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## The Essential Role of Women in European Security

Women are central to Ukrainian recovery and, therefore, to European security. This seemingly obvious point is, regrettably, better understood by conservative and right-wing politicians who wish to reverse gender-equity policies of the last decades (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022) than by progressive forces committed to building sustainable peace and security in a united Europe. True – putting women “back in their place” is easily achieved even by doing nothing, whereas advancing women’s positions, especially in Europe’s embattled periphery, would require a significant reorientation of economic and military investments. Yet the long-term costs of doing nothing, or even of treating the war in Ukraine like yet another opportunity for nominal liberal peace with women’s rights as political ornaments, are much too high at this juncture. If the European project is to thrive, not merely survive, then the livelihood of women, particularly in its frontier zones, must be secured first.

### War transforms and reaffirms gender roles

Women are critically important to Ukraine for three reasons. First, the war in Ukraine has been deeply gendered. As Kratochvil and O’Sullivan (2023, p. 347) have argued, the war is explicitly fought over “the so-called traditional values, against gender and sexual equalities,” since Russia views the latter as pillars of Western decadence. What is at stake in Ukraine, therefore, is gender rights themselves: not upholding them means ceding ground to Russia on both physical and ideological battlefields. In addition, the war is – as wars always do – transforming and reaffirming gender roles in Ukrainian society and beyond (Hozic & Restrepo-Sanin, 2022). While all Ukrainian citizens, men and women, children and elderly, have been affected by the brutality of this war, they face different challenges. Men between 18 and 60 years of age have been restricted in their movements whereas women and children could leave Ukraine. Men have been disproportionately killed and maimed on the front, but women have also joined the military in unprecedented numbers

and have filled jobs vacated by soldiers (Mathers, 2024). Demobilized men – wounded and traumatized – need more than just physical care; women, within the context of war-battered families, are usually the only ones who can provide that care. The war’s lasting consequences and family ruin are, therefore, unevenly experienced and shared: as extensive research shows, men will be debilitated, prone to violence, suicide and self-harm (Green et al., 2018; Huitt, 2021; Kostovicova et al., 2020). Women will be tasked with mitigating the war’s effects for decades to come.

Second, Ukraine is experiencing a catastrophic demographic decline. The country has been losing population since the 1990s. After gaining independence, Ukraine’s population was 51.5 million; in 2019, its estimated population was 37 million. Future estimates put Ukraine’s population “at between 24 million and 35 million individuals and argue that by 2030 Ukrainian society may likely be one of Europe’s oldest, with a high proportion of individuals suffering from multiple illnesses, disabilities, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression because of massive emigration, high mortality, and low birth rates” (Rogoza, 2023). The war exacerbates all these trends, yet the need for people who can secure Ukraine’s future has never been greater. Whatever security scenario is envisioned for Ukraine, recruitment of soldiers will be the state’s principal problem.

Third, women’s labor is the crucial link between the Ukrainian and European (and world) economies. Before the Russian invasion in 2022, Ukraine was the largest recipient of remittances in Europe and Central Asia, which accounted for nearly 10% of its GDP (World Bank, 2022) and as much as 15.7% in 2022 (European Commission, 2023). The remittances are the result of the mostly female migration and work abroad. In 2020, there were approximately 1.5 million Ukrainians in Europe. Nearly 55% of them were women, although in some countries – like Italy – that percentage was even higher, nearly 75%. The majority of Ukrainian women were employed in the care sector – so many in fact that in Italy “the term ‘Ukrainian’ became equivalent to that of ‘badante’ (caregiver), in the same way as some decades ago in Italy, it was common to use the word ‘Philippino’ as synonymous with ‘domestic worker’” (Salaris & Tedesco, 2020). The pattern has held since the Russian invasion. EU states have granted fleeing Ukrainian women a temporary protected status, which gives them the right to work. However, language barriers, lack of available childcare (most of the refugees are single mothers) and non-transferable or not

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recognized qualifications have pushed refugees into the informal labor market, particularly care provision. A 2023 study by Care in Poland, albeit limited in scope, showed that most Ukrainian refugee women, although highly educated, found work in the low-paid domestic sector – cleaning, caring for children, elderly or pets, housekeeping or gardening (Klakla et al., 2023). Because of the lower wages and increased need to care for families abroad, it was estimated that remittances declined from US \$18.1 billion in 2021 to US \$15.7 billion in 2023 (IOM Ukraine, n. d.). But open borders and gendered mobility may also be disguising the true value of money transfers from Ukrainians abroad (surveys show that 95% of Ukrainian women refugees rely on cash (Iskenderian, 2023)) and the extent to which Ukraine continues to depend on remittances for its survival.

