



Ukraine's "Invisible Battalion": Perceptions and Treatment of Gender in the Donbas War

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual essay addresses a gap in the literature regarding first-person perspectives of women veterans. It applies a feminist lens to a thematic analysis of first-person narratives by women who participated in the anti-terrorist operation (ATO) during the Donbas war in eastern Ukraine (2014–2022) by drawing on qualitative data contained in 25 published textual accounts (in *Girls Cutting Their Locks* (Podobna, 2018)) and six accounts documented on film (in *Invisible Battalion* (Tsilyk et al., 2017)). In these testimonies, women soldiers share their perceptions of gender discrimination along with their experiences at war, thus providing a powerful feminist historiographical alternative to dominant, and almost exclusively male, war narratives. To study the impact of gender in Ukraine's official military and volunteer battalions, three themes are analyzed: gender-based stereotypes and discrimination; women's responses to gender-based differences; and the emotional and psychosocial impacts of war on women. By analyzing the unique socio-historical experiences of Ukrainian women in wartime, this project contributes to the fields of military and veterans studies a better understanding of the lived experiences of women serving in the military across the world, and in turn, by advocating for practical social, legal, and attitudinal changes based on these experiences and perceptions.

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Women have served in Ukraine's military since 1993 (Hrytsenko et al., 2016). Their status is protected by international and national legislation.¹ In practice, however, gender stereotypes continue to shape women's experiences at war, and there is little political will to implement changes when it comes to gender equity (Hrytsenko et al., 2016). Further, the personal stories of Ukraine's women soldiers remain largely invisible. Only a privileged few are publicly recognized; for example, Olha Bihar (nicknamed "The Witch"), a platoon commander who went viral for her courage and resilience (Jankowicz, 2023). Along with their contributions, largely unnoticed is these women's limited access to gender-specific medical and psychological resources, especially upon demobilization when many of them experience posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This is concerning because females appear to be at a higher risk for PTSD than males, and veterans—at a higher risk than other civilians (Brunet et al., 2015; Tolin & Foa, 2006). Adding to their minority status as women in the military, those women who fought as volunteers in unofficial battalions during the Donbas war in eastern Ukraine (2014–2022) have difficulty securing formal veteran status and pensions (Hrytsenko et al., 2016; Podobna, 2018).

The few positive changes that Ukrainian women in the military have achieved are thanks to the recent women veterans' movement—*Veteranka*, and specifically, the project *Nevydymy Batal'ion* (Invisible Battalion) spearheaded by Donbas veteran Mariia Berlins'ka. In late 2015, a mixed-methods sociological survey was conducted by the Invisible Battalion team with the objective to study women's participation in anti-terrorist military operations (ATO) by identifying both successes and problems with women's integration as military personnel. This study revealed that women on the frontlines were legally only permitted to serve as cooks, technicians, nurses, seamstresses, communication specialists, and accountants—all service positions that reinforce the gendered image of woman as mother/sister first; in fact, it was nearly impossible for women to participate in active combat in any official capacity (Invisible Battalion, n.d.a). After being turned away by the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU), some women joined as volunteers, but this meant that they could not access adequate social services, nor could be nominated for or receive military awards.

A year after Hrytsenko et al.'s (2016) study, Berlins'ka produced the documentary film titled *Invisible Battalion*, co-directed by three Ukrainian cinematographers, which has been screened around the world, including in North America, in an effort to publicize the experiences and struggles of Ukraine's "invisible battalion" (Invisible Battalion, n.d.b). *Veteranka* was inaugurated in spring 2018, when nine women veterans got together, started

to hold educational workshops, planted memorial alleys to commemorate fallen women soldiers, and organized long-term psychological care for more than 40 women, as well as the "Veteran Travels" initiative (Mandry veteranok), which allowed more than 70 women veterans and their families to vacation abroad (Invisible Battalion, n.d.a). Also in 2018, the edited collection *Divchata zrizaiut' kosy* offered the narratives of 25 women soldiers who participated in the ATO during the Donbas war (Podobna, 2018; translated into English by Mariia Kovalenko as *Girls Cutting Their Locks* (Podobna, 2020)). Six of these women were featured in the *Invisible Battalion* documentary, and one (Oksana Iakubova) is also the protagonist of another documentary specifically focusing on PTSD, *Iavnykh proiaviv ne maie* (No Obvious Signs) (Horlova, 2018).²

To explore women's roles, lived experiences, and challenges during Ukraine's Donbas war, this project, then, expands on the momentum in recent critical literature in the fields of women's and veterans' studies (e.g., Graham et al., 2022; Harris et al., 2018; Hrytsenko et al., 2016; Meade, 2020; Thomas & Hunter, 2019; Warner, 2022). Building on Hrytsenko et al.'s (2016) study in particular, I apply a feminist studies lens to a thematic analysis of phenomenological data from women veterans found in the abovementioned collection of 25 first-person narratives and six first-person accounts documented on film, where women soldiers share their perceptions of discrimination, what their first encounter with gunfire was like, and what was the most difficult to handle in combat. To study the impact of gender in Ukraine's official military and volunteer battalions, I home in on three themes: gender-based stereotypes and discrimination; women's responses to gender-based differences; and the emotional and psychosocial impacts of war on women. Their testimonies provide a powerful feminist historiographical alternative to dominant, and almost exclusively male, war narratives. By analyzing the unique socio-historical experiences of contemporary Ukrainian women in wartime, this project contributes to the fields of military and veterans studies a better understanding of the lived experiences of women serving in the military across the world, and in turn, by advocating for practical social, legal, and attitudinal changes based on these experiences and perceptions.

