

Adapting and Resocializing After Fighting for Ukraine's Independence: Women Veterans' Experience From 2014 to the Present

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Executive Summary

The number of Ukrainian veterans is estimated to reach four million by the end of the full-scale invasion. Up to 20 percent of them will be women. However, Ukraine's veteran care system is ill-equipped to handle the specific needs of women veterans. This has detrimental effects not only on these veterans' lives but also on Ukrainian society as a whole. To counteract these effects, this policy brief outlines opportunities for international actors to support women veterans in Ukraine by: training mental health professionals to address gender-specific psychological needs; campaigning to raise awareness of women soldiers' contribution to defending Ukraine; counteracting spatial biases in financial support to NGOs, which predominantly goes to urban areas; and using international leverage to support advocacy for women veterans.

Introduction

National policymakers and international actors who support Ukraine usually fail to consider the gendered needs of women veterans.

Responding to the needs of women veterans is an urgent task for Ukraine. The country is fighting a war for its independence, a war that escalated in 2014 and 2022 but is also one that has been ongoing for more than 300 years.¹ Because the full-scale invasion drastically increased the number of combatants, Ukraine's Ministry of Veterans expects that the number of veterans at the end of the Russian-Ukrainian war could exceed 4 million.² After 2014, considerable attention was paid to the problems of veterans, but there was no differentiation between the needs of female and male veterans. For instance, women veterans experience specific medical needs because of the negative effects that combat and military service have on reproductive health. Further gendered differences become visible when comparing the socio-professional positioning of women and men in the Ukrainian army; their social reintegration after returning to civilian life; trends in the employment and unemployment of demobilized veterans, including the impact of their military experience on employment; and the particularities of how different genders transit through the higher education system.³ However, national policymakers and international actors who support Ukraine usually fail to consider these and other gendered needs of women veterans.

The purpose of this policy brief is therefore to illustrate women veterans' specific needs and provide recommendations for how to address them. To prepare this policy brief, I conducted offline interviews with women who are currently serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine (n=20). This was a fruitful approach, but it was partially limited by the challenges inherent to potential interviewees being in active service during a hot war.

¹ Ukraine has been under attack or occupied by Russia in various forms (by the Russian Empire, the USSR, and the Russian Federation) for centuries. While there have been short periods of independence and peace, Russian imperialism has been a constant threat to Ukraine throughout its modern history.

² Ministry of Veteran Affairs, "Minister of Veterans Affairs Talks About Assistance to Veterans and Their Families," accessed July 1, 2024, <https://mva.gov.ua/ua/news/rivnij-rivnomu-minveteraniv-zaprosuhye-veteraniv-ta-chleniv-yihnih-simej-na-rol-pomichnika-veterana>.

³ Anna Artemenko and Kateryna Bataeva, "Military Identity and Social Adaptation of ATO/OS Veterans," 2022, accessed July 1, 2024, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/357092040_MILITARNA_IDENTICNIST_TA_SOCIALNA_ADAPTACIA_VE_TERANIV_ATOOS.

Therefore, I also used an alternative research strategy: sending written, open-ended questions to women veterans, women soldiers on the frontlines, and women soldiers in the process of rehabilitating at military hospitals (n=48). Additionally, I conducted expert interviews with representatives of the Ministry of Veterans, the National Health Service of Ukraine, and local politicians (n=6).

This policy brief continues as follows: First, I describe the situation of veterans in general and of women veterans in particular and identify the main challenges this second group faces. I then evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of Ukraine's veteran policy. Finally, I discuss recommendations for how international actors can cooperate with local civil society organizations and NGOs to effectively support women veterans in Ukraine.

