

The Impact of Gendered Narratives in the Conflict in Ukraine

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August 2023

Gendered norms and identities shape everyone’s involvement in violence, including men, women, and nonbinary people. How groups, whether nonstate actors or states party to a conflict, construct norms, which includes expectations of femininity and masculinity, is crucial to understanding violence.¹ These constructions impact the roles imagined, the behaviors normalized, and the treatment of different gendered groups. Traditional gendered narratives have often been resurrected by all sides to the Ukraine conflict, with Russian President Vladimir Putin’s appeal to women, mothers, sisters, and fiancées to support their loved ones in battle; the image beamed around the world of a wounded, pregnant Ukrainian woman curled on a stretcher;² and comments made by the UK defense secretary that President Putin is suffering from “small man syndrome”³ providing just some examples.

Many of these narratives are flawed, reductive, and unhelpful for long-term conflict resolution. They also undermine advancements in the field of women, peace, and security. The presentation of men as defender-warriors and women as fragile and requiring protection contends with the reality of Ukrainian women taking up arms,⁴ masks the existence of other potentially vulnerable identity groups, and ultimately impedes the adoption of an inclusive approach to the conflict and any postconflict settlement.⁵ Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has proven much more adept at producing unconventional gendered war propaganda, refusing to denigrate Russian troops and emphasizing women’s active participation in the conflict. Yet, the imagery of female “gun-strapped blonde soldiers”⁶ still exceptionalizes women’s participation in the war. Meanwhile, there are some concerns that

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- 1 Elizabeth Pearson, Emily Winterbotham, and Katherine E. Brown, *Countering Violent Extremism: Making Gender Matter* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 33.
 - 2 “Ukraine War: Pregnant Woman and Baby Die After Hospital Shelled,” BBC News, 14 March 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-60734706>.
 - 3 David Hughes, “Vladimir Putin Has ‘Small Man Syndrome,’ Defence Secretary Ben Wallace Claims,” *Independent* (UK), 29 June 2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/vladimir-putin-ben-wallace-boris-johnson-ukraine-president-b2111840.html>.
 - 4 Jessica Trisko Darden, “Ukrainian Wartime Policy and the Construction of Women’s Combatant Status,” *Women’s Studies International Forum*, vol. 96 (January–February 2023), p. 4.
 - 5 Katharine A.M. Wright, “Where Is Women, Peace and Security? NATO’s Response to the Russia-Ukraine War,” *European Journal of Politics and Gender* 5, no. 2 (June 2022): 275–277, 277.
 - 6 Azadeh Moaveni and Chitra Nagarajan, “Another Deeply Gendered War Is Being Waged in Ukraine,” International Crisis Group, 15 March 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/eastern-europe/ukraine/another-deeply-gendered-war-being-waged-ukraine>.

Ukrainian women are not treated as equal to men in terms of military mobilization.⁷

This brief analyzes the ways in which gendered narratives have been employed during the war in Ukraine. It reflects on the traditional use of gendered narratives in the field of security and draws on the author's research on the role of gender in the field of terrorism.⁸ It then explores how these narratives have been deployed by parties to the conflict in Ukraine and the implications of this approach. It does not provide a detailed gendered analysis of the Ukraine conflict or a comprehensive linguistic analysis of the various traditional and social media datasets available. Instead, it aims to demonstrate the hypothesis that gendered narratives used in the conflict and security space, including by those working on counterterrorism issues, often promote flawed understandings about the nature and impact of violence, which can have counterproductive policy implications. The recommendations are aimed at policymakers working in the fields of conflict, security, and terrorism.

