

Men are Defenders, Women are Defended? How the War Affects the Public Attitudes Toward Gender Roles in Ukraine

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This article explores how Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has influenced public attitudes toward gender roles, particularly in the context of (gendered) military duty. On the basis of analysis of representative national surveys of leading sociological centers in Ukraine and other data from open sources, the author explores whether there are signs of the militarization of Ukrainian society at the level of (gendered) sociocultural expectations, with an emphasis on public attitudes toward three issues: the military and its role in society including in postwar reconstruction; the roles of men during war; and the roles of women during war. The findings reveal a complex and often contradictory set of gendered attitudes. While legislative norms reinforce a binary of gender roles of men who are "defenders" and women "are defended", societal attitudes are more fluid: many men resist the prescribed "defender" role, and women's participation in the military is increasingly accepted. The article contributes to debates on militarization and gender equality by showing that, in the Ukrainian context, war has led to erosion of patriarchal gender norms at sociocultural level rather than to their reinforcement

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On April 28, 2022, two months after the start of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, Stefan Weichert published an article titled "The 'New Israel': The Irreversible Peril of Ukraine's Militarization," in which he argues that "nearly a decade of war and a new hero cult that's arisen since Russia's invasion mean Ukraine is now one of the world's most heavily militarized societies" (Weichert 2022). In the Global Militarization Index (GMI) ranking for 2023, Ukraine took first place,

which for many years had belonged to Israel. The index is based on a limited list of objective indicators, such as military expenditures (including in relation to health spending), military and paramilitary personnel (including in relation to physicians), and the quantity of heavy weapons in relation to the size of the population. The militarization of societies is a much more complex process that manifests itself at different levels, including societal ones. The data of a representative survey conducted in 2024 give an idea of the sociocultural dimensions of these processes in the war-affected Ukraine: Sixty-four percent of surveyed Ukrainians answered positively to the question: “How do you feel about the possibility of changing budget priorities in your community for a long-term period in favor of increasing spending on security?” (Ukrainskyi tsentr 2024).

Other available data indicate some public attitudes regarding the impact of a full-scale war on the dynamics of gender roles in Ukraine. In a representative survey of young people aged fifteen to twenty-five that was conducted at the end of 2022, 58 percent of respondents disagree that the war has strengthened gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles, while 28 percent believed that the influence of gender stereotypes during the war strengthened, and only 12 percent reported that it weakened. The study assumes that the respondents associate the increase of this influence with military conscription for men and restrictions on men leaving the country. However, the erosion of these stereotypes may be a consequence of the increased visibility of women in the army and the fact that women began to perform “male” roles in displaced and separated families (Vолосевych, Prochukhanova and Strelnyk 2023, 51).

This article explores whether there are signs of the militarization of Ukrainian society at the level of (gendered) sociocultural expectations, with an emphasis on public attitudes toward three issues: the military and its role in society including in postwar reconstruction; the roles of men during war; and the roles of women during war. The article contributes not only to the ongoing discussion about the gender dimensions of the Russo-Ukrainian War but also to wider international debates about the connection between war, militarization, and gender. Many feminist scholars have examined the close link between war, militarism, and patriarchy and showed that gender ideologies are constructed during war based on essentialist ideas that men are the “defenders” and women are the “defended,” and that, as a result of war, gender roles become polarized. It is also argued that wars, especially

wars of national liberation, fuel both militarized and nationalist attitudes and discourses in which women are presented as biological, cultural, and social reproducers of nations and men as defenders and national heroes.

While recognizing the partial relevance of these findings in the context of the war-torn Ukrainian society, I affirm that an understanding of the extent and nature of militarization requires a more nuanced view of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. In the paper, I argue that indeed, trust in the military in Ukraine (as one of the markers of militarization) is unprecedentedly high, which has potentially negative gender implications. A wartime, gendered citizenship regime that prioritizes the voices of the military (the vast majority of whom are men) can lead to the marginalization of the voices and needs of those who do not participate in the military resistance—namely women and especially men of draft age who did not serve. Against the background of the legislative polarization of the gender roles of men as “defenders” and women as “defended,” we observe a diverse picture at the level of sociocultural expectations and practices. First, there is inconsistency between the legislative regulation of the roles of men as “defenders” and the attitudes and practices of men regarding military mobilization. Second, the spectrum of roles that are “normal” for women to perform has been expanded in the context of war, especially the inclusion of military roles.

