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Women in war: voices from the many front lines

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Introduction

Corina Stratulat, Associate Director and Head of European Politics and Institutions Programme at the European Policy Centre

War is often told through the language of power: territory seized, battles won, red lines crossed. Yet its deepest consequences are rarely confined to the battlefield. They unfold in homes, shelters, hospitals and kitchens — in the intimate spaces where survival, care and resilience are negotiated every day. It is there, too, that women's experiences of conflict become impossible to ignore.

Too often, however, women appear in narratives of war mainly as victims. That reality cannot be dismissed: women and girls are disproportionally exposed to displacement, violence, economic insecurity and profound social disruption. But this is only part of the story. Across conflicts and generations, women have also been organisers, defenders, chroniclers and community leaders. They sustain families through crisis, join and lead resistance efforts, document abuses and help imagine what peace might look like once the guns fall silent.

This compendium illuminates that fuller picture by bringing together diverse voices – Ukrainian researchers and teachers, a Bosnian peacebuilder, a Pakistani-European analyst, a Lebanese conflict scholar, a Serbian who remembers the sky turning red over her childhood home, a Kosovar shaped by war at age ten, and women working on the frontlines of mediation in Afghanistan and the DRC. Their contributions examine not only what war does to women, but also what women do in war: how they endure it, resist it, respond to it and help shape its political and human aftermath. Their perspectives are as varied as the conflicts they speak from. What unites them is the conviction that women are not peripheral to war — they are central to understanding its consequences and indispensable to shaping its outcomes.

At a time when war has returned to Europe and violent conflict continues to reorder the world, these questions go to the heart of how we understand security, democracy and peace. If war continues to be analysed primarily through the lens of military force and state power, we risk missing not only part of the story, but also part of the solution.
The future of peace will not be built only in negotiating rooms or on front lines. It will also be shaped by women, whose labour, leadership and endurance hold societies together through war itself.

The contributions collected here examine not only what war does to women, but also what women do in war: how they endure it, resist it, respond to it and help shape its political and human aftermath.

War, gender and power

1

When might makes right, women often pay the price

Almut Möller, Director for European and Global Affairs at the EPC; member of Women in International Security (Germany)

In a world of might makes right, women and girls are among the most vulnerable.

A quarter of a century into the United Nations' Women, Peace and Security agenda, the global situation of women and girls affected by armed conflict is more alarming than at any point in recent history.

According to the latest data from UN Women and the United Nations Secretary-General's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) report, almost 700 million women and girls are estimated to live in close proximity to armed conflict, the highest number since the 1990s.

The proliferation of conflicts documented by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), alongside a growing trend towards militarisation and the rise of authoritarianism, suggests that women's rights and well-being will further deteriorate across the globe in the years to come.

As the world increasingly embraces a logic of survival of the fittest and the ruthless pursuit of narrow self-interest, women and girls are among the most vulnerable. The declining respect for international law and the questioning of the United Nations itself in some of the most powerful parts of the world suggest that UN Security Council Resolution 1325 has come under threat.

Compounding these trends is a widening political backlash against gender equality itself. Far-right parties and movements have mobilised culture-war narratives that frame women's rights and gender equality policies as threats to 'traditional values', national identity and 'strength'.

Global chaos, escalating armed conflict and ideological backlash all pose a direct threat to decades of progress on women's rights.

Europeans, make no mistake: This is not a distant issue. It is an increasingly present reality in Europe, with Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and its hybrid warfare against Europe more broadly. The bravery of Ukrainian women standing up to the aggressor in many different roles should serve as a strong reminder to women across Europe: We cannot rest. We must stand up – now.

In a world of might makes right, women and girls are among the most vulnerable.

Who holds power matters – so does how

Shada Islam, member of the European Policy Centre's Strategic Council; Senior Adviser for the EPC's Europe in the World programme; Senior Adviser at the Centre for Global Development; and Visiting Professor at the College of Europe (Natolin Campus)

I spent a large part of my childhood in Pakistan, a country where war with India often felt only a terrifying heartbeat away.

The partition of India and Pakistan was a formative trauma for both my parents. My father, who had just joined the Indian Civil Service, opted for its equivalent in Pakistan and had to leave behind Hindu and Muslim friends and colleagues who remained in India. My mother, then a university student in Lahore, still recounts the heartbreaking goodbyes to her Hindu and Sikh friends as they left for India. There were promises to meet again. But history had other plans.

