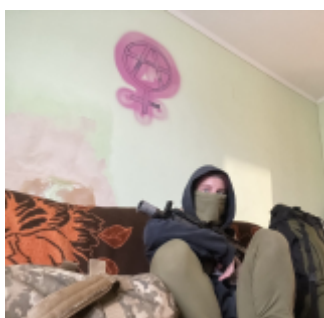


## Ukraine: Ivanka, a feminist in the army

Thursday 13 February 2025, by [Ivanka](#), [LE TRÉHONDAT Patrick](#) (Date first published: 8 February 2025).

**Ivanka, a feminist activist from Lviv, joined the Ukrainian armed forces a few months ago. Previously, she was active in the feminist group Bilkis. In particular, she took part in the distribution of food that Bilkis organised every Sunday for the needy in the city. After Ivanka joined the Ukrainian military forces, Bilkis ceased these distributions due to a lack of financial resources. Between two military tasks, Ivanka kindly agreed to answer our questions.**



### **Can you introduce yourself to our readers?**

My name is Ivanka and I am 31 years old. I have lived most of my life in a small town, Rubizhne, in the Luhansk region. I was surprised by the total invasion in Kharkiv, where I had come to help my friends build a cultural space called KROV (the project was not implemented due to the war), while also working with children. I have a background in education and have studied the world of children, and I am interested in everything related to it. Last year, I celebrated 10 years of teaching. I have never been involved in the army, I never thought I would serve in the army, especially in Ukraine, especially in the Kherson region, but life has taken a strange turn and I am now in the armed forces of Ukraine. I immersed myself in medicine, and this is my profile in the army. In accordance with the new path I have chosen, I pay a lot of attention to self-education, research and development in this field.

### **You were very active in distributing food with the Bilkis group. Can you tell us about this activity? What did it mean to you?**

I was the coordinator of the “годівничка” project, a small activist initiative that helps people in need to get food. I consider myself a poor person and therefore know from experience how things can go in life and how important it is to be able to preserve one’s life, health and human dignity, starting with meeting the most basic needs. The socially disadvantaged are one of the most stigmatised groups in the population. The “годівничка” project helped people in need by providing them with food, including hot vegan meals, drinks and sweets. We just wanted to support those who have it harder than us and make this world a little better!

### **A few months ago, you decided to join the Ukrainian armed forces. Why did you decide to**

## **join the Ukrainian armed forces?**

After 2022, I lost my house, the Russians completely occupied the Luhansk region, and I was evacuated to western Ukraine. I tried to join the armed forces during the first month of the invasion, but at the military training centre in Lviv, I was rejected and pushed towards the exit. Despite this refusal, the desire to fight did not disappear. I carried it within me every day and, at a certain point, this desire became like an overripe grenade that exploded in the sun and scattered its seeds. Little by little, I abandoned all my civilian projects and began to follow the path of enlisting in the army, and by overcoming many obstacles, I found my place in the Ukrainian defence forces.

## **In the West, feminist movements often oppose war and the army. How can you explain to them that a feminist activist voluntarily joins the army to fight?**

I have not had any direct communication with Western feminists, but I have heard a lot about these professions of pacifism. In fact, war as a phenomenon, concept and idea cannot be perceived as a good solution, but the motivation of Ukrainian feminist activists to fight the Russian army is obvious: it is simply a desire to live on their land as free people with their own values, and not to become a quasi-slave of Russia. It is a war against authoritarianism and imperialism! In the army, I can recognise my true self, which hates violence and killing, but here I have transformed into a new and stronger self, which sees violence and killing every day. Personally, I have not abandoned my convictions and I do not believe that the world will always be cruel and imperfect.

## **As a woman, did you face any particular challenges in the army?**

I am one of those cases where, as a woman, I had to fight to have the opportunity to join the army on an equal footing with men. I didn't succeed the first time, but I persevered. From the first day at the recruitment office, I was living proof of gender discrimination in the army, even though I am often in better physical shape than some of the young men! I hate my brothers' condescension because I am perceived as "weak and fragile". To be on an equal footing with the men, I have to train much harder. For example, I exercise every day, I chop wood and I always help with the housework so that I am seen as strong and resilient. Sometimes I tell myself that not only do I have to be as good as the men, but that I have to work twice as hard to show that I am capable of it, even when I don't feel physically well, but I don't tell my brothers.

## **Recently, a female soldier explained that the patriarchal upbringing of girls prevented them from participating in military operations, particularly because of their physical condition. What do you think about that?**

I agree with what this woman said. In my work with children, I have seen many consequences of this patriarchal upbringing, when people buy children clothes of different colours and patterns, different toys (for boys - cars, DIY tools, books or puzzles that develop logical thinking, and for girls - dolls, soft toys or household items). The books contain stereotypes about the roles of boys and girls (boys repair cars, go on outings with their father, read books, girls help their mother with the housework, look after their brothers and sisters). The result of this upbringing is that men are more efficient at digging trenches or lifting heavy loads, and are therefore more likely to be recruited.

## **Other female soldiers explain that the military equipment does not suit them, for example, that their clothes or shoes are too big or that their bulletproof vests do not fit. Have you faced such a problem?**

Yes, that's true! In my brigade, there is no uniform adapted to women's "parameters" either. I was given a men's uniform and had to call on the services of a seamstress. The sizes and styles of men's

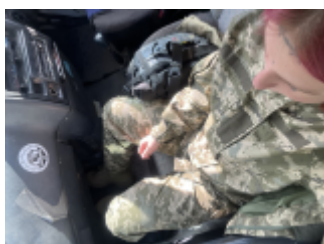
clothing do not correspond to those of women. The trousers were fine at the hips but too big at the waist, the jackets had long sleeves, and the shoulder of the jacket went almost down to the elbow. Unfortunately, gender budgeting is only a dream for the Ukrainian armed forces. My friend gave me a bulletproof vest, because the one I was given could have paralysed my back.

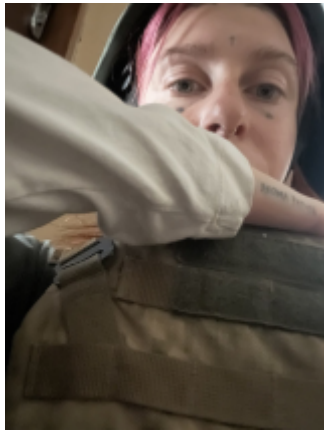
**I was surprised to learn that the Ukrainian army has an association of female soldiers, which is not the case in the French army, for example. Do you have any links with this association or other military feminists?**

No, I am not involved in such communities, but my military career is just beginning, and I think I will delve deeper into this world in the future.

**That's a difficult question. How do you see your future and that of Ukraine?**

I believe in a bright future. I have lyrical hopes and dreams that after the end of the war, conclusions will be drawn about the role of women in war. There will be women's brigades, which will not only be offered office work, accounting and cooking in the military training centre (these positions are also important), there will be no harassment or sexism, all positions will be accessible to women, there will be good training and specialised education, and not only the BZVP [*Military Training Base*]. I want stability and peace of mind, and to achieve this you need a long period of time with the right to make mistakes and the opportunity to correct them, to refine and adjust things. It is difficult to keep afloat, but Ukraine has held its own for ten years thanks to people who care. I want to believe that we will be able to survive this historic period. I am not counting on the help of the state apparatus or the loyalty of the deputies - they don't care about us. Ukraine exists for you, for us and for our children.





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**Ivanka**

**Patrick Le Tréhondat**

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