



Thematic Analysis: The use of Gender Perspective in the Conflict in Ukraine

1. Introduction

In March, 2022, the NCGM was tasked by its Steering Committee to examine gender-related lessons identified and lessons learned from the ongoing war in Ukraine. The NCGM Steering Committee articulated the need to analyse *how both parties to the conflict utilise concepts of gender to their advantage*. Since the beginning of the armed conflict, NCGM has monitored and gathered observations from the conflict in our role as an expert centre on Women, Peace and Security and Gender in Military Operations. This thematic analysis was written for the NCGM Steering Committee, and presented during the NCGM Steering Committee's Annual Conference in November 2022.

Therefore, this thematic analysis is by no means an exhaustive or comprehensive analysis and account of the conflict, but rather a prefatory thematic analysis which highlights a sample of observations on the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine from a gender perspective. It is intended as a starting point for discussions on the gendered strategies used, and consequences of, the war in Ukraine. The thematic analysis provides examples illustrating the relevance of gender perspective in the ongoing conflict, for the purposes of continuing to monitor the conflict with a gender perspective. Notably, the analysis relies on open source information, including research, briefs and reports already available to the public. The paper does not rely on, or convey, any previously undisclosed information. While the NCGM intends for the paper to increase awareness on the use of gender perspective in Ukraine and beyond, this paper does not advocate for any particular situation-specific courses of action.

The paper starts with a background on gender inequalities in Ukraine and Russia before the outbreak of war, followed by an overview of gendered consequences of the war. Finally, it addresses the question posed by the Steering Committee on strategic use of concepts of gender.

2. Background

2.1 Political and Legal Context

Ukraine has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and has a National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) from 2016¹. Hence, it is an example of a country both adopting, conducting training on, and

¹ During a recent inter-ministerial conference on sexual violence in conflict, Ukraine announced intention to update its NAP to reflect the new realities of war.



monitoring a National Action Plan during an ongoing conflict (Manolienko, 2022). Further, the Ukrainian constitution grants equal rights to women and men (in article 24). However, traditional gender roles are prevalent. In 2022, the country ranked 62 out of 146 on the global gender gap index, scoring high on educational attainment but low on labour force participation and gender equal political participation (World Economic Forum, 2022). Labour force participation among men and women differs, and in 2019 61 percent women and 73 percent men were employed in the formal sector (the World Bank, 2019). The Ukrainian Labour Code prohibits discrimination based on sex (in article 22), yet some provisions are in themselves discriminatory (for example, article 175 prohibits the hiring of women for work at night, except in the case of an emergency and as a temporary measure). Women, and Roma women in particular, are overrepresented among the poorest groups in society. Among European states, Ukraine is the main country of origin for trafficking in human beings. Internally displaced women are overrepresented among victims of trafficking, and mainly trafficked for sexual exploitation and while men are mostly trafficked for forced labour. The ongoing conflict has exacerbated these issues (Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020; Olsson et al, 2021: 56-70).

Moreover, Ukraine has high rates of gender based and domestic violence, where women are disproportionately affected. Annually, 1500 women in Ukraine are killed by a family member, and 3 million children witness domestic violence (Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020; Olsson et al, 2021: 56-70). An estimated 1,9 million Ukrainian women are subjected to domestic violence in Ukraine each year (Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017: 14). Ukraine also has high rates of both suicide and alcohol and drug abuse among men (Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020; Olsson et al, 2021: 56-70).

However, Ukraine has been making progress in women's political participation. After the parliamentary elections in 2019, 21 percent of parliamentarians were women. A small percentage relative to the number of men in parliament, yet a significant increase from 12 percent after the previous election. Still, 24 out of 25 Ukrainian governors were men (Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). In general, Ukrainian women participate in politics through civil society organisations to a larger extent than through representational political channels. Both women and men participated in the Maidan protest movement. (Olsson et al, 2021).

The Russian Federation, like Ukraine, has ratified CEDAW but does not have a WPS NAP. There is constitutional support for gender equality, but patriarchal attitudes remain strong. Labour laws remaining from the Soviet era, like in Ukraine, still prohibit women from having certain professions (Moscow Times, 2019). The country has fallen in the global gender gap index, moving from place 75 to place 81 in three years. While the gender gap in employment is low, the gender pay gap is 28 percent. This is a large gap for a high-income country. Single mothers are overrepresented among the poorest in the country (Atencio & Posadas, 2014; Piskaklova-Parker, 2022:3). The gender care-gap in Russia is large, with women



spending approximately 17,9 percent of their time on care and domestic work, while the average for men is 8,1 percent. The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the existing care-gap (Piskaklova-Parker, 2022:5).