Growing up in Pakistan, I lived a constant paradox. At home, we spoke of peace and cooperation as necessities. Around me, talk of war was relentless. As a young girl, I witnessed two futile wars between India and Pakistan, framed by politicians and the military in both countries as matters of patriotic duty and territorial pride.

Gender alone does not confer moral courage. What matters is not simply *who* holds power, but *how* power is defined and exercised.

Women's voices were absent before the wars, during the conflicts and even when truces were tentatively discussed. What I remember most is not strategy or speeches, but grief: a young family member widowed within the first three days of a 10-day war. Her husband, a soldier, had spent barely one month with their newborn child.

Those early experiences shaped how I understand conflict and why I recoil when war is treated as normal, even natural: when deaths are reduced to numbers, when civilians killed far from battlefields – overwhelmingly women and children – are dismissed as 'collateral damage', when suffering is sanitised and dehumanised.

Today, as wars multiply – from Gaza to Iran to Ukraine and from Sudan to the Sahel – something deeply disturbing is happening. Diplomacy is being hollowed out, while militarised masculinity is back in fashion. We often forget that the EU's history is one of peace and reconciliation.

Peace is not possible without women. But we must also resist a comforting illusion that women leaders are inherently more peaceful. Experience – and the headlines – are proof that many have embraced militarism, authorised wars, or remained silent and complicit in the face of mass atrocity and ongoing genocide.

Gender alone does not confer moral courage. What matters is not simply *who* holds power, but *how* power is defined and exercised.

When war ends without you noticing

Lina Khatib, PhD, Associate Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House; Visiting Scholar, Middle East Initiative at Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center

I was born during the Lebanese Civil War. During my formative years, the civilian society around me seemed focused on snatching as many moments of hope as possible between bouts of fighting. I do not remember a distinct day marking the end of the war. While everyone agrees on when the Lebanese Civil War started, there is no agreement on when it finished. As I did not know how peace would feel, the war ended without me noticing.

Though I had stopped thinking about it, in many ways the war stayed with me. Years later, it resurfaced as I became increasingly drawn to the professional world of analysing conflict and geopolitics. I realised that having lived through war had given me a gut instinct that, coupled with research and field work, allows me to grasp the complexities of conflict more intuitively. I wanted to use this insight to improve policymaking.

Living through war also made me more pragmatic in the way I approach conflict dynamics. War is always ugly and almost always avoidable. But failures of governance, diplomacy and policy often drag societies towards it.

I spent years investigating and writing about the representation of conflict and about conflict drivers, dynamics, repercussions and resolutions. Time and again, I saw similar cycles feeding conflicts across different countries. I also came to understand that peace is not the same as the end of war, and that sometimes wars are justified as a path to peace – a view that many regard as controversial.

Through all this, I learned that what is most useful is not engaging in oversimplification or wishful thinking about wars, but supporting those who, despite the horrors of conflict, strive for a better present and a brighter tomorrow – no matter in which domain or the scale of their efforts. They are the ones who continue to snatch moments of hope and nurture them.

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Whose peace?

Dr. Laura Davis, Expert in people-centred conflict analysis and peacebuilding; Director of Ariadne's Thread Consulting bv.

I have worked with women and men peacebuilders in Europe, Africa and the Middle East for 20 years. 'Peace' means very different things to different women in conflict-affected situations. They know what they want; the challenge is often accessing the power to make it happen.

There are persistent similarities across diverse situations. 'Conflict' is often understood only as politicised or militarised. This narrow definition overlooks the complex social relationships that shape relations between people and between society and institutions. 'A peace' that only addresses the interests of the armed men at the negotiating table will not resolve the underlying causes of conflict. Analysis from diverse women (and men) offers a deeper understanding of what is at stake and helps identify opportunities for sustainable peace.

Women are also too often treated as a homogenous group. Yet why should a rural woman farmer from South Kivu in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo have the same interests and views as a woman lawyer in Kinshasa, the capital? Some women may support ongoing conflict. Others may reject the 'peace' on offer.

When women are consulted, they are often restricted to discussing so-called 'women's issues' – usually sexual and gender-based violence. Their views on other matters – also women's issues – such as governance, economic development or defence are sidelined. Engaging diverse women to imagine and articulate their aspirations for peace in its many forms reveals not only what women want, but how to achieve it.