THE POWER OF GENDERED NARRATIVES

How leaders use strategic narratives is widely accepted as a soft power in the realm of global politics, conflict,

and terrorism.⁹ Strategic narratives are a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of international politics and a tool to articulate a position on a specific issue and to shape the perceptions, beliefs, and behavior of domestic and international actors.¹⁰ Their “narrators” are primarily elites (government leaders, security experts, consultants, policy analysts, etc.) who construct and communicate them to the general public through speeches, press conferences, official documents, and more.¹¹ Narratives have grown in significance in particular due to the introduction of social media, which provides another arena to demonstrate power, critique, and even mockery.¹²

Politicians routinely employ gendered metaphors in foreign policy legitimation.¹³ These rely on often preexisting essentialist understandings of women in national culture and mythos and on stereotypes prevalent in the foreign policy and security realms, which are shaped by and assumed to be the realm of men and male actors. This contributes to a gendered framing in which masculinity is superior to femininity.¹⁴ Military institutions, among others, may present women as victims, “damsels in distress,” in need of protection and as ancillary to conflict due to their physically “inferior” attributes and maternal or peaceful disposition.¹⁵ Countless examples of these narratives can be found, throughout history, more recently deployed

7 Darden, “Ukrainian Wartime Policy and the Construction of Women’s Combatant Status,” p. 7.

8 Pearson, Winterbotham, and Brown, *Countering Violent Extremism*; Emily Winterbotham and Elizabeth Pearson, “The Radical Milieu: A Methodological Approach to Conducting Research on Violent Extremism,” RESOLVE Network, May 2020, https://www.resolve.net.org/system/files/2020-05/RVSE_RVSeries_WinterbothamPearson_May2020.pdf; Elizabeth Pearson and Emily Winterbotham, “Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalisation: A Milieu Approach,” *RUSI Journal* 162, no. 3 (June/July 2017): 60–72, <https://rusi.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/03071847.2017.1353251>; Emily Winterbotham and Elizabeth Pearson, “Different Cities, Shared Stories: A Five-Country Study Challenging Assumptions Around Muslim Women and CVE Interventions,” *RUSI Journal* 161, no. 5 (October/November 2016): 54–65, <https://rusi.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/03071847.2016.1253377>.

9 Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon, and Ben O’Loughlin, “Strategic Narrative: A New Means to Understand Soft Power,” *Media, War & Conflict* 7, no. 1 (2014): 70–84; Andrew Glazzard and Alastair Reed, “Beyond Prevention: The Role of Strategic Communications Across the Four Pillars of Counterterrorism Strategy,” *RUSI Journal* 165, no. 1 (2020): 74–88, 74.

10 Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, “Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations,” working paper, 2012, p. 8, https://pure.qub.ac.uk/files/147369822/Forging_the_World_Working_Paper_2012_Final.pdf; Irina Khaldarova and Mervi Pantti, “Fake News: The Narrative Battle Over the Ukrainian Conflict,” *Journalism Practice* 10, no. 7 (2016): 6.

11 Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, “Forging the World,” p. 5.

12 Julian Schmid, “(Captain) America in Crisis: Popular Digital Culture and the Negotiation of Americanness,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 33, no. 5 (2020): 690–712, 692.

13 Elizaveta Gaufman, “Damsels in Distress: Fragile Masculinity in Digital War,” *Media, War & Conflict*, 2022, pp. 1–2, https://scholar.google.com/scholar_url?url=https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/17506352221130271&hl=en&sa=T&oi=ucasa&ct=ufr&ei=3om0ZM6BCMaMy9YPhvKA-A4&scisig=ABFr3wPpsKu3gEBkTLG3PIQOnWQ.

14 Meredith Conroy, *Masculinity, Media, and the American Presidency* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 74.

15 Gaufman, “Damsels in Distress,” pp. 4–6.

by policymakers and terrorist groups alike during the “Global War on Terror.” The international intervention in Afghanistan was accompanied by images such as the liberation of Afghan women from the Taliban, indelibly associating the two ideas in the public imagination.¹⁶ Narratives of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant targeted men as soldiers of war while messages for women focused on their roles as mothers, sisters, and lovers. Similar images and narratives appear in the development field¹⁷ and are visible even in the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.¹⁸