Women's political representation in Russia is low, with only 15,8 percent of parliament seats held by women in 2021. Overrepresentation of men is particularly high in local governments (UN Women²). With a restricted civil society, political participation through extra-representational channels is limited and women's organisations have limited political space. Between 2019 and 2022, several laws were passed to close down independent news organisations and prohibit sharing information considered "fake news" regarding the Russian Armed Forces (Ferrari, 2019). So-called "foreign agent" legislation also makes it more difficult for civil society organisations, including women's organisations, to operate (Piskaklova-Parker, 2022:11).

Rates of domestic violence in Russia are high and reported to be on the rise - especially since it was decriminalised in 2017. During the pandemic, calls to national domestic violence helplines increased by 74 percent (Piskaklova-Parker 2022: 5-9; UN Women²). The gender norms are traditional, and a survey conducted in 2019 showed that the most important quality in women according to the average Russian man is being a good homemaker, followed by attractiveness. Women, especially older women, shared the same attitudes. Both men and women ranked intelligence as most important for men (Levinson, 2019). In the same 2019 survey, 71 percent of Russians agreed that the main purpose of a woman is to be a good mother and homemaker, while 89 percent consider that men are responsible for providing for their families (Piskaklova-Parker, 2022:4).

2.2 The Conflict

Ukraine already had a large number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) because of the conflict in eastern Ukraine dating back to 2014. Before February 2022, an estimated 1.5 million Ukrainians were internally displaced (60 percent women, 40 percent men) (UN Women & Care International, 2022). Since the Russian invasion in 2022, it is estimated that one third of the Ukrainian population (amounting to around 15 million persons) has been displaced, of which approximately 7 million are internally displaced (OHCHR¹).

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, both women and men have participated in the Ukrainian conflict response and resistance. They serve in the armed forces, organise protests, participate in diplomacy and act as frontline health care workers and humanitarians. In general, men have tended to volunteer more in the security and defence sector, while women volunteer more in assistance to vulnerable populations and humanitarian work (UN Women & Care International). In severely affected areas, women's grassroots organisations have played an important role in distributing humanitarian aid, hygiene products and emergency birth control (Manoilenko, 2022). In addition, 80 percent of health care workers in Ukraine are women, while the Ukrainian Armed Forces consists mainly of men (International Peace Institute, 2022). However, women also serve in combat



roles. Discriminatory laws prohibiting women's participation have been revised to enable increased participation in the armed resistance, largely due to advocacy projects such as the Invisible Battalion (Nordaas et al, 2022; Manoilenko, 2022). In 2020, approximately 31 000 women served in the Ukrainian Armed Forces (16 percent), out of which 12 were Company Commanders and 109 were Commanders of Platoons (Melander, 2022). Ukrainian sources claim that in 2022, women made up approximately 22 percent of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, which is a higher percentage than most NATO countries' military forces (Hendrix & Korolchuk, 2022; Manoilenko, 2022). In addition, the Ukrainian Armed Forces have Gender Advisors.

In Russia, feminist organisations play a key role in the country's anti-war movement, but face great risks of reprisals and arrest (Amnesty International², 2022; Human Rights Watch³, 2022. Ferrari, 2022). One of the fastest growing anti-war campaigns is the Feminist Anti-War resistance (FAR). Protesters from the movement have been met with reprisals, detentions, arrests and violence from the security sector (Moscow times, 2022; Piskaklova-Parker, 2022: 10). In addition, Russian soldiers' mothers cooperating with the Feminist Anti-war Resistance (FAR) have played a prominent role in opposing the war, for example by launching a petition against the war on Mothers' day, participating in protests and posting videos with critique against the war and the government (Meyer & Hayes, 2022; Lukiv, 2022; Nyström, 2022). In international media, the soldiers' mothers are portrayed as playing a central role in the resistance

According to the United Nations civilian casualties update, a total of 6,595 persons (2,575 men, 1,767 women, 172 girls, and 206 boys, as well as 37 children and 1,838 adults whose sex is yet unknown) have been killed in Ukraine between the 24th of February and the 20th of November (OHCHR²).

Since February 2022, the Russian Armed Forces have been reported to use targeted violence against civilians and civilian infrastructure, shelling of civilian targets and deliberately targeting residential areas (OHCHR³, 2022:3). In addition, they have hindered humanitarian access, blocking evacuation routes and food deliveries. There are allegations of forced recruitment of Ukrainians in Russian-controlled territories, and ill-treatment of prisoners of war. Extrajudicial executions, arbitrary detentions, conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) and use of illegal weapons, including cluster munitions and white phosphor bombs, have been reported (International Peace Institute; OHCHR³). In Russian-controlled territories, lack of access to communication channels and a shrinking civic space prevents residents from reporting human rights violations (OHCHR³, 2022:3). In addition, enforced disappearances and abductions of journalists, activists and politicians have been reported. Between February and July 2022, OHCHR documented 407 cases of enforced disappearances (359 men, 47 women, 1 boy). Among the victims, 17 men and 1 woman were subsequently killed (OHCHR³).