Finally, too many women in fragile situations experience violence in their own homes and communities, perpetrated by men from their own families and communities. So-called 'domestic violence' is rarely considered part of conflict because of the narrow ways in which we define conflict. Even when peace processes address sexual violence, they often assume the perpetrators are enemy combatants. In reality, 'peace' must begin at home – and with what women themselves want.

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Living through war

2

Women carry what war leaves behind

Marika Djolai, Independent Scholar of Peace Studies and International Development

As a woman whose life was deeply disrupted and profoundly changed by the war in former Yugoslavia – the first major conflict on European soil since World War II – I share experience common to tens of thousands of women who suffered in shocking and intrusive ways. Although I eventually left the Balkans, I continued collecting stories from women across the region. Without understanding the stress and trauma of war, it is difficult to comprehend the complex and nuanced experiences of women who have survived it.

The language of wartime politics is often much louder in public spaces than the expression of everyday experience. Sadly, the language of survival, of protection, of hope that loved ones will return home safely, that all family members will survive and that peace will return tends to be much quieter.

Everyday life does not halt during war; and it often falls on women to cope with the turmoil while men are fighting on the front lines. One woman told me her story of carrying her elderly parents for days during an exodus from their home community. Another shared: "During the war, we had to eat boiled grass; children's stomachs were empty, as was mine. Consuming grass made us sick, but we had no other food. Maintaining [the] body meant preserving sanity." One survivor described being held for days in a make-shift military prison at the age of 16.

Sometimes survivors hold your hand and confide, "You understand me – I can see it in your eyes." While carefully concealing their inner darkness, they need to feel someone cares about their story, acknowledging that what they endured truly happened. For women who survive violence, recognition matters, not only from the world, but from themselves.

Often you may hear "Let's not talk about the war, it's behind us". Silence feels less intrusive and offers comfort. Time takes its toll and can cast doubt on the past but the experience of a war is never left behind us. For survivors, especially women who showed extraordinary strength, one wish remains – to never experience war again.

Everyday life does not halt during war; and it often falls on women to cope with the turmoil while men are fighting on the front lines.

The night the sky turned red

Milena Mihajlovic Denic, Co-founder and Programme Director of European Policy Centre (CEP) Belgrade

That warm spring evening in 1999, I went to bed earlier than usual – just before midnight. Dad tucked me in, saying reassuringly that the air raid sirens had not gone off that evening, as was almost the rule those days. Just before he turned off the light, I glanced once again at my clothes folded neatly over the chair, ready for me to put on quickly – just in case.

I had just fallen asleep when my mom's trembling voice burst into my room, insisting that I get up and dress immediately, as we needed to get to the bomb shelter across the street. The sirens blared. From the next room, I could hear my dad's voice, calmly dictating the same to my brother. It was obvious that this was no ordinary night, that my parents sensed something was about to happen.

In seconds, all four of us were at the door, rushing to the gate and towards the building across from our house, which hosted the only bomb shelter in the neighbourhood. Over our heads, in the black moonless sky, the roaring engines grew.

Just as we stepped out of our yard onto the pavement, the sky lit up. Red and orange. For a moment, it was almost daylight. Then, all I could hear was thunder and my parents' panicked voices as they pulled me towards them. I had frozen in the middle of the street – unaware at that moment of what was happening, paralysed by the sight and sound of nearby explosions.

When I could finally move my legs again, something like a huge ball in my chest rose towards my head. As my mom pulled me into the shelter, holding and squeezing my hand, an echo of thunder roared inside my head. My eyes burst with tears, and my chest erupted with loud sobs. A moment later, I realised I was standing in the middle of a dark, damp room, unable to control my complete breakdown, with scared, but silent women, men and children looking on with sympathy.

That night passed, and so did several more. My town and the neighbouring one were hit several times in the last weeks of the bombing. I grew less scared and, somehow, even got used to it.

For years after, I flinched at the sound of thunder or a loud airplane. Still, I believe this experience also affected me in some positive ways. Mostly, it made me appreciate peace, cooperation and European integration very early. Just a year later, I studied hard to earn my scholarship for the American University in Bulgaria – where I spent the next four years learning about the European Union, EU integration, regional reconciliation and transitional justice – and where I forged lifelong friendships with students from across the Balkans.

