

Another 8 March at war: Ukrainian feminists' perspectives

Wednesday 29 March 2023, by [TURENKO Kateryna](#) (Date first published: 11 March 2023).

A year after the start of the war and on the eve of Women's Day, Kateryna Turenko spoke to several feminist activists to show what they have been doing against this backdrop and what challenges they face.

In mid-February, [a bill](#) was posted on the Parliament's website calling for the cancellation of the 8 March celebrations, intending to introduce Ukrainian Women's Day instead. Claiming the economic losses derived from 8 March being a bank holiday and the need to "move away from the Soviet legacy", the politicians blatantly ignored the political significance of the day which draws attention to the struggle for women's rights.

Ukrainian feminists have been fighting for political, economic and personal rights and opportunities for women for many years. They have drawn attention to gender-based violence, the gender pay gap and the devaluation of reproductive work. By no means did these problems disappear with the war and crisis: on the contrary, they increased and created new challenges for the feminist movement.

We spoke with grassroots activists to learn more about the status of women during the war, the problems and challenges faced by the feminist movement, and the threats that may become relevant to Ukrainian society when the war ends.

How does the war affect gender inequality?

One of the harshest problems Ukrainian society faced after 24 February 2022 was [sexual violence](#) perpetrated by Russian soldiers.

"Ukrainian women are under constant threat of war crimes like sexual violence. We can only imagine what is going on in the occupied territories," says "Feminist Workshop" member Anastasia Yurchenko.

Beyond the direct physical dangers of bombing and violence, war leads to harsh socio-economic ramifications. [Close to the battlefield](#), the population often ends up on the brink of humanitarian catastrophe but the problem has intensified everywhere. Vulnerable populations are the first to suffer for it as funding for the social sphere is being cut.

"Lowering salaries in the civil service affects women who are a large part of the state workforce at different levels (nurses, doctors, teachers, bureaucrats). The loss of money for the pre-school sector implies an additional burden on women. With the lack of funding, some programmes against violence may be restricted, etc.," explains Anastasia.

Yana, an activist of the "Bilkis" initiative, also emphasises that the war increases economic inequality: "it increases the burden on the care sector which is mainly composed of women. There

are women who carry unpaid or underpaid reproductive work on their shoulders."Most of the household chores fall on women. If there is no gas, electricity, water and heating, they face problems: how to bathe the baby, cook a meal, clean the house and so on," Yana believes.

In the midst of these problems there are optimistic legislative changes taking place: the ratification of the Istanbul Convention for which Ukrainian feminists had been fighting for years, the intensification of work on the UN resolution, "Women. Peace. Security."

"If we look at this national level, we see that European integration has become a positive influence and a lever for the state. They can no longer ignore the issue of gender equality," says Anastasia Chebotaryova, a member of "Feminist House".

UN resolution 1325 "Women. Peace. Security", she believes, is very important during war: "This resolution is significant as it recognises that war affects men and women differently and focuses on security measures that counter violence and the inclusion of women in peace implementation processes. Ukraine became the first country to ratify resolution 1325 in wartime. The large-scale invasion became the stimulus to update the national action plan. Before, this was mainly part of the agenda of activists and governments in the eastern and central regions of Ukraine, now we see new coalitions emerging in all Ukrainian regions," concludes the activist.

Alisa Shampanska of Femsolution sees positive changes in the visibility of women in the Ukrainian armed forces and the use of feminine forms of nouns at the state level.

What are the prospects for the post-war feminist movement?

Human rights defender and leader of the Women's Perspectives centre Marta Chumalo identifies four threats that may become relevant in the near future. The first and most important: there is an attack on reproductive rights. She believes that there are likely to be attempts to ban abortions, appealing to the arguments of the loss of life on the battlefield and the deaths caused by bombing, as well as the fact that many Ukrainian women have left the country. Another threat is the strengthening of far-right discourse that often goes hand in hand with attacks on women's rights. The radicalisation of nationalism is a frequent consequence of wars. There may be an increase in domestic violence, caused by men returning from the front psychologically traumatised. There is also a risk that key decisions on recovery and reconstruction at the highest level will be made mainly by men.

Anastasia Chebotareva agrees that the [needs of women and girls](#) may be ignored in post-war reconstruction processes: "it will be relevant for the reconstruction of cities, of care infrastructure, of basic infrastructure. It is crucial to start looking now for ways to be included in the process. Non-governmental organisations have an opportunity to get the support of their international partners, says the activist.

Ukrainian society is already in need of rehabilitation programmes for veterans that help them deal with both physical and psychological trauma: "implementing a rehabilitation and aid system is a major challenge. The feminist movement can also participate in this," believes Alisa Shampanska.

Marta Chumalo points out the threat of the strengthening of traditional gender roles of both men and women: "behaviour that is outside the framework defined by these norms is often not approved by other people. Whether it is men who avoid mobilisation or women affected by domestic violence by demobilised men who are asking for help - they face condemnation and lack of understanding. This in turn magnifies gender differences."