These narratives are underpinned by the assumption that physical strength is associated with masculinity, which trumps the alternative, physical weakness, which is associated with femininity¹⁹ or effeminate men.²⁰ Masculine men are often described as war-fighters possessing traits such as leadership, heroism, physical dominance, and aggression.²¹ Similar narratives have also been deployed by violent extremist groups drawing on notions of violent masculinity, including feelings of entitlement and supremacy, and gendered grievances, such as shame and emasculation, in their propaganda to recruit and retain committed members.²²

REDUCTIVE OR JUST FALSE

Narratives have implications, a fact that is often poorly understood by policymakers. If a strategic narrative is a tool for leaders to shape perceptions, beliefs, and

behaviors, it is understandable that it is not always entirely accurate and may even be harmful. As a result, the rhetoric can clash with the local reality. Justifying interventions in Afghanistan on the rationale of the liberation of Muslim women reflected ignorance of critical information about Muslim women, Afghanistan, the Taliban, and the realities of the U.S. invasion.²³

Similarly, Russian foreign policy propagated through mass media has presented Ukraine as a neo-Nazi state in need of defeating. The war is therefore presented as a holy crusade in defense of the motherland. In fact, Russian leaders use “motherland” when it is something to be protected, “fatherland” when the situation calls for aggression. Russian narratives intimate Ukraine’s supposedly subordinate role in geopolitical terms by describing Ukraine as a “loose woman in need of saving by its older brother.”²⁴ Ukrainian male politicians are presented as “sissy boys” and no match for “real men” of pro-Russian politics.²⁵ President Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov are presented as the masculine ideal, compared to the seemingly deviant male (sissy boys) and female protagonists (damsels in distress), to legitimize the war.²⁶

These narratives have been undermined by unfolding events on the battlefield and challenged by President Zelenskyy’s success at presenting his country as “a progressive, gender-egalitarian, LGBTQ-friendly,

16 Pearson, Winterbotham, and Brown, *Countering Violent Extremism*, p. 47.

17 The Millennium Development Goals have been criticized for equating gender with women in biological terms and as different from men—“more hardworking, more caring, more responsible.” Andrea Cornwall and Althea-Maria Rivas, “From ‘Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment’ to Global Justice: Reclaiming a Transformative Agenda for Gender and Development,” *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (February 2015): 396–415, 399, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Andrea-Cornwall/publication/274179129_From_gender_equality_and_women's_empowerment_to_global_justice_reclaiming_a_transformative_agenda_for_gender_and_development_Andrea_Cornwall_Althea-Maria_Rivas_Third_World_Quarterly_Vol_36_Iss_2_201/links/56ac91ba08ae43a3980c56ac/From-gender-equality-and-womens-empowerment-to-global-justice-reclaiming-a-transformative-agenda-for-gender-and-development-Andrea-Cornwall-Althea-Maria-Rivas-Third-World-Quarterly-Vol-36-Iss-2-20.pdf.

18 The conception of women as more peaceful is also implicit in the WPS agenda. Laura J. Shepherd, “Power and Authority in the Production of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325,” *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (June 2008): 383–404.

19 Conroy, *Masculinity, Media, and the American Presidency*, p. 74.

20 Gaufman, “Damsels in Distress,” pp. 6–7.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

22 Alexandra Phelan, “Special Issue Introduction for Terrorism, Gender and Women: Toward an Integrated Research Agenda,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 46, no. 4 (2023): 353–361.

23 Pearson, Winterbotham, and Brown, *Countering Violent Extremism*, p. 47.

24 Gaufman, “Damsels in Distress,” p. 1.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

26 *Ibid.*

21st-century democratic power.”²⁷ These narratives also rarely acknowledge that conflict creates a range of lived experiences for different identity groups.²⁸ Popular Western narratives referring to the horrors facing women and children in every address urging support of the conflict²⁹ are not the full picture. Some women may indeed be more vulnerable during conflict, particularly those who are from ethnic minorities or poorer communities. Yet, people with disabilities may also lose access to vital infrastructure or public services, while sexual violence toward all people is exacerbated by conflict. LGBTQ+ groups also face risks in this conflict. President Putin has mentioned “gender freedoms” more than once to justify Russia’s war against Ukraine and simultaneously crack down on its own citizens. Over the last decade, gender and LGBTQ+ issues have become central targets of repression in Russia aimed at protecting President Putin’s regime from perceived domestic threats.³⁰