Research Question and Theoretical Framework

My research question is how Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine affects public attitudes toward the roles of men and women (with a focus on issues of military duty and military service) and whether these gendered attitudes are related to the militarization of society. I mainly focus on changes in these sentiments and attitudes in the context of the military service of men and women, because they form the core of the dramatic changes in the gender order in the context of the full-scale war. At the same time, I present some data related to a wider spectrum of public expectations regarding gender roles, such as in the family, for a better understanding of the context of Ukrainian society.

As a general theoretical framework, I rely on research on the processes of militarization of societies, particularly the social dimensions of militarization in the aspect of sociocultural ideas and beliefs, including gender expectations about men's and women's roles. It is worth

noting the limitations regarding this framework, especially the concept of “militarization” itself. First, any universal definition and interpretation of militarization is quite conditional, as it depends on the type and form of the state system (authoritarianism or democracy), the goals of state military policy (aggression or defense), the conditions under which it is carried out (wartime or peacetime), the degree of coverage of public life (total or partial), and the type and nature of the threat (external or internal; terrorism, crime, etc.) around which militarization is built. Second, the case of Ukrainian society, which is fighting for survival, requires a revision of conventional interpretations of the militarization of society as a predominantly destructive phenomenon and as something that negatively correlates with gender equality.¹ Third, the militarization of societies is a complex phenomenon involving not only materials or resources (e.g., weapon and military expenditures) but also sociopolitical dimensions (Bayer et al 2023; Enloe 2004).

Recognizing these and other limitations of the concept of militarization for the analysis of the context of Ukrainian society in a state of full-scale defensive war, I use theoretical frameworks on the manifestation of militarization at the level of public ideas and attitudes. As Bernazzoli and Flint (2010) noted based on their literature review, the mobilization of society to support military activities is only successful with a simultaneous mobilization of moral “imperatives” such as obligation to the nation. I rely on the sociocultural markers of the militarization of society defined by Enloe (2004) who offers a wide list of “core beliefs” characteristic of this process: (a) that armed force is the ultimate resolver of disputes; (b) that human nature is prone to conflict; (c) that having enemies is a natural condition; (d) that hierarchical relations produce effective action; (e) that a state without a military is naïve, scarcely modern, and barely legitimate; (f) that in times of crisis those who are feminine need armed protection; and (g) that in times of crisis any man who refuses to engage in armed violent action is jeopardizing his status as a manly man (Enloe 2004, 219). Bernazzoli and Flint (2010) outlined additional core beliefs to this list: (h) that soldiers possess certain values and qualities that are desirable in civil society; (i) that military superiority is a source of national pride; (j) that those who

1. In particular, the definition of militarization as a process in which “a society’s institutions, policies, behaviors, thought, and values are devoted to military power and shaped by war” (Kohn 2009, 182).

do not support military actions are unpatriotic; (k) that those who do not support military actions are anti-soldier.

Unfortunately, these core beliefs of militarized societies were not operationalized in the sociological sense in the works cited, and the data used in the paper empirically do not directly correspond to the defined markers of militarization above. Given the available data, this article focuses on testing the three groups of “core beliefs” of a militarized society, and empirical data are presented in three parts, respectively. The first part deals with public sentiments toward the military: trust in them, ideas about their role in the postwar development of society, and the connection between patriotism and military service. These sentiments are related to core beliefs of militarized societies “that soldiers possess certain values and qualities that are desirable in civil society” and “that military superiority is a source of national pride” defined by Bernazzoli and Flint (2010). The next two parts deal with the gender aspects of these processes. The second part provides an overview of ideas about the masculinity of the role of men in the context of war and, in particular, how consolidated the Ukrainian society is around gender expectations regarding the belief that “men are defenders” that correspond with the belief that “any man who refuses to engage in armed violent action is jeopardizing his status as a manly man” (*ibid.*). The third part focuses on expectations regarding the roles of women in the context of war and, in particular, how these expectations correspond to the marker “women are defended” and “in times of crisis those who are feminine need armed protection” (Enloe 2004), including society’s attitude toward the military conscription of women and gender attitudes toward military women.

Research Data and Study Limitations

For this study, I draw on data from published representative quantitative and qualitative studies conducted by authoritative sociological centers on Ukraine. Chronologically, I mainly focus on the period after the start of Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine on February 24, 2022. However, I also use data from 2014, taking into account the fact that Russia’s armed aggression against Ukraine began in 2014 with the support of separatists in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions after the events of the Revolution of Dignity. Examining data for the period from 2014 to February 24, 2024, demonstrates the dynamics of changes in public attitudes and sentiments.