Both *Girls Cutting Their Locks* and *Invisible Battalion* are excellent sources of fresh perspectives, especially for scholars and women veterans who might not otherwise encounter these works or have access to the original languages (Ukrainian and Russian). English-language primary sources include Carolyn Furdek's memoir, *Locked-in: A Soldier and Civilian's Struggle With Invisible Wounds*, about her experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Kayla Williams' *Love My Rifle More Than You: Young and Female in*

the U.S. Army, among others (Goodreads, n.d.); combining research with narrative, the anthology *Invisible Veterans*, co-edited by women veteran-scholars reports on the lived experience of women in the US military and reviews the latest data on their reintegration into civilian society (Thomas & Hunter, 2019); other scholars of veterans studies have also applied intersectional analyses to study what is now the fastest growing population of veterans, at least in the United States (Meade, 2020). This conceptual essay therefore contributes to a growing body of scholarship by and about women veterans.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: WOMEN IN THE MILITARY

Historically, women have played a critical role in Ukrainian resistance movements. As volunteers, grassroots organizers, and street protesters, many of them participated in the Revolution of Dignity and Euromaidan (2013–2014), a series of demonstrations and civil unrest in response to then Ukrainian President Yanukovych's refusal to sign a trade agreement with the European Union, some of them joining the so-called *Zhinochi sotni*, or formations of “a hundred women.” In 2014, women joined the ATO military operations against Russia-backed separatists in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions of eastern Ukraine (Donbas), both in unsanctioned, volunteer battalions and as official members of the AFU (Hrytsenko et al., 2016). In January 2016, dressed in aprons and holding various kitchen utensils, women marched from the Kyiv train station to the Ministry of Defense. This so-called “March with Pots and Pans” was in response to an order, issued a month earlier, which temporarily suspended the recruitment of women for contract service (this order was later repealed) (Podobna, 2018, p. 335).

Indeed, it was not until 2016 that Ukraine's Ministry of Defense opened combat roles to women (Ellyat, 2024). In 2018, due to the advocacy campaign led by the Invisible Battalion, the law “On ensuring equal rights and opportunities to women and men during military service in the armed forces of Ukraine and other military formations” finally granted women the right to take up arms rather than participate in a service capacity only (Invisible Battalion, n.d.a). The sniper Iuliia Matvienko (call sign “Squirrel”), one of the essay writers who was also featured in the documentary film, provided anecdotal evidence of two women soldiers having received awards “For courage” who, according to their papers, served as seamstress and hospital attendant, respectively; in reality, one was a sniper and the other—a spotter (Podobna, 2018, p. 21). Similarly, Andriana Susak (call sign “Kid”) said that, although she was a combatant in

the “Aidar” volunteer battalion from May 2014 to July 2015, her official title was: “head of a sewing and repair team for military equipment” (Tsilyk et al., 2017, 1:18:50).

As of 2020, the number of women in the AFU was reported to be 57,132, but only 29,760 of them hold the rank of military personnel (Invisible Battalion, n.d.a). Even after being granted the same status as servicemen by law, in practice, they continue to be subjected to sexist stereotypes and discrimination (Ringis & Golovin, 2023). In 2023 further restrictions were removed, aligning the age for women to serve as contractors with that for men (Ellyat, 2024). Moreover, the material security of servicewomen was improved with the introduction of a woman's hot weather combat uniform, whereas only parade dress uniform was previously available (Ministerstvo oborony Ukrainy, 2024). Still, certain limitations remain in women's military education, access, and promotion, such as gaining full access to the Ukrainian Air Assault Forces or attaining certain officer positions (Invisible Battalion, n.d.a).

Hrytsenko et al. (2016) explain that the name of their study, *The Invisible Battalion*, is a metaphor for how the interests of women soldiers are ignored by the authorities, how women are left out of decision making, and how needs specific to women are not met (e.g., gynecological care, including for menstruation and pregnancy; gender-appropriate uniform and footwear; and hygiene). Some servicewomen have internalized gender stereotypes, deeming themselves incapable of performing as well as men (Hrytsenko et al., 2016). Women's “discursive invisibility” is further evident at the organizational level of the military infrastructure, where more effective integration measures are needed (p. 16). Likewise, women veterans remain largely invisible in academia as compared to male veteran scholars, a gap that *Critical Military Studies* is working to address (West & Antrobus, 2021). One of the women soldiers in Podobna's (2018) anthology defines “the invisible battalion,” simply, as “the unequal treatment of women in the army” (p. 54). And again, this is worse in the case of volunteers who are absent from formal military registries: ATO sniper Olena Bilozers'ka describes combatants like herself as “they're-not-there's” (p. 41).

This is part of a longer history of marginalizing veterans, and especially disabled veterans, in the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the Eastern Bloc, whose experiences have recently been illuminated by scholars of history, disability studies, and veterans' studies, but are limited to ex-servicemen, rather than women (Galmarini, 2024; Sumpf, 2022; Vynnyk, 2024). Svetlana Alexievich's (1983/2017) *The Unwomanly Face of War* was one of the first books to break the silence on women in the military; it includes immensely informative interviews with women who fought in the Soviet Union during World War II. However, more critical

work is warranted on women veterans in contemporary Ukraine and other post-Soviet nations.

The challenges to women's integration into the military are hardly unique to Ukraine. Harris et al. (2018), the co-authors of *Women Veterans: Lifting the Veil of Invisibility*, describe the experiences of women veterans in the United States, including the impact of military sexual trauma (MST), a derivative of PTSD that disproportionately affects veterans. Echoing many of the same sentiments as their colleagues across the Atlantic, Harris et al. (2018) set out to "lift the veil" off the "triple denotation of invisibility" in the US military: as a form of androcentric cultural amnesia, wherein women's contributions, however instrumental, are forgotten during peacetime, thereby continuing the legacy of excluding servicewomen even after the repeal of the US Combat Exclusion Policy (1948–2013); as a form of self-imposed concealment by women veterans themselves, who experience greater challenges than their male counterparts upon reentry into civil society; and as a form of suspicion regarding their military status and experiences from civilian institutions, such as the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) (pp. 3–5; see also: Cheney et al., 2014; Decew, 1995; Gould & Obicheta, 2015; Segal, 1995). Another study indicates that, despite their growing numbers as participants in combat, US servicewomen are still treated as second-class citizens, as compared to their male counterparts with similar experiences (Best et al., 2021). Confirming such findings, Graham et al.'s (2022) qualitative study suggests that disabled women veterans in the UK receive disproportionately lower mental health services and confront access barriers, lack of understanding from mental health professionals, gender- and sexuality-based discrimination, and overall stigmatization of mental disabilities. Further, an ethnographic study of veteran women in Southeast Europe (the former Yugoslavia) has found that ex-servicewomen are actively relegated to "second place," with their accomplishments disproportionately underrepresented (Warner, 2022).