In a report by Amnesty International, the Ukrainian Armed Forces were also accused of committing war crimes, mainly by using civilian buildings, such as schools and hospitals



near populated areas, for military purposes. Thereby, the buildings are made targets of attacks, endangering the civilian population (Amnesty International¹: 2022). Notably, the report has been criticised by various actors and raised controversy. It is both being cited as an important source of information on war crimes and critiqued for being flawed and enabling Russian propaganda (Posner, 2022).

Furthermore, according to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ukrainian law enforcement bodies have been accused of ill-treatment of prisoners of war, arbitrary arrests, and detentions of persons suspected of assisting the Russian Armed Forces. According to the OHCHR, 47 cases of arbitrary arrests and 31 cases of enforced disappearances (28 men, 3 women) attributed to the Ukrainian Armed Forces were reported between February and July 2022. Ukrainian killings of civilian “traitors” may constitute extrajudicial executions. Additionally, there are two verified cases of CRSV attributed to the Ukrainian Armed Forces (OHCHR³).

2.3 Gendered consequences on the security environment

While the lack of comprehensive sex-and age- disaggregated data (SADD) does not allow for a full analysis of the gendered consequences of war, some broader trends in the security environment are evident.

First, **conflict affects gender roles and relations in Ukraine**. The war has increased levels of unemployment for men and women. More men join the Ukrainian Armed Forces, which leads women to assume new roles to ensure their families’ survival. In turn, this leads to an increase in paid and unpaid work for women. There is also an increase in unpaid care work for men who have lost their jobs because of higher unemployment rates. Men often face social expectations to contribute to family income, and thus face added social pressure when losing their job. Increasing poverty due to lack of income likely increases the amount of workers in the informal sector, but also disproportionately affects groups who were already marginalised on the labour market, such as the Roma population, and Roma women in particular. With education being held online and/or schools being closed, the burden on women to engage in home-schooling increases, as does the lack of access to education for girls and boys - with Roma girls being at particular risk (UN Women & Care International).

In addition, **conflict exacerbates existing inequalities**. Female-headed households, IDPs, Roma people, LGBTQ persons, the elderly and people with disabilities are more severely affected by the consequences of the war because of pre-existing inequalities. Persons with disabilities and older persons with limited mobility lack access to shelter and evacuation. LGBTQ persons face discrimination when looking for housing and shelter. Groups who were previously exposed to more violence in the public space, such as LGBTQ persons, face increased risks when more small arms are in circulation and streetlights are not functioning. Trans-women are prohibited from crossing the borders if the gender in their passports does not correspond to their identified gender (Cohen, 2022; Moaveni & Nagarajan, 2022). Same-sex couples fleeing the country face discrimination when they are not recognised as



families or couples at the border or in neighbouring countries (Council of Europe, 2022). Roma people tend to lack documentation, preventing them from leaving the country (UN Women & Care International; OHCHR³). People in rural areas, particularly rural women, face increased security risks as they are forced to travel into big cities in search of electricity, water and fuel. Older women without families are particularly vulnerable to economic hardship (OHCHR³).

Furthermore, **the energy supply crisis** in Ukraine, and more widely in Europe, has been labelled as a Russian war strategy that affects men, women, girls and boys differently. In turn, this is connected to the broader issue of the gender pay and care gaps. Women are at greater risk of energy poverty than men, particularly women with low incomes and female headed households (who often count on a single income). People with lower incomes, a group where women are overrepresented, more often live in houses with poor insulation (European Parliament, 2017: 7-28).

Men between 18 and 60, regardless of whether they have a civilian or military background, are bound by martial law and **not permitted to leave Ukraine**. While all countries have a right to conscript their citizens in wartime, civilian men who are not yet part of the military forces and not military trained find themselves restricted in their freedom of movement, often estranged from their families. Ukrainian men who have not yet been conscripted and remain unemployed face increased vulnerability as they lack access to both financial resources and social networks. With women and children being prioritised in shelters, men's access to shelter is more limited. There are also reports of men being shamed if they do not want to fight. Moreover, reports claim that in some instances, men are expected to fight without proper training (Carpenter 2022; International Peace Institute, Skare Orgeret & Mutsvairo, 2022; Moaveni & Nagarajan).

