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War in Ukraine

"Our goal is to win this war"

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THE RUSSIAN INVASION of Ukraine is having an appalling impact on women and girls, especially among marginalized populations like the Roma. In bare summary:

Military strikes have targeted maternity hospitals and other healthcare facilities, killing and wounding women and children, including pregnant women and new-born babies.

*** Rape is used as a weapon of war.**

*** Access to essential health services is practically non-existent in those parts of Ukraine that are under severe attack, as well as being badly hit in the rest of the country.**

*** Gender-based violence, including sexual violence is increasing, increasing the risks of exploitation, including sexual exploitation and trafficking.**

In this interview Viktoriia Pihul, Ukrainian feminist, anti-capitalist activist in [Sotsialnyi Rukh \(Social Movement\)](#) and initiator with other feminists of the manifesto "[The Right to Resist](#)," explains how Ukraine's women are organizing and fighting back in the appalling conditions created by Putin's war. Emphases in the text are by Viktoriia Pihul.

How is the feminist movement trying to best cope and help with the present disaster? What are its priorities?

The war we now live through has affected and changed every aspect of our lives. The occupiers are working, among other things, to demoralize the population. That is why they use all means, including violence. At this very moment we need to understand that rape is a way of showing power and control over a situation, not a desire for sexual contact.

Of course, the work of feminist organizations under these conditions has changed considerably. Before the war, feminists and those who fought with us for women's rights and visibility did a very large part of the educational work: educational courses, programs and events; organizing actions, marches, etc.

Now this work is being transformed and assistance is primarily focused on survival and humanitarian support: finding humanitarian aid, medicines for trans representatives, creating shelters, helping women with children to find or provide babysitting services. Social Movement, for example, collects humanitarian aid for women and children from trade unions. Organizations with which we have friendly relations, like [Femsolution](#), [Feminist Lodge](#) and [Bilkis](#) now do likewise.

This is a contradictory moment: on the one hand, the feminist movement is getting closer to women, hearing their voices. *The good point for women's rights is that women lead and are more engaged in community humanitarian efforts.* It provides opportunities for humanitarian actors to seek women's participation and guidance. I think that it is very important to focus on this: *women are involved in very important processes that allow Ukrainians to live and survive in the rearguard.*

On the other hand, many of the problems that the movement has worked on for years risk becoming "not now"

issues. And what women are now doing to help win may be overlooked in public discourse. Because all attention is now focused on military operations and men's role, and the female contribution at the front will be less noticeable as well. That is, the inequality in the representation of female and male roles does not disappear during the war, but rather increases.

I see potential spaces for feminist work as grassroots activism and work with women to build cohesion, awareness of our visibility, and further struggle for women's political participation. For example, gender quotas, the work of gender commissioners, the promotion and implementation of the [Istanbul Convention](#), which was ratified last month in Ukraine, working with the problem of domestic violence, the creation of shelters for women. All this can be realized when women want to represent their interests and fight the stereotype that in politics everything is done by a few great people, and they do not decide anything.

Olena Zelenskaya (Ukraine's "First Lady") has said: "Our resistance, as our future victory, has taken on a particularly feminine face. Women are fighting in the army, they are signed up to territorial defence [units], they are the foundation of a powerful volunteer movement to supply, deliver, feed ... they give birth in shelters, save their children, and look after others' children, they keep the economy going, they go abroad to seek help. Others are simply doing their jobs, in hospitals, pharmacies, shops, transport, public services ... so that life continues."

How accurate is this picture of women's engagement in the fight against the Russian invasion?

In this context I want to underline that gender roles are now changing in Ukraine. *Women on the homefront have a war going on, too, which is just as important.*

Zelenskaya's words really reflect what I have seen in these more than four months of war.

With many people becoming unemployed and primarily men joining the Armed Forces of Ukraine, women are taking on new roles and multiple jobs to make up for the lost family income. Many women, forced to leave their homes and possessions behind, find themselves needing to buy household necessities all over again in a new place. By the way, the state has provided one-time assistance of 6500 hryvnia (Euros220) to Ukrainians, but this is very little taking inflation into account.

At the same time, women are now spending more and more time with children, as they are on distance education. Women very often decide to stay in the occupied territories to care for the elderly parents or others. Or they are afraid of losing their sources of income. Thus, they are increasingly at risk of violence, both from the Russians and domestic psychological abuse.

All this creates an additional burden and requires a lot of effort on the part of women. *I want to emphasize that they often take their work and their contribution to the resistance for granted.* It is our task as feminists to support women, to recognize their needs and to help in any way we can. The most important thing is not to let the female face of war remain in the shadows.