Although sociologists face numerous challenges conducting representative surveys during the war (such as the unavailability of respondents, large-scale displacement, and changes in the composition and structure of the population), there is a certain consensus among Ukrainian sociologists that public opinion polls provide reliable data. Any concerns about the interpretation of results are listed in the footnotes.

It is also worth considering that during wartime, sociological surveys study mainly the civilian population: for practical reasons, it is extremely difficult for sociologists to reach military personnel, especially those serving on the front lines. One can assume that the opinion of the military on the issue of mobilization and the phenomenon of evasion of military service may differ from the opinion of civilians.

Another limitation is the dynamic nature of the situation: An ongoing war can cause rapid changes in public attitudes, expectations, discourses, and policies. We are dealing with unfinished and dynamic processes taking place in a war-torn society. We do not know how long the war will last, what changes there will be in the mobilization policy of the Ukrainian state (including policy regarding civilian women), what share of men and women will serve, what will be the further impact of the war on structures, institutions, practices, and attitudes of Ukrainian society, including the (re)formatting of public attitudes regarding gender roles, femininity, and masculinity.

Empirical Findings

Public Attitudes Toward the Military: Unprecedented Trust and Respect

The army as an institution underwent serious transformations during the period of independence of Ukraine. After the collapse of the USSR, the 1990s and early 2000s were characterized by a rapid decline in the prestige and role of the army as an institution and a significant reduction in the number of military personnel. Although the level of public trust in the Armed Forces between 2005 and 2013 fluctuated, it was generally higher than in other structures of the security and defense sector (e.g. law enforcement) (Pechenyuk and Pechenyuk 2021). With the beginning of the armed conflict in Donetsk and Luhansk regions in 2014, which became the starting point for the revival of the position and authority of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU), the level of trust in the AFU has been constantly increasing. According to a 2015

survey, Ukrainians trusted volunteers (67 percent), the church (62 percent), and the army the most (55 percent) (Ukraintsi naibilshe 2015).²

According to the latest publically available data, since the start of the full-scale war, the security and defense sector of Ukraine has about 1.2 million people, of which up to 700,000 people were mobilized to serve in the Armed Forces (that is, they went voluntarily or were drafted). Among civilians surveyed in 2023, 70 percent reported having relatives or loved ones fighting at the front, compared to 54 percent of those surveyed in July 2022 (Sotsiolohichna hrupa “Reitynh” 2024). On the eve of the full-scale Russian invasion, against the backdrop of growing security threats in December 2021 in connection with the build-up of Russian troops on the border with Ukraine, the level of trust in the Armed Forces was 72 percent; it increased to 96 percent in December 2022 (KMIS 2023) and stayed at the same level throughout 2023–2024. According to 2023–2024 polls, 94 percent of those surveyed trusted the soldiers of the AFU and veterans of the current war, while 76 percent of respondents believed that society today respects veterans. For 86 percent of respondents, faith in the AFU is the main factor that helps them maintain stability during the war with Russia, and 82 percent consider the Armed Forces to be the country’s most effective institution (Sotsiolohichna hrupa “Reitynh” 2024). In an ongoing defensive war, when the fate of society is largely decided on the front line, such attitudes and glorification of the military are understandable.

One of the markers of the militarization of society is giving the military a special status, role, and authority in civilian life and in postwar development that is close to one of the “core beliefs” of a militarized society offered by Bernazzoli and Flint (2010): that “soldiers possess certain values and qualities that are desirable in civil society.” According to 2023 survey, 46 percent of Ukrainians believe that the military and veterans will be the group that most contributes to the effective development of Ukrainian society in the future. Only youth (50 percent) were assessed more highly than the military and veterans in this respect (Sotsiolohichna hrupa “Reitynh” 2023b). According to Enloe, the privileging of the military in post-conflict society is one of the key feminist issues (Enloe 2004, 221–226), as prioritizing the voices of the military (the vast majority of whom are men) can lead to the

2. The survey provided a wide list of institutions to determine the level of trust in them. These included as well: media, parliament, the President, the Cabinet of Ministers, banks, and courts.

marginalization of the voices and needs of those who did not participate in the military resistance—women, people with disabilities and other groups.