Similarly, since the Russian government's decision on "partial mobilisation" on the 21st of September 2022, many international media channels have reported on **Russian men awaiting, or fleeing from, conscription**. Reports have indicated long queues at the Russian borders out of fear that, like in Ukraine, they may soon be closed for men (Al Jazeera, 2022; Otte, 2022; the Economist, 2022). In addition, international media sources have also reported that Russian mobilisation efforts disproportionately target men from minority groups and in rural areas. In addition, anti-war protesters are claimed to be arrested and subsequently drafted (Sveriges Radio). Women may be conscripted too, particularly women working in fields such as cartography and medicine, but men are the primary subjects. Women are allowed to be exempted from mobilisation if they have children under 16 years of age. There are no similar exceptions for men. Further, the status of conscription for transgender people is unknown, as they have previously been deemed "unfit" to serve in the Russian Armed Forces (Meduza, 2022). European countries are currently considering whether the refusal to serve in the Russian Armed Forces, in the context of ongoing war crime allegations, amounts to political persecution for the purpose of granting asylum/refugee status (Dannenbaum, 2022).



At time of writing, **the war in Ukraine has displaced over one third of the Ukrainian population.** Figures from October 2022 indicate that at least 7 million Ukrainian **refugees** have been recorded across Europe (UNHCR). Although over 10 million border crossings have been reported, as many as 3 million refugees have returned to Ukraine (Hickson, 2022). It is clear that the number of refugees who are women, girls and boys is larger than the number of male refugees. An estimation by the International Organization for Migration is that 90 percent of Ukrainians who flee the country are women. This is because most men are required to stay in the country under martial law (UN Women & Care International).

Over 7 million Ukrainians are internally displaced. Among the internally displaced, the percentage of men is higher compared to the amount of male cross-border refugees. It is estimated that 60 percent of internally displaced persons are women, while 40 percent are men (UN Women & Care International). However, some men may refrain from reporting as IDP's out of fear of being conscripted (OHCHR³, 2022:2). Displaced Ukrainians, where the majority are women, girls and boys, face security threats such as lack of access to safe shelter.

In addition, the **lack of access to health care**, including menstrual health needs, lack of access to sexual and reproductive health (such as maternal health and child health) negatively affects displaced women and girls in particular. In addition, refugee women fleeing to Poland struggle to access safe abortions. Groups of men, on the other hand, are disproportionately affected by lack of medication in Ukraine. For example, more men in Ukraine are HIV patients (52 percent men) and in need of treatment for drug abuse (80 percent men), but access to medical treatment is severely impacted by the war, particularly in Russian-occupied territory (UN Women & Care International). The current lack of access to health care also disproportionately affects LGBTQ persons, for example, trans-persons who are not able to access hormone therapy (Council of Europe¹).

Moreover, **the risk of human trafficking** for displaced persons, both IDP's and cross-border refugees, increases. Women, particularly young women and girls, are at a higher risk of being targeted. They also constitute the majority of refugees. The risk of trafficking is imminent both in direct relation to displacement and in a long-term perspective, when personal resources such as social networks and economic resources become more scarce (UNSC²; OHCHR¹).

The **reporting of domestic violence** has decreased since the invasion in February 2022, but it is unlikely that actual cases have decreased. In contrast, there was a surge in reported cases of domestic violence in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions after the start of the conflict in 2014 (Amnesty International², RFE/RL). The decrease in reports during 2022 is believed to be a consequence of a decrease in functioning reporting mechanisms and access to services and shelter due to the war rather than an actual decrease in cases (Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 2022). The Ukrainian parliament has taken important steps in



adopting necessary national legislation on domestic violence in the last couple of years² and ratifying the Istanbul Convention on the 18th of July 2022 (Human Rights Watch²; Council of Europe). Increased stress, trauma and displacement, less street lights and more small arms in circulation due to the war are all factors which have likely increased the risk of gender-based violence against women in the public and private spheres (UN Women & Care International; Carpenter; Perotta Berlin & Campa, 2022).

Finally, there are reported differences in **the access to humanitarian assistance** for the population in Ukraine. For example, older women and men tend to find it physically difficult to access humanitarian aid. Roma women, in particular, have reported discrimination when trying to access humanitarian aid, and lack of information regarding when and how aid is distributed (UN Women & Care International, 2022: 21).

3. Scope and Limitations

Against the background outlined in the above section, it is clear that there are gender specific consequences of the war in Ukraine. However, not all gendered consequences are the results of intentionally gendered strategies. Therefore, the remaining part of the analysis will focus on the trends in how parties to the conflict in Ukraine utilise gender perspective to their advantage. The analysis in the following section gives examples of how the Russian and Ukrainian parties utilise gender perspective during the conflict, aiming to respond to the question:

What trends can be seen in how parties to the conflict in Ukraine utilise concepts of gender to their advantage?