THEORETICAL CONTEXT: FEMINIST VETERANS' STUDIES

Feminist veterans' studies is a vibrant interdisciplinary field that examines the experiences of women veterans through a feminist lens, exploring issues, such as: the politics of gender identity; women veterans' physical and psychosocial health and disability; and the challenges women veterans experience while transitioning to civilian life, including unemployment and homelessness. As Eichler (2017) notes in her critical review of the growing research on gender in the military, "most of the gender research on veterans uses

the term gender as a synonym for women or treats it as just another variable (sex) to be added to the study of veterans" (p. 2). Up until recently, gender-focused research on women veterans was housed predominantly in the health sciences using quantitative methods (Eichler, 2017). The current project follows Eichler's (2017) lead in treating gender not merely as a descriptor, but as an analytical category in line with intersectional feminist usage, i.e., exploring how gender "centrally shape[s] veterans' experiences and involve[s] both masculinities and femininities, relations of power and inequality, or the intersections of gender with other categories of social difference" (pp. 2–3). A feminist intrusion into veterans' studies is incredibly important given that "[m]ilitaries are one of the key institutions reproducing gender inequalities in society, as they privilege a particular version of masculinity defined in opposition to subordinate masculinities and femininities" (Eichler 2017, p. 677; see also Eichler, 2014). The goal is, ultimately, to encourage attitudinal and policy changes to advance the social and political status of active service members and women veterans.

More specifically, I applied a feminist lens to the study of *Invisible Battalion* and *Girls Cutting Their Locks*. Within a feminist theoretical framework, the first-person narratives of Donbas women veterans can be considered examples of what feminist disability scholar Garland-Thomson (2005) calls "reimaginings," or efforts to "not only retriev[e] overlooked experiences and undertheorized critical perspectives, [but also] to rewrite oppressive social scripts" (p. 1567). Although her essay collection came out nearly 40 years after Alexievich's (1983/2017) Nobel Prize-winning ethnography, Podobna (2018) directly references "the unwomanly face of war" in the introduction to *Girls Cutting Their Locks*, suggesting that the gendered notion of woman as "created to grant life, not to take it away" persists to this day (p. 6).

A feminist lens can illuminate issues of femininity, embodiment, ageism, access, and inclusion, in order to reveal the multiple intersecting levels of othering to which women veterans are subjected: their education and socialization are typically different from that of men, who are trained to be soldiers/"heroes" from a young age: children are exposed to gendered stereotypes and societal expectations through GI Joe action figures versus Barbie dolls, with the former inculcating traditionally masculine ideals of courage and physical strength, while the latter reinforces the association of femininity with domesticity and promulgates unrealistic beauty standards. Further, soldiering has historically been linked with masculinity, and women have either been excluded or given limited access to militaries (Goldstein, 2001). Women's bodies differ from "the norm," which is a male body; they are transformed at

mobilization (their hair is cut; their appearance and attire are altered, in part to deter sexual advances); perceived as primary caregivers, women are also publicly shamed for potentially orphaning their children; and upon being injured, they encounter a double standard due to unattainable gendered expectations of physical beauty and mental health—all of which is compounded by the always already marginalized status of veterans in civil society.

The phenomenological data found in first-person accounts are the perfect vehicle for such an investigation as such data offer as direct a pathway to these military women's subjectivity as one can obtain from published testimony. In both the written and the spoken first-person narratives (on film), the reader-spectator gains access not only to firsthand testimonials of war experiences, important for socio-political and ideological purposes, but also to the subjective processing of those war experiences. In the case of trauma, such internalization effectively shapes the subsequent narration, allowing the speaker to express the initially incomprehensible material at a later time, so that "*history* [can] arise where *immediate understanding* may not" (Caruth, 1996, p. 11; original emphasis). There is, moreover, a gendered dimension to remembering, in Alexievich's (1983/2017) words: "[women] are capable of seeing what is closed to men [...] their war has smell, has color, a detailed world of existence" (p. xxxiii).

METHODOLOGY

THEMATIC ANALYSIS (TA)

My research objective was to analyze how gender perceptions influenced the experiences and treatment of Ukrainian women at war. I applied the method of thematic analysis (TA) to the study of 25 first-person narratives of Donbas women veterans published in *Girls Cutting Their Locks* and six stories documented in *Invisible Battalion*. These women varied in age (29–46 years old), socioeconomic class, educational background, regional identity, marital status, and military training; the majority were nondisabled (at the time), white Caucasian women, who participated in the ATO during the Donbas war (Olha Benda had her leg amputated following a war injury; Iuliia Paievs'ka later became partially disabled due to an injury to her hips; and Oksana Iakubova was diagnosed with and treated for PTSD). According to Braun and Clarke (2012), "TA is a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set. Through focusing on meaning across a data set, TA allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences" (p. 57, original emphasis). In this case, a pattern of responses emerged specifically related to gender

and their treatment as women soldiers; this pattern took three forms: gender-based stereotypes and discrimination; women's responses to gender-based differences, which take the form of physical or other external adjustments, and women's insistence on and evidence of being capable soldiers who deserve equal treatment; and the emotional and psychosocial impacts of war on women.

