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Gender, Citizenship and War: How Russia's War on Ukraine Affects Women's Political Rights

OLENA STRELNYK

At the beginning of February 2022, feminist groups and women's organizations in different cities across Ukraine were preparing to hold the annual feminist march for International Women's Rights Day on March 8. Then organizers thought whether it was appropriate to march in the threat of full-scale war looming. Peaceful assemblies were not banned at the time, however there was a risk of public criticism that it was not the 'right time' for such an event to take place. In the town of Poltava, where I lived, I was a co-organizer of the protest, and the organizing team made the decision to hold the march but to develop appropriate messages for the public in the context of security challenges. For obvious reasons, the demonstration did not ultimately go ahead because of the beginning of the full-scale war.

The idea of human rights and gender equality is important for understanding the position of Ukraine, which is currently paying an extremely high price for its freedom and independence from the 'Russian world' (*Russkiy mir*), where there is no place for the values of human rights, gender equality, and countering gender-based violence. Moreover, gender and sexuality occupy a central place in the Russian campaign against the European Union and the West, and this cultural war has played a major part in legitimizing the actual war against Ukraine (Graff/Korolczuk 2022).

Especially after signing the association agreement with the EU in 2014, Ukraine has made significant progress in gender equality. These changes were not only a formal response by the Ukrainian state to the demands of the association agreement, but also a consequence of the powerful women's movement in Ukraine.

The war dramatically affects the situation of women and their social, civil, political, cultural and ecological rights. In this paper, I focus on what is happening with women's political rights in the current situation. What do we know about positive and problematic impacts and what challenges does the war create for the feminist movement in Ukraine?

This paper was developed in January 2023 and concerns processes that are not completed. It should be noted that in such a situation of dramatic social change, some reflections might quickly become irrelevant.

My theoretical perspective is based on (feminist) revisions of the classical concept of citizenship. According to T. H. Marshall (1965), citizenship entails civil rights such as liberty of the person and freedom of thought or religion; political rights such as the right to participate in the exercise of political power; but also social rights such as the right to economic welfare and security to work and to have a minimum standard of living. Later approaches indicate that citizenship goes beyond the legal and political relationship

between individual and the state, to involve participation in civil society. In addition to being about a status that confers rights and obligations, citizenship is also a practice whereby people are able to participate in shaping their societies (Meer/Seve 2004, 9).

I start with the issue of how citizenship is related to citizen's duty to defend the state: I focus on the issue of military mobilization and service as it is not only part of the patriarchal order, but also an important context affecting the possibilities of political and public representation of women and their rights. I ask how the war affects women's political rights as well as opportunities to influence decision making, and their agency as political and civil actors. Finally, I present some of my thoughts on the war as a challenge for Ukrainian feminism.

Gender, Citizenship, and the Duty to Defend the State

The impact of war on gender ideologies, citizenship and women has been the focus of numerous classic feminist works. In times of war, traditional representations of gender roles are reinforced, as in most countries with conscription armies, including Ukraine, women are exempt. Gender ideas are constructed during wartime based on the essentialist ideas that men are 'protectors' while women are 'protected' (Yuval-Davis 1997; Enloe 1983, 2000; Cockburn 2012).

In Ukraine, citizenship in the context of war and duty to defend the state is constructed *de jure* as gender neutral but *de facto* as predominantly a man's responsibility. According to martial law in Ukraine, the vast majority of civilian men aged 18 to 60 can be mobilized and are banned from leaving the country. This law does not mean that *all* men are conscripted: different waves involve the mobilization of different categories of men. Some groups of men are exempt from mobilization and allowed to leave the country, or they can be mobilized only with their consent. These are those who are unfit for military service due to health; men who have three or more children under the age of 18; men raising children under the age of 18 alone; men raising a child with a disability. In the meantime, trans women, in case they have not changed their documents, have to complete this additional procedure to get permission to leave the country which might be complicated during the war (NGO Insight 2022).

Currently, men who do not conform to a role of 'defender' and are perceived as having refused to fight in the national army face social exclusion. As of July 2022, officially more than one million people are sustaining the activities of the security and defence sector in Ukraine (Melnik 2022). Despite the fact that not all men or even not a majority of them are on a frontline, gender expectations that men should or have to fight are quite strong. According to a recent study, some internally displaced people stated that the local people had a negative attitude towards them. This was especially true for men because of the idea that men are defenders and should fight, but not stay in safe areas. According to some respondents, these prejudices

led to some barriers to accessing housing for men (CEDOS 2022). I guess that men displaced abroad can also face stigma, even stronger.

Under martial law, civilian women can be mobilized only with their consent, and they are free to leave the country. The implementation of the law on military registration of women of certain professions and probably some further restriction for them was postponed at least till October 2023 (BBC News Ukraine 2022).

This legal framework for military service demonstrates gendered citizenship and reflects the patriarchal tradition of the army as a masculinised and conservative social institution. The ideas about the roles of women and men in Ukraine are very traditional, and society will have to rethink the issue of the involvement of both men and women in the defence of the state. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the necessity to mobilize more people to be ready for armed resistance have encouraged Ukrainian society to see women as (potential) soldiers (Martsenyuk 2022).