The analysis was mainly conducted during October 2022, with minor updates in November and December 2022 and early January 2023. It is based on open source data, such as international media sources, and reports from international organisations and academics. Only English and Swedish language sources have been used, which has limited the possibility to get a full view of the conflict parties' strategies, particularly regarding disinformation strategies. The general lack of information from Russian-controlled areas further complicates the analysis.

When discussing disinformation, the analysis refers to “knowingly manipulated information with a political agenda” (Geisow, 2022). Disinformation is spread with the purpose to mislead, in contrast to misinformation, which is false information without malicious intent.³

² Including the landmark 2018 Law on Prevention and Combating Domestic Violence

³ Definitions according to Oxford English Dictionary:

Misinformation: the act of giving wrong information about something; the wrong information that is given

Disinformation: false information that is given deliberately, especially by government organisations



4. Trends

4.1. Conflict related sexual violence (CRSV)

Before the Russian invasion in February 2022, CRSV was reported to occur both in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. It was believed to be opportunistic, rather than strategic (Olsson et al, 2021). After the invasion in 2022, more and more reports indicate that sexual violence is used strategically in the conflict. Sexual violence is committed in private homes and in public spaces, reportedly common at checkpoints and detention facilities, and used as a form of torture (Myroniuk, 2022; OHCHR³). Information about sexual violence committed by Russian forces is widespread among Ukrainians. According to a survey conducted in April 2022, 93 percent of Ukrainians know of CRSV committed by Russian forces, and 20 percent personally know someone who has been subjected to sexual violence committed by Russian troops since February 2022 (Nordaas et al, 2022).

According to reports by the OHCHR, the Russian Armed forces are the main perpetrators of CRSV. However, there are also cases where the Ukrainian Armed Forces and territorial defence groups have been perpetrators. There are recurring allegations of Russian soldiers using sexual violence, mainly against women and girls, but also against men and boys (Graham-Harrison, 2022). Before 2022, the reports of sexual violence from detention camps concerned both women and men, while women were more often subjected to sexual violence in public spaces, for example at checkpoints (Olsson et al 2021). Since the escalation of the conflict, there is no doubt that sexual violence is used by the Russian Armed Forces with the purpose of humiliation and intimidation (OHCHR; UNSC3; UN Women; McKernan, 2022). Ukrainian media reports that Russian soldiers threaten civilians to “keep their girls at home” to avoid rape (Myroniuk, 2022).

Women and girls tend to be subjected to CRSV in populated areas in Russian controlled territories close to military positions, while men and boys are typically subjected to CRSV as a form of torture during detention (OHCHR³, 2022: 2). Cases of CRSV as torture have been reported since 2014, and include sexual harassment and humiliation, forced nudity for both women and men, sexual slavery and enforced prostitution for women and castration of men (Chatham house, 2020). In 2022, female prisoners of war have reported being forced to undress, squat, and shave their heads. According to the OHCHR, 33 out of 38 civilians (34 men, 4 women) who had been detained by the Russian Armed Forces between February and July 2022 reported being subjected to torture and ill-treatment.

According to the OHCHR, there were 43 UN verified cases of CRSV between February and July 2022, however, verification of cases remains difficult. Out of the 43 UN verified cases mentioned, 30 were committed by the Russian Armed Forces, two by Ukrainian Armed Forces and 11 by civilians or territorial defence groups (OHCHR³:2022:15). Regarding the 43 UN verified cases, the OHCHR report specifies:



“9 cases of rape (against 8 women and 1 girl), 15 cases of sexual violence used as a method of torture or ill-treatment against men, and 11 cases of forced public stripping against both men and women considered to be ‘lawbreakers’.[.....] 8 cases of other forms of sexual violence (against 5 women, 1 man, 2 girls), such as forced nudity, unwanted sexual touching, sexual abuse and threats of sexual violence.” (OHCHR³, 2022: 15)

Moreover, reports include coercion, assaults at gunpoint, rape, gang rape and family members being forced to watch their partners, parents or children being subjected to sexual violence (McKernan, UNSC¹, OHCHR³). In addition to the verified cases, the OHCHR monitoring team had collected observations on 124 alleged acts of CRSV across Ukraine in June 2022 (UNSC¹). At the time of writing, figures on UN verified cases are yet to be released for the second half of 2022, but the Ukrainian prosecutor’s office reported opening a total of 154 cases of CRSV during 2022 (Gall, 2023).