These three factors are all interrelated and dependent on women's bodies and their reproductive labor. They can work at cross-purposes, creating a vicious circle of instability – or they can be addressed with well-calibrated policies to enhance Ukrainian, and European, security. NATO and EU leaders may believe that they have other, more significant, priorities than women's well-being but there will never be enough drones to replace a country's population. And a traumatized, aging Ukraine in perpetual economic decline is hardly the secure frontier on Europe's eastern border worthy of the enormous sacrifices exacted by the ongoing war.

### Recovery plans structurally disadvantage women

Ukraine's most recent recovery plan, which informs the Ukraine Facility – the European Union's financial assistance program for Ukraine – aims to “build back better” by simultaneously attracting investments into Ukraine and promoting targeted reforms that would align Ukrainian legislation with EU standards (Ukraine Facility, 2024). It revolves around five male-dominated sectors, “assessed to have the largest potential for unleashing economic growth”: energy, agriculture, transport, critical raw materials and information technology. The plan also recognizes three “foundational sectors” – education, health care and social services – which usually employ women as “important to build up the labour force, incentivise the return of Ukrainians abroad, and improve the general quality of life” (Ukraine Facility, 2024, p. 10). An entire chapter in the plan is devoted to “human capital,” viewed as crucial to putting the economy back on its path in face of the war's damages to the very fabric of social life – including the number of people killed, wounded, disabled, internally displaced or taking refuge abroad. The plan makes several references to gender equality, acknowledging that “gender bias in education, limited accessibility of childcare facilities and

gender imbalances in the labour market” (Ukraine Facility, 2024, p. 120) may be hurting not only women but the economy as a whole.

The details of the plan, however, echo previous post-conflict recovery plans in structurally disadvantaging women, despite their enormous support for the war effort. Massive privatization of state-owned enterprises (SOE) and reform of the public sector, which have in other contexts favored male asset-owners and led to decreases in female labor participation, are already on the way. Replenishment of “human capital” is envisioned primarily through the rebuilding of physical health care and education infrastructure, again favoring male employment in the construction sector. Meanwhile, “foundational sectors,” which are both critical employers of female labor and facilitators of women's labor participation, are viewed as ripe for private investment.

The plan highlights “a big potential to significantly develop the private sector within the traditional sectors like education (including military education, attracting international students), healthcare (including medical tourism that was already developing before the full-scale invasion), social services (including foster care), cultural heritage (which will facilitate tourism, including foreign tourists)” (Ukraine Facility, 2024, p. 22). The potential for unequal access to such privatized services and their detrimental effects on gender equality are never discussed. Similarly, the plan envisions “deinstitutionalization of care” – closure of mental health facilities, orphanages and senior care centers – without addressing the impact of their privatization on families, and women in particular. Finally, the plan acknowledges that projected labor shortages might not be met by Ukrainians alone, thereby requiring “an effective state migration policy that will facilitate the return of Ukrainian citizens and attract foreign labour” (Ukraine Facility, 2024, p. 127). Remittances, which are mostly sent by women working abroad and by far exceed foreign direct investment in Ukraine and even the value of its agricultural exports, are not mentioned even once in the entire plan.

### Including gender objectives

In June 2024, participants at the third Ukraine recovery conference in Berlin recognized the insufficient inclusion of women in recovery and peace planning, leading to the creation of the Alliance for a Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Recovery for Ukraine. Highlighting the fact that nearly 90% of official development assistance to Ukraine does not include gender objectives, the Alliance is committed to increasing funding for projects that advance gender equality and protect women and girls; supporting the full, equal and meaningful participation of women and

women's rights organizations in decision-making processes at all levels; and delivering financial and technical assistance that addresses the specific needs of women and girls, utilizing tools for gender-responsive planning and budgeting, and financing projects identified in the Ukraine Plan and the Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (UN Women, 2024). Building upon the conference and arguing in favor of giving women greater prominence through the Alliance, Verveer and Donovan (2024) recommended retraining Ukrainian women to better fit in critical sectors: finance and cybersecurity. Their recommendations dovetail with the Ukrainian plan in suggesting that women's access to the market, which has hitherto been limited, needs to be enhanced with loans, empowerment and entrepreneurship.