What could have remained a lasting war trauma became the chief motivator behind my educational and career choices. It set me on a path toward understanding conflict, reconciliation, cooperation and integration. It taught me that peace is neither abstract nor guaranteed, but fragile and deeply personal.

The memory of that night has never fully faded. But over time, fear gave way to purpose. Perhaps that is one of the quiet paradoxes of war: even destruction can plant the seeds of a commitment to peace.

What could have remained a lasting war trauma became the chief motivator behind my educational and career choices.

The cost of war: a moment at Warsaw central station

Katarzyna Sidło, Senior Policy Analyst for the Middle East and North Africa at the European Union Institute for Security Studies

Immediately after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, large numbers of Ukrainians headed towards the Polish border. In an extraordinary show of solidarity, thousands of Poles drove there to help people continue their journeys to Warsaw and other cities across Poland. Thousands more opened their homes to Ukrainian refugees. Civil society groups set up information points at train and bus stations, while individuals and private businesses provided meals and other basic support. For weeks, this spontaneous civic response filled the gap before the government stepped in. I remain proud to have been part of that movement.

Over time, however, it became clear that amid this outpouring of solidarity, some people were also trying to exploit the situation for malign purposes. Reports began to emerge of women and children being picked up at the border by cars claiming to be run by volunteers, only to disappear without a trace. Before civil society organisations and volunteer networks had enough structure in place to create databases and safely match people offering shelter with those seeking it, stories also surfaced of vulnerable refugee women being abused and taken advantage of.

At that time, most Ukrainian refugees were women and children. With only a few exceptions, men of fighting age are prohibited from leaving Ukraine. This made those fleeing significantly more vulnerable. Many suddenly became the sole caretakers of their children, as well as elderly or sick relatives.

I will never forget one woman who arrived at Warsaw Central Station in the early days of the war carrying an infant in her arms. She seemed unable to nurse or comfort the baby. She simply stared ahead, motionless, as if frozen in shock. To me, she will forever remain a reminder of the price women – and their children – so often pay for war.

I will never forget one woman who arrived at Warsaw Central Station in the early days of the war carrying an infant in her arms. She seemed unable to nurse or comfort the baby.

What does not kill you rarely makes you stronger

Dr. Elena Davlikanova, Senior Fellow with Sahaidachnyi Security Center (Kyiv) and Center for European Policy Analysis (DC)

War can become routine, but never normal.

There are many stories of women and girls in Russia's war on Ukraine, yet the leitmotif is the same – bitterness. For Ukrainian women, the war has penetrated every role. Some serve in the armed forces; others volunteer, work in decision-making roles or advocate. Some are widows; others are partners of veterans trying to rebuild lives fractured by the front. Some are forced migrants, shamed for leaving their husbands or Motherland, while those who stayed are shamed for not taking their children to safety. Mothers sustain the wartime economy by day and spend nights in bomb shelters with their children. You simply cannot win.

No amount of time can normalise living under shelling, even for those who adapt quickly. There is nothing normal about constant anxiety for your children's future – knowing that if Russia is not stopped, the prospect of you or your son or daughter ending up on the front line in a few years is not abstract but plausible. Or that you may not live long enough, buried beneath the rubble of your own home.

You never truly adapt to seeing portraits of fallen heroes along the "alleys of glory" in towns across the country. Each new photograph is a life interrupted, a family broken, a future erased.

War trauma is often stigmatised, with those who carry it dismissed as 'unobjective' or 'emotional,' even though Ukrainian assessments of Russia and its strategies have repeatedly proven among the most accurate. Those who have never lived through war should not assume they are more balanced in their judgments; more often, they simply lack the lived understanding needed to see beyond theory and mainstream narratives. Ukrainians are not 'crazy' – we are better informed.

In this environment, the word resilience has become almost unbearable. It is spoken admiringly, yet often feels like a coin dropped into the cup of a street musician – a token gesture. Instead of sufficient air defence systems and PAC-3 missiles to shield civilian infrastructure, we receive generators to help people survive the cold when the power grid is destroyed. Instead of policies that cut the financial lifelines of the aggressor, Ukraine is pressed to restore a pipeline that replenishes the coffers funding our own extermination.