Furthermore, civilians in Russian controlled territories are subjected to so-called “filtration procedures”. There are reports that in addition to detailed interrogations about political affiliations, personal and family background, the filtration procedures involve forced nudity and body searches. There are concerns that filtration procedures also include sexual abuse, particularly of women and girls (OHCHR¹; OHCHR³)

In general, cases of CRSV are under-reported (UN¹; UN Women; IPI, OHCHR³). Because of greater stigma, cases of CRSV against men are likely reported to an even lesser extent (Graham-Harrison). In addition, the Ukrainian prosecutor’s office reports that the number of prosecuted cases is low because the system requires direct access to witnesses or, alternatively, evidence of the crimes if prosecution is to be possible (TSN, 2022). The amount of individuals, mainly women but also men, calling hotlines with allegations of CRSV have increased since February 24th, but the possibilities to receive treatment and assistance are insufficient (International Peace Institute). Additionally, the conflict has reduced access to service and reporting mechanisms for victims of CRSV (OHCHR³, 2022:16).

After the invasion in February 2022, statements on CRSV being used as a weapon of war have been made in the European Parliament, with the FEMM committee chair Robert Biedroń stating that “Mass rapes, sexual and gender-based violence, torture and genocide are being used as a weapon of war” (EU Parliament press). Likewise, Sima Bahous, Executive Director of UN Women, referred to allegations of sexual violence committed by the Russian Armed Forces after February 2022 in her address to the UN Security Council, stating that it raises “all the red flags” (UNSC⁴). An investigative article in the New York Times states that there are similar patterns of CRSV in Russian Occupied territories and that there are indications of commanders either ordering or condoning sexual violence (Gall, 2023). In May 2022, a Framework for Cooperation was signed between the government of Ukraine and UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, with a view to support national prevention, protection and response programmes, as well as to strengthen rule of law and accountability for sexual violence



crimes. While analyses differ, this indicates that the international community is increasingly considering the occurrence of CSRV in Ukraine to be systematic.

4.2. Russian Strategic Communication

Since the start of the conflict in eastern Ukraine in 2014, rumours and propaganda have been prevalent in news, media and social media, particularly in eastern and southern Ukraine, which can be reached by disinformation from Russian media. Olsson et al. (2021) state that: “Such disinformation campaigns have played on men’s responsibilities for their families and on women’s roles in society as well as targeting the norm of gender equality” (2021:61)

Further, Olsson et al. conclude that threats targeting male fighters and their families, and smear campaigns against female politicians, are common. This includes sending messages to male soldiers targeting their families and orchestrating smear campaigns online that target individual female politicians. Targeting women and LGBTQ activists in particular, and the gender concept in general, is believed to be a strategy utilising gender perspective and undermining democratic movements. In general, Russian disinformation in eastern Ukraine tends to portray women as either vulnerable victims in need of protection or aggressors going against traditional gender norms.

In addition, **the trend of referring to “gender ideology”** as a threat to the traditional family structure, connecting it with hate campaigns against the LGBTQ community and labelling it as “anti-life”, is prevalent in the Russian propaganda (Moss, 2017). The focus on traditional gender norms is often connected to campaigns against immigrants and exacerbated by white extremist and far-right groups (Olsson et al; Moss; Fleser, 2022). “Gender ideology”, a term that increasingly appears in Russian media, academia and political spheres since 2010, is quickly spreading as a backlash to gender equality across Europe. “Gender ideology” is portrayed as: “A covert political strategy, a sort of conspiracy aimed at seizing power and imposing deviant and minority values to average people.” (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017:6)

Furthermore, Europe is sometimes referred to as “Gayropa” and democracy portrayed as “Homocracy”, building on homophobia to emphasize the threat of “gender ideology” and signify European values with moral decay and cultural imperialism (Bias, 2022: 42-43). In his speech following the annexation of occupied territories in Ukraine on the 30th of September, President Putin referred to western gender values as “dictatorship of the western elites” and “outright Satanism”⁴ (Laurén, 2022).

⁴ “do we want to have, here, in our country, in Russia, parent number one, number two, number three instead of mom and dad – have they gone made out there? Do we really want perversions that lead to degradation and extinction to be imposed on children in our schools from the primary grades? To be drummed into them that there are various supposed genders besides women and men, and to be offered a sex change operation? Do we want all this for our country and our children? For us, all this is unacceptable, we have a different future, our own future. I repeat, the



Framing gender equality as a threat to culture and traditional values is utilised by Russia to frame not only NATO and the EU as political and military threats, but a democratic world order in itself as a threat to Russian interests (Fleser). Men, women, boys and girls are targeted by Russian disinformation. However, women and minority groups tend to be used as content in targeting misinformation, while the targeting is directed towards people who are already questioning these groups - mainly men. The purpose is to polarise societies (Horgensen-Gjorv, 2022). For example, Russian disinformation campaigns send out the message that entry into NATO will entail the loss of traditional values and forced acceptance of “western gender norms” and the “decay of western civilization” (Moaveni & Nagarajan; US Department of State, Kuhar & Paternotte).