Gendered stereotypes depicting women as civilian victims also clash with the reality of Ukrainian women’s active participation in conflicts.³¹ Women became eligible for the draft in December 2021, and by 2022, more than 13,000 women were assigned combat status for their service in Donetsk and Luhansk. It is unknown how many women currently serve in the armed forces, although estimates range from 10 to 25 percent, but there is evidence of a growing recognition of women’s ability to contribute to the war effort in

a variety of ways.³² This gives Ukraine a way to buttress its military in numerical terms relative to Russia, which confines the majority of women in its military to noncombat roles.³³ Approximately 41,000 women serve in the Russian military and constitute 4.3 percent of active duty forces.³⁴

President Zelenskyy’s narratives have also resisted conventional wartime militarized sexist stereotypes. One analyst observed that “[r]ather than denigrate the Russians by implying they mistreat their women or demonizing their men as monsters, for example, he has blamed the war on Putin directly.”³⁵ First lady Olena Zelenska’s use of social media includes pictures of women in military uniform in the trenches or women as part of rescue crews with the caption “Our new opposition has a female face to it.”³⁶ Women combatants are also visible in international media coverage. Headlines shout, “Women Rush to Ukraine’s Defence” and “Ukrainian Women Stand Strong Against Russian Invaders.”³⁷

If women are not purely damsels in distress, the alternative narrative of gun-strapped blonde soldiers is just as reductive. These types of images in Western and Ukrainian media emphasize the significance of Ukrainian women fighting, which reinforces the notion that women’s participation in wartime violence is exceptional and therefore newsworthy.³⁸ Women’s participation in armed conflict therefore becomes

27 Charli Carpenter, “Male-Only Conscription Will Undermine Ukraine’s War Effort,” *World Politics Review*, 11 March 2022.

28 Christine Chinkin, Mary Kaldor, and Punam Yadav, “Gender and New Wars,” *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development* 9, no. 1 (2020): 1–13, 4.

29 Moaveni and Nagarajan, “Another Deeply Gendered War Is Being Waged in Ukraine.”

30 Valerie Sperling et al., “Vladimir Putin, the Czar of Macho Politics, Is Threatened by Gender and Sexuality Rights,” *Conversation*, 11 April 2022, <https://theconversation.com/vladimir-putin-the-czar-of-macho-politics-is-threatened-by-gender-and-sexuality-rights-180473>.

31 Darden, “Ukrainian Wartime Policy and the Construction of Women’s Combatant Status,” p. 2.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

33 Carpenter, “Male-Only Conscription Will Undermine Ukraine’s War Effort.”

34 Darden, “Ukrainian Wartime Policy and the Construction of Women’s Combatant Status,” p. 3.

35 Carpenter, “Male-Only Conscription Will Undermine Ukraine’s War Effort.”

36 Kristin Skare Orgeret and Bruce Mutsvaio, “Ukraine Coverage Shows Gender Roles Are Changing on the Battlefield and in the Newsroom,” *Conversation*, 22 March 2022, <https://theconversation.com/ukraine-coverage-shows-gender-roles-are-changing-on-the-battlefield-and-in-the-newsroom-179601>.

37 “Heroic Spirits: Women Rush to Ukraine’s Defence,” *Agence France-Pres*, 11 March 2022; Siobhán O’Grady and Kostiantyn Khudov, “Ukrainian Women Stand Strong Against Russian Invaders,” *Washington Post*, 18 March 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/18/ukraine-russia-women-war/>.

