

# Women in Ukraine: How have gender roles and attitudes changed?



**This briefing<sup>a</sup> explores how the role of women and attitudes to gender roles have been changing in Ukraine, against the backdrop of the full-scale invasion that started in 2022. This briefing presents research conducted by BBC Media Action which examines how men and women are reacting to women's changing roles in Ukraine and their reflections on the future of gender equality in the country. It examines the diverse and sometimes conflicting contemporary discussions around gender equality, and how media and communication can reflect this.**

Evidence shows that this war has disproportionately affected women. For example, women have been affected by gender-based violence, forced relocation and related socio-economic impacts, and increased care responsibilities.<sup>1</sup> However, it is important to recognise women not just a vulnerable group or victims of this war. The number of women in the Ukrainian military has doubled since 2014 and women now make up one-fifth of the country's armed forces.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, as most military-age men are unable to leave the country owing to martial law, Ukrainian women have emerged as prominent international advocates for their country. Female journalists and NGO leaders have actively supported the collection of evidence of

<sup>a</sup> This briefing is part of a series of three, see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/publications-and-resources/research/briefings/europe/ukraine/gender-perceptions/>



war crimes to help ensure post-war justice. Other women are active volunteers at the forefront in providing humanitarian assistance to war-affected communities.<sup>3</sup>

In times of conflict, traditional gender roles and attitudes can become further entrenched or be disrupted.<sup>4</sup> In Ukraine, the war has prompted women to take on a range of new roles and responsibilities, some of which both reflect and challenge traditional gender roles. At the same time, disinformation campaigns in Ukraine have used narratives on gender roles and gender equality to create division, including by discrediting women's contributions to, or experiences in, the conflict.<sup>5</sup>

In Ukraine as elsewhere, media and communication has a key role to play in ensuring that gender roles and stereotypes are not perpetuated or exploited for disinformation purposes. They can do this by effectively addressing gender issues, shifting discriminatory attitudes around gender, and providing a space and platform to highlight women's needs and interests. Media content that is stereotypical, sensational or lacking in professional and ethical standards risks restricting women's freedoms and increasing their sense of insecurity and vulnerability.

## Methodology

This briefing is based on the findings of multi-method BBC Media Action research conducted in Ukraine in late 2022 and early 2023. The Ukrainian research agency InfoSapiens carried out most of the quantitative and qualitative research. Online analysis of the Ukrainian digital space was conducted in April 2023 by a UK-based agency, Discover.ai, which specialises in using artificial intelligence (AI) to scan online sources and then use human analysts to generate insights into the key narratives and themes. BBC Media Action then triangulated this data to gain a comprehensive picture of how women's roles in Ukraine are changing, how they are being discussed and portrayed online, and how men and women are reacting to those changes.



A woman receives some sweets for her kids from volunteers in Bucha, Ukraine

ALEXEY FURMAN/GETTY IMAGES

Table 1: Research methods, aims and samples

Method	Sample	Purpose
<b>Quantitative telephone survey</b>	A nationally representative survey of just over 1500 women living in Ukraine in territories controlled by the Ukrainian government.  A similar survey was conducted with 500 men, though this smaller sample means the findings are not as representative.	To measure key impacts and actions taken because of the war, as well as media consumption habits, content preferences and attitudes towards misinformation and gender equality.
<b>Quantitative online survey</b>	A survey of over 200 women living in non-government controlled areas (NGCAs).	To measure the same questions as above, but using a different method to reach women in NGCAs as most Ukrainian mobile phone operators in Russian occupied areas have been cut off.
<b>Online focus group discussions (FGDs)</b>	8 FGDs with women: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4 with internally displaced persons (IDPs)</li> <li>• 4 with non-IDPs</li> </ul> 4 FGDs with men: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 with IDPs</li> <li>• 2 with non-IDPs</li> </ul>	To examine: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How the impacts of war were being experienced on a day-to-day basis</li> <li>• Perceptions of media and communication, especially to gain a deeper understanding of how women and men felt about the changing role of women during the conflict, and how gender roles and attitudes may be changing.</li> </ul> Visual stimuli showing women taking up different roles in the war were used to stimulate part of these discussions to unearth more ingrained attitudes around gender roles.
<b>Online and face-to-face, in-depth interviews (IDIs)</b>	9 IDIs with female respondents from relatively vulnerable groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3 with women with disabilities</li> <li>• 3 with women from Roma communities</li> <li>• 3 with women who live near the conflict front lines or in NGCAs</li> </ul>	To examine the same issues as the FGDs to gain a more individual narrative experience of how women have been affected by the war.
<b>Key informant interviews (KIIs)</b>	8 KIIs with women leaders working in the humanitarian, civic and media sectors.	To generate a broader perspective from experts on the impacts of the war on women, and what these changes might mean for gender equality in the future.
<b>Online analysis</b>	Use of AI data to sift through the content of over 200 Ukrainian online sources and triangulating these findings with data from the qualitative and quantitative research.	To unearth how women and gender issues were being discussed and portrayed online, to gain a comprehensive picture of how the roles undertaken by women are changing, and how men and women are reacting to those changes.