Such individual solutions do not address the conditions that have led to a dramatic deterioration of the position of women since the independence (Klemparskiy et al., 2022), and which the current vision of Ukrainian post-conflict recovery may not improve. Ukraine's macroeconomic circumstances remain dire. The government is cash strapped and the asset managers are asking that Ukraine repay its debt, despite the ongoing war. The costs of servicing the debt are now skyrocketing, and default is avoided by incurring more debt. Over the last decade of warfare in Ukraine, and under the International Monetary Fund (IMF) guidance, Ukraine's austerity policies have disproportionately depended on women's labor to sustain the increased militarization. The defense budget was exempt from IMF's conditionalities through a "national security loophole" (Mathers, 2020). Meanwhile, spending on social services in Ukraine dwindled to less than 1% of state expenditures in 2023, whereas in Europe it represents 20%-30% of the budget of the social sphere (Ukraine Facility, 2024). Even the cost of an increase in energy prices has been mostly born by women (Dolan-Evans, 2021); stimulating resource extractivism as the magnet for foreign direct investment resembles recommendations for other war-torn but resource-rich countries: without recognizing the degree to which violence and extraction are co-dependent. As Duncanson and Cohn (2020) write, International Financial Institutions (IFIs) continue to conflate recovery from war with recovery of the economic system because of the rootedness of their plans in neoclassical economics, but also because of their neglect of the lessons drawn by feminist political economists.

Western Balkans, where the IFIs have led the recovery while the region was left behind by the EU integration processes until recently, offers a grim picture of Ukraine's potential future. Women's labor participation in the Western Balkans is among the lowest in Europe, and especially in

Bosnia and Herzegovina (40%) and Kosovo (20%). Even the introduction of gender mainstreaming measures, including gender budgeting, proved ineffective for as long as tax structures remained unchanged (Bojičić-Dželilović & Hozic, 2020). Women trafficking, violence against women and femicides have become endemic. Women in political leadership positions only mask the degree to which women are generally absent from public spaces and media, unless hyper-sexualized. Berry and Lake's (2021) inconvenient research finding has demonstrated that efforts at women's inclusion may often mask other forms of exclusionary politics. Most importantly, inadequate funding of "foundational sectors" and/or their privatization has led to the utmost depletion of the care industry, now the principal exporter of labor to the EU. According to some estimates, over the last 13 years, more than 400,000 health workers have left Bosnia and Herzegovina, including more than a thousand medical doctors and thousands of nurses (Hozic, 2024).

## Conclusion

Europe benefits from the exodus in its periphery. The European crisis in the care sector (Dowling, 2021), driven by its aging population and heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic, is now mitigated by immigrant labor. Selective visa regimes are attracting workers from Europe's less secure edges. According to a Pillars of Health (2022) report, Germany alone has imported 200,000 nurses since 2013, 17.3% of whom came from the Western Balkans, representing 29.3% of nurses in the region itself. The move was made possible by the Western Balkan Regulation of 2016, which made "refugee talent visible and accessible to EU labor markets" (Wagner et al., 2023). While intended to ease political pressures over the "refugee crisis" in Europe, the development of these new "complementary pathways" effectively linked conflicts and crises elsewhere with the fulfillment of needs for skilled workers within the EU (Wagner et al., 2023). The most recent German legislation on the employment of foreigners, which came into effect in November 2023, raised the annual quota of workers from the Western Balkans from 25,000 to 50,000 and indefinitely extended the previous legislation. "The systematic brain-drain of health workforce towards Germany," concluded Pillars of Health (2022) report, "is a European and a global health scandal" that poses "a significant risk for the source countries."

There is still time to reverse this vicious circle with smart public investment in foundational sectors throughout Europe, but especially in its fragile border zones. Militarization, conscription, and the building of a war economy seem to be the preferred political solutions of the European elites grappling with polycrisis and the lack of in-

ternal consensus. There is almost no discussion of the gendered implications of such military buildup, leaving the terrain of demographic fears and fantasies wide open to the demagogues on the extreme right of the political spectrum. Rebuilding Ukraine better and safer may mean investing in its hard security for generations. Ukrainian women, exceptionally well educated as they are, may indeed become the country's best investors and engineers. But without rebuilding the sectors where the majority of women work and that make their work possible – child-care, health care, care for the elderly and mentally ill, education – if gender equity is even addressed as envisioned, it will only lead to a select few elite women presiding over an increasingly empty land.

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