38 Darden, “Ukrainian Wartime Policy and the Construction of Women’s Combatant Status,” p. 1.

characterized as abnormal or even “monstrous.”³⁹ Ukrainian women, however, express similar motivations as men for fighting, that of defense, preservation, survival, and continuity of the state.⁴⁰ The Ukrainian military’s claim of being a champion of gender equity also falls short of reality, evidenced by the leadership’s refusal to allow women into senior ranks and most notably by restricting women from command positions outside of women-specific roles⁴¹ or placing them in roles that are distanced from actual combat.⁴² Female soldiers also complain of shortages of gear in appropriate sizes and lack of access to military education and training programs.⁴³

Military recruitment posters and politicians’ adoption of military-style clothing reflect that the government’s more recent efforts to mobilize its citizens for war are infused with masculine narratives.⁴⁴ Focusing on men’s masculine status as soldiers, protectors, or fathers “reinforces masculinist and heteronormative gender ideologies.”⁴⁵ This focus ignores the fact that, despite universal forced conscription, many men do not wish to fight and have left the country illegally or are hiding from local military recruiters in plain sight among the roughly 7.1 million people who are internally displaced, 40 percent of whom are male.⁴⁶ Those who have left legally because, for instance, they have three or more children are subject to sexist ridicule from fellow Ukrainians and often have trouble renting housing and getting work because landlords and employers may not trust their military exemptions.⁴⁷ Meanwhile,

men also experience sexual violence during conflict but may deliberately use words such as “abuse” or “torture” rather than recount the sexual aspect of the violence they have incurred for fear that this may compromise their masculinity. Male sexual violence disturbs gender relations for its tendency to strip men of their masculine status as soldier or protector and deliberately feminizes them or labels them as homosexuals in the eye of the perpetrator. This, in turn, further “feminizes conflict-related sexual violence, trauma and vulnerability.”⁴⁸

INCREASING THE INSECURITY OF MEN AND WOMEN

A greater concern is the clash of President Zelenskyy’s progressive narratives with certain Ukrainian military policy. “[F]orced universal conscription of men in Ukraine and Ukraine’s breakaway regions of Donetsk and Luhansk [is] resurrecting binaries of men as defender-warriors and women as fragile and needing protection.”⁴⁹ Although exemptions to conscription were permitted,⁵⁰ an immediate effect of this provision was that refugee flows from Ukraine overrepresented women.⁵¹

This has serious human rights implications. There are indications that Russian forces appear to be operating under the assumption that all males are combatants,⁵² even though unmobilized men retain their civilian status under international law.⁵³ Men are

39 Ibid., p. 2.

40 Miglé Lapénaité, “Motives for Women’s Participation in Military Conflicts: The Ukrainian Case,” *Politologija* 103, no. 3 (2021): 75–108, 100.

41 Darden, “Ukrainian Wartime Policy and the Construction of Women’s Combatant Status,” p. 3.

42 Olga Olikier, “Fighting While Female: How Gender Dynamics Are Shaping the War in Ukraine,” *Foreign Affairs*, 21 November 2022; Darden, “Ukrainian Wartime Policy and the Construction of Women’s Combatant Status,” p. 5.

43 Olikier, “Fighting While Female.”

44 Darden, “Ukrainian Wartime Policy and the Construction of Women’s Combatant Status,” p. 3.

45 Élise Féron, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men: Masculinities and Power in Conflict Zones* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

46 Darden, “Ukrainian Wartime Policy and the Construction of Women’s Combatant Status,” p. 6.

47 Olikier, “Fighting While Female.”

48 Chinkin, Kaldor, and Yadav, “Gender and New Wars,” p. 8.

49 Moaveni and Nagarajan, “Another Deeply Gendered War Is Being Waged in Ukraine.”

50 Some exceptions were permitted, including for men whose conscription had been deferred, who were deemed medically unfit for service, who were the sole parent of a minor child or children, who had three or more minor-aged children, who were permanent residents abroad, or who were studying abroad. Darden, “Ukrainian Wartime Policy and the Construction of Women’s Combatant Status,” p. 6.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid., pp. 1–2.