TA was selected due to its accessibility as a qualitative method, making the important and timely subject of Ukrainian women veterans available to English-speaking non-specialists outside of Ukraine; and its flexibility in terms of focus, allowing me to legitimately focus on the specific aspect of gender, as part of the broader phenomenon of women soldiers' lived experience; and discursive elements, allowing me to "report the obvious semantic meanings in the data," and also to "interrogate the latent meanings, the assumptions and ideas that lie behind what is explicitly stated" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 58; see also Braun & Clarke, 2006). Specifically, I combined an inductive approach to data coding and analysis (themes derived from the primary documents themselves), with a deductive approach, applying the social construct of gender from feminist scholarship on women veterans, especially Hrytsenko et al. (2016) and Harris et al. (2018). The research question of how gender influences the perceptions and experiences of women in the military was experiential and exploratory, illustrating an experiential form of TA within a conceptualist framework, which assumes that language gives us access to the truth, though this truth is socially constructed and mediated by experience (Madill et al., 2000).

DEMOGRAPHICS

The film *Invisible Battalion* consists of six vignettes; each of these focuses on a single woman soldier who tells her story, in her own voice, as the camera documents her daily activities, showing her living quarters and/or camp, interactions with other soldiers, and even footage of military operations (Tsilyk et al., 2017). Although each woman cinematographer has a slightly different directorial approach, all six vignettes have several common characteristics: captions announce the name, call sign, age, education, military rank (official vs. actual), civilian occupation, how long they were mobilized/ at war, and the women soldiers' awards and medals. These factors help us better understand women's roles in the ATO and the dramatic mismatches, first, between their educational background/civilian experiences and their *de jure* and/or *de facto* military assignment; and second, between what these women did *on paper* versus what they actually did on the frontlines. For example, Iuliia Paievs'ka (call sign "Taira"), former president of the Aikido Federation of Ukraine, designer, and fitness instructor with no formal medical training, found herself volunteering as

a paramedic during the Euromaidan protests in 2013 and again, during her time in Donbas (2014–2018), where she also founded “Taira’s Angels,” a volunteer ambulance corps.³ The 38-year-old Iuliia Matviienko holds a master’s in economics and was an economist in civilian life, and the 46-year-old Oksana Iakubova (call sign “Trap”) is chief economist at the Ministry of Finance; both are married with children. Iakubova is a vice commander for HR and a major; Matviienko is a sniper, though, according to her military documents, she is an “AGS 2 medical assistant and military unit medical assistant-instructor” (12:39). The 38-year-old Olena Bilozers’ka, a married poet and journalist with a master’s degree in humanities, served as a sniper in the volunteer army and was not officially enlisted. Dariia Zubenko (call sign “Dart”), the 30-year-old fire-show performer and lecturer in sociology and political science, describes her former civilian self as a member of the anti-conformist youth movement (*neformaly*), who gathered on Kyiv’s main square, wore motorcycle jackets and military boots, and played music. “Before 2014,” Zubenko says, she was a “creative do-nothing,” “all artsy and airy,” but after 2014, all of that changed when she assumed her role as a volunteer “combatant-paramedic” without officially enlisting (28:06–29:59). And, as previously mentioned, in a stark example of discrimination at the level of state infrastructure, Susak was given the title of lieutenant by the Ministry of Defense but assigned to “manager of sewing factory” (1:18:50).

Of the six women soldiers, those who were officially enlisted were recognized for their service with medals and honorary badges: Paievs’ka received a medal “For the development of the Armed Forces of Ukraine” from Ukraine’s Ministry of Defense and an honorary badge “For services to the Armed Forces of Ukraine,” along with other awards (11:35); Matviienko received the President’s Order “For Courage,” third class (26:23); and Iakubova received several awards, including the Patriarch of the Kyiv Ukrainian Orthodox Church medal “For self-sacrifice and love to Ukraine” and a medal for “Trust” from the journalist community (1:11:10). The 29-year-old Susak, a translator and brand manager with a master’s degree in humanities, was recognized as “People’s Hero of Ukraine” (1:26:24).

The other source of phenomenological data, *Girls Cutting Their Locks*, is a compilation of 25 stories, written between November 2017 and July 2018, by women who fought in the ATO in the Luhansk and Donetsk region (Donbas) of eastern Ukraine, as part of the official AFU and in volunteer battalions—as medics, snipers, grenade launchers, reconnaissance officers, paramilitary combatants, and commanders, whereas previously they had been students, journalists, and photographers, most without any formal military training. Some women joined volunteer battalions

after being barred entry to the official armed forces due to real or perceived gender discrimination (see also: Hrytsenko et al., 2016). Based on their stories, women came to the frontlines for various reasons: to realize a childhood dream of joining the army; to follow friends and/or family members who enlisted; to take action against the pro-Russian separatists, who had impacted them personally; to continue the work started at Euromaidan (opposing pro-Russian governmental alliance and human rights violations); and to defend their nation based on ideological motivations. For example, Ol’ha Simonova, a Russian woman from Cheliabinsk, came to Ukraine in 2014 after she had learned from her Ukrainian friends that “something totally sick was happening,” and got to the frontlines in 2015 where she helped care for the wounded while herself being shelled (Podobna, 2018, p. 77).

In their stories, women combatants recount not only why they volunteered or enlisted, but also how they were trained, the physical and psychological toll of those trainings and subsequent missions, the gender-based discrimination and patronizing attitudes they encountered from their superiors and male peers, and the relationships they developed, including falling in love, getting engaged, becoming pregnant, and seeing their beloved perish. Most continued to fight despite legal hurdles: Maryna Valyts’ka (call sign “Xena”), a member of the “Right Sector” Ukrainian Volunteer Corps writes: “We fought, carried out combat missions, and everyone was satisfied with everything. Yet, just imagine, before that we fought without any salaries, benefits, or special statuses” (Podobna, 2018, p. 253).