One of the markers of militarized societies is the association of patriotism with military service, which resonates with core beliefs of a militarized society identified in the literature: “in times of crisis any man who refuses to engage in armed violent action is jeopardizing his own status as a manly man” (Enloe 2004, 219) and that “those who do not support military actions are unpatriotic” (Bernazzoli and Flint 2010). In 2023, the sociological group “Rating” conducted a survey on the public’s perception of patriotism asking the question “What do you consider to be signs of patriotism?” Most surveyed chose three positions: “donating, volunteering” (46 percent), speaking Ukrainian (45 percent), and serving at the front (33 percent). Women more often chose the position “donate, volunteer” (52 percent versus 37 percent among men), and men chose the position “serve at the front” (38 percent versus 29 percent among women). However, even among men, the position of serving in the army was second after the position of “speaking Ukrainian” (41 percent) (Sociologichna hrupa “Reitynh” 2023c). Thus, we see that patriotism is only associated with military service as a third choice (second in men’s attitudes) and probably reflects not only attitudes, but also practices: taking into account the effect of a socially desirable response, one can assume that the respondents when answering sociologists’ questions, named the signs that corresponded to their behavior. For example, if a man does not serve but donates, this criterion will be important for him, as it will allow himself to be counted among the patriots.

“Men are Defenders”?: Martial Law and Official Discourse vs. Public Attitudes and Practices

At the level of political discourse and state politics, gender equality has been identified as one of the priorities of the development of Ukrainian society, especially since 2014, when Ukraine signed the association agreement with the European Union. At the same time, Ukrainian legislation extends responsibilities differentially to citizens based on gender in relation to military service as in many other countries (Pew Research Center 2019). Ukraine has a mixed system of military formation: professional and conscription. Women can join the professional army (with significant positive changes after 2014, as discussed below),

while only men are drafted into the army. The Law, “On Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men” (2005), states that conscription for men is not a manifestation of gender discrimination. Along with this, it is worth noting that a conscription army was a rather nominal norm before the start of the full-scale war as the majority of men born in the late Soviet period or independent Ukraine did not serve in the conscript army or undergo military training while studying at institutions of higher education.³

In the context of the war, the situation has changed dramatically. The onset of the war and the adoption of martial law on February 24, 2022, led to the *de facto* entrenchment of a new gendered regime. Martial law and the rhetoric of state officials now construct the duty to defend the state as a man’s responsibility.⁴ Most men ages eighteen to sixty are prohibited from leaving the country while civilian women can be mobilized only with their consent are free to leave the country.⁵ Elsewhere (Strelnyk and Phillips, 2025), I have shown how gendered citizenship is constructed in Ukraine in the context of Russia’s full-scale invasion. The high value of participation in the defense of the country during the war leads to the endowment of the soldier with “full citizenship,” and those groups who do not participate in military service (e.g. women) are excluded from this.

To what extent do sociocultural expectations regarding men’s roles support this new regime of citizenship, and how do public expectations in Ukraine correspond with the belief of militarized societies that “any man who refuses to engage in armed violent action is jeopardizing his

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3. A reduction in the number of conscripts is also related to a planned reduction in the volume of conscription. In 2013, President Yanukovich canceled conscription to the army, which was restored in 2015. Between 2015 and 2020, the number of conscripts in the army fluctuated between 27,000 and 34,000 each year (Strokova viiskova sluzhba 2021).
 4. It is worth noting certain changes since 2014. With the beginning of the war in Luhansk and Donetsk regions, partial mobilization was announced, mainly for those who had previous military experience or training. Therefore, mobilization policies did not affect the majority of the country’s population and men’s rights. In particular, the right to freedom of movement was not restricted.
 5. Some groups of men are exempt from mobilization and allowed to leave the country, or they can be mobilized only with their consent: those deemed unfit for military service due to health; men who have three or more children under the age of 18; single men raising a child under the age of 18; and men raising a child with a disability, or those who have a spouse or parent (their own or one of their spouse’s) in the I or II disability group.