## Key findings

### Women have taken up different roles since the start of the war

The research found that the war has affected women in multiple ways, such as displacement, challenges with income, employment, and mental and physical health. This has been particularly acute for specific groups of women such as internally displaced persons (IDPs) or women living in occupied or non-government controlled areas (NGCAs) of Ukraine.<sup>b</sup>

As expressed in focus group discussions (FGDs) for this study, one of the main ways in which women's roles have changed during this war is the sole responsibility that many bear for their families while their partners or husbands are away fighting. This was especially felt by women IDPs who had to make decisions alone for their children, and women in rural areas who had to cope with the added responsibilities of farming jobs that men used to take on. Women and men in the FGDs recognised the role of women taking on more responsibility in their homes, families and communities. This was seen as a valuable contribution to the war effort.

<sup>b</sup> For more detail on the way the war has affected women's lives, please see the sister research briefing in the series 'Women in Ukraine: What key issues are they facing?' Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/publications-and-resources/research/briefings/europe/ukraine/gender-perceptions/>

## Women's perception of their own role is changing

The Ukrainian concept of an 'ideal' woman is changing. When women participants in the qualitative research discussed this concept, their definition was broad – reflecting the changing roles women are undertaking and the challenges they face. They believed that an ideal woman should be independent, brave, wise, strong, resilient and patriotic (particularly during wartime) while also being kind, a good mother and well-groomed. For example, one female IDP said she used to see a perfect woman as tender and a source of joy – including for her partner – but more recently she has shifted to think that a perfect woman should be strong and encourage others to be strong too.

**“ The cult of *berehynia* [women as home protectress] that has seriously been present... has disappeared..., it seems to me. This is because many men and women are volunteering [for combat], and women know about drones and military fatigues no less than men – this blurs these roles. ”**

*Key informant interview with female gender and security expert*

Changes in self-image among women was also a key theme picked up in the analysis of online narratives in Ukraine. In the past a very narrow and prescriptive ideal of physical beauty was framed as women's primary value but the war has brought about a significant shift towards pride in beauty in all its forms.

## Women's role models include leaders and their peers

Women research participants discussed which role models inspired them to cope with the impacts of the war. Middle-aged groups of women cited examples including the First Lady Olena Zelenska, the Deputy Minister for Defence Hanna Malyar and celebrities. In contrast, young women were more inspired by people they know, such as local women taking action who have featured in the media, or their own friends.

High-profile stories of women such as Kateryna Polishchuk (a female combat medic who survived Russian captivity and returned as part of a prisoner swap) were mentioned by both women and men. The online analysis showed that women's role models tended to be high-profile women in politics (who notably still conform to high standards of glamour). It also highlighted that campaigns or activism around the need for women's empowerment resonated more in urban areas and among urban women.