Situation Brief

To understand how veterans adapt and are resocialized after leaving military service, researchers and policymakers typically consider several aspects: veterans' reintegration experiences; healthcare services; employment opportunities; overall wellbeing; and sociopolitical perspectives. The same categories can be used to assess the experiences of both Ukrainian men and women who left military service since 2014.⁴

Much has been done to reintegrate veterans in Ukraine. At the state level, 13 Veteran Development Centers have been opened. These centers, housed at leading higher education institutions, provide career guidance and individual professional development as part of the transition from military service to civilian life. Veterans and their families can receive information on medical, psychological and social rehabilitation at these centers, which also offer activities to improve emotional resilience and communication skills.⁵

As part of its cooperation with the National Health Service of Ukraine (NHSU), the Ministry of Veterans explains to veterans what medical services they can receive under the Medical Guarantee Program, as well as which civilian medical institutions have contracts with the NHSU. There are currently 2,338 such hospitals across the country.⁶ What is more, a new initiative – the Veteran's Assistants Institute – has been established and is currently being piloted in ten regions. A veteran's assistant is not just any office worker but rather a specialist who is themselves a veteran or a member of a veteran's family. Veterans' assistants will provide peer-to-peer service support to war veterans, their families and demobilized soldiers⁷ – facilitating dialogue between these groups and the institutions from which they seek services – in order to ease the transition to civilian life. Veterans' assistants will work directly with people in their community and report to the district and regional levels.⁸

⁴ Anna Artemenko and Kateryna Bataeva, "Military Identity and Social Adaptation of ATO/OS Veterans."

⁵ Ministry of Veterans Affairs, "Equal to Equal: Ministry of Veterans Invites Veterans and Their Families to Become Veterans' Assistant," accessed July 1, 2024, <https://mva.gov.ua/ua/news/rivnij-rivnomu-minveteraniv-zaproshuye-veteraniv-ta-chleniv-yihnih-simej-na-rol-pomichnika-veterana>.

⁶ As part of its cooperation with the Ministry of Veterans, the NHSU offers free rehabilitation care for veterans under the Medical Guarantee Programme 2023. See: Ministry of Veterans Affairs, "In the Framework of Cooperation with the Ministry of Veterans, NSZU Offers Free Rehabilitation Assistance for Veterans under the 2023 Medical Guarantees Program," accessed July 1, 2024, <https://mva.gov.ua/ua/news/u-ramkah-spivpraci>.

⁷ Soldiers who no longer take part in military operations, but are technically still part of the military.

⁸ Ministry of Reintegration, "Implementation of the Veteran Assistant Institute Begins," accessed July 1, 2024, <https://minre.gov.ua/2023/07/01/rozpochynayetsya-vprovadzhenya-institutu-pomichnyka-veterana/>.

Although there has already been significant investment in developing veteran policy, reintegration programs have yet to sufficiently analyze and address the differing needs of men and women veterans. Why is that? Most importantly, because of stereotypical views held about women in the military and about women veterans. Simply put, the Ukrainian army is a male-centric institution. For example, Ukraine only began to approve military uniforms and ammunition designed for women's bodies last year.⁹ Similarly, standard first aid kits do not include pads and tampons. This means that female soldiers must overcome not only the general difficulties of service and combat but also the obstacles of gender bias in a military system that was built for men. Just like the military, the structures of Ukraine's veteran community are also primarily designed around men, who make up more than 80 percent of the community. This results in the interests and needs of women veterans often being overlooked or ignored entirely.¹⁰

The Main Problems Facing Women Veterans

When looking more closely at the situation of women veterans, it becomes clear that women experience the process of returning to civilian life differently than men, and that it is often more difficult for them to reintegrate. This problem begins with how Ukrainian society applies its perceptions of gender roles to soldiers: while a man in the army is perceived as a hero, a woman soldier is mostly seen as a victim of circumstance. Women soldiers and veterans face high levels of stigma from both the military and civilian populations, who feel that military service is not consistent with women's usual role in society (i.e., motherhood). Yet in times of full-scale war, women soldiers perform tasks and bear responsibility on an equal footing with men, thus subverting traditional gender norms. Tragically, this often leads to hostility toward active and retired military women and hinders the recognition that women are making crucial contributions to Ukraine's survival.

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Beyond these obstacles to social recognition, which create barriers to reintegration, women veterans also face further specific challenges. In particular, attention should be paid to the health issues, sexism, and resocialization and adaptation problems facing women veterans upon returning to civilian life. I identified these challenges through the oral and written interviews conducted for this policy brief.