status as a manly man” (Enloe 2004)? During a war, masculinity is primarily associated with heroism and the willingness to give one’s life for the defense of the state, and men are considered typically as soldiers (protectors) or political leaders (Sjoberg 2014, 54–81). At least during the first year of the war the legislative consolidation of the role of a man as a defender of the state resonated with public expectations. By October 2022, 55 percent of internally displaced people (IDPs) and 59 percent of locals stated that they “have come across cases when men are accused of not fighting (hiding from the Military Commissariat)” with different degrees of frequency (Info Sapiens 2022, 71).⁶ Traditional gender expectations, especially regarding men’s roles, were the basis of tensions and conflicts in communities between locals and IDPs. These tensions were especially noticeable in the construction of the image of an IDP man “who evades mobilization” (*ukhylianty*) (Strelnyk 2024b). According to a study conducted after the first months of the full-scale war, some IDPs said they experienced a negative attitude toward themselves from the locals. This was especially true for men due to the idea that men are defenders and should fight but not stay in safe areas: some respondents reported that these prejudices led to barriers to accessing housing (CEDOS 2022). It is to be expected that public views regarding those displaced abroad are also gendered. According to 2023 survey data, the most positive public attitude is toward refugee women with children, and the most negative is toward men of military age who do not have children and have gone abroad; respondents had a more neutral view of men of conscription age who do not serve at the front, but remain in Ukraine (Sotsiologichna hrupa “Reitynh” 2023c).

It is worth taking into account, however, the dynamic nature of these expectations and attitudes. The first days and months of the war demonstrated an extremely high readiness of Ukrainian society for resistance: 400,000 volunteers joined the military, which is a large number from a military point of view. Since those early months, several factors have led to a significant decrease in the number of men who are willing to serve in the armed forces: the protracted nature of the war; the sometimes forced nature of mobilization, and other violations of the rights of conscripts (Korshak 2023); the open-ended nature of mobilization and the absence of a legal process of demobilization

6. The survey referred to those who were internally displaced persons after February 24, 2022.

during wartime (as of August 2025, the law on military demobilization has not been adopted).

Men's evasion of military duty (so-called *draft dodging*) is not unusual for a country at war and is well researched in military studies. Although some of the reasons for evasion of mobilization in wartime seem universal (e.g., fear of death or disability), they are contextual as well and can indicate a wide range of attitudes toward war, mobilization policies, trust in a state, assessment of the degree of social security of military and veterans, and assessment of other risks. In particular, 65 percent of urban men in Ukraine surveyed in 2024 indicated the fear of death or disability as a reason for their reluctance to join the Armed Forces, 66 percent indicated the insufficiency of the army's material support, and 60 percent the uncertainty of the terms of military service (Info Sapiens 2024).⁷ Among the factors for which there are no quantitative data yet, it is worth noting the critical attitude of men and women toward mobilization policies and practices as unfair and class-based,⁸ as well as the lack of public resources for the treatment, rehabilitation, and social protection of soldiers and veterans (creating a burden on families and women), which can affect the readiness to mobilize as well. It is also worth considering the conflict between the role of a man as a "defender" and as a "breadwinner." According to a 2016 survey, 81 percent of women and 84 percent of men agreed with the statement that "a man should fully provide for his family" (Sotsiolohichna hrupa "Reitynh" 2016). Although the security and defense sector is the highest paid in the country (especially for those on the front lines), the state nevertheless struggles to provide for all of its soldiers' basic needs, and the families of many serving in the armed forces purchase essential items for the soldiers and their units, even ammunition. This additional financial burden, together with the high probability of death or disability, threatens men's ability to fulfill another traditional male gender role: "breadwinner."

7. An online survey was conducted of 455 men aged 18–55 who are urban residents of settlements with a population of more than 50,000 people.

8. The symbol of such criticism is the "Monaco" battalion that is the symbolic name of Ukrainian politicians, civil servants, deputies of the Verkhovna Rada (parliament) of Ukraine, influential businessmen and other powerful people (and members of their families) who illegally went abroad after the start of the war using their connections.

Some data are available on how many men are likely to evade mobilization using (semi)legal and illegal practices in Ukraine. For example, in 2022–2023, the proportion of men who entered universities increased substantially. According to the current law, studying in institutions of higher education, including PhD programs, gives the right to deferment from mobilization, while admission to universities under the contract form, when the student pays for the education themselves, has been significantly simplified. Open data showed that the share of men among first-year students in 2023 increased to 70 percent, and their age increased to twenty-seven years. The most striking increase is observed in male students over thirty years old. The presumed reason for this gender and age imbalance is that the status of a student guarantees deferment from the military draft during the martial law period (Tuziak and Onushko 2023). A similar trend is observed with the increase in the number of entrants to PhD programs: men accounted for almost 60 percent of entrants to PhD programs in 2022–2023 (Krechetova 2024).