Another divisive word is peace. While women are often expected to embody the role of peacemakers, Ukrainian women are sometimes treated as pariahs for insisting on weapons, ammunition and credible security guarantees rather than supporting "immediate peace at any cost." We refuse to sign our own delayed death sentence – something Ukraine was effectively pushed into in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum.

Resilience exists. It lives in the quiet heroism of everyday survival. But there is hypocrisy in celebrating that heroism while failing to remove the conditions that demand it.

We refuse to sign our own delayed death sentence – something Ukraine was effectively pushed into in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum.

Rethinking peace on the train to Ukraine's front line

Solomiia Hera, Ukrainian researcher and investigative reporter who has worked with domestic and international outlets, including The Associated Press and PBS' *FRONTLINE*; Brussels–Ukraine Programme leader at City of Brussels

As Europe debates its role in trilateral negotiations and repeats the word peace, I find myself asking what it truly means for Ukrainian women.

On a train heading east towards the front line, peace does not sound abstract. In the carriage sit pregnant women travelling to see their husbands in near-frontline towns. Mothers carry bags with food and medicine. Worn-out soldiers return after a short leave. None of them speak about peace as a ceasefire line on a map or the mere absence of hostilities, as it is often imagined in the West.

For Ukrainians, peace surely begins with victory. But it does not end there. It is a tangible term shaped by years of lived experience. Ukrainian women know that any hope for peace must come with guarantees.

War has many faces. Among them are women: A mother shielding her child from explosions. A sister fearing for her brother on a mission while assembling medical kits through the night. A wife who does not recognise the man returning from war. A daughter who has not seen her father for years. A widow remembering the touch of her husband's skin. Nurses persuade soldiers who have lost limbs that life is still worth living. A girl, broken by rape, clings to the hope that one day she will live without shame. A soldier finds her place in a unit surrounded by men, proving that courage has no gender.

For them, peace means mechanisms that protect refugees, veterans, survivors of sexual violence and war crimes, prisoners of war, civilian detainees, abducted children, families of the missing, and millions under occupation who cannot speak freely. It also means support for returning soldiers. Women are often the first to face veterans' trauma, carrying the invisible burden of war at home.

Occupation has taught Ukrainian women what the absence of guarantees looks like: rape used as a weapon, torture silenced, forced disappearances and the erasure of identity. It means fearing your own Ukrainian passport. For many, it means your child growing up under an imposed history – or being taken away. Even without open hostilities, occupation is a life of hiding.

Peace is not merely the absence of war. It is everything that must be built after it: functioning courts, accountability for perpetrators, protection of vulnerable populations and rehabilitation after trauma. It is also the possibility to plan a future. Peace restores the horizon of time. Peace centres a human life.

Peace means truth prevailing. It means acknowledging that what people endured is real and deserving of justice. In war, people disappear twice – first from the world around them, then into statistics. Peace demands collective responsibility so that crimes are not passed to the next generation and the principles of humanity endure.

Ukrainian women know that any hope for peace must come with guarantees.

Reflections on Peace: Lessons from Women in Sarajevo

Priscilla Morris, author of Black Butterflies, a Sarajevo siege novel inspired by maternal family history. Black Butterflies was shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction 2023 and awarded Fiction Runner-up for the Dayton Literary Peace Prize 2025

During the almost four-year siege of Sarajevo in the 1990s, a form of old-fashioned neighbourliness resurfaced in opposition to the ultranationalist rhetoric that was fuelling ethnic cleansing. Next-door neighbours visited, helped and looked after each other, regardless of their ethnonationality. They shared coffee and cooked their meagre food together. This was the spirit of prewar Sarajevo: a city once famed for its religious and ethnic tolerance, its lack of nationalism, and its plurality, hospitality and warmth.

Since all able-bodied men between the ages of 16 and 60 were either fighting or evading the draft, it was often women who met and helped one another. It was largely women who queued for hours to fetch water and firewood, trapped pigeons to eat and handwashed clothes in icy water. When I interviewed Sarajevans for my novel, it was *women's* stories about daily life under siege that stayed with me. The women I spoke to were not concerned with politics, distrusting what they heard from politicians' lips. They were concerned with preserving a semblance of 'normality', with surviving day to day – not being shot, having enough to eat, not freezing. Peace meant the absence of explosions and snipers on rooftops. It meant freedom of movement, food, gas, electricity, water and connection with the outside world. Peace meant having their dignity and rights restored.