**“ When I see such stories [of other women] I feel incredible respect and admiration because I couldn't do something like this. ”**

*Woman IDP, aged 18–24*

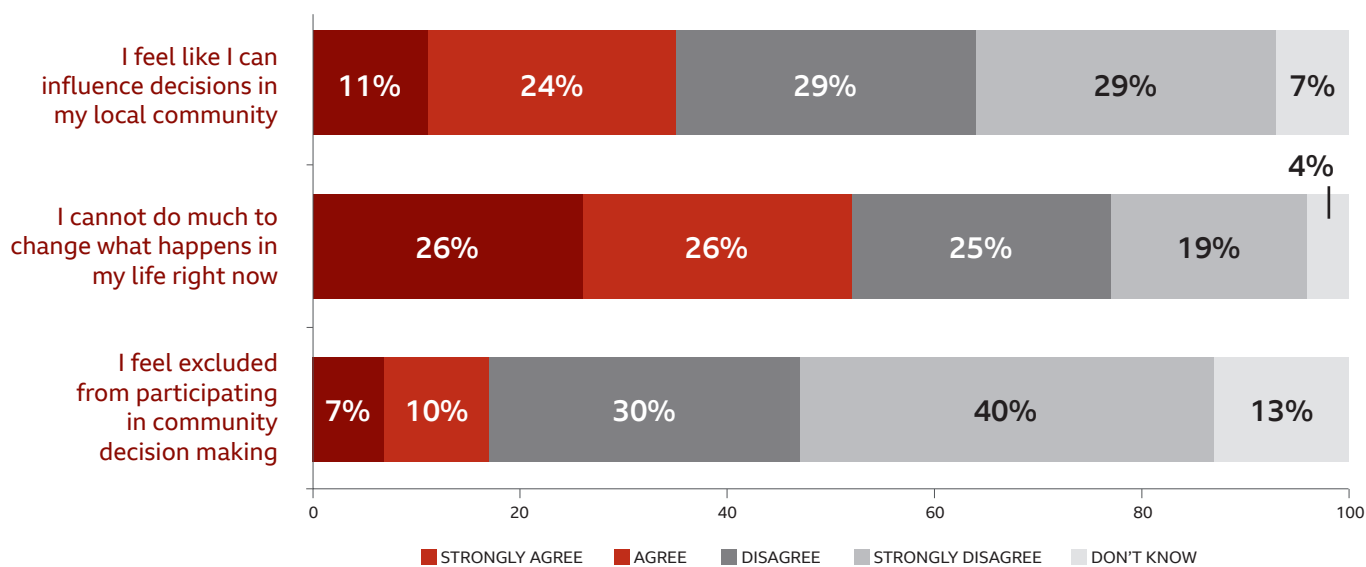
## Women's sense of their role in community decision-making varies

Recent gender analysis research in Ukraine has shown that while women's leadership has increased in community-level humanitarian efforts, their participation in local formal decision-making processes has decreased.<sup>6</sup> However, ensuring women's experiences, participation and inputs influence decision-making at the heart of the post-conflict recovery process is important for the future of Ukraine.<sup>7</sup>

Although women in Ukraine are taking on increased responsibilities and a variety of steps in response to the impact of the war, over half (52%) of the women survey respondents felt they could not do anything to change what happens in their lives. This feeling was more common among older women (38% of those aged 55+ stated this, compared with 15% of those aged 18–34) or those who live in the east or have disabilities. In the FGDs, women talked about how the war made it impossible to plan the future and expressed a huge sense of uncertainty and lack of control.

Women's equal participation in decision-making at local and national levels is important to ensure that diverse voices are represented. For example, one woman NGO leader talked about the importance of women's representation in the reconstruction of Kharkiv, to ensure that everyone's needs are met. Overall, just over a third of women survey respondents (35%) thought they could influence decisions in their local communities, with 57% feeling they could not. Amongst the 29% of women who strongly disagreed that they could influence decisions in their local community, they were more likely to be Russian speakers (37% stated this, compared with 28% of Ukrainian speakers) or women with disabilities (37% versus 26% without disabilities). They were also more likely to live in the east than Kyiv (34% versus 21%) and to be older – 35% of those aged 55+ said this, compared with 23% of women aged 18–34.

Figure 1: Levels of perceived influence and decision making



Q: I am going to read out several statements some people have made. For each one I would like you to tell me whether you agree or disagree.

