

W O M E N W I T H O U T B O R D E R S

WOMEN'S MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION IN WAR AND POST-WAR UKRAINE

How can international stakeholders provide the necessary support?

*A POLICY PAPER BY Iryna Drobovych
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THE POLICY CONTEXT.

One year on since Russia invaded Ukraine and launched a full-on war against the global democratic order, Ukrainian women have demonstrated resilience and bravery in the face of conflict. Yet history also shows that the rights and freedom of women are systemically rolled back during and after war. Women must be guaranteed a place at the table, during and post-war, where national and local decisions are made to ensure equal opportunity and representation, and the groundwork and preconditions for this system need to be built now, while the war is still ongoing.



THE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS.

International governments and stakeholders must continue to condemn the Russian aggression in Ukraine. In view of women's extraordinary role in the war, they should also provide the necessary support to Ukrainian women's organisations, networks, and communities that contribute to the ongoing efforts in Ukraine. The key components of this support might include: 1) Providing opportunities for Ukrainian women to speak on international and foreign platforms; 2) Supporting exchange and peer-to-peer programmes for women's organisations, including access to educational programmes and grants for women entrepreneurs as part of support packages for Ukraine; 3) Supporting psychological and rehabilitation programmes for Ukrainian women affected by the war with special attention to women veterans; and 4) Contributing to the development of an international mechanism to arrange access to people in Russian captivity with special attention to women.

WOMEN LEADING FROM ALL SIDES

Since 24 February 2022, when Russia launched a large-scale war against Ukraine, the women of Ukraine have played a central role both on and off the battlefield and have demonstrated consistent and strategic leadership during the conflict. As a national platform, the Ukrainian Women's Congress has carefully documented and analysed the role of women during the war and summed up key recommendations for

foreign actors in building up partnerships with Ukrainian women leaders, women's organisations, and networks to support their efforts both in times of war and during the country's rebuilding.

From joining the military, to keeping the heartbeat of humanitarian efforts alive, to leading a country through uncertain times, women are everywhere and continue to step up in Ukraine. Almost 60,000 Ukrainian women serve in the Ukrainian Armed Forces today, and 5,000 of them perform combat tasks on the frontlines.¹ 70% of Ukrainian women have volunteered to provide support for their fellow citizens affected by war², and many have started and are still

running humanitarian hubs that provide humanitarian support and medical supplies both to internally displaced persons (IDPs) and to soldiers on the battlefields. 48% of the small businesses that were started during the war are led by women³, many of whom have

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relocated their existing small and medium enterprises (SME) from their war-torn hometowns to other, safer regions, resulting in more jobs and contributing to the economy in Ukraine. Since the beginning, Ukrainian women have also led communication and relationship-building efforts with international partners to advocate for support, including humanitarian aid, funding, international awareness, media campaigns, and the supply of weapons, all of which are critical.

¹ The data provided by the Minister of Defence of Ukraine *Mr. Oleksiy Reznikov* during the 6th Ukrainian Women's Congress (Kyiv, November 28, 2023).

² UN Women research (March-April 2022) - <https://hromadske.ua/posts/vijna-ne-virok-yak-zhinki-vidpovidayut-na-yiyi-vikliki>

³ The data provided by the Vice-Prime-Minister and Minister of Economy of Ukraine *Mrs. Yulia Svyrydenko* during the 6th Ukrainian Women's Congress (Kyiv, November 28, 2023).

THE IMPORTANCE OF A NATIONAL PLATFORM TO ENSURE GENDER EQUALITY IN TIMES OF WAR

Since 2017, the Ukrainian Women's Congress has provided a national platform and united high-level politicians and decision-makers, local leaders and gender experts, international partners, business leaders and media for discussions on how to promote and ensure gender equality in Ukraine. Over the years, these discussions have resulted in policy recommendations and have contributed to significant amendments to national law that, for example, have: introduced gender quotas for elections that have paved the way for women to become elected as national and local leaders; provided opportunities for Ukrainian women to obtain officer positions in the Armed Forces; opened the door for Ukrainian girls to be educated at the military academy; and struck down the Soviet-era law of so called 'prohibited professions', allowing women to build their careers in any sphere they want.

However, like any other global conflict, large-scale war can roll-back women's rights and gender policy to pre-war stereotypes, where men are perceived as the heroes and women as the victims of war. As history goes, there is a genuine risk that this too will happen in Ukraine, thus

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depreciating all the achievements that the women's movement in Ukraine has reached in national gender policy.