Deteriorating Health

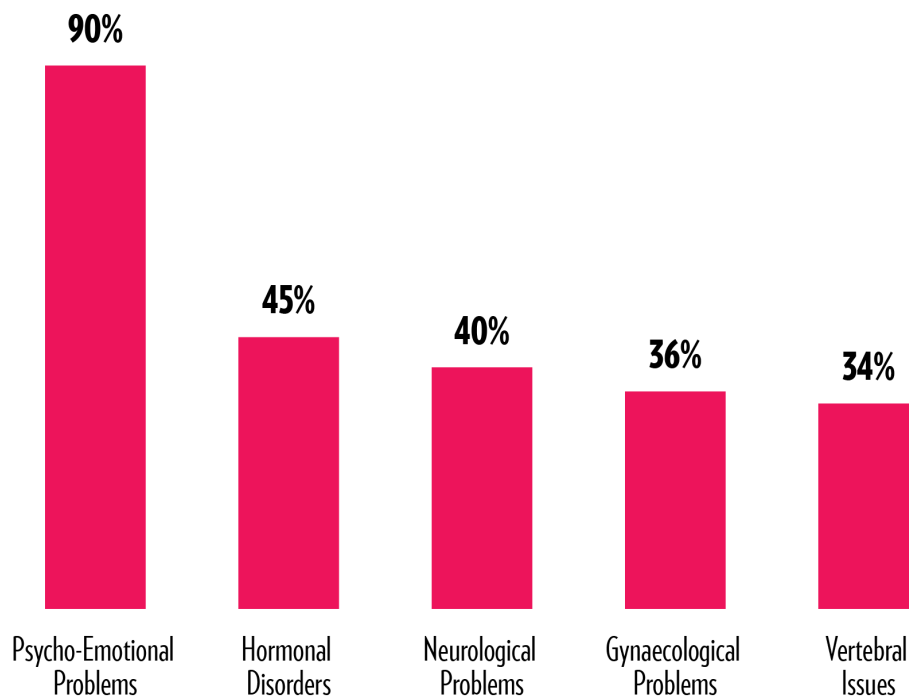
According to my interviewees, the most common health issues are psycho-emotional problems, experienced by around 90 percent of my interviewees. Nearly 40 percent indicated that they have problems with neurological disorders. What is more, almost 70 percent of interviewed women believe that regular military psychologists do not treat

⁹ Ministry of Defense, "For the First Time, the Armed Forces of Ukraine Began Issuing Women's Military Uniforms," accessed July 1, 2024, <https://www.mil.gov.ua/news/2024/02/01/u-zsu-vpershe-pochali-vidavati-zhinochu-vijskovu-formu/>.

¹⁰ IREX, "Female Veterans in Ukraine," July 14, 2021, accessed July 1, 2024, <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/Female%20Veterans%20in%20Ukraine%20%E2%80%93%20Ukrainian.pdf>.

them effectively, because they offer no effective mechanisms for addressing trauma – both during and after war. This is also reflected in respondents’ assertion that while they received care for physical health problems caused by injuries, psychological support is lacking during treatment. This problem is compounded by the near absence of psychologists trained to deal with gender-specific trauma, such as that resulting from gender-based violence. Plus, because of the high demand for their services, some psychologists prioritize private (i.e., self-paying) patients. This further restricts the accessibility of psychological support for women veterans who are unable to pay a psychologist.

Figure 1: Common Health Problems Faced by Ukrainian Women Veterans (in % of Interview Respondents)



Source: Dr. Yuliia Siedaia

The second-most-common category of health problems relate to reproductive health, specifically hormonal and gynecological issues. Reproductive problems for women veterans can stem both from combat injuries and from the psychological trauma induced by the combat experience itself. According to respondents, symptoms resulting from combat injuries include decreased sexual desire, pain during sex, problems with fertilization due to pelvic injuries, and lower self-esteem due to injuries to the face and chest. Trauma can itself also have a profound impact on sexual desire and, consequently, reproductive functions. More than other medical issues, such as vertebral injuries, reproductive problems are heavily gendered as they impact women’s ability to abide by dominant social norms around motherhood.

Sexism

Sexism is another major problem for women veterans and for women who are currently still in the military. The main gendered prejudices these women encounter from both

civilians and members of the military are: (1) the belief that women join the military to find a romantic partner; (2) the refusal to accept that women can be warriors, too; and (3) the lack of trust in their expertise, which translates into fewer career advancement opportunities.