Base: all respondents – nationally representative telephone survey of women (n = 1535)

## Women have taken a range of actions in response to the impacts of war

Despite the challenges outlined above, women research participants reported having taken a range of actions to cope with the impacts of war and contribute to the war effort. Donating money was the most common action taken (cited by 73%), followed by supporting others with food, housing and clothing. These actions differed between different groups of women. Younger women were significantly more likely to have taken these actions than older women, female IDPs were significantly more likely to have changed job than non-IDP women, and women living with disabilities were significantly less likely to have taken any actions.

In the qualitative research discussions, women talked about their admiration for other women who were doing things such as volunteering and shared specific examples of this, such as preparing food for the military, taking in IDPs or even trying to talk to relatives in Russia to explain what was happening in Ukraine.

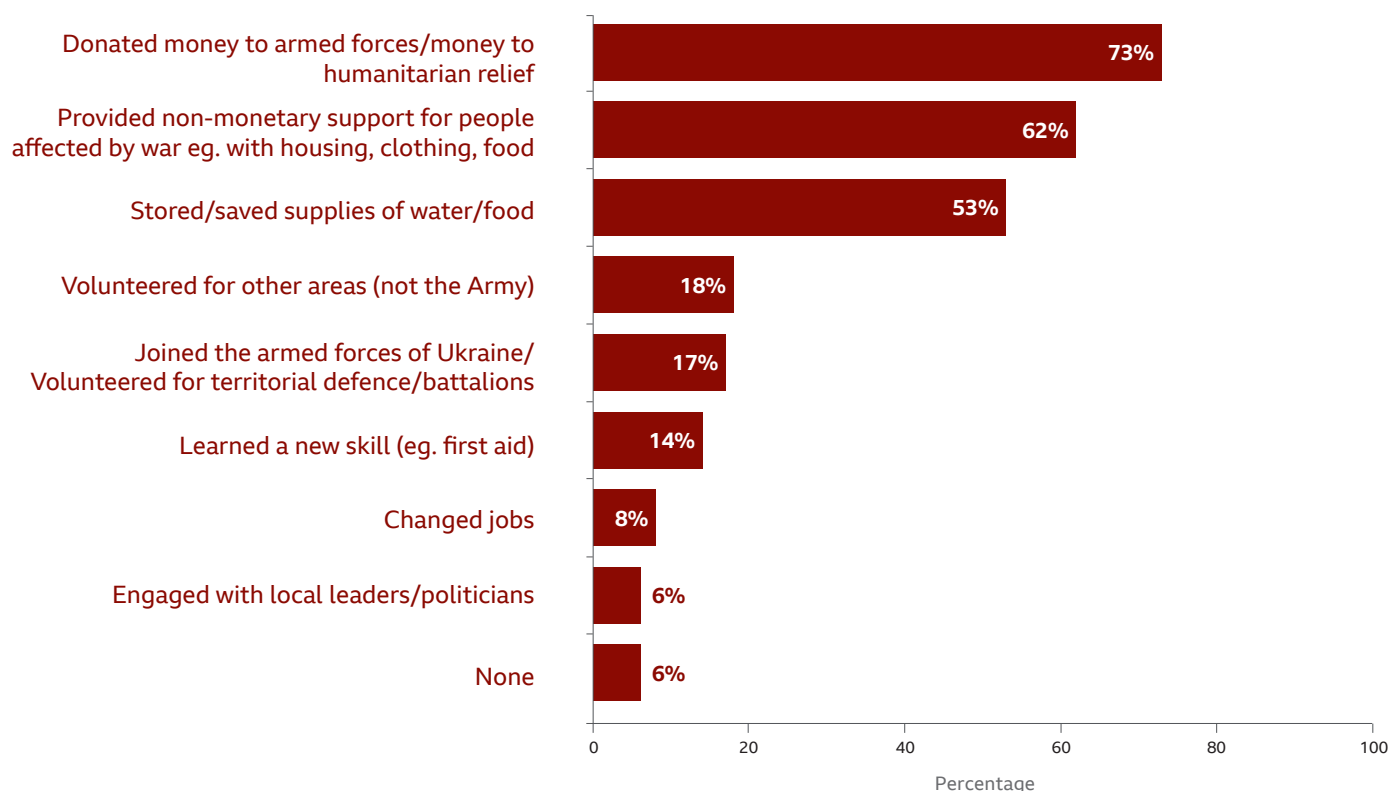
The experience of women living in NGCAs were very different to other women in Ukraine. Women living in occupied regions were much more focused on taking practical actions such as saving or storing food and water (61% of survey respondents said they had done this), learning new skills (cited by 26%) and changing jobs (21%), which reflects the more acute impacts faced by this group.