53 Carpenter, “Male-Only Conscription Will Undermine Ukraine’s War Effort.”

disproportionately represented in the civilian casualties of the war. Of the 6,595 adult civilian fatalities where the individual's sex was known, 2,575 were identified as men while 1,767 were identified as women.⁵⁴ This pattern was witnessed during the Bosnian war, the most infamous example being the Srebrenica massacre of 7,000 unarmed men and boys. A true gender-integrated military would deconstruct the idea that the distinction between civilian and combatant is based on gender.⁵⁵

The declaration of martial law has also reinforced the ambiguous position of women who want to serve and the traditional gender norms that position women primarily as victims of rather than participants in armed conflict. This has implications because it determines the international legal regime under which women are protected and affects their access to wartime and postwar resources such as rations, veterans' benefits, and rehabilitation programs.⁵⁶ Similar concerns have been noted in the terrorism field where experts have observed serious implications in the prosecution, risk assessment, and management of women violent extremists in prison (e.g., more lenient sentences for female returnees or insufficient facilities in prisons for women, especially for mothers). Women may also struggle to access rehabilitation and reintegration programs.⁵⁷

UNDERMINING THE POTENTIAL FOR RESOLVING CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE

The burden of responsibility for conflict resolution does not fall on narratives alone. As one international relations expert observed, "Conflict generated by aggressive or militant leaders with vested interests in escalating conflict is generally not amenable to reduction unless intentions change."⁵⁸ Yet, changing images and narratives are part of conflict resolution.⁵⁹ Policymakers and commentators point to soft power as one way to reduce tensions, mitigate conflict, and find common ground in international affairs.⁶⁰

Attempts by some Western leaders to undermine President Putin through ridicule are therefore contentious. President Putin is pivotal to Russian narratives. Political legitimacy is centered around a patriarchal understanding of President Putin as a hypermasculine "real" man.⁶¹ In June 2022, UK Defence Secretary Ben Wallace hit out at President Putin's "macho" view of the world, which he said was based on "small man syndrome."⁶² His comments came after UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson stated that President Putin's war in Ukraine was a "perfect example of toxic masculinity."⁶³ At the Group of Seven summit around the same time, leaders also mocked President Putin over his infamous bare-chested picture on a horse.⁶⁴ Deploying belittling gendered narratives may rally domestic audiences but could constrain political action in the longer run.⁶⁵ In fact, ridiculing President Putin feeds into Russia's own

54 Darden, "Ukrainian Wartime Policy and the Construction of Women's Combatant Status," pp. 1–2.

55 Carpenter, "Male-Only Conscription Will Undermine Ukraine's War Effort."

56 Darden, "Ukrainian Wartime Policy and the Construction of Women's Combatant Status," pp. 1–2.

57 Emily Winterbotham and Carola García-Calvo, "Quarterly Research Review: Radicalised Women," Radicalisation Awareness Network Policy Support, 1 December 2022, <https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-12/Quarterly%20research%20review-radicalised%20women.pdf>.

58 Janice Gross Stein, "Image, Identity, and the Resolution of Violent Conflict," in *Turbulent Peace: The Challenges of Managing International Conflict*, ed. Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall (Washington: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 1996).

59 *Ibid.*, p. 198.

60 Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin, "Strategic Narrative," p. 72.

61 Gaufman, "Damsels in Distress," pp. 6–7.

62 Hughes, "Vladimir Putin Has 'Small Man Syndrome,' Defence Secretary Ben Wallace Claims."

63 Adam Durbin, "Ukraine War: Johnson Says If Putin Were a Woman He Would Not Have Invaded," BBC News, 29 June 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-61976526>; Moaveni and Nagarajan, "Another Deeply Gendered War Is Being Waged in Ukraine."

64 David Propper, "G7 Leaders Mock Vladimir Putin Over Shirtless Horse-Riding Picture," *New York Post*, 26 June 2022, <https://nypost.com/2022/06/26/g7-leaders-mock-vladimir-putin-over-shirtless-horse-riding-pic/>.