Furthermore, the Russian disinformation campaigns and promotion of “true” European values is seen **as a strategy used to de-stabilise the EU**, where Europe is portrayed as a continent “in chaos and decline”, and “gender ideology” increasingly appears in connection with Europe and is allowed to symbolise “a stand-in for Western geopolitical strategy” (Moss, 2017: 203). Russian traditional values are presented as an alternative to the decaying morals of the west (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017: 8). In contrast to NATO and the EU, Russia is portrayed as “a bulwark against wokeism and political correctness” (Edenborg, 2022). Unlike most states experiencing a state-influenced wave of resistance to gender equality, the universities in Russia are not resisting the Russian state narrative of “gender ideology”, but rather supporting and promoting it (Moss, 2017).

As stated by Fleser (2022) in an issue brief for the Atlantic Council (a US think-tank): “The Kremlin has intentionally targeted and exploited societal gender fault lines through hybrid warfare as a reliable tactic for destabilizing cohesion and unity among populations throughout Europe”

Anti-gender rhetoric has increased throughout the 2010’s, but is strategically used to gain advantages and cause tensions in connection with the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The defence of Russian “values” and “traditions” has been a recurring rhetoric to justify the invasions in both 2014 and 2022 (Fleser). It is estimated that the Kremlin budget allocated to disinformation campaigns in 2021 was 1,5 billion USD (Geisow, 2022).

4.3. Ukrainian Strategic Communication

In an article in Foreign Affairs, International Crisis Group’s Olga Oliker states that “If there is a feminist way to wage war, Ukraine wants everyone to know that this is how it is fighting its battle against Russia”. The Ukrainian side has, like the Russian Federation, **emphasized gender in external communication**, but in the opposite sense. Reportedly, Ukraine has

dictatorship of the Western elites is directed against all societies, including the peoples of the Western countries themselves. This is a challenge for everyone. Such a complete denial of man, the overthrow of faith and traditional



utilised gender strategically by, possibly, inflating the number of women fighting on their side, placing focus on allegations of CRSV, and emphasizing bombings of maternity wards and mothers as victims in media narratives (Oliker, 2022; NPR News, 2022). Oliker further states that “Prominent Ukrainian feminists have travelled to Washington, D.C., to lobby for weapons”, indicating that emphasizing women’s participation seems to be a strategy to gain support from western actors (Oliker, 2022).

It is clear that **narratives of CRSV** committed by Russian soldiers have been prevalent among Ukrainian politicians and activists to attract attention from international media and other nations. However, in May 2022, this sparked scandal when the Ukrainian Parliament (Verkhovna Rada) commissioner for human rights was fired after a no-confidence motion. She was accused of publishing detailed reports of CRSV on social media to gain support from the outside world. Accusations mainly referred to the parliamentarian’s use of excessively detailed accounts of rape of children to stir up emotions, which was considered unethical. She was further accused of using examples of cases that had not been verified (Staten, 2022; Roscoe, 2022). President Zelenskyj’s Administration called the parliamentarian’s actions “an attempt to switch attention from real achievements and problems to some kind of conspiracy theories” (The New Voice of Ukraine, 2022).

Moreover, the Ukrainian side has **used gender relations strategically** to gain direct military advantages by tasking women to reach out to Russian men on online dating apps. The strategic use of online dating apps from the Ukrainian side, not only to locate Russian troops and gather intelligence, but also to spread counter-narratives about the invasion, is one example of this strategy (Pereira, 2022). Using the role of mothers, Ukrainians have resorted to making phone calls to mothers of Russian soldiers, asking them to come to Ukraine and pick up their sons. Another example is a popular Ukrainian YouTube channel⁵ which broadcasts calls between Russian soldiers and their mothers. The videos mainly feature soldiers who claim they were tricked into going to war. In addition, the Ministry of Interior of Ukraine has established a hotline where Russian families can call to try to locate lost soldiers. There is also a Ukrainian Telegram channel, “Find your Missing”, dedicated to the same purpose (Aagård, 2022; Shukla, Marquardt & Streib, 2022). The channels mainly target mothers and relations between mothers and sons.

4.4. Gendered mobilisation narratives

In Ukrainian mobilisation efforts following the outbreak of conflict in 2014, women were rejected when applying for participation in the armed resistance based on assumptions about their gender. This resulted in the creation of separate “Women Squads” and women’s participation through other means, such as conflict mediation and civil society. The

⁵ Zolkin, Volodymyr. YouTube Channel. <https://www.youtube.com/@zolkinvolodymyr9639>



Ukrainian Armed Forces' mobilisation only targeted men, and before 2016 women were banned from combat roles. Discrimination against women in the Ukrainian Armed Forces has been prevalent (Olsson et al, 2021). Since 2016, when women were allowed to join the army, around 30 000 women are part of the Ukrainian Armed Forces and have had to fight for equal rights within the organisation (Verwimp, 2022; Invisible Battalion). This background is connected to the current Ukrainian narrative regarding mobilisation and defence.