There are many cases of illegal practices of evasion of mobilization. Between the beginning of the full-scale war and September 2023, 7,312 criminal proceedings were initiated for evading the mobilization draft (“V Ukraini vyznachyly” 2023). One of the most common practices of evading mobilization is crossing the state border illegally, often using forged documents or bypassing official checkpoints (“SBU vykryla” 2023). Some men of draft age falsely claim a status that would give them the right to deferment from mobilization, such as disability (their own or that of their wife).

What are public attitudes toward the mobilization of men and toward those men who evade military service? Polls in 2018 and 2022 (after February 24, 2022) showed that the majority of the population supported a professional army model (on a contract basis) open to men and women, while a draft model for men only in 2022 was supported by 14 percent of respondents (Martsenyuk 2022). The data available at the time of finalizing this paper (summer 2025) allow one to assume that Ukrainian society is not consolidated regarding the issues of men’s military duty, mobilization, and the attitude toward men of draft age who evade military service during a full-scale war, and has conflicting attitudes regarding these issues. In 2024, 43 percent of surveyed Ukrainians said that they are “ashamed of men who are hiding from mobilization,” while 54 percent of respondents to the same survey believe that those who avoid mobilization can be understood because “no one wants to

die” (Chunikhina et al. 2024, 87–88). Other polls showed that 46 percent of respondents believe that “there is no shame in being a dodger in wartime” and 29 percent have the opposite opinion (Vedernikova 2024),⁹ and among non-mobilized urban men who do not have “*bronni-a*,”¹⁰ 35 percent expressed readiness to mobilize if they receive draft prescription (*povistka*) (Info Sapiens 2024).

Thus, we see a discrepancy between the legislative assignment of the functions of protecting the state during war to men and the attitudes of men regarding their readiness to serve and fulfill the role of “defenders,” that are influenced not so much by norms of masculinity as by factors such as the risk of death or disability, and critical attitude to state mobilization policies.

“Women are Defended”? Public Attitudes on Women’s Roles in the Context of War

The Ukrainian state has made many commitments in the field of human rights and gender equality, especially after 2014 when the association agreement with the EU was signed. Many regulatory and legal acts on gender equality were adopted: the criminalization of domestic violence (2018), gender quotas on lists of political parties (2019), and prohibiting discrimination based on sex in advertising and job postings (2022). In June 2022, Ukraine ratified the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating domestic violence and violence against women (or “Istanbul Convention”), which it signed in 2011.

Along with this, gendered ideas about women’s and men’s roles as well as practices of distributing these roles in both public and private spheres stay eclectic, combining patriarchal and emancipated models. Philosopher and editor-in-chief of the popular Ukrainian resource

9. A limitation to the interpretation of the data: We note that the wording of the questions in both cases was manipulative, which could affect the result. In the first case (Chunikhina et al. 2024), respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the statement: “It’s a shame for the men who hide from mobilization today, when the fate of our people is being decided on the battlefield,” and respondents were offered an additional explanation, “because no one wants to die.” In the second (Vedernikova 2024), the word “draft dodger” is used, which is an emotionally charged category that is open to interpretation.

10. Exemption from mobilization for men working in so-called critical enterprises (institutions and organizations that the state has designated critically important for the functioning of the economy and ensuring the livelihood of the population).

“Gender in Details” (*Hender v detaliakh*), Tamara Zlobina, called this process “gender breakdown” (*Hendernyi rozpad*): the old ideas about a woman as primarily a “*Berehynia*” (literally translated as “the one takes care of, protects”) and a “decoration of a man’s life” for whom work is “not the main thing” began to collapse. Instead, an emancipated vision of women as equal and equal participants in social, economic, and political processes developed and strengthened. She notes that old (patriarchal) ideas did not disappear immediately, and Ukrainian society is still in a state of “gender eclecticism,” in which conservative and emancipated views on gender roles coexist (Zlobina 2019). This can be illustrated by examples of the distribution of gender roles in the family.

According to data collected before 2022, the attitudes of women and men regarding the distribution of roles in the family were rather traditionalist. According to a survey of Ukrainian men conducted in 2018, 69 percent agreed with the statement that “women’s most important role is to take care of her family and cook for her family,” 63 percent agreed that “changing diapers, giving a bath and feeding kids is the mother’s responsibility.” At the same time, 52 percent agreed that “men have to share the work around a house with women equally” (UNFPA 2018). Women’s attitudes were more egalitarian; however, they were also contradictory. In 2016, fewer women agreed that “a man should be a head of a family” and that “a woman should not burden her husband with household chores.” Along with that, the share of women who believe that “a man should completely provide for his family” was very high and is almost identical to the share of men who support this expectation: 81 percent vs. 84 percent, respectively (Sotsiolohichna hrupa “Reitynh” 2016). It is important to emphasize that gender beliefs do not always reflect lived realities. Gender stereotypes often lag behind actual social practices and tend to reproduce the values of previous generations. In practice, many Ukrainian families function in an egalitarian way, though this does not eliminate gender asymmetries in the distribution of household and care responsibilities.