DISCUSSION

Respondents in both the documentary film and the edited collection shared their experiences as women soldiers, commenting on how gender shaped many aspects of their service, starting with mobilization (e.g., some women were turned away on the basis of gender and/or age) and continuing on throughout their active service (e.g., some women were given special accommodations, such as separate shower cabins or regular military leave for personal care; others experienced unwelcome advances and/or lack of respect from their male peers). When discussing gender differences in *Girls Cutting Their Locks*, Ukrainian women combatants mention strengths, such as women being better suited for certain military roles, like snipers, but also recount examples of male chauvinistic and patronizing attitudes. Both their perceptions of gender and their experiences as women in the military evidence a range that can be best represented through concrete examples from individual testimonies.

GENDER-BASED STEREOTYPES AND DISCRIMINATION

During my analysis, I identified essentialist gender stereotypes of women that allegedly make them unsuitable for the military and active combat, in particular. In the documentary, Iuliia Matviienko speaks to widespread sexist expectations: “They don’t want girls in the army”; women are relegated to “the kitchen, communication, medics” (Tsilyk et al., 2017, 22:20). Zubenko similarly attests to the male chauvinist stereotyping of woman as “a delicate flower who came to war” (30:30) or “a girl who needs a manicure” (30:51). Olha Nikishyna (call sign “Cholera”) was at first turned away due to her “grandma age” of 43 (Podobna, 2018, p. 242), and upon mobilization, prevented from joining the frontlines: “We do not let women go to the front, only medics” (p. 243). The sniper Olena Bilozers’ka confirms the prevalence of gender discrimination by voicing her protest: she figuratively kills the proverbial “Angel in the House” in one of her first statements in the edited collection, claiming “[she] was never brought up thinking her job was to cook borsch” (traditional Ukrainian beet soup) (p. 26).

Even if they did not experience discriminatory treatment directly, women soldiers still attest to encountering and having to challenge gender stereotypes. Maryna Valyts’ka, for example, says she did not “feel any discrimination” (Podobna, 2018, p. 254), but later adds that she “was [not] immediately perceived as a fighter” and kept being “asked to deal with paperwork” (p. 257). Iana Chervona was offered positions which did not interest her because they were “too ‘feminine’”: “Maybe they wanted to protect me, and this was a sign of care; maybe they just didn’t see me as a fighter, I don’t know...” (p. 222). Oksana Iakubova comments on the reactions she got when applying for a leadership position: “The authorities are shocked: a female chief of staff?! At war, there are no ‘girls’ in such positions” (p. 198). Although they eventually came to respect her, at first Iakubova’s male colleagues decorated her bulletproof vest with ribbons and attached a cute bunny to her helmet as a sign of mockery.

Like Iakubova, Oleksandra Osypenko (call sign “Cat”) found it difficult to secure a position of leadership and had little choice in her employment. While she herself wanted to become a sniper, Osypenko was initially told she could only serve as a cook or communication specialist, though eventually she was assigned to be a machine gunner, the other option being—“go home” (Podobna, 2018, p. 89). Tetiana Dunduk-Kucheriava (call sign “Tank”), the first woman to go on the humanitarian mission “Evacuation-200” and “the only female tank driver in Ukraine,” also documents patronizing attitudes: “I was asked: ‘Isn’t it scary?’ But what does ‘scary’ and ‘not scary’ mean? No one asks the guys if they are scared. They go and protect me, and I wake up every morning under a peaceful

sky. If I can do something, I must do something” (p. 98). Valeriia Burlakova (call sign “Liera”) reports a similarly patronizing attitude from her commander, who refused to let her go on a mission “because ‘he doesn’t want to see girls with no legs’” (p. 144). Anastassiiia Tsebryns’ka (call sign “Phoenix”), member of the “Golden Gates” battalion, also mentions being barred from certain missions: “There was this kind of discrimination. Although I understood that [the guys] were worried about me, I wanted to be on an equal footing” (p. 296). Echoing this, Iryna Tsvila (“Lens”), a volunteer in the Sich battalion, complains about not being allowed to join combat action, but justifies this with the same kind of protective attitude: “Now I understand that they [male peers] were just saving me, worrying about me. But in the end, I still got my way” (p. 279). She reports that men from other brigades would ask her “why does she need to go to war, anyway”; however, she was reassured by other women that it was well worth it (p. 280). Mentioning routine issues with using the toilet and washing her hair, Tsvila concludes: “Sure, a woman at war has difficulties, but there are no problems that cannot be solved” (p. 282).

Some women, however, claim they did not run into gender discrimination at all. After changing battalions for personal reasons, Marharyta Tairian-Tymchenko reports being treated fairly in her new post: “I am a shooter here. Everything is equal—we live together with the guys” (Podobna, 2018, p. 290); she believes “everyone has a place in the army [...] regardless of sex” (p. 291). Viktoria Dvoret’s’ka (call sign “Wild”) agrees, notably referencing the same stereotype of cooking borsch as Bilozers’ka, but to argue to the contrary: “No one told me, ‘Put the radio down and go cook borsch.’ I’ve been familiar with weapons since I was a child—my dad was a hunter” (p. 48). The same Dvoret’s’ka, a volunteer in the “Aidar” battalion and a military commander, was officially listed as “bathhouse attendant”; yet, her prior training and skills appear to have influenced others’ attitudes about how “fit” she was for the military in the same way that Iakubova’s care and persistence eventually earned her the respect of her male peers, suggesting the presence of a double standard with women soldiers held to different and more stringent standards than men.