**“At all times, women used to be one stage below men. But women are proving that they can be equal with men in all spheres.”**

*Woman IDP, age 25-41*



Figure 2: Actions taken by women to cope with the impacts of war



Q. Have you done any of these since the start of full-scale war?

Base: all respondents – nationally representative telephone survey of women (n = 1535) Multiple response

While women and men qualitative research participants noted that many women – especially young women – were increasingly joining the military, they still recognised that there were general differences in men’s and women’s contribution to the Ukrainian war effort. In general, men were taking military action and women were volunteering, supporting humanitarian aid, taking in IDPs and taking the lead responsibility for children or other dependants. This was backed up by responses to the quantitative survey. While the most common actions taken by both men and women were donating money or providing other types of non-monetary support, 30% of men said they had joined or volunteered for the armed forces or their affiliates, compared to 17% of women.<sup>c</sup>

However, both women and men recognised that women’s roles, including providing psychological support, becoming medics, volunteering, keeping the economy going through working or taking up traditionally male roles are key to the war effort. This theme of women providing vital support for the home front was also found in the analysis of online narratives. Women were seen as key drivers and defenders of national resilience – supporting and caring for their families and communities while men are away fighting.

### Traditional attitudes around women’s roles are strong despite women’s varied roles in supporting the war

This research uncovered a mix of progressive and more traditional attitudes to the different roles women have taken on in Ukraine since the war started. In the survey data, 77% of women felt that equality had already been achieved in Ukraine and 84% said women and men have equal roles to play in the war. However, 45% of women also felt that a woman’s most important job is to take care of her home and cook for her family. Men’s attitudes mirrored this – 90% agreed that women and men have equal roles to play but a significant proportion (48%) felt that women’s most important role was at home.

<sup>c</sup> Data from the men’s quantitative survey is indicative only – it cannot be directly compared with the women’s sample, which was larger and more nationally representative.

These mixed attitudes also came across in the qualitative research. A sense of national unity and that everyone has a part to play was a key driver of acceptance of, and more positive attitudes towards, women's participation in the war effort. Women and men were generally supportive of women choosing how they wanted to contribute to the war effort, regardless of whether they stayed in or left Ukraine, chose to join the military or contributed to humanitarian efforts. Younger women especially were supportive and non-judgemental about this.

**“I admired these girls who are at the front... When they – like boys – shoot, run, throw, I am simply fascinated.”**

*Woman IDP*

However, when women and men were probed further on the acceptable roles for women in the war, more conflicted attitudes emerged. While they expressed initial support for women in any role they wished to undertake, older women and men also felt that being the *berehynia* (home protectress) was still women's most important role. Some research participants said that women with children should not join the military.

In FGDs, especially when presented with images or ideas of women in more aggressive military roles, some older women felt it would be more suitable for women to stay at home and look after their children. Men expressed generally positive attitudes to women participating in the war effort in any way they wanted, and felt pride and admiration for this, but some believed that women were less suited to frontline military roles and that they could become traumatised by taking on such roles.

**“The women's mission is to keep the hearth, to give birth to children, while the war is a man's business.”**

*Woman in-depth interview participant, age 52*

This mix of views on women taking military roles was also highlighted in the analysis of online narratives. One key theme that emerged online is how some resistance to women fighting on the frontline is countered by admiration of their courage and the necessity of women fighting alongside – or working in support roles – alongside Ukrainian men.