Since the invasion in 2022, the Ukrainian narrative of masculine protectors and brave Ukrainian female warriors is used to mobilise support and repel the enemy. Protecting the family and community is associated with being “a good man”, and men who do not want to fight are often mocked and shamed for it (Skare Orgeret & Mutsvairo; Moaveni & Nagarajan). In contrast to the context before 2022, women are now encouraged to take part in the armed response, and media coverage of women making Molotov cocktails, confronting Russian soldiers, and bearing arms are spread in Ukrainian and international media and by Ukrainians in social media channels (BBC News¹ BBC News²; Skare Orgeret & Mutsvairo; Moaveni & Nagarajan; Tu). Simultaneously, messaging to the outside world has contained pictures of women and children as victims, playing on stereotypes where “women do the caring and men do the protecting”. In cases where women are also portrayed as fighters, it connects to stereotypes of “the vengeful mother protecting the nation” (Ellner, 2022).

The Russian mobilisation narrative uses a patriotic and nationalistic rhetoric, appealing to far-right groups and increasing the focus on military activities and pride, while at the same time referring to Russian history of confronting Nazism and fascism. There is a clear connection to a masculine ideal, connecting to war heroes of the past. A video circulating on Telegram ridicules Russian men who flee conscription. The video shows two women who state that “the boys have left but the men have stayed” (Van Bruger, 2022). Also, president Putin is portrayed as an undisputed leader, playing on traditional masculine norms (Melander, 2022). The same trends as in external disinformation campaigns can be seen internally, where civil society, activists and international actors are portrayed as threats to Russian traditions and culture, with reference to the need to defend Russia against non-traditional values (such as gender equality norms) (International Crisis Group²). There is also a growing emphasis on patriotic education in schools (International Crisis Group), which are simultaneously forbidden to educate on LGBTQ rights⁶ (Human Rights Watch¹).

Furthermore, to counter the resistance of Russian Soldiers' mothers, the Russian Federation has also started using **a narrative that puts mothers at the centre**. Leading up to the Russian Mothers' Day in 2022, president Putin called a meeting with selected soldiers' mothers at the Kremlin and addressed their loss directly, stating that their pain is shared by the Russian government. The meeting was televised. (Moscow Times², 2022; Nechepurenko, 2022). In international media, the meeting is referred to as a clear example of staged

⁶ Federal Law No. 135-FZ of June 29, 2013, which bans the distribution of information about LGBT people's lives to “minors” (people under age 18).



propaganda, and that the claimed mothers were actually government officials (Roth & Sauer, 2022; Vitkine, 2022; Nechepurenko, 2022; Switzerland Times, 2022).

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, it is clear that both parties to the conflict use gender perspective to their advantage, mainly through strategic communication. Ukraine uses traditional gender roles as motivators for mobilisation. They emphasize women's participation in the conflict response, as well as the commission of CRSV by the opposing side in their external communication. The Russian Federation utilises gender by framing "gender ideology" as a threat to traditional values and ways of living. Moreover, Russian disinformation campaigns use gender perspective to create tensions with occupied territories, but also outside Ukraine and Russia.

Further, CRSV and threats of CRSV are used in the war in Ukraine, where women and girls are disproportionately affected, although men and boys are also targeted. From being used opportunistically at checkpoints and in detention centres in the early years of occupation in eastern Ukraine, it seems that the invasion in February 2022 has resulted in an increased occurrence of sexual violence committed by both parties to the conflict, but mainly by Russian troops in occupied territories. While the extent of the issue is likely underreported, the different contexts and situations in which men and women are targeted indicate that gender perspective is needed to understand the implications of the occurrence of CRSV. In an ongoing conflict with difficulties to report on the occurrence of CRSV, it is still difficult to get a full picture of its scale. Hence, continuously monitoring the situation is necessary.

The conflict in Ukraine is an example of how gender dynamics play out and how gender is used strategically in a current conflict in a European territory. This thematic analysis provides a non-exhaustive prefatory for a gender analysis on the behaviours of the parties to the conflict in Ukraine, as of December 2022. It is, however, important to continuously evaluate and update all gender analyses regarding the conflict and maintain a focus on gender perspective throughout all phases of the conflict. It is evident that that gender analysis remains an integral part of the conflict response as well as in a future peace process. Moreover, hostile strategic communication framing "gender ideology" as a threat and appealing to far-right groups, mainly in Europe, is arguably an issue of increasing relevance to European security.



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