WOMEN’S RESPONSES TO GENDER-BASED DIFFERENCES

Physical or Other External Adjustments

The phenomenological data from the essay collection and the documentary indicate that women’s encounters with (perceptions of) gender differences impact their daily lives on the front. A telling example is featured in the very title to Podobna’s (2018) book: women soldiers’ comment on the changes to their bodies, such as needing to cut their hair, which help them adapt to harsh living conditions and also

serve as a necessary precaution against sexual violence. In the words of Osypenko (“Cat”), a member of the AFU’s 53rd Separate Mechanized Brigade, “First off, I cut my hair. I had long hair before. But I knew that the boys would hit on me, so I decided to make myself look as much like them as possible” (p. 94). The essay collection opens with a poetic epigraph from Olena Zadorozhna, which directly references haircutting:

Girls are cutting their braids,
tightly lacing their combat boots.
Happiness comes to them in a dream, or so it seems.
Bleeds their bandaged heart. (quoted in Podobna,
2018, p. 6)

Zadorozhna is a Ukrainian poet, journalist, and social activist, who participated in the Revolution of Dignity at the end of the Euromaidan protests in February 2014 and as a volunteer, distributed food at the front in Donbas (Zavhorodnii, 2016). Although not an active service member herself, in her war poetry she concisely introduces concerns key to women soldiers: namely, the prominence of gender and the focus on women’s bodies—as (re)productive, destructive, (re)generative, transforming/ed, “bandaged,” and dis/abled, as well as their wounded mental health metonymized by the “bandaged heart.”

Similarly, in the opening to the *Invisible Battalion* documentary, Paievs’ka is seated on a chair, and her head is being shaved into a mohawk by another woman soldier. Looking more like “the guys” is not only a precaution against unwelcome sexual advances, but also a matter of convenience in wartime conditions without heat or running water: the film shows Bilozers’ka washing her hair outside in a rusty bucket; Matviienko has a cropped pixie cut. The perceived threat to women’s bodily autonomy is not only from their co-combatants but also the opposing army: Susak insisted that her call sign be “Malysh,” rather than “Malyshka,” the feminine version of the Ukrainian word for “kid,” so the enemy would not know her sex because, she states euphemistically, she could not afford to be taken prisoner (Tsilyk et al., 2017, 1:18:00).

Women Are Capable Soldiers Who Deserve Equal Treatment

When reflecting on their perceptions of gender differences, women soldiers make forceful arguments against double standards. Paievs’ka, the fitness trainer turned medic featured in Tsilyk et al.’s (2017) documentary, insists that women are integral to the war effort and need equal rights because they can do as much as men—except, perhaps, women of smaller stature who cannot carry heavy bags or perform other physically strenuous tasks. “But there are women who were born for the frontlines,” Paievs’ka adds

(4:10); “women shoot no worse than men. When you’re in a subdivision, you don’t have to prove anything because it’s obvious who’s worth what. It’s not a business office. It’s a matter of life or death” (4:20).

Echoing Paievs’ka, the sniper Matviienko (“Squirrel”) claims that women have the right to demand gender equality in the military, and the camera shows her in a trench with three men, where her role is to “cover,” that is, to shoot the enemy before they can shoot her co-combatants (Tsilyk et al., 2017, 23:08). Reiterating the perceived value of professionalism, like Paievs’ka, Matviienko adds, “you have to prove that you can polish a gun just as well [...] if you work well, you work well; if women show themselves as professionals in the army, this would be good as a new norm in our society” (31:05); the film effectively shows this through footage of a female instructor facilitating a first-aid workshop for a group of male soldiers. As a striking visual testament to women’s equality, Bilozers’ka’s story opens with her loading bullets and then training at a shooting range with three men. A bit later, Bilozers’ka is once again on screen surrounded by her male co-combatants: peeling potatoes, sharing jokes, and finally, in a sleeping bag, surrounded by and in the same conditions as the rest of her brigade. Challenging women’s traditional role as caretakers, in yet another scene, Bilozers’ka is counting out 100-hryvnia bills to buy a new rifle, which she then caresses and rocks like a baby.

On the whole, women exemplify a range of opinions, from a more traditional attitude toward gender equity to a more radically feminist assertion of women’s apparent superiority in certain military tasks. An example of the former is Iuliia Filipovych’s (call sign “Vega”) opinion that “[p]atriotism has no gender”: “If you love your country, you love your country. It doesn’t matter whether you’re a guy or a gal” (Podobna, 2018, p. 108). On the other hand, when describing their strengths, women soldiers single out resilience, focus, and attentiveness as “feminine” traits. Matviienko even claims that her skills as a sniper are threatening to men:

They said that men were especially afraid of women-snipers, because we are a little bit better at this job, and they can’t predict how we might act. Due to physiological differences, we are a little more resilient and attentive. [...] By the way, what is the difference between men and women snipers (and perhaps not only between snipers, but also in sports)? When a man is worn out, he needs time to rest, to calm down, to restore. When a woman is tired, she inexplicably gets a second wind. This is a mystery of nature. (pp. 15–16)

Notably, when asserting women’s capability as being equal, or even superior, to that of men snipers, women soldiers tend to reiterate essentialist notions about gender,

which may not have grounding in human anatomy and suggest the prevalence of internalized gender stereotypes. Olena Bilozers'ka differentiates between male and female physiology but then turns ostensible bodily limitations into professional strengths: "Even before the war, I knew I was going to be a sniper. I was a decent shooter, and I have a suitable character—colossal stubbornness and patience. I am not very strong physically; I do not run well. [...] What else could I do?" (Podobna, 2018, p. 27) She, too, insists that women make better snipers: "Being a sniper, in my opinion, is a woman's job" (p. 39). Bilozers'ka also echoes Matviienko's claim about women's greater resilience when she describes having had severe food poisoning the night before her first assignment, passing out on the ground at the checkpoint, and being advised by her husband to stay back; nevertheless, she chose to go, because, she explains, "Showing weakness is deadly" (p. 30). "Anything the guys can handle, I can handle," writes Bilozers'ka. "The hardest thing for me is to get over my physical weakness. [...] I can't carry sandbags, let alone pick them up and throw them. I can, however, shovel soil and sand into those bags and make them ready. So, I just try to do what I can—it still has to be done" (pp. 35–36).