Ukraine has already come a long way in the direction of gender-responsive changes in the professional army. Until 2014, the Armed Forces of Ukraine traditionally remained an extremely conservative social institution. The army was semi-decayed and did not receive sufficient public or state attention, with no gender reforms. With the beginning of the war in Luhansk and Donetsk regions in 2014, many women who went to serve faced a considerable number of restrictions and challenges, in particular the fact that many positions in the army were prohibited to them. These problems were discovered during the research and advocacy project 'Invisible Battalion' in 2015 dedicated to the position of women in the army (Grytsenko/Kvit/Martsenyuk 2016). After the research and advocacy campaign, the list of military professions allowed for women in the professional army was significantly expanded and the need for full gender equality in the security sector and the destruction of the 'glass ceiling' became the subject of public debate.

Now women make up 22% of all military personnel. In total, 38,000 women serve in the army of Ukraine, about 5,000 of them are on the front line, and we see in the example of media and public discourse an increase in their visibility and agency (Sitnikova 2022). A gender-sensitive approach is gradually being introduced in the security sector, and it is worth noting once again that servicewomen fought for these changes, and that these changes were not granted to them by the authorities from the top-down (Hrytsenko 2022). For example, Women Veterans founded the "Ukrainian Women Veteran Movement", an initiative to strengthen women veterans and increase their role in decision-making processes regarding governance, security, and defence.

Political Participation and Decision-making

War affects women's opportunities for political participation, influence on decision-making, and active citizenship in a broad sense.

One of the obstacles for women's active citizenship are caring responsibilities. Feminist theories of citizenship criticize the dichotomy of private and public, personal,

and political in scientific research and concepts of citizenship, emphasizing that women's activities in the private sphere are closely related to the functioning of society (ten Dam/Volman 1998; Held 2006; Reznikov 2022; Fuchs/Hinterhuber 2022). Some citizenship studies deconstructing the dichotomy of private and public raise the question of the role of care in women's activism as a practice of citizenship. For example, women's social roles, fixed in the private sphere, become an obstacle to their political and civic participation. This is especially relevant in the context of the war in Ukraine which has immensely increased women's unpaid care work: women are mainly responsible for adapting the family to new conditions in the situation of displacement and are mostly responsible for getting humanitarian aid for their families. Childcare services have become increasingly unavailable. In the frontline regions, kindergartens do not operate at all, in safer regions they are often overloaded. Some families prefer home childcare due to safety considerations.

Another challenge for women's influence on decision making is the fact that in war-times the voice and position of people with military expertise is greatly enhanced, both symbolically and politically, and these are mostly men. According to media monitoring, since the full-scale war started, the representation of women as both experts and heroines of publications in the media has decreased. On average, online media quote female experts in only 16% of materials (7% less than in the third quarter of 2021), respectively, male experts were quoted in 84%. As heroines, women are mentioned in 22% of materials (by 7% less than last year), and men in 78% of online media materials (Instytut masovoi informatsii 2022).

Ukraine has achieved a significant increase in the representation of women in government bodies, particularly, in elected ones. Women's representation in the parliament, regional and city councils increased significantly in comparison with the previous elections: on 9% in the parliament (to 21%), on 12% in regional councils (to 27%), on 4% in city councils (to 33%) not least thanks to the mechanism of gender quotas in party lists implemented in 2015 (with amendments in 2020).

In the context of the war, there are contradictory trends at the level of decision-making and political influence of women as a component of citizenship. At the informal community level, in government-controlled cities, respondents of research carried out by UN Women and Care International note that people's participation in decision-making and management of resources has increased, due to the active self-organizing efforts of volunteers and civil society. This is especially true for women, who lead and manage the majority of humanitarian response measures and volunteer groups. However, at the level of formal decision-making processes the majority of respondents who are representatives of women's NGO and local and national governance agreed that it has become more difficult to influence these kinds of decisions due to the centralization of power and increased role of the military administrations in wartime decision-making (UN Women 2022).

Moreover, I expect that because of the war, the rights of citizens, and understanding what it means to be a 'good' or 'bad' citizen will be constructed along the lines of

involvement in the state defence. Those who fought will have a stronger position, and this will lead to a certain hierarchization of citizenship both in the sense of social rights and of whose voice will be prioritized. The voices of men who did not fight as well as women in general or those not involved explicitly in volunteering will be marginalized. Those displaced abroad will be symbolically excluded from citizenship, but also with a distinct gender specificity: I suppose that Ukrainian society tolerates women, especially mothers who have fled the country with their children, but not men who might be symbolically excluded from citizenship.

Demands on Gender Equality: The War as a Challenge for Ukrainian Feminism

During the war, engagement in the state defence has become a tool for legitimizing political demands. We see this with the example of sexual citizenship. With the beginning of the war, the discourse of granting LGBT people the right to register marriages intensified. However, the justification for granting such rights is not based on the right of a citizen of the country by default, but through the legitimization of LGBT people's participation in the army or existential threats of death.