It is worth noting, however, the positive dynamics: Over time, Ukrainian society is making progress in abandoning gender stereotypes and the traditional distribution of gender roles. It seems that the full-scale war did not stop the positive dynamics. A representative survey conducted in March 2023 showed that, compared to 2021, the share of Ukrainians who believe that “men are better leaders than

women” decreased (from 43 percent to 24 percent) as did the proportion of those who believe that “a woman’s main vocation is to give birth to children” (from 64 percent to 59 percent) (Ukrainskyi veteranskyi fond 2023). Despite the progress, we can see that Ukrainian society remains more open to the idea of a wider representation of women in the public sphere than to changes in their roles in the private sphere, especially when it comes to motherhood.

The events of the Revolution of Dignity (2013–2014) and Russia’s war against Ukraine influenced the expansion of the spectrum of women’s roles and their public normalization, primarily in the sphere of military service. Women have served in the Armed Forces since Ukraine proclaimed its independence in 1991. Natalia Dubchak points out that, while the total number of servicewomen decreased between 2001 and 2006, the number of servicewomen showed a dynamic increase in all categories. Whereas in 2001, women officers accounted for 0.7 percent of the overall officer corps, in 2006 the rate had reached 2.25 percent. The trends of women’s representation in the defense sphere were positive, but the reason for this was not the prestige of the service, but first and foremost, the reluctance of men to take up low-paid positions. It was also mostly wives, daughters, and other relatives of servicemen who did military service in the AFU (Dubchak 2008).

The legal framework designed in Soviet times imposes restrictions on women that exclude them from many professions, both civilian and military. As a result of this model, only a few professions were available for women in military forces at that time (e.g., medical, communications, computer engineering, meteorology, cartography, and similar). Hanna Hrytsenko noted that this paradigm of women’s participation in the Ukrainian Armed Forces was rooted in the consistent Soviet concept of protecting women’s fertility and their ability to bear children. According to this concept, motherhood was of great value to the whole society. This imposed corresponding restrictions on women’s work in general, with no regard to whether a woman wanted to have a child (Hrytsenko 2022).

For Ukrainian women, service in the Armed Forces is a right for which part of the liberal feminist movement fought for a long time. The situation with gender issues in the army has changed significantly since 2014. With the beginning of the war in Luhansk and Donetsk regions, many women who went to serve as volunteers faced a considerable number of restrictions and challenges, in particular the fact that many positions in the army were prohibited to them. The situation changed

under the “Invisible Battalion” advocacy project in 2015, when the first research on the problems of women in the army was conducted (Martsenyuk, Grytsenko and Kvit 2016). Under the influence of this research and advocacy campaign, the list of military professions allowed for women 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. Further phases of the project were devoted to the situation of women veterans and the issue of sexual harassment in the military.

Before the start of the full-scale war, the number of women who served and worked as civilians in the Armed Forces reached 22 percent.¹¹ A gender-responsive approach is gradually being introduced in the security and defense sector. It is worth noting that servicewomen and women activists fought for these changes—they were not granted by the authorities from the top down (Hrytsenko 2022).

After 2014–2015, the visibility of military women in state and public discourses increased and depicting them in gender non-stereotypical images in media discourses is becoming more common (Strelnyk 2024a). Military women and their visibility challenge the traditional gender order:

The fact that some Ukrainian women are risking their lives in defense of their country stands in contrast to dominant gender norms which depict women as civilian victims of war and men as defenders against invasion and, by extension, combatants. The presence of women on the frontlines in Ukraine reflects both the militarization of women and a process of cultural and institutional change spurred by the conflict. (Darden 2022, 1)

At the level of ideas and expectations, before the war, the armed forces were strongly associated with masculinity. For example, there was a tradition in many Ukrainian schools whereby boys were congratulated on the Ukrainian holiday “Day of Defender” (October 1, the day of honoring Ukraine’s Armed Forces) as “future defenders.” At the same time, there were public discussions on the relevance of this practice, taking into account the high share of women in the armed forces of Ukraine. In 2021, the “Day of Defender” was officially renamed the “Day of Defenders” (in the plural, the title includes both male and