How important for the overall morale of the resistance against the Russian invasion has the big increase in women's participation in the army and volunteer organizations been?

From the very first, we were all on adrenaline, taking on all kinds of things: volunteering, searching for ammunition, humanitarian aid, transporting people out of dangerous areas. With time, of course, this phase is replaced by

immersion in trauma and helplessness.

But I hear and see in the public space women saying, "We have no right to give up." As I said, women have begun to band together locally to help. They weave camouflage nets, cook food for the military, pack and ship humanitarian aid. This promotes cohesion, so women feel they are not alone in their grief. It seems to me that even psychologically there is a certain support in this that we hold on to. Now voluntary work has become not something from the world of activists, but something close and understandable to almost everyone.

As for women's participation in the army, I immediately remember our "bird" from Azovstal. This girl Katya, who defended Azovstal in Mariupol until her last day. She sang songs and said she would fight to the last. Her photo and video of her singing went viral on all social networks. She became one of the symbols of the defense of Mariupol.

Now 35,000 women serve in the Ukrainian military, 1000 of them are commanders, and two are generals. It is important that women also went from the first day of the war into territorial defense. Now there is more talk about women's participation in the army, and they are becoming an example for all of us who are on the home front.

Regarding attitudes in the Ukrainian Army, [Hromadske International](#) noted in 2014: "To be honest there's nothing to celebrate yet as the changes are very slow. In the General Staff of Ukraine's Armed Forces you can hear the phrase 'my dear,' so the army needs to be reformed starting with them. Many don't understand that significant changes will only take place after more than one generation."

That comment would seem to be confirmed by the army celebration of the 30th anniversary of Ukrainian Independence, which saw women soldiers marching in high heels. Is the seriousness of the resistance struggle against the Russian invasion helping put an end to this sort of sexist nonsense?

Sexism and inequality are still present in the army. In 2014, women who were, for example, snipers or artillerymen, were written in the employment record book as "communications officer" or something similar, and they received less money. In eight years, the situation has changed, but globally the problems remain. For example, *at the beginning of the full-scale war women were issued with men's flak jackets and shoes, which are often larger in size, because there were no small ones. Women's body armour is also very different, but there was none.* So too with hygiene items: pads, shampoos, mosquito repellent and even hairpins. I want to mention the volunteer initiative Zemliachky: they are very supportive of women who serve and do humanitarian aid for women who are fighting, given their special needs.

As to public stereotyping, I want to share one case that impressed not only the feminist movement, but also most people who do not belong to it. A Ukrainian stand-up comedian at the end of May (when it was three months into the war) "joked" as follows: "Can you imagine what a women's battalion would look like? I can't. Would it be a battalion of sucking troops" ... and further references to blowjobs. It was a blatant case of devaluation, sexism and toxic masculinity. What's more, people in the audience laughed, and a stand-up YouTube channel posted the video on their page (and still hasn't deleted it). This video was sent to one of the feminists by a woman who had fought in [Debaltsevo](#) in 2015 and had seen hell on earth, including the torn bodies of her comrades. One can only imagine how she felt when she saw this video.

Also, one musician, who joined the military forces of Ukraine, on March 8 in his Instagram "congratulated" those guys who are hiding from the army, with the inference that they are supposedly women. These are just examples of recent high-profile cases, but on a domestic level there is still an unequal perception of women and men who are fighting.

But those men who are in the Armed Forces with women note their courage, fearlessness and bravery. Various

volunteer initiatives make social films and projects to bring women in the army out of the shadows and show how they are on a par with men in combat, and the men themselves attest to this. *I think that this war will break down a lot of stereotypes. But still, it is a very high price to pay.*

In times of crisis of defense of invaded nations and civil wars women fighters always appear, for example, the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War, the Soviet women in the Great Patriotic War and more recently the women battalions in Rojava, so important in the defeat of Islamic State. What similarities and differences with these experiences do you see in the engagement of Ukrainian women in the resistance to the Russian invasion?

I think that Ukraine now has its own character.

It is very different from the Soviet narrative of [War Has No Woman's Face](#) and it is not like the resistance of women in Rojava, because Kurdish women had to fight for basic rights and representation in society. In Spain there were constant conflicts about how women tried to fight for the right to fight as equals in the Republican army, but they were constantly thrown into secondary roles. It is difficult for me to say anything about the position of women in the army now, as that is best said by the women themselves after some time in the war has passed.