Women's resourceful neighbourliness across ethnic divides in Sarajevo offers a powerful model of resistance in wartime. It shows how to create peace amid ongoing violence. Peace starts with education: learning to value, listen to and connect with those who are different from ourselves. Peace is *only* possible through collaborative co-existence, where conflicts are resolved through mediation rather than violence. Peace is a process in which we must all engage, coming together to resist a world where war and division have become the norm.

Women's resourceful neighbourliness across ethnic divides in Sarajevo offers a powerful model of resistance in wartime.

No generation put on hold: Teaching through war in Ukraine

Polina Vasyleha, Educational Recovery Project Coordinator at Teach For Ukraine NGO

My name is Polina Vasyleha. I am a teacher and the granddaughter of educators. For many years I lived and worked in Lysychansk in the Luhansk region – a city that is currently under Russian occupation.

Russia's full-scale war forced me to leave everything behind. I became an internally displaced person, losing my home and sense of stability. I had to rebuild not only my life, but also my identity as a teacher. The Educational SUPport program by Teach For Ukraine became my lifeline. I first became a tutor in the Educational SUPport program, working with children, and later joined the team as a project coordinator for educational recovery.

Supporting children today, helping them learn, rebuild confidence, and imagine their future is so important even in times of war.

Today I see how difficult it has become for Ukrainian children to dream. They have been forced into survival mode, leaving little room for imagination or long-term thinking. Helping them set goals again and believe in the future feels like extremely important work.

For me, peace means moving from a "pedagogy of survival" to a "pedagogy of growth" – where education unlocks talents rather than simply helping children endure. It means learning that is not interrupted by air-raid sirens, and children returning from remote schooling to real human connection. It also means feeling at home again.

We cannot press pause on an entire generation. That is why supporting children today, helping them learn, rebuild confidence, and imagine their future is so important even in times of war.

Women on the front line of resistance

3

When women step in: Equipping Ukraine's female soldiers

Melinda Haring, Senior Adviser at Razom for Ukraine,
Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council

Iryna Nykorak wastes no time. The Member of Parliament dashes into Paul Restaurant in downtown Kyiv last December to meet me for 42 minutes before climbing in her waiting SUV to give a live television interview.

I ask whether she often does interviews from the car. She assures me that this is normal and tells me to fire away and not waste a minute.

The hard-charging lawmaker is on a mission to support women in Ukraine's armed forces and its more than 56,000 female veterans. With more than 130,000 women in the defense and security sector, including 10,000 at the frontline as of writing, the challenges they face are far from marginal.

Nykorak's Arm Women Now initiative has developed underwear and uniforms for Ukraine's female service members in coordination with Ukraine's Ministry of Defense; it distributes combat boots for women, maternity uniforms for pregnant service members and bulletproof vests designed for women – all free of charge. The NGO also offers a real, live space in Kyiv, where female servicemembers can attend trainings and workshops, jointly navigate the challenges of military service and prepare for a life after the military.

Just as Ukraine has pioneered low-cost strategies to down Iranian drones, it is also adapting quickly to the realities of a military in which women play an increasingly visible role. Arm Women Now's female military uniforms have been exhibited at NATO Headquarters in Brussels, as well as in the Netherlands and Sweden. The Dutch plan to replicate Ukraine's models.

Manpower remains Ukraine's greatest challenge in sustaining the fight. Ukraine's determined and capable women have answered the call.

As we mark the beginning of the fifth year of Russia's full-scale invasion, let us remember every Ukrainian woman serving and fighting – and the team behind the Arm Women Now initiative helping to equip Ukraine's mighty female warriors.

Just as Ukraine has pioneered low-cost strategies to down Iranian drones, it is also adapting quickly to the realities of a military in which women play an increasingly visible role.

Women are leading the fight for Ukraine's democratic future

Olena Prokopenko, Senior Fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States

Women play a more foundational role in Ukraine's defence effort and democratic transformation than often recognised. From the battlefield and the home front to the fight for Ukraine's political future, women are a driving force in upholding the fundamental values Ukraine is ultimately fighting for.