The well-known Ukrainian LGBT activist Tymur Levchuk noted a boom in coming-out among servicemen, commenting in an interview: "A man who is now in the army, who puts his/her life on the line to protect the country, has every moral right to demand equal rights" (author's translation, cf. embedded video interview in Grigors'ka 2022). Notable in this context is the activity of the public organization "Military LGBT and their allies" (<https://lgbtmilitary.org.ua/>).

It seems that the public climate regarding LGBT rights has indeed begun to change. In summer 2022 a petition for the granting same-sex marriages received 28,000 signatures in one month for the first time in Ukrainian history, which was enough to warrant the President's consideration. The petition stated: "At this time, every day can be the last one. Let people of the same sex get the opportunity to start a family and have an official document to prove it. They need the same rights as traditional couples" (Elektronni petytsii 2022).

Changes in public attitudes towards LGBT rights are reflected in the data as well. Ukraine (as well as other Central and Eastern European countries) had a very high proportion of people who oppose allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally. 85% of respondents spoke against it, according to comparative research in 2015/17 (Pew Research Center 2018). However, the full-scale war has affected these attitudes in a positive way. In April 2022, 23.6% of respondents answered affirmatively to the question: "Do you support the introduction of a registered partnership for of same-sex couples, similar to ordinary marriage, but without the right to adoption of children" in comparison with 4.8% surveyed in 2018 (Martsenyuk 2022).

The positioning of the feminist movement in the context of the war can be problematic. In considering these challenges, I would distinguish political legitimation and

public legitimization of the feminist movement or its demands. This is a very conditional separation to illustrate contradictions.

Representative data on what share of Ukrainian society is favorable to feminism are not available, although feminist ideas, according to my observations, are becoming more popular among young girls and women.

Ukrainian feminism faces a challenge of constructing and communicating new messages of women's rights issues, especially in the context of the fact of restrictions of men's rights during the war, and mainly men's responsibility to protect the state. The information climate in Ukraine is generally favorable of balanced coverage of the equal participation of men and women in the defence of the country and overcoming the challenges of war: stories of women's coping strategies, resistance, leadership and agency during the war, women's participation in the state defence, and recognition of women's contribution to victory are becoming more visible in Ukrainian media. This is the result of increased professionalism and gender sensitivity of Ukrainian journalists, the activities of a considerable number of projects and the influence of grassroots activists and civil society on the media. Meanwhile this is not only a matter of media reality. Feminist organizations in Ukraine do a great job in providing humanitarian aid for women and contributing to community resilience but there is an open question as to whether this contribution will be sufficient to make women's voices visible and to provoke public discussions around how the war affects women.

The political demands of feminist movements can be legitimised by pointing out that human rights and gender equality are in contrast to the 'Russian world'. While the so-called 'anti-gender' initiatives are also supported by clearly pro-Ukrainian forces, linking movements against gender equality with Russian narratives can delegitimise the position of the 'anti-gender' movement and its influence on decision-making in Ukraine.

Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine irreversibly cemented Ukraine's European integration intentions, which creates a new positive context for the implementation of gender equality policies as already exemplified in the ratification of the 'Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence' (Istanbul Convention) which Ukraine signed in 2011. For a long time, the ratification had been the most problematic aspect of Ukrainian legislation. Two years in a row, the petition for the ratification of the Convention received the necessary 25.000 signatures, however, it was not ratified due to the opposition of the Council of Churches and grass roots 'anti-gender' initiatives. Ratification of the convention was the central agenda of the 'Women's March' for several years, as well as the advocacy campaign of women's organizations and initiative groups. In June 2022, at the time that the issue of Ukraine's EU candidate status was being discussed and negotiated, the Ukrainian Parliament finally ratified the Convention. Of course, there are fears and risks that this step was taken solely to accelerate Ukraine's status as a candidate for EU accession but in any case it provided new tools for the advocacy of women's rights in the direction of preventing and countering gender-based violence.

Given the current context it is probable that the so-called ‘anti-gender movement’ in Ukraine will lose its symbolic weight and influence on political decision-making. However, it is obvious that it is trying to adapt to changes in the political context. Recently, I found a new conservative, ‘anti-gender’ web resource that became active in 2022 with new messages. One of the materials posted on the website is titled ‘LGBT and other leftists are against providing more weapons to Ukraine, for peace with Russia’, which is obviously designed to discredit the global and Ukrainian LGBT community (Varta zhyttia 2022).

My last concluding remark is that the full-scale war in Ukraine affects the whole society, including all social processes, institutions, and practices. It affects the position of girls and women, and the women’s movement as well. The war has created numerous challenges for Ukrainian feminism. There are several structural changes facing women’s social rights: threat to life and safety, the deterioration of the economic situation of women, the expected deepening of the gender pay gap, gender-based violence, a lack of childcare services, a reduction in social expenditure on women and vulnerable groups, and neoliberal reforms of the labour market. These challenges will be the basis for the agenda of political demands and activities of feminist organizations in Ukraine during the war and throughout the recovery process. Achieving solutions to these problems is however far beyond the reach of the women’s movement alone. I am certain, however, that a powerful Ukrainian women’s and feminist movement will serve as a safeguard against the conservative backlash which can be expected a consequence of the war.

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