The Ukrainian Women's Congress highlighted the key challenges for women's rights during the war at regional and national events organised under constant blackouts and the threat of rocket attacks. The respective

discussions with national decision-makers, thought leaders, international partners, and media identified the gaps in gender policy that have been revealed during the war. The discussions contributed to finding solutions to maintain a gender-based approach and to ensure women's meaningful participation in times of war and in rebuilding the country.

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These events allowed for a multistakeholder approach to unite the efforts of different women's and human rights organisations in preparing and developing strategic policy recommendations. With this, a fruitful partnership was established between the Ukrainian Women's Congress and the Association of Women Layers 'YurFem' that contributed to recommendations on working with survivors of war crimes and supporting women suffering from domestic violence, particularly during war.

Another successful cooperation was forged between the Ukrainian Women's Congress and the Business Association of Rural Women that highlighted the challenges of double burdens that rural women face because of the war. Partnerships such as these are excellent opportunities for Ukrainian women's organisations to join efforts and to amplify the voices of Ukrainian women from the local to the national and international levels. In so doing, the Ukrainian Women's Congress ensures that these voices and lived experiences are heard by the Government and Members of the Parliament of Ukraine.

Throughout the war, the Ukrainian Women's Congress has also expanded its activity to international advocacy to inform international women's networks and platforms about the actual situation in Ukraine.



Such advocacy work is critical as it keeps foreign women's networks well-informed about the needs of Ukraine and provides them with the arguments for dialogue with their governments and decision-makers on delivering further support to Ukraine.



Via this channel, the Ukrainian Women's Congress communicates with networks all over the world, bringing awareness about the importance of supporting Ukraine and highlighting the extraordinary leadership of Ukrainian women. For example, the Ukrainian

Women's Congress has partnered with the Polish Women's Congress and with the Austrian-based NGO 'Women without Borders' to develop and disseminate international-level advocacy campaigns. Such advocacy work is critical as it keeps foreign women's networks well-informed about the needs of Ukraine and provides them with the arguments for dialogue with their governments and decision-makers on delivering further support to Ukraine.

EVIDENCE-BASED PROPOSALS FOR WOMEN'S MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION IN WAR AND POST-WAR UKRAINE

Facing the first anniversary of the war in Ukraine, the Ukrainian Women's Congress has analysed the role Ukrainian women have had during these challenging times and developed key strategic directions that should be considered to ensure women's rights and women's meaningful participation, during war and post-war.

First, women must be part of decision-making processes at the national, regional and local levels, and access to such opportunities must be made widely available and accessible. As stated by UN Women, when women participate in peaceful negotiations, the chances for sustainable peace increase by 35%.⁴ Women also ensure that a gender-based approach is implemented and considered in policies and decisions, both on the local and national levels.

During the war, Ukrainian women leaders have typically remained with their communities and provided them with the necessary support. 70% of Ukrainian women have volunteered for the needs of people affected by the war⁵, established humanitarian hubs for IDPs, and have become members of rescue teams delivering medical supplies to the frontlines. Moreover, 63% of Ukrainian women have demonstrated their willingness to defend their country⁶ with women comprising 20% of the Armed Forces of Ukraine; this is more than in NATO countries, with 12% of women on average. In light of the lived experiences and demonstrated leadership of Ukrainian women in time of war, it is imperative that Ukrainian women

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⁴ A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 - <https://wps.unwomen.org/participation/>

⁵ UN Women research (March-April 2022) - <https://hromadske.ua/posts/vijna-ne-virok-yak-zhinki-vidpovidayut-na-yiyi-vikliki>

⁶ Citizens' Assessment of the Situation in the Country, Trust to the Social Institutions, Political and Ideological Orientations of the Citizens of Ukraine in the Conditions of Russian Aggression (September-October 2022) - <https://razumkov.org.ua/napriamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/otsinka-gromadianamy-sytuatsii-v-kraini-dovira-do-sotsialnykh-institutiv-politykoideologichni-oriientsii-gromadian-ukrainy-v-umovakh-rosiiskoi-agresii-veresen-zhovten-2022r>

have a place at the table, where all post-war and rebuilding decisions will be made.