While tens of thousands of Ukrainian women serve in the Armed Forces, their contribution to the defence effort against Russia's full-scale aggression extends far beyond the battlefield. Women organise volunteer networks, coordinate medical battalions, document Russian war crimes, run humanitarian hubs and lead veterans' support initiatives, often filling roles that keep frontline units functioning and society connected to those who fight.

On the home front, with nearly a million men mobilised, women are sustaining Ukraine's daily life under extraordinary pressure. They keep the wartime economy running, step into male-dominated jobs affected by labour shortages, maintain public services and play a vital role in Ukraine's reconstruction efforts. They bear primary responsibility for the young and the elderly and often serve as the sole breadwinners for their families. Those forced to flee to safety to protect their loved ones must rebuild their lives abroad while coping with the loss of their support networks and careers.

But beyond immediate survival and day-to-day resilience, equally as essential is the role of Ukrainian women in shaping the country's European future. Women represent some of the strongest voices in the Ukrainian government and civil society. They are driving Ukraine's ambitious reform agenda – from anti-corruption and rule of law reforms to public administration and corporate governance – and lead Ukraine's efforts to advance its EU accession.

For Ukrainian women – who sacrifice daily for Ukraine's democracy and freedom – peace means preservation of Ukraine's sovereignty, full restoration of its territorial integrity, justice for victims of Russia's atrocities and robust security guarantees from Europe and the US to ensure that future generations can live without fear of repeated Russian aggression.

Women keep the wartime economy running, step into male-dominated jobs affected by labour shortages, maintain public services and play a vital role in Ukraine's reconstruction efforts.

Shaped by war, working for peace

Donika Emini, Researcher on International Relations & Security;
Member of the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group - Biepag

I was 10 years old when I experienced war. At that age, I did not understand geopolitics or the architecture of international security. What I understood, instead, was the sudden rupture of everyday life: the uncertainty, the fear and the realisation that the stability around us can disappear overnight.

In my case, that experience did not remain only a memory. It shaped the path I chose. I grew up to work on the very questions that defined my childhood: dealing with the legacy of war, regional security and the complex dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. These issues remain deeply sensitive and politically charged, touching not only institutions and borders but also identities, memories and unresolved grievances. How we choose to address them continues to shape our future.

Working on these issues has never felt entirely abstract. For those of us who come from societies shaped by conflict, the line between the professional and the personal is often thin. Analysing the past and working to build a more stable future carries a different weight when the history you study is also the history you lived through. Over the past two decades, I have been part of the long, often uneven process of peacebuilding and state-building in Kosovo and across the Western Balkans. It is work that requires patience and persistence, but also a conviction that dialogue, however difficult, remains the only sustainable path forward.

Yet the broader environment in which this work takes place is drastically changing. The return of war to Europe following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, alongside growing global tensions, has revived the language of deterrence and militarisation. The international order that once seemed to provide a framework for stability now appears far more fragile.

For those of us shaped by war but committed to building peace, this moment carries both concern and responsibility. Peace is never a finished project. It is a continuous effort, one that must be defended, renewed and carried forward, especially when the world begins to take it for granted.

For those of us who come from societies shaped by conflict, the line between the professional and the personal is often thin.

Women shaping peace

4

Women must play a bigger role in peace and conflict negotiations

Amanda Paul, Senior Policy Analyst, Deputy Head of Europe in the World Programme at the European Policy Centre

Women's participation in conflict resolution, peacekeeping and negotiating teams remains extremely low, despite their strong track record of success and valiant efforts by the UN to increase their numbers and role. This also applies to the selection of National Security Advisers. Despite many women being competent experts, this post is dominated by men with only around 13% of women engaged as defence or security adviers. Research consistently shows that women can be important agents for change. When women participate meaningfully in peace processes, agreements are more likely to be reached and to endure. For example, women played important roles in the peace negotiations for Northern Ireland and the Liberian Accra Peace Agreement. Yet their contributions continue to be undervalued and under-resourced.

Women's participation broadens legitimacy; peace deals brokered exclusively by men or political and military elites often struggle to gain public trust. Whether formal peace negotiations or grassroots initiatives, women bring unique perspectives and skills that are crucial for achieving sustainable peace. They also tend to emphasise oft overlooked issues such as reconciliation, education, healthcare, land rights and justice for survivors of violence. Thus, including women also signals a whole-of-society approach and can therefore help achieve wider community buy-in, which is critical for implementation.