The Emotional and Psychosocial Impacts of War on Women

Along with the lack of proper hygiene and the physical exertion experienced during military operations, there is also war's psychological toll on women's mental health. Liudmyla Kalinina (call sign "Builder"), a member of the Donbas assault battalion, has trouble forgetting the cries of a boy whose legs were literally ripped off and who tried to get back up using his arms only (Podobna, 2018). In Paievs'ka's case, the psychosocial impact is depicted on film through shots of her smoking, alone, looking out into the distance, but also of planting and taking care of flowers at the camp. These cinematic sequences, rather than Paievs'ka's words, visually communicate her story. Touching the very soil she came to defend acquires symbolic meaning as a source of comfort and promise of regeneration, but also a reminder of human mortality and burial. Paievs'ka goes on to describe her memory of trying to console a dying soldier by reciting Psalm 23 (David's prayer), the only one she knew by heart. As another poignant reminder of the ultimate transformation of the body and the soul, we are introduced to Maviienko, in turn, as she is walking, pensive and somber, through a military cemetery with seemingly endless rows of light-gray tomb stones bearing signs, like "Unknown Warrior 4057 – Perished in the Zone ATO" (Tsilyk et al., 2017, 12:34).

Whereas one woman narrator accepts death as a natural occurrence, since "we lose people in civilian life, as well" (Podobna, 2018, p. 42), for most respondents, the

experience of human loss is the most difficult part of being at war. Following the deaths of her fiancé and her close friend, Valeriia Burlakova describes her "feelings and emotions as though blocked" (p.145). Iryna Harkavenko admits to feeling "complete numbness": "the scariest part about war is the loss of emotion, when you cannot even cry, when you feel nothing" (p.160). After the deaths of five other soldiers, Iana Chervona writes, "There were no hysterics. I cried over all these deaths, but how should I put it... I cried quietly. [...] Perhaps this is some kind of defense mechanism" (pp. 225–226). Nikishyna ("Cholera") drives the point home: "Did I survive the death of our boys? One cannot survive such a thing. They say that time heals. No, it does not" (p. 246).

Diana Vinogradova (call sign "Dana"), who fought in the "Right Sector," recalls experiencing "basically, PTSD," a state of complete shock and disorientation when notified over the phone of her spouse's probable death in combat (Podobna, 2018, p. 307). In the film, we see Matviienko receiving a phone call informing her that a guy from her trench hanged himself, but she cannot even emote: "I will cry at some later time," she solemnly adds (Tsilyk et al., 2017, 18:00). Tsebryns'ka ("Phoenix") reports experiencing posttraumatic symptoms every time she hears the noise of a civilian plane (Podobna, 2018). Osypenko ("Cat") describes her inability to forget the horrors of war in terms that evoke PTSD, as well: "I often have all these 'pictures' in my head: those people who died, by my own hand" (p. 93); she hopes that one day she can "get back to normal" (p. 95). Filipovych ("Vega"), another member of the "Right Sector," shares that her "memory blocks certain stressful moments" and "many of the details of our battles" as a kind of "defense mechanism" (p.113). Likewise, Iuliia Tolopa, who survived a series of seven concussions, can remember certain events "only in fragments, pieces"; even four years later, Tolopa finds herself in "a kind of constant disorientation" (p. 265).

CONCLUSION

Invisible Battalion and *Girls Cutting Their Locks* provide an urgent feminist historiographical corrective to the traditionally male-dominant discourses of war, from Homer's (2003) *Iliad* to *Saving Private Ryan* (Spielberg, 1998). In the current study, I adopted a feminist veterans' studies approach to argue that an analysis of first-person narratives by women veterans and their depiction in a documentary film can help expose gender discrimination in Ukraine's military and, in turn, encourage attitudinal and policy changes. It is significant that women respondents continually singled out gender-based stereotypes and discrimination, as well as documented the profound impact war has had on their mental and emotional health.

The former confirms the enormous role that militaries, as social institutions, play in reproducing gender inequalities, and it also implies that, to achieve true equity, attitudinal changes toward gender would be beneficial for men as well as for women. By directing scholarly and public attention to this issue, we can stimulate reform efforts and the allocation of material resources toward promoting such equity, which is important given the growing numbers of women in Ukraine's military.

In Podobna's (2018) collection and the two documentary films produced by the Invisible Battalion team (the eponymous *Invisible Battalion* (Tsilyk et al., 2017) and *No Obvious Signs* (Horlova, 2018), we encounter fewer than 30 women soldiers. Within the first year following Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, the total number of Ukrainian women in the army more than doubled, from roughly 32,000 to more than 70,000; but because the armed forces had expanded overall, in 2023 women made up just 10 percent of all military personnel (Ringis & Golovin, 2023). As of October 2023, Ukraine had 43,000 servicewomen with an estimated 5,000 on the frontlines. As of September 2024, the total number of women in the AFU was estimated at 68,000, of whom 48,000 are military personnel and approximately 5,000 are engaged in active combat (Hrytsenko et al., 2016; Ministerstvo oborony Ukraïny, 2024). My hope is that the previously "invisible battalion" of Ukrainian women veterans becomes visible in the global women veterans movement, allowing for transatlantic collaborations to serve those who have sacrificed so much to serve us.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

The scope of the current study does not allow me to expand on the invisible mental disabilities referenced in the *Invisible Battalion*, especially the effects of PTSD upon reentry to civilian life, which are the primary focus of Alina Horlova's (2018) other documentary film, *No Obvious Signs*—an expanded, hour-long version of the fifth vignette centering on Iakubova. "It is harder to survive after the war than to die at war," Iakubova maintains, and we witness her experiencing a severe panic attack while riding in a crowded subway car (59:20). Iakubova admits to being unable to communicate with her son and her husband, from whom she now feels alienated, "like a stranger"; she also admits to having suicidal ideations and being overwhelmed by "apathy," a desire "to disappear, vanish" (57:27).