65 Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin, "Strategic Narrative," p. 72.

narratives that the West does not respect or understand Russia, which strengthens the Russian leader's position. If conflict is to be reduced and resolved, hostile imagery eventually must change.⁶⁶

Neither are Russian narratives intrinsically linking militarism with masculinity helpful.⁶⁷ Male endorsement of traditional masculinity can be associated with negative outcomes in relation to conflict resolution. It follows that men endorsing beliefs about manhood might avoid the use of conflict resolution strategies perceived as feminine.⁶⁸ The Ukraine war has also witnessed a return to gendered narratives about NATO as a “muscular military power,” with “less attention paid to the human stories underpinning the war, particularly the voices of Ukrainian women and their agency, or a concern with how to reach beyond audiences primarily interested in military power.”⁶⁹ The WPS agenda has been entirely missing from NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg's briefings following the numerous high-level meetings and summits that NATO has held in response to the war.⁷⁰ Despite commitments in policy, the United States, NATO, and the European Union have done little to demonstrate the mainstreaming of gender in addressing the conflict.⁷¹

This undermines the possibility of a lasting, inclusive peace reflective of the whole of Ukrainian society. Women and other marginalized groups have been largely sidelined from real decision-making at national and global levels in the conflict.⁷² An acknowledgment of the gendered impact of armed conflict, as well as the impact on LGBTQ+ communities, is also missing. This draws attention to what many feminists had feared: the disjuncture between the rhetoric and the

reality of the global commitment to the WPS agenda. As a result, certain groups and tools that NATO has at its disposal to support a more inclusive response to the war are being sidelined.⁷³

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Some steps have been taken, particularly on the Ukrainian side, to move away from conventional, stereotyped gendered narratives in the conflict. This is reflective of the reality on the ground, which has mobilized the entire Ukrainian population against the Russian invasion. Yet, reductive gendered narratives are still prevalent, including among NATO and other Western actors. These narratives have real-world implications that can undermine the safety and security of Ukrainian men and women and are an impediment to longer-term peace and stability in Ukraine and elsewhere.

In the terrorism field, the value of narratives and strategic communications to counterterrorism is widely accepted by governments. In academia, research has increasingly focused on how terrorists communicate and what works in response.⁷⁴ In part inspired by a desire not to reproduce the narratives of terrorist groups, pushback has been seen in the counterterrorism field. Policymakers and practitioners increasingly recognize the importance of avoiding gender misconceptions and stereotypes,⁷⁵ which can ignore women's capabilities to contribute to counterterrorism and countering violent extremism (CVE) efforts in a range of areas, including as policy shapers,

66 Gross Stein, “Image, Identity, and the Resolution of Violent Conflict,” p. 201.

67 See Moaveni and Nagarajan, “Another Deeply Gendered War Is Being Waged in Ukraine.”

68 Candice A. Reardon and Kaymarlin Govender, “Shaping Up: The Relationship Between Traditional Masculinity, Conflict Resolution and Body Image Among Adolescent Boys in South Africa,” *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies* 6, no. 1 (March 2011): 78–87, 79.

69 UN Women and CARE International, “Rapid Gender Analysis of Ukraine,” 4 May 2022, <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Rapid-Gender-Analysis-of-Ukraine-en.pdf>.

70 Wright, “Where Is Women, Peace and Security?” p. 276.

71 Moaveni and Nagarajan, “Another Deeply Gendered War Is Being Waged in Ukraine.”

72 Ibid.

73 Wright, “Where Is Women, Peace and Security?” p. 276.

74 Glazzard and Reed, “Beyond Prevention,” p. 74.

75 Global Counterterrorism Forum, *Good Practices on Women and Countering Violent Extremism*, n.d., https://cve-kenya.org/media/library/GCTF_Undated_Good_Practices_on_Women_and_CVE.pdf.

educators, community members, and activists,⁷⁶ and acknowledge that a better understanding of the relationship among gender, terrorism, and counterterrorism can help improve counterterrorism and CVE efforts. The Islamic State group's successful recruitment of women has also challenged perceptions that women are always vulnerable, peaceful, or moderate.⁷⁷ This progress is just one of the reasons why it is disappointing that parties to the Ukraine conflict are deploying traditional gendered narratives.