11. As of 2023–2024, 62,067 women serve and work as civilians in the armed forces, which comprises 7.3 percent of the total number of military personnel while 5,000 women perform combat tasks on the front line (Hamalii 2023).

female genders: “*Den zakhystnyka ta zakhysnytsi*”) at the initiative of women deputies of the Parliament. It seems that these changes affect the public sentiments and attitudes: according to the data of a survey of September 2023, 80 percent of Ukrainians answered that they associate the image of a veteran equally with men and women while only 20 percent associate it with a man (Sotsiolohichna hrupa “Reitynh” 2023a). According to the data from a survey conducted in 2024, 54 percent of respondents called the defense of the country a “male” occupation, while 46 percent claimed that both women and men should be involved in the defense of the integrity of Ukraine (KMIS 2024).

Data from representative surveys indicate positive changes regarding opportunities for women in the military. In 2018, 53 percent agreed that women in Ukraine should be granted equal opportunities with men to work in the Armed Forces of Ukraine and other military formations. After the start of the full-scale war in 2022, the percentage of these supporters increased to 80 percent. The second question was about the type of army that Ukraine should introduce. The situation did not change radically between 2018 and 2022. “Professional army with enlistment of both men and women only on a voluntary (contract) basis” was the most popular answer, chosen by 62 percent of respondents in 2018 and 64 percent in 2022. The current Ukrainian situation—conscription of all the men and only some women—in 2022 is supported by 14.5 percent of respondents, while conscription of men only is supported by 14 percent. In 2018, less than 2 percent supported the idea of conscription of both men and women, in 2022, the percentage slightly increased to 4.2 percent (Martsenyuk 2022).

Thus, we see that some conservative public attitudes, such as for women’s family roles, are combined with egalitarian ones in particular, with the recognition of women’s military roles. It seems that the goal of military defense of the country against an aggressor is a factor in the erosion of gender stereotypes, and it is a higher priority compared to the preservation of the traditional distribution of gender roles.

Conclusion

Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine led to the polarization of the roles of men who are “defenders” and women who are “defended” at the legislative level and changes in the configuration of gendered citizenship and the gender order: If for a man it is a duty to fight, then for a woman, accordingly, it is a duty to provide care for children and the

elderly while the partner is fighting. We observe, however, a more complex picture at the level of public attitudes and practices.

This article has explored whether there are signs of the militarization of Ukrainian society at the level of (gendered) sociocultural expectations, with an emphasis on three aspects: public attitudes toward the military and their role in society including postwar reconstruction, the roles of men during war, and the roles of women during war. It is obvious that in a country fighting a defensive war, the military is assigned special roles, and trust in them is very high. A sign of militarization at the sociocultural level is giving the military a special status, role, and authority in civilian life, which we can observe in Ukraine: Almost half of the surveyed in 2023 Ukrainians believe that the military and veterans will contribute the most to the effective development of Ukrainian society in the future. This can be a negative factor in gender equality because prioritizing the voices of the military (the vast majority of whom are men) can lead to the marginalization of the voices and needs of those who did not participate in the military resistance. At the same time, the available data suggest that the signs of militarization related to the roles of men as “defenders” and women as “defended” are not characteristic of Ukrainian society in a state of full-scale war. First, we see a discrepancy between the legislative assignment of the functions of protecting the state during the war to men and the attitudes of men regarding their readiness to serve in the armed forces and fulfill the role of “defender.” We see that patriotism is not necessarily associated with military service. For women, we see that some conservative public attitudes (e.g., on their roles in the family) are combined with egalitarian ones, specifically the recognition of women’s military roles.

This paper complements the work of other Ukrainian researchers who write about the complex nature of the impact of war on issues of gender (in)equality in Ukraine and challenge the conventional discourse in (Western) feminist and gender studies of war, which claim that wars fuel militaristic and nationalist sentiments, and inevitably lead to increased polarization of gender roles. This paper only partially describes the challenges of the war for gender (in)equality, the most important of which are changes at the structural level, which require additional time and data to track. These structural changes relate to the probable gender changes in the labor market and employment, the challenges of the war for the political representation of women, the deterioration of the position of women working in feminized sectors of the economy, the deepening of the feminization of poverty, as well as

the dramatic impact of the war on the composition and structure of the family, which also has implications for women.

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