**“No matter how brave she may be, she is a woman. That's not her role, a woman should give life, give birth to children, and not kill.”**

*Man FGD participant, not an IDP*

## **The challenge of traditional gender narratives**

There are concerns that gender equality can stall and gender stereotypes can become more entrenched during times of conflict.<sup>8</sup> While only 19% of women survey respondents agreed with the statement “Ukrainian mass media tend to portray women as weak and men as warriors”, women and men participants in the qualitative research were aware of a strong media narrative of men as Ukraine's defenders. They expressed high levels of appreciation for men (and women) serving in the military but noted that this dominant portrayal of men could pose problems for gender equality in future. This was especially noted by younger women, who expressed less traditional attitudes around gender roles.

**“This will strengthen patriarchal tradition because we now tend to have these gender roles – men as defenders... and women as... waiting, supporting, etc. Even if we have been moving away from this, we will have to do it all over again after this [war].”**

*Woman IDP aged 41–59*

In key informant interviews, those women working for NGOs highlighted that media often falls into the ‘trap’ of showing men as fighters or defenders and women as victims, or contributors to humanitarian efforts, which could further entrench gender stereotypes. One interviewee highlighted that while the ‘traditional man’ was the media’s key focus, there needs to be more diversity to avoid gender equality stalling. In the analysis of online narratives, the notion of women as fierce defenders of home and hearth also relates to the challenge identified in the qualitative research – while women and men recognise and value this role, there is a risk that it reinforces more traditional gender views and stereotypes.

**“Men are now highlighted as our gods, our guardians, this is visible everywhere, and there are different videos on TikTok and Instagram.”**

*Woman IDP, aged 18-24*

## Understanding how women are portrayed in the Ukrainian digital space

BBC Media Action brought together qualitative and quantitative data from this research with an analysis of the online space in Ukraine. The six key narratives that emerged from this online analysis, and how these chimed with the qualitative and quantitative research data, is summarised below.



### 1. War amplifies and de-prioritises women’s challenges:

While difficulties faced by women increase during conflict, they may also become less immediately significant because of that same conflict. Female research participants talked about the new challenges and responsibilities they had taken on, and how they admired other women who were fighting, volunteering or taking other steps to support the war effort. But the audience data also showed that the impacts of war were more acute for specific groups of women, particularly for those in non-government controlled areas.

**2. Frontline courage and advocacy:** There is some online resistance to women serving on the frontline but that is countered by the necessity of these roles and admiration for women’s courage in taking them on. This attitude was reflected in the qualitative research – women and men generally supported women making any contribution to the war effort, including joining the military, but some retained traditional ideas that women’s primary roles are as wives and mothers.



**3. Inspiration from the top:** The dominant female role models online tend to be women in high-profile public roles. This was echoed somewhat in the qualitative research but participants expressed a desire to see and hear more from everyday women role models such as volunteers, fighters or providers of humanitarian support.



**4. Rights and values of IDPs:** This was a key theme online as women and children comprise so much of the refugee and IDP populations. Women fleeing with children and without their male partners reinforces traditional gender roles, especially the primacy of motherhood, but also means that women are having to be more resourceful and less reliant on husbands and fathers. The qualitative and quantitative research echoed this – IDP women faced a more acute set of challenges, especially moving location and being responsible for other family members and the family income.



**5. Women's shifting self-image:** The online analysis found that the war and its social shifts and demographic changes has brought about a significant shift towards accepting and celebrating beauty in all its forms rather than a narrow physical ideal. Women in the qualitative audience research also held on to the idea that the ideal woman should be well-groomed and that physical beauty is important but also that a woman should have attributes to help her cope with the war such as being strong, brave and independent.

**6. Fierce defenders of the home hearth:** The online analysis picked up the theme of women as fierce defenders of the 'home hearth', which has both demonstrated women's strength and resilience and reinforced traditional gender roles. This was also evident in the qualitative research – women were having to cope and contribute to the home front by looking after families and taking up non-traditional jobs. Women and men alike were proud of this and recognised its value but some women were concerned about a possible backsliding in gender roles because of the war.



## Recommendations for media and communication initiatives

This research uncovered mixed views in Ukraine on the roles and responsibilities women should assume during wartime. While there were generally positive views on women being able to assume whatever roles they want in wartime, there were also some more traditional views of men's rightful roles being defenders and heroes while women should focus on looking after children and the home.