Peace built on exclusion is fragile; peace built on inclusion is resilient. Furthermore, societies that value gender equality usually also enjoy greater security, better health outcomes and stronger economic growth.

Addressing gender inequality is crucial to enhancing women's participation in peace processes by creating an environment that supports women in public life and leadership. This means challenging societal norms and stereotypes that limit opportunities for women. Expanding women's leadership in peace processes isn't tokenism: it is a tactical advantage.

Societies that value gender equality usually also enjoy greater security, better health outcomes and stronger economic growth.

Women at the front line of peacebuilding

Marina Danoyan, Project Manager, Women in Peacemaking (WiP)
at CMI-Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation

The landscape of contemporary peacebuilding has shifted significantly in recent years. The current international focus increasingly prioritises fast dealmaking over legitimate and inclusive peace processes. In this context, respect for human rights, accountability and justice are often overlooked as essential conditions for lasting peace. Yet this does not mean these principles are unimportant. On the contrary, tremendous efforts are being made to advance human security – particularly by women – even in the absence of formal peace processes.

Coming from a conflict-affected country myself and having worked in the field of peace mediation at CMI for 15 years, I have witnessed the profound value of these small, everyday efforts to build peace. It is through these quiet and persistent actions that real change takes root. Whether in Ukraine or Afghanistan, my work has shown me women's relentless efforts to support their communities, mitigate tensions, provide psychological support and document crucial witness accounts. They are not passive beneficiaries of peace but active agents and advocates, exercising this role every day. For them, peace means having the space and recognition to do this work.

Beyond this, women also play a crucial bridge-building role, navigating between different groups in ways that foster understanding across divides. In Ukraine, for example, mobile groups consisting of a mediator, a psychologist and a communicator work between displaced and host communities, establishing constructive communication and facilitating dialogue between different groups. In Afghanistan, women inside and outside the country collaborate to amplify local voices on international platforms, ensuring their expertise shapes global peacebuilding conversations. For them, peace means enabling, protecting and actively supporting this vital work.

Although women's contributions often remain invisible in formal peace processes, we must recognise and value their role in building everyday peace. This is where real, sustainable peace begins. Our responsibility to support and invest in these efforts has never been greater.

Tremendous efforts are being made to advance human security – particularly by women – even in the absence of formal peace processes.

When peace inherits war's hierarchy

Alida Vračić, Co-founder and Executive Directress of "Populari", a Bosnia based think tank specialising in the European integration of the Western Balkans region

In war, women become the infrastructure of survival. They do the impossible: Stretch food when there is none, find or improvise shelter, keep households functioning without electricity, gas or water, and calm children while their own bodies are paralysed with fear. They navigate everyday horrors and provide hope. And when needed, they head to the front line, too: As fighters, medics, couriers and journalists. In many conflicts, women are truly on the front lines and act as the cement that keeps life from collapsing altogether.

Still, women are rarely invited to negotiation tables. Their efforts may have sustained entire communities in wartime, but their authority is treated as unnecessary and secondary when agreements are drafted. That is why peace, unfortunately, too often inherits war's hierarchy. Those who wielded force or influence are rewarded, while women and their efforts are discounted.

I carry both perspectives. One as a young woman under the siege of Sarajevo many moons ago. The other from my professional experience years later, when I have sat in rooms where peace is discussed as an outcome – a framework, with timelines, benchmarks and acronyms. For the women I have known and met – survivors of wartime sexual violence, activists, civil servants, mothers and daughters – peace is not a framework loaded with acronyms. It is the beginning of a journey back to normalcy, burdened the need to be seen, to have their rights restored and their competences heard.

I wish I could say that decades after the war in Bosnia, women have fully realised their rights and received the acknowledgement they deserve. But I cannot. And that is where peace failed them.

In many conflicts, women are truly on the front lines and act as the cement that keeps life from collapsing altogether.

NOTES

The **European Policy Centre** is an independent, not-for-profit think tank dedicated to fostering European integration through analysis and debate, supporting and challenging European decison-makers at all levels to make informed decisions based on sound evidence and analysis, and providing a platform for engaging partners, stakeholders and citizens in EU policymaking and in the debate about the future of Europe.

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