Regarding the first sexist prejudice, many interviewees pointed out that women veterans often face condemnation for their choice to defend their homeland. The harmful idea that women can only be interested in marriage – even when they are risking their lives to serve in the military – pervades Ukrainian society, including civilian and military men alike. In some cases, military women receive unwanted attention from men who subscribe to such a sexist ideology and even have to fend off aggressive advances.

Women's martial achievements are often downplayed, ignored or even attributed to men.

Echoing the social lack of recognition for women soldiers, many interviewees lamented the traditional image of femininity that still holds sway in Ukrainian society. The dominant assumption is that men's and women's roles are firmly divided. As a rule, men are associated with heroism, believed to be uniquely capable of winning victories on the frontlines against the nation's enemies; and the image of a woman is that of a mother, the keeper of her family's health. Women's martial achievements are often downplayed, ignored or even attributed to men. As one respondent explained, many people are "sincerely surprised when they find out" that she also participated in military actions (and holds the associated legal status), not only her husband.

Finally, doubts about women soldiers' professionalism suppress their career development opportunities and keep them from receiving the rewards they deserve. As reported by interviewees, a large number of women, both active soldiers and veterans, have had their decisions questioned just because of their gender. Very often, ideas and proposals voiced by women are deemed to be incorrect or inadequate and thus not taken into account. One veteran's reflection reinforces this point: "I have to fight for respect for myself because I am a woman veteran ... it is very outrageous."

Resocialization and Adaptation After Participating in the War

In the third year of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the number of demobilized soldiers returning to civilian life is increasing. This is mostly due to soldiers being injured, disabled or reaching the end of their service. Helping servicewomen and servicemen adapt to civilian life requires joint efforts from the state, businesses and civil society organizations, who must collaborate to organize a unified support system. Yet at present, despite the active integration of women in the military, there are no state-run social protection or support programs specifically aimed at women veterans. Instead, social and psychological reintegration programs are the same across genders, which overlooks the differences in gender roles, the divergent social expectations for women and men in civilian life, and the distinct ways men and women perceive themselves after the war and within their families.¹¹

Demobilized women face a number of psychological and economic problems. Firstly, when returning to civilian life, veterans often face post-traumatic stress disorders and difficulties in finding psychological support. This is because the heightened demand for psychological treatment cannot be met by the limited mental health resources in Ukraine.

¹¹ Poltava Wave, "Women at the Front: Sexism – This Is What Female Veterans Face When They Return from War," July 28, 2022, accessed July 1, 2024, <https://poltavawave.com.ua/p/zhinki-na-fronti-seksizm---tse-te-z-chim-stikaiutsia-veteranki-koli-povertaiutsia-z-viini-585146>.

While this creates problems for veterans of all genders, women also have specific psychological needs. For instance, women veterans' experiences of sexual harassment, sexism and public hostility generate further stress and anxiety that require psychological treatment. However, psychologists are rarely trained to diagnose and treat such gendered mental health problems.

Women veterans' experiences of sexual harassment, sexism and public hostility generate further stress and anxiety.

Secondly, regarding veterans' employment after war, interviewees emphasized the need for advanced training for veterans – and in particular for medics. They also called for the government to allow former combatants to defer registering with the employment center; at present, they are required to do so immediately after leaving the service. According to female veterans, the government must also provide appropriate training to the staff at employment centers so that they can understand the needs of women veterans and develop non-violent communication skills. At the same time, veterans need opportunities to retrain and potentially change their profession. While some veterans are physically unable to continue their old jobs, others may have lost interest or no longer believe in the meaning of their previous profession after fighting in a war. Two attractive possible career paths for former combatants, according to one focus group of veterans, are working for private military companies or serving as trainers and instructors for military units.¹²

How Women Veterans Can Adapt and Resocialize: NGOs as a Bridge

Since 2014, there have been NGOs actively working in Ukraine to unite and support women with combat experience. Themselves often founded by women veterans, these organizations mainly focus on the following activities: advocating for women's rights in the military; integrating women veterans into civilian life; implementing various educational projects; providing mentorship and psychological support; and forming a community of trust among servicewomen. However, since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, these organizations have shifted their priorities to supporting troops and returnees, thus scaling down many of the abovementioned activities.