Worth exploring further is the therapeutic role of writing—and of narrating their stories on film—to work through grief, emotional distress, and the loss of loved ones. More work is warranted in this area to buttress social supports for returning women veterans, particularly with respect to psychosocial disabilities. Admitted to a hospital for bronchitis, Valeriia Burlakova ("Liera") had a chance

to speak to a psychologist about her mental health, and she turned to writing to process her emotions (Podobna, 2018). In Burlakova's case, moreover, writing had an added pragmatic purpose: to reach out to the authorities in order to change everyday conditions for women in the military.

An additional avenue for exploration is the depiction of motherhood. Many women left their children behind when they mobilized and were judged for it harshly. To spare her feelings, Iryna Tsvila told her mother that she was going to a ski resort. Iuliia Tolopa found out that she was pregnant at the funeral of her co-combatant, and "[her] daughter became [her] lifeline" (Podobna, 2018, p. 285). "She showed me that it's possible to live not only by war. Though, 'to live' is an overstatement. I'm a stranger here. [...] I'm just barely surviving" (p. 269). Andriana Susak (call sign "Kid"), on the other hand, challenges conventional notions of caregiving and motherhood: she was supposed to be demobilized in the third month of pregnancy, and she recalls joking with her male peers about them having to deliver her baby on the frontlines and no longer fitting into a bulletproof vest "because of her [growing] belly" (p. 71).

LINGERING QUESTIONS

The documentary film shows Susak, the protagonist of the last vignette, visiting a museum devoted to the liberation of the village Shchastia (which, ironically, means "happiness" in Ukrainian), where she sees her own name and personal belongings in a display case (Tsilyk et al., 2017). This moment is pregnant with meaning: in the voiceover, Susak juxtaposes being back home, struggling to get used to life "without gunfire," but she immediately adds, as a kind of modern Cassandra prophesying the full-scale invasion five years later, that "the train to Moscow is still running. Workers are still going to Moscow" (1:15:00). This kind of recognition is important for the invisible battalion, but it also introduces the problematics of memorializing women veterans, particularly in a nation which has been at war since 2014. "We had life before 2014, and another life after 2014," Susak says referencing Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea which led to the Donbas war (1:25:00). Susak's vignette opens with her changing into a camo uniform to do a professional photoshoot, and it closes with a shot of a bus stop billboard featuring the finished photo. The lists of medals mean to reclaim these women's accomplishments that might otherwise go unnoticed; however, the public-facing poster also raises questions about the use of the images of women soldiers in governmental PR for the purposes of galvanizing support for the military and helping with mobilization efforts, but without necessarily disclosing the physical or psychosocial disabilities that veterans are likely to encounter, nor supplying them with information or resources for their transition back to civilian life. It is

hard not to notice Susak's aesthetic appeal as a beautiful, young, blond, nondisabled ciswoman—an epitome of what Hrytsenko et al. (2016) describe as the stereotypical depiction of a woman soldier as “warrior woman,” who is perceived to fight on a par with, and alongside, her male colleagues; a “defender,” a “manly Athena” or “Amazon” (pp. 46–48). But what the poster conceals are the sexism and the harsh conditions of which Susak and others speak in their essays and on film.

Hence, a number of questions remains: When will women finally get the recognition they deserve—with equal representation in exhibits and medals/honors? What is the role of such recognition in raising morale among active service members and helping veterans transition to civil life? And will this recognition be limited to an elite few, or can it be distributed more widely among all servicewomen and veterans, especially those in typically underrepresented rural areas (outside of Kyiv)? Additionally, how is the struggle to adjust to civilian life in Ukraine shaped by the fact that the nation is still at war, with gunfire, air raids, and full-scale devastation being a daily occurrence? Are these experiences similar to those of women veterans in the US, who have served abroad (in Iraq, Afghanistan, etc.) and elsewhere; and if so, how?

NOTES

- 1 At the international level, the status of women soldiers in Ukraine is protected by the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, originally adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); at the national level, it is protected by the 1996 Constitution of Ukraine (Section II, Article 24), the Labor Codex, and a designated 2005 law “About the provision of equal rights and opportunities of women and men” (Hrytsenko et al., 2016, pp. 4–6).
- 2 All translations from the Ukrainian and Russian are the author's own. Kovalenko's English version of *Girls Cutting Their Locks* was used for consultation only. The two documentary films available for streaming on Vimeo and YouTube are in Russian and Ukrainian without English subtitles. Proper names and other Cyrillic terms are transliterated as per the American Library Association (ALA) and the Library of Congress (LC) Romanization Tables for transliterating non-Latin scripts into the Roman alphabet, except in those cases where a different transliteration is commonly used, e.g., Yanukovych (not Ianukovych).
- 3 Iuliia Paievs'ka (also known as Yuliya Paevska) was captured by the Russians in Mariupol on 16 March 2022, at the start of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. As her name was among those most wanted, “Kremlin propaganda trumpeted that the Russian military had detained the chief medical officer of Azov, the ‘bloody Tayra’ who supposedly killed the parents of local civilians and tried to use their kidnapped children to escape from Mariupol. In the detention camp, jailers refused to provide Paevska, who had her thyroid removed, with vital medication” (Trofimov, 2024, p. 137). In reality, “Taira's Angels” were credited with saving hundreds of people, and Paievs'ka's eventual release on 17 June 2022 was announced by the President of Ukraine and she was recognized for providing important bodycam footage of her time in occupied Mariupol, which she had smuggled out in a tampon (Stepanenko & Hinnant, 2022).

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The opinions and assertions contained herein are the private views of the author.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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