deaths, including children, as well as cases of rape by Russian soldiers. Given Russia's warfare history, like in Chechnya, these

brutal tactics directed at civilian populations can be considered a deliberate gendered strategy to suppress and humiliate Ukraine.

Russia's unjustified acts of violence in Ukraine can be seen as a performance of the extreme masculinity (hypermasculinity) of the Russian state which was created by Putin to facilitate his hold on to power but which has become the very feature and behaviour of the gendered state itself. This masculinity has relied on articulation of traditional femininity through attempts to promote traditional values, including international efforts carried out through Russia's anti-gender ideology crusade. In his speech on 24 February 2022, Putin justified the invasion by connecting it with the protection of these Russian values: *"they sought to destroy our traditional values and force on us their false values that would erode us, our people, from within, the attitudes they have been aggressively imposing on their countries, attitudes that are directly leading to degradation and degeneration, because they are contrary to human nature. This is not going to happen. No one has ever succeeded in doing this, nor will they succeed now."*

Putin accuses others of the very strategy he deploys on other countries. Russia has been rather successful at undermining countries from within. Most of the Central and Eastern European states, including Ukraine, have refused to ratify the Istanbul Convention, as they faced transnational anti-gender movements supported by Russia, among other actors. In Putin's imagination, Ukraine is part of this traditional "Russian world" and he is now using the patriarchal logic of power to demonstrate it.

*Governments, media, NGOs and civil society,
should start listening more to the voices of
Ukrainian women and raise their agencies in
order to avoid horrific scenarios like those of the
recent Balkan wars.*

More than victims

Beyond some attention to Ukrainian female soldiers, however, Ukrainian women's agencies are almost invisible. The traditional gendered images of war still prevail, with men governing, negotiating and fighting to protect the nation and the women and children fleeing to safety. This interpretation strengthens the masculine culture, which does not sufficiently respect women as agents, and which in turn leads to their exclusion and the post-war deterioration of their position.

It is also apparent from the stories of Ukrainian women that women's agencies are largely overlooked by the international community. The enormous engagement of Ukrainian women can be seen in the military and medical care, as well as in the media, politics, peacebuilding, and humanitarian aid. Hundreds of thousands of women collect and distribute aid among the regions under constant threat of bombing and work with internally displaced people. Every day, they leave their children and families and continue to work for peace and freedom of their country. They have immediate information about the situation on the ground, whether it is the lack of medical supplies or Russian crimes against the local

population. Their experiences and voices are thus key for recognising the warning signs of an escalating conflict.

The international community already has instruments for countering Russia's hypermasculinity. It is already clear that Russia has breached bilateral agreements and international conventions by targeting civilians in a brutal manner that includes rape and murder. People live in constant fear because no one knows what will come tomorrow. There have also been first reports of human trafficking for the purpose of forced sex work on the Polish and German borders, which requires urgent preventive measures. Such measures, as the Bosnian experience taught us, should be implemented through learning from and listening to the voices of local women and international feminist NGOs.

War as a gendered continuum

Governments, international organisations and civil society, as well as the media, should start listening more to the voices of Ukrainian women and raise their agencies in order to avoid horrific scenarios of events like those of the recent Balkan wars, such as gender genocide or large-scale trafficking in human beings for forced sex work. Understanding the war as gendered is also fundamental for women's meaningful participation now and in post-war times. Laura Sjoberg's feminist thesis says that wars start earlier and go on longer than traditional interpretations acknowledge; war from this perspective takes place on a gendered continuum.

In the context of Ukraine, this thesis highlights that the negative impacts of the eight-year conflict and austerity policies have now entered new proportions. If we start to respect Ukrainian women as agents and listen to their voices now, and not later as an afterthought, there will be support for gender-responsive peacebuilding in the long-term post-war period.

This article was originally published in Czech on 8 March 2022 by the Institute of International Relations Prague. This translation is republished from HBF Prague.



Míla O'Sullivan is a feminist international relations, peace and security researcher at the Institute of International Relations Prague (IIR). She is also an academic advisor on gender in Czech foreign policy in various government and non-government bodies. She is currently researching the foreign policies of Central European countries as well as the gendered nature of security institutions like NATO and OSCE and Russia's war on Ukraine.

Published May 4, 2022

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/where-are-the-ukrainian-women/>

The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space. Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.