
War in Ukraine: Resistance and strength of Ukrainian women

by

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From February 2022 to today, because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has turned into a terrible war of attrition, we have witnessed a mass exodus of Ukrainian refugees, mostly women and children, while also a significant number of women remain in Ukraine. For those women and girls who have crossed borders, safety is not guaranteed. Women are first at high risk of sexual exploitation in the transit process as they flee conflict. For those women who remain, especially in the zones of battlefield, the risk of sexual abuse and rape is high.

In this context which exposes women and girls in war to a situation of greater vulnerability, it is indeed important not to forget, however, the contribution of Ukrainians in the resistance. They fight against war, and many are forced to re-invent themselves, losing their old identity and forging a new one shaped by war. When we explore closely the multiple and complex roles that the women play in conflict, the narrative of women in war changes, breaking the stereotypes that see women only as victims. We restore to them the dignity of women who struggle in their daily life, against the atrocity of the war. Focusing on women primarily as victims disguises their agency and contributions in the ongoing war. Fortifying stereotypical assumptions of women as victims only can reinforce ideas about the need for a protective culture in which women's agency and power are belittled. So, it is important to recognize the contribution of the Ukrainian women in the resistance also in the way in which we perceive their involvement in the conflict, with the hope that their contributions will be recognized also at the political level, in the peace talks.

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In my recent work, as human rights and gender advisor at a center for peace and human rights in Norway, I have collected several testimonies and stories of Ukrainian women, both refugees in Norway and from women who still live in Ukraine. Through their voices and their narratives, I learnt about the burden they carry, simultaneously as their immense courage and strengths. Refugees, fighters, human rights activists, laborers, humanitarian workers, mothers, daughters, wives, sisters, partisans. All unify in a common struggle, to fight for the freedom of their country and preserve/rebuild the future of their children and community. Determined to fight, in their different roles and responsibilities, whatever the price to pay.

Amongst these testimonies, a special one involved the story of three Ukrainian women who fled the war with their two children. Originally from Nikolaev, in southern Ukraine, their testimonies tell of a journey undertaken to escape from the war. Their journey over days, crossing borders, and defying every difficulty and fear, represents the journey of many Ukrainian women, forced to leave their home, their country to seek protection¹.

In my several encounters with Ukrainian women between 2014-2017, when I worked in Ukraine, first in Odessa, then in Donbass, I had the honor of encountering the strength of the Ukrainian women more closely. At that time, I was in charge of monitoring and reporting violations of human rights in Ukraine, with particular attention to women's rights. The aspect that emerged in those encounters, regardless of the role that each of them play in the society, was their pride and their personal engagement in the conflict. They were proud in taking care of their family, their children, but, at the same time, aware that their role did not stop only in taking care, but also in fighting and fighting for their country. Women united by their determination to play an important role in the conflict and its resolution, whatever their role in society was.

Their voice is even more powerful today, in this current brutal war. Ukrainian women are at the forefront of fighting this war. Each of them, whether forced to flee the country or remain, they carry with them the burden of the war. In a new shape of their internal lives that war has brought, they fight against this atrocious aggressivity committed by the Russian forces. Strong women determined not to be crushed by the brutality of the war, but to resist, with an inner strength that sees them engaged in a common struggle, in the name of freedom and justice.

This inner strength is something that I felt also in all the latest Ukrainian women's stories I have collected. In the encounters I had with the Ukrainian women refugees, despite their pain in having been forced to flee their country, to ensure safety to their children, their words and voices were clear. Stories of women who don't give up, ready to face any obstacle, every fear, every loss, in the exhausting wait for the war to end. In their tales of lacerations, pains and fight, I recognize, once again, their extraordinary strength.

While I write this simple but sincere homage to the strength of Ukrainian women in their daily struggle against war, my thoughts go to all Ukrainians women whom I

¹ A video of these testimonies can be viewed at: <https://beheard.no/livshistorier/katia-lena-and-nina>.

have met along my path. In particular, to the women I met in Severodonetsk², now under the brutal Russian onslaught. An area surrounded by fields of sunflowers, where the gaze is lost in the horizon, immersed in an intense infinite yellow color. Generous, kind, deep souls as the souls of the women who inhabit those lands. Stories of women struggling for their lives and the lives of their loved ones, struggling in keeping their humanity and dignity, in the midst of the most inhumane of all human acts: war.

Women's war has its own colors, its own smells, its own lighting, and its own range of feelings. Its own words. There are no heroes and incredible feats, there are simply people who are busy doing inhumanly human things³.

² Sievierodonetsk, Sieverodonetsk or Severodonetsk is a city in the Luhansk Oblast of Ukraine, located to the northeast of the left bank of the Siverskyi Donets river and approximately 110 km to the northwest from the Oblast capital, Luhansk. It faces Lysychansk across the river.

³ Svetlana Alexievich, Nobel Prize in Literature 2015. *The Unwomanly Face of War*. Born in the Ukrainian town of Ivano-Frankovsk. Her father was Belarusian and her mother Ukrainian. After her father's demobilization from the army the family returned to his native Belarus.