Which feminist practices have been rendered impossible because of the war and which

have emerged in their place?

According to activists, since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, most feminist initiatives have launched humanitarian aid campaigns, thus slightly shifting the focus of their activities. For example, the “Women’s Perspectives” centre has already set up seven shelters for women from vulnerable populations: elderly internally displaced women, women with mental disorders, mothers of many children, disabled women and women victims of gender-based violence. The Feminist House initiative has also focused heavily on the distribution of humanitarian aid. “These are often hard-to-reach places that no large humanitarian fund will reach - villages, temporarily occupied territories, areas near the front line. We have created a wide network of volunteers and partners - In Kramatorsk, Kherson, Zaporizhzhya and in the Zaporizhzhya region and the one in Kharkiv” says Anastasia Chebotareva.

Activist Ivanka from the “Bilkis” initiative also explains that their activities are mainly directed towards low-income and homeless people: “we are currently working on two projects with a social orientation. One is the “Space of Things”, where you can bring something you no longer need and take something you do need. The “Bird Feeder” is aimed at low-income and homeless people. We are a feminist intersectional initiative and that makes us believe that gender inequality connects with other forms of inequality such as economic. We also plan to organise a series of film screenings about women and war and do educational tiktoks about feminism in Ukraine.”

Thus, involvement in humanitarian aid does not mean that feminists stop speaking out on the issues of gender inequality. On the contrary, it is by helping people that they are able to increase their audience. Alisa Shampanska also tells how “FemSolution” combines humanitarian and educational activities: “now, our main activities in these areas are through informative influence on our public on social networks. We provide humanitarian aid to women and their families and people subscribe to our social networks because they want to receive help, not because of their feminist views. So we started creating educational images: for example, we participated in the “16 days against violence” campaign and convinced people to vote on the state online platform Diya to keep March 8 a bank holiday, so that we could continue the protests.”

Activists have [left the country](#) and are advocating for more support to the Ukrainian community: “I am currently living abroad and my main activity is to seek international solidarity, spread true information and fight against propaganda. Throughout this year, I have been working remotely with different communities within the country, with activities ranging from seeking and securing financial aid to organising closed events focused on reflection, says “Social Movement” activist Valeriya Zubatenko.

Solidarity and cooperation - in Ukraine and abroad

Most feminists agree that since the beginning of the large-scale invasion, the ties between grassroots feminist collectives have strengthened.

“When we are setting up a shelter or a humanitarian programme, we contact more experienced activists and get help. If, for example, we need nappies for the children in a shelter, we write to activists’ chat groups and find what we need,” shares Anastasia Yurchenko.

There are dozens of examples of cooperation between different movements that are not limited to these joint efforts of feminists but include other types of activists and the LGBT+ community. The activist believes that society has shown many positive cases that include influential discussions on violence against women and objectification, the status of women in the armed forces and a powerful volunteer movement that includes feminists. On the other hand, it shares stories of [hostile attitudes](#)

from representatives of municipal authorities.

“Conservative MPs put pressure on our organisation, aggressively interfered with our work. Unfortunately, the authorities did not offer us any proper solution to this problem,” she adds.

Anastasia Chebotaryova underlines that Ukrainian feminists have significantly had much more attention from the international community. “We are invited to conferences, become heroines of articles and have opportunities to join exchange and study programmes. This makes me believe that we have chances to be proactive in responding to the challenges that our ideological adversaries are preparing.”

Zhenya from “Bilkis” also mentions material help from European feminists: “in the summer we were visited by French feminists, they gave us important things for our office and helped us with donations. Other European activists also sent us humanitarian aid and office supplies”.

At the same time, several activists mention the manifesto “[Feminist resistance against war](#)”, in which foreign activists and academics spoke out against sending weapons to Ukraine. Among the challenges the feminist movement faced in seeking international solidarity, Valeriya Zubatenko recalls the fact that part of the Western left did not understand its security privilege. “Whereas in Ukraine, for a year now, we have been showing in practice what feminism and anti-fascism is and not just talking about it, in the West these same problems were still the subject of long debates: instead of collecting funds for the humanitarian effort, they have been equating whether or not it is right to send arms to Ukraine. To the extent that we seek solidarity from the Western left, this has become a challenge.”

Opposing some of the more problematic claims made by some Western feminists, on the initiative of a group of Ukrainian activists the manifesto “[Right to resist](#)” was drawn up. This appeal, signed by more than 900 activists and 70 collectives from all over the world, proved that Ukrainian feminists have a lot of support.

Since the beginning of the war, significant changes have taken place in Ukrainian society. Marta Chumalo says that the level of mutual support and sensitivity to the needs of feminists from different regions of Ukraine has greatly increased, as has the cooperation, solidarity and support of foreign feminists. “Feminist ideology is becoming a trend. Many women now identify themselves as feminists even if they did not before.”

At the end, we suggested activists to choose slogans for March 8.

Kateryna Turenko

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