

Ukraine: 2 years of war, a Ukrainian feminist point of view

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An Interview with the feminist group, Feminist Workshop by Patrick Le Tréhondat

After the 2 years of war, how do you see the situation in Ukraine?

Over the past two years, Ukrainian society has undergone dramatic changes in its way of life and visions. This transformation is also evident among feminist activists and women* in general.

The war has awoken a discussion on whether feminist movements should be unambiguously anti-militaristic. In a time when Ukrainians face the threat of physical annihilation, the anti-militaristic stance of some Western feminists appears as a privilege, blind to the real-life threats and dangers Ukrainian women face daily. Ukrainian feminists have embraced a key message during these times: Ukraine needs weapons. It needs defensive arms, such as air defense systems to protect its skies from constant russian missile attacks that devastate Ukrainian cities and kill civilians, as well as offensive weapons to reclaim occupied territories from the aggressor.

The war has affected everyone in Ukraine. While some regions appear “normal” and free of direct hostilities, rocket attacks and constant threats from russia persist. Almost everyone has a loved one serving in the army or has lost someone over these years. Ukrainians are forced to overcome personal and collective trauma, uncertainty about the future, daily military threats, and everyday difficulties while demonstrating resilience and calling for international support and assistance.

Unfortunately, over the past two years, general interest in Ukraine has been declining, while the challenges facing Ukrainian society have not diminished. These challenges continue to exist or evolve into new forms. Issues range from addressing the needs of thousands of internally displaced people from frontline cities to figuring out how to provide cities with electricity during the bombings of energy infrastructure. Ukrainians must constantly demonstrate their flexibility, creativity, and resilience to face the new challenges posed by the war.

Feminists, like all Ukrainians, have been forced to adapt to new roles and challenges brought on by the full-scale war. Many feminists are serving in the army or actively volunteering to meet frontline needs. Feminist organisations in Ukraine continue their work, now also addressing the needs arising from the war, such as aiding internally displaced persons and tackling other challenges. The needs of women in Ukrainian society have significantly increased. Economic and social insecurity are rising, along with job losses. Many women have lost their homes and jobs and have been left alone to cope when their husbands were mobilized to the front.

Ukraine still lacks a distinct voice in many international discussions. It is often deprived of its agency by the international community and perceived as a region of interest for NATO or russia. Ukrainians

must fight not only for their physical survival but also for the right to represent themselves and their interests, continuously reclaiming their agency. These issues are also relevant to Ukrainian feminists, who must consider not only their survival and providing help within the country but also deal with misunderstandings and occasionally paternalistic attitudes from Western feminists.

However, there have been also positive changes for the Ukrainian feminist society. In June 2022, the Ukrainian government ratified the Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence. This had been one of the main demands of Ukrainian feminists for several years and a step towards further integration of Ukraine into the EU. Additionally, Ukrainian female soldiers are actively advocating for their rights in the army, which has initiated changes in military organisation and adaptations to better accommodate women's needs. The perception of feminism in Ukraine is changing, with society beginning to view it not only through stereotypes about women activists, but also as a collective image of female military activists, activists who open shelters and assist with humanitarian issues, and female volunteers, among others. This shift helps create new connections with partners and change the overall perception of feminism.

What is the situation of your association and your projects?

With the start of the full-scale Russian invasion, Feminist Workshop was forced to broaden its field of activity. The full-scale war not only amplified existing social problems but also created new challenges, which urged us to launch new directions. Our team has opened the Crisis Response direction, whose main task is to help women* and children affected by the war. One of the target audiences is internally displaced people. We saw that people who were forced to leave their homes needed security, support, communication, leisure, self-realisation, and development. These needs are basic and essential for human life. That is why we have started shelters - safe spaces that help build trust in the community, increase social cohesion, and engage internally displaced persons in community life. Since their creation, the shelters have been home to 80 people, some with their pets (three cats, two rats, two dogs). Initially, we set up three shelters, and now one of them is still actively functioning. We quickly realised that war-affected women and children need not only a place to stay but also complex support to overcome their traumatic experiences and live a full life. We also provide individual assistance in solving the daily problems faced by the residents of the shelter. Another important aspect of our support was the organisation of groups for children of internally displaced women, a program to help low-income elderly women, digital literacy courses, and psychological support for the community. And this list is not complete.

Despite our organisation's active efforts to confront the challenges of the full-scale invasion, new challenges bring unforeseen expenses, for example, purchasing generators to keep the office running during attacks on the country's energy infrastructure. Searching for funding for both our existing and new activities is not getting any easier. The unpredictability and complexity of planning, the difficulty in meeting the demands of Western partners during a full-scale invasion, and general exhaustion all contribute to making fundraising an additional challenge.

What do you hope for year 2024?

Hope is a privilege we cannot afford during a full-scale invasion. There are concrete actions and support that we need and call for. As Ukrainian feminist organizations working to defend human rights and help women* overcome the consequences of the armed conflict, we possess a deep understanding of the context and current needs of our audience, and the best ways to provide this assistance. Without financial, informational, and humanitarian support, we will not be able to work systematically and create change. We are not just hoping for Feminist Workshop to continue its activities and to have enough financial and human resources; we are constantly fighting for it. We

are also tired of being excluded from discussions about possible ways to help Ukrainian women. This year is crucial for us to bring the voice of Ukrainian feminists to international platforms, advocating for their needs and reclaiming their right to speak in global discussions. In general, we just want to survive in 2024, in every sense of the word. And like all Ukrainians, we believe in and fight every day to achieve our main goal - the victory of Ukraine and the end of Russian aggression.



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P.S.

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