A positive example of the efficacy of NGOs has been in countering the harassment of women veterans. Since the full-scale invasion began, many projects have been or are currently being implemented in Ukraine to support military women subjected to hate speech and gender-based violence. NGOs were the first to counteract discrimination and to make women's contributions to the war effort visible: back in 2014, the Invisible Battalion project was launched to study the integration of women into the security and defense sector.¹³ Publicizing women's contributions to Ukraine's fight for independence is an important step to counteract discrimination, as it deconstructs the very gender norms that normalize the subjugation of women.

At the same time, problems with NGO operations and their reach remain. NGOs particularly struggle to penetrate rural areas, even though this is where the majority of

¹² Veteran Fund, "Veterans See Their Professional Future in Ukraine," February 14, 2024, accessed July 1, 2024, <https://veteranfund.com.ua/2024/02/14/profesiine-maibutne-veteranivy-bachat-ioho-v-ukraini/>.

¹³ Invisible Battalion, accessed July 1, 2024, <https://invisiblebattalion.org/>.

female veterans live. This creates a rural–urban divide as a result of which many women veterans – who need real help on the ground – remain without NGO support. This means that there is a need to create small, localized organizations that can improve the situation in small towns and villages. Where they already exist, local NGOs must receive more funding, as most international donors are currently heavily biased toward supporting larger and better-established organizations in the major cities.

Recommendations

As described above, we can observe the significant work that has been done to resocialize and support veterans. However, many challenges clearly remain. Adaptation and resocialization activities by the state and by NGOs are too often focused on men and on urban areas. Additionally, Ukrainian society joins the government in valorizing men and women’s contributions to the national liberation struggle in very different ways, which creates biases and barriers for women veterans to be recognized and treated as equal to their male counterparts. Against this backdrop, I suggest implementing the following recommendations:

Train mental health professionals.

The insufficient number of public psychologists is a problem in Ukraine. Private treatment is unaffordable for most veterans, and foreign psychologists can rarely treat Ukrainian military women because of the language barrier and the differences in their mentalities. Therefore, Ukraine needs the help of foreign experts to train its own psychologists. Crucially, these psychologists must be sensitized to gendered psychological needs, such as those of women veterans who have experienced harassment. It should also be noted that many women would rather entrust their care to female psychologists. Therefore, it will be necessary to train female psychologists in particular.

Strengthen and expand campaigns to inform Ukrainians of women’s integral military contribution.

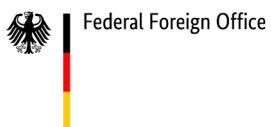
Sexist attitudes toward women veterans and women in the Ukrainian Armed Forces persist. This can be counteracted by designing and funding advocacy campaigns that promote the visibility of women veterans. Such public awareness campaigns can include panel discussions with celebrities and opinion leaders, as well as short videos, blogs, vlogs, and other events. The goal should be to honor the contribution of women veterans and to break stereotypes about women in the military by creating a positive image of servicewomen’s professionalism and dedication.

Counteract biases in financial support to NGOs.

NGOs vitally address needs of women veterans, including mental health support, that are too often neglected by the state. However, there is a bias in the distribution of attention and funding to big NGOs in major cities. This means that rural areas and small NGOs are mostly excluded from international actors’ funding. Accordingly, if international actors want to increase their support for NGOs that support women veterans, they first need to conduct a thorough mapping and needs assessment of small and local NGOs. Such a mapping is most likely to succeed if conducted by a Ukrainian think tank or researcher, who can visit small towns to identify and contact local organizations. Based on this mapping, international actors should then set up a funding scheme that distributes funds to local NGOs.

Support advocacy for women veterans.

While international actors have some degree of influence on the situation of women veterans in Ukraine, the Ukrainian government remains the key player that needs to implement changes. While international actors should respect the autonomy of Ukraine's government, they can support feminist advocacy NGOs and groups that put pressure on the government to better address the needs of women veterans. Another point of leverage for international actors is their funding for Ukraine's recovery. Much like in other (post-)war contexts, foreign governments and international financial institutions will make major contributions to financing Ukraine's recovery. So, whenever funding programs or policies related to veteran affairs are being decided, international actors should use their leverage to advocate for the inclusion of women veterans' perspectives.



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