From what we can see, women's position in the army is surprisingly good, but surrounded by a lot of prejudice (as I described above). *The main problem is that the army is provided mostly for men's participation.* Both men and women resist in common, for the rights of all the people.

But it must be understood that the role of women in it is very important, because their position would be much worse if Russia seized power. Because the power of the aggressor is very conservative and sharply denies women's rights.

We have read that there is a strong feminist tradition, if not in that name, in Ukraine, of self-sufficient women resistant to patriarchal attitudes and norms. What truth is there to this vision? How does it show in the present mobilisation of women against the Russian invasion?

Feminism in Ukraine is now a grassroots movement, run by activists. If you ask an average woman from the periphery what feminists are, she will answer something along the lines of "these are some crazy young girls who have not developed a personal life, so they dye their hair in bright colours and hate men." For example, my friend always tells me that feminists can only be young girls who don't have children and just want to find a community or a place to hang out. Obviously, there are a huge number of women with children in the feminist movement, but this attitude persists.

I think that this non-mass popularity of feminism is due to economic and social prerequisites: women have to work, look after children, provide for them somehow, and be a housewife (the stereotype that a woman is the keeper of the home is not going away). In the constant race for survival, you need to have the time and energy to be part of a movement/organization/community.

It is indeed said about women in Ukraine (and they say it about themselves) that they are very strong, able to take a lot into their own hands, work hard and climb heights. But, as I mentioned before, they very often take that for granted.

Amid all the events and volunteering, the work of feminist organizations with women has increased dramatically. *It is also important that in addition to feminist organizations, there are organizations in which women play a leading role,*

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and which are essentially fighting for women's rights in certain aspects (such as labour rights) I want to mention the nurses' union [Be like Nina](#).

I believe this will help us build trust and show that feminism is about fighting for our rights and our self-determination.

The strongest component of the Russian anti-war movement is Feminist Anti-War Resistance, whose Telegram channel carries regular reports of what is really happening in Ukraine, including correspondence from women in the areas temporarily by Russian forces. How is the Ukrainian movement looking to collaborate with its Russian sisters?

I follow the activities of this movement and consider these girls to be the only adequate leftists in Russia. While the once popular leftists are either splitting up or continuing to tell old narratives about the USSR and the "fraternal peoples" and shoot videos on YouTube, these girls are engaged in underground activities and newspapers, putting up flyers, writing critical materials. I think that this is an important point for a *totally fragmented Russian society, where everyone is for himself or herself*.

Many female members of Feminist Anti-War Resistance signed the manifesto of Ukrainian feminists that I wrote together with my comrades.

I cannot make any predictions about further interaction. It is important to understand that Ukrainian feminist initiatives are also going through difficult times. In the light of military events very many people do not even want to hear about having any kind of cooperation with anything Russian. And here everything will depend on how the situation develops.

What are the most important issues that feminists in the rest of the world need to understand about the struggle of their sisters against the Russian invasion of Ukraine?

We have seen many pacifist statements by Western feminists, including [their manifesto](#). In the face of war and the daily deaths of our women and children, we are critical of this position. In this context, I am part of a working group of Ukrainian feminists who have written the [Ukrainian Feminist Manifesto](#). We call for support for Ukrainian women, including our right to armed resistance. *This war shows us that feminism is a movement that needs to respond to changing situations, to be flexible and to develop principles according to new conditions*. What I mean here is that succumbing to geopolitical reasoning and geopolitical thinking and withdrawing from conflict by condemning all sides *is not a workable position*. We must clearly distinguish the rapist from the victim and help the victim to assert her right to exist and to be a subject.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Our main goal now is to win this war. We understand that it can be protracted, and it is not a quick process, and there are hopes for it. *What is critical to victory is not to let the war and all the terrible events in Ukraine disappear from the world's agenda*. If everyone conditionally gets used to it, it will be harder for us to survive and the problem will not only be ours there is a risk to the world, too. I ask you to support one of the [Social Movement's biggest campaigns](#) for writing off Ukraine's foreign debt. It is a great burden for the Ukrainian economy, which has been created by years of oligarchical dominance. We have [created a website](#) where we have gathered arguments, a petition, and materials from around the world in support. It's important for women, too, because we will be the ones rebuilding Ukraine.

I want to say that women are already doing a lot to make Ukraine recover. And we, as a leftist organisation, are

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fighting for our labor and social rights, which the government is trying to curtail to various degrees. This is important for the post-war rebuilding of Ukraine to be possible and based on the principles of non-discrimination.

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