The following conclusions and recommendations draw on some of the lessons from the counterterrorism space over the last two decades and are aimed at policymakers and practitioners involved not only in Ukraine but in the wider field of conflict and security.

- Leaders should avoid using gender-stereotyped narratives to legitimize military operations. With regard to Ukraine, gendered narratives may strengthen President Putin's justification for the invasion while ridicule may enhance Russia's claims that the West does not respect or understand Russia. In the field of terrorism, policymakers need to avoid emulating the narratives deployed by violent extremist groups and promote women's active role in efforts to counter terrorism and prevent and counter violent extremism. Reductive narratives are damaging to people of all genders and potentially undermine longer-term conflict resolution and efforts to defeat terrorist groups.
- Policymakers could draw on the Ukrainian experience to normalize women's participation in conflict and to emphasize that unmobilized men are civilians. A gender-integrated approach to security must deconstruct the idea that there is a difference between civilians and combatants based on gender. This normalization also needs to address

the gender norm stereotypes that are often reproduced around women's participation in violence and conflict. Additionally, the narrative normalization must be accompanied by the expansion of resources for female or other often marginalized participants, including ensuring access to rehabilitation and reintegration packages for women combatants and women terrorists.


- Policymakers and media should avoid exceptionalizing women's participation in the conflict. How the media portrays women's participation in conflict and terrorism can influence public opinion. For example, media attention on the case of Shamima Begum in the United Kingdom entrenched the public, possibly political viewpoint that Begum was "exceptional" and that "extraordinary" measures should be taken against her, including the deprivation of British citizenship.⁷⁸ Media training is key to combating sensationalism and polarization while maintaining independence and authenticity.
- Policymakers should adopt an intersectional approach to understanding conflict and terrorism. Countries such as Canada, Finland, France, Spain, and Sweden say they have a feminist foreign policy. Yet, mentions of the deeply gendered harms inflicted by this war and how to better protect people of all genders have been limited.⁷⁹ Greater efforts are needed to identify the specific humanitarian needs and the lived experiences of all individuals experiencing conflict and terrorism-related violence in order to more fully account for how inequalities of all kinds influence how and why people engage in violence and how they are impacted by it.
- Despite commitments in policy, the United States, NATO, and the EU have done little to demonstrate the inclusion of gender in addressing the

76 Seran De Leede, "Women and Women's Organization in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE)," in *Enhancing Women's Roles in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE)*, ed. Sara Zeiger et al. (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2019), pp. 88–94.

77 Pearson, Winterbotham, and Brown, *Countering Violent Extremism*, p. 368.

78 Ibid., p. 303. Shamima Begum is one of three East London schoolgirls who traveled to Syria in 2015 to support the Islamic State group. She was born in the UK to parents of Bangladeshi heritage and was 15 when she left. Her citizenship was stripped on national security grounds in 2019.

79 Moaveni and Nagarajan, "Another Deeply Gendered War Is Being Waged in Ukraine."



conflict.⁸⁰ NATO should publicly acknowledge the relevance of a gender perspective and uphold commitments to UN Security Council Resolution 1325 beyond emphasis on the deployment of women as part of NATO's Response Force.⁸¹ NATO should

also explore the use of instruments, such as the NATO Civil Society Advisor Panel, to reach out to Ukrainian civil society and ensure a diversity of voices are heard.⁸²

80 Ibid.

81 UN Security Council, S/RES/1325, 31 October 2000.

82 Wright, "Where Is Women, Peace and Security?" p. 276.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Global Center on Cooperative Security gratefully acknowledges the support for this project provided by the government of Norway. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Global Center or its advisory council, board, or sponsors or the government of Norway.

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The Global Center on Cooperative Security works to achieve lasting security by advancing inclusive, human rights-based policies, partnerships, and practices to address the root causes of violent extremism. We focus on four mutually reinforcing objectives:

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- Advancing human rights and the rule of law to prevent and respond to violent extremism.
- Combating illicit finance that enables criminal and violent extremist organizations.
- Promoting multilateral cooperation and rights-based standards in counterterrorism.

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