

Ukraine war: Attitudes to women in the military are changing as thousands serve on front lines

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Thousands of women have voluntarily joined Ukraine's armed forces [since 2014](#), when Russia's occupation of Crimea and territories in eastern Ukraine began. Over the past nine years, the number of women serving in the Ukrainian military has more than doubled, with another

wave of women joining after Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022.

Women have served in Ukraine's armed forces since the country declared its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, but were mainly in supporting roles until the beginning of the war in 2014. They started serving in [combat roles in 2016](#) and all military roles were opened to women [in 2022](#). However, many women in non-combat roles, such as [medics](#), are exposed to the same dangers and hardships as their male and female colleagues who fire the weapons.

According to Ukraine's deputy minister of defense, Hanna Maliar, by the summer of 2022 more than 50,000 women were [employed by the armed forces](#) in some capacity, with approximately 38,000 serving in uniform. Women are now with units on the front lines.

Women in the armed forces are being taken as prisoners-of-war by the Russians. Ukrainian medic [Yulia Paevska](#) was imprisoned for [three months](#). "The treatment was very hard, very rough ... The women and I were all exhausted," she told Associated Press.

Patriarchal attitudes are changing

Ukraine is a country with [strong patriarchal traditions](#), especially in the defense sector. But Ukraine's women soldiers are increasingly being accepted by Ukrainian society and the country's political leadership during this war.

One indication of the recognition of women's presence in the military and society's rating of their contributions was when National Defenders' Day was renamed in 2021 as the [Day of Men and Women Defenders of Ukraine](#).

And there are other indications. [Images of servicewomen](#) are now regularly used by the ministry of defense in its [social media posts](#). Ukraine's women soldiers are also often in the news, talking about [their military experiences](#). There are also [approximately 8,000 women officers](#) as of October 2022, and [one of Ukraine's deputy defense ministers is a woman](#).

But the presence of women in the Ukrainian armed forces has not been without controversy. [Some analysts warn](#) against assuming that the photographs and videos in the news and on social media showing women on the front lines means that they enjoy equality with the men they serve beside.

Boots that don't fit

Ukraine's women soldiers still have to overcome skepticism from commanders and fellow soldiers about their commitment and abilities, obstacles to promotion and career development, as well as difficulties with practical—and vitally important—matters such as getting uniforms, body armor [and boots that fit](#).

Women are also more exposed to sexual violence. Many Ukrainian female combatants mention in interviews with journalists that [they must avoid captivity by any means](#) and that they are ready to die rather than being captured by the Russians.

A major research project, [Invisible Battalion](#), began in 2015 and has shed light on the conditions of military service for Ukrainian women. Led by a group of Ukrainian sociologists (including Anna Kvit, one of the authors of this article), it identified legal barriers to women's employment in the defense and security sector, as well as obstacles to their access to military education and training. These regulations had [prevented women](#) in the military from occupying a range of technical

and leadership positions.

Not only have many of these formal obstacles now been removed, but gender advisers and audits have been introduced to encourage a military culture that is more welcoming for women. In families where both parents are serving in the armed forces, parental leave is no longer the exclusive preserve of mothers.

Social attitudes towards women soldiers have also improved a great deal over the past few years. For example, the percentage of Ukrainians who agreed that women in the military should be granted equal opportunities with men [increased dramatically from 53% in 2018 to 80% in 2022.](#)

Looking ahead to post-war Ukrainian society, it is hard to predict whether these more positive public attitudes towards women soldiers will translate into greater acceptance of women in the relatively new role of war veteran. A follow-up study conducted for the Invisible Battalion project in 2017 revealed that women veterans struggled to have their status recognized by both government officials and civilians. This meant difficulties in accessing public services for veterans and in making the transition back to civilian life.

Will attitudes roll back?

In the aftermath of war there is often social pressure on women to resume more traditional gender roles, namely to focus on motherhood and family. This is precisely what happened to Soviet women who fought in the second world war: they were the first to be demobilized and were even [instructed not to talk about what they did in the war](#) in case they might embarrass their husbands.

However, just as [public attitudes](#) towards women in in the military are changing quickly in Ukraine, so too are the country's [laws and](#)

[government policies](#).

Ukraine's commitment towards addressing women's needs and rights is reflected in the government's strategic documents for the next decade. For example, in 2022 Ukraine adopted the [national strategy on equality of women and men](#), covering the period up to 2030.

In 2020 it introduced Ukraine's [second national action plan](#) including measures to improve conditions for women's military service and support women veterans. [The plan makes a commitment](#) to provide "servicewomen with uniforms, equipment, and body armor that would fit their anthropometric measures", and to provide women veterans and their family members with free legal advice.

The common experience of war brings an understanding of the scale and nature of the contributions that Ukraine's women are making to protect and defend their country. This shared understanding, reinforced by everyday encounters with women veterans who are friends, neighbors and family, might mean these [women's](#) experiences will be valued in the years to come.

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