Second, women must be supported in their ongoing economic activities. The opportunities for small and medium enterprises (SME) run by women must continue to be supported during the war. At the 6th Ukrainian Women’s Congress held in November 2022, Vice-Prime-Minister and Minister of Economy of Ukraine Mrs. Yulia Svyrydenko stated that 48% of the small businesses that were created during the war are led by women, and more than 40% of entrepreneurs, who applied for micro-grants, are also women. Moreover, despite the reality of war,

“ Despite the reality of war, thousands of women have been educated and have learned new skills from the State Employment Center of Ukraine. ”

After Ukraine’s victory, these conditions for economic opportunities for women will contribute to a faster process of rebuilding and will increase the chances for those who fled Ukraine, to return home. Because as the polls show, the majority of Ukrainian refugees (87%) are women who are well-educated, entrepreneurs and/or qualified workers.⁷

Third, women veterans returning to civilian life must receive and have access to appropriate living conditions and psychological support. Before the war, there were more than 38,000 women veterans,⁸ and now

⁷ *Attitudes and Assessments of Ukrainian refugees, July-August 2022* – <https://razumkov.org.ua/napriamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/nastroi-ta-otsinky-ukrainskykh-bizhentsiv-lypen-serpen-2022p>

⁸ *The data provided by the Minister of Veterans of Ukraine Mrs. Yulia Laputina during the 6th Ukrainian Women’s Congress (Kyiv, November 28, 2023).*

almost 60,000 women are serving in the Ukrainian Armed Forces.⁹ The number of returning women veterans will be significant. The subsequent work with them will be done in a society severely affected by the war, both in terms of infrastructure conditions and psychological trauma. This all must be taken into account when setting up programmes for returning women veterans.

Lastly, but what touches on all areas, is the constant and systematic work required to combat gender stereotypes and prejudices that in times of war become more engrained in society: men as heroes and women as victims. This dangerous narrative devalues the role of women in all aspects of war and risks significant roll-back in national gender policy.

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS

A majority of Europeans consider Russia's attack on Ukraine as an attack on all of Europe (66%); agree that Ukrainians are fighting for our shared freedom and prosperity (62%); and have faith in a Ukrainian victory (61%).¹⁰ These poll results reflect the common efforts that Ukrainians, together with Europeans, should make to rebuild a country severely destroyed by an aggressor that knows no boundaries, and to ensure that sustainable, long-lasting peace will be guaranteed in the whole of Europe for generations ahead.

⁹ The data provided by the Minister of Defence of Ukraine Mr. Oleksiy Reznikov during the 6th Ukrainian Women's Congress (Kyiv, November 28, 2023).

¹⁰ *Anxious we stand?* by Isabell Hoffmann & Catherine E. de Vries - <https://eupinions.eu/de/text/anxious-we-stand>

With a view to supporting the Ukrainian women's movement that has and continues to contribute significantly to Ukraine's fight for freedom, the following recommendations for international governments, policymakers, and women's organisations might be useful:

1. **Provide opportunities for Ukrainian women to speak on international and foreign platforms.** This is an opportunity for them to tell the truth about the war in Ukraine, to inform audiences about the status and needs of women from different groups affected by the war, and to have action-oriented dialogue with communities in different countries about the nature of the war in Ukraine.
2. **Support and finance exchange and peer-to-peer programmes for women's organisations.** This would be a chance for Ukrainian women to become familiar with European best-practices in good governance and community building, in human rights and social work, in media and communications. At the same time, Ukrainian women could share their experiences of leadership and community work under enormous security challenges that could in turn contribute to European internal policies.
3. **Include educational and grant programmes for women entrepreneurs as part of support packages for Ukraine.** Small grants provided to women during the war would contribute to developing infrastructure, creating jobs, and supporting the overall Ukrainian economy. Furthermore, these programmes would prepare or requalify Ukrainian women in professions that would be prioritised for the needs of the country in times of post-war rebuilding.

4. **Support psychological and rehabilitation programmes for Ukrainian women affected by the war with special attention to women veterans.** The high level of trauma that is and will reverberate throughout Ukrainian society can also be found in dozens of other parts of the world that are also ridden with conflict. By developing and supporting such programmes for psychological support and rehabilitation, Ukraine could be a best-practice model.

5. **Contribute to developing an international mechanism to arrange access to people in Russian captivity with special attention to women.** This mechanism would be part of a new international legal system aimed to ensure justice and human rights for every person that has suffered from the war that Russia launched not only against Ukraine, but against the global democratic order.

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About the Author:

Since 2019, Iryna Drobovych is the Strategy Director at the Ukrainian Women's Congress (UWC) responsible for working out and implementing the organisation's long-term strategy and for building partnerships with national and international women's networks and platforms. Iryna is also active in public communications on leadership of Ukrainian women, including in time of war, and her articles have been published in key Ukrainian media outlets. Before joining the UWC, Iryna supported the national platform Kyiv Security Forum as Advisor on partnerships and events, and served in the Government of Ukraine as Assistant to the Prime Minister of Ukraine on international diplomacy and communications.

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Women without Borders (WwB) is an international nonprofit organisation headquartered in Vienna. Since 2001, WwB has been building capacity through women leadership and empowered dialogue efforts to address gender-based violence and violent extremism, the world over.