While more traditional perspectives on gender roles are often reinforced by media content, media can also help to shift these views. It can do this by changing how women are represented in media content and by challenging the concept of women's roles to stimulate dialogue. The following recommendations, based on the findings of this mixed-method research study, should help media and communication professionals to have a positive influence on gender roles and attitudes in Ukraine.

- **Media and communication initiatives should aim to reach and engage audiences with content which can both reflect and challenge their understanding of the role of women in Ukraine today, both showcasing how women are contributing to the country and creating spaces for dialogue.** Media content should highlight the role of women as those who keep the home front going in a wider sense (economic, social, and taking care of children and other dependants) without perpetuating harmful tropes such as portraying women solely as victims or mothers and homemakers.
- **Media could leverage the recent disruption of gender roles and the strong sense of national unity in Ukraine to have a positive impact on gender equality.** Showcasing women contributing to the war effort in roles traditionally dominated by men could help to counter narratives that risk further entrenching gender stereotypes (such as women as victims or refugees, or men as defenders). Media content or stories that focus on women's competence and the skills required during periods of crisis such as leadership, resourcefulness and decision-making could also help to promote positive attitudes around gender.
- **It is evident that women are making substantial contributions to the war effort in Ukraine, especially in supporting humanitarian work.** Media and communication should work in partnership with NGOs to highlight and amplify local women-led humanitarian responses to emphasise the importance of women holding decision-making and leadership roles.
- **The dominant narrative of men as defenders of Ukraine could have future implications for gender equality as it could entrench gender stereotypes.** Media and communication content has a key role in portraying a balanced picture of the issues and challenges women face and the different ways both women and men contribute to the war effort. Media organisations could help to ensure this by monitoring and reviewing the gender balance of their output and also how their content portrays women, taking care to avoid stereotypes and traditional gender norms.
- **Positive changes in gender roles and attitudes have the potential to foster a more inclusive society in Ukraine.** Media and communication partners should monitor how mis- or disinformation that aims to target and exploit societal divides on attitudes around women and gender issues are affecting audiences.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> UN Women and Care International (2022) Rapid Gender Analysis of Ukraine 4 May 2022, Available from: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Rapid-Gender-Analysis-of-Ukraine-en.pdf>
- <sup>2</sup> Chatham House (2023) Ukraine needs women to win the war – and the peace, Available from: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2023-02/ukraine-needs-women-win-war-and-peace>
- <sup>3</sup> UN Women and Care International (2022) Rapid Gender Analysis of Ukraine 4 May 2022, Available from: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Rapid-Gender-Analysis-of-Ukraine-en.pdf>
- <sup>4</sup> OECD (2017) Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in Fragile and Conflict Affected Situations: A Review of Donor Support [Online] Available at: [https://www.oecd.org/dac/conflict-fragility-resilience/docs/Gender\\_equality\\_in\\_fragile\\_situations\\_2017.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/dac/conflict-fragility-resilience/docs/Gender_equality_in_fragile_situations_2017.pdf)
- <sup>5</sup> Atlantic Council (2022) Beyond munitions: A gender analysis for Ukrainian security assistance - Atlantic Council
- <sup>6</sup> UN Women and Care International (2022) Rapid Gender Analysis of Ukraine 4 May 2022, Available from: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Rapid-Gender-Analysis-of-Ukraine-en.pdf>
- <sup>7</sup> UN Women (2022) Securing Gender Equality in Ukraine Amidst the War [Online] Available from: [https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/Securing%20GE%20in%20Ukraine%20Amidst%20the%20War\\_Final.pdf](https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/Securing%20GE%20in%20Ukraine%20Amidst%20the%20War_Final.pdf)
- <sup>8</sup> Birchall, J. (2019). Gender as a causal factor in conflict. K4D Helpdesk Report 549. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies.



## Acknowledgements

This research briefing was prepared as part of a project implemented by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and thanks to funding from Global Affairs Canada (GAC). The content of the briefing is the responsibility of BBC Media Action. Any views expressed should not be taken to represent those of the BBC itself or of any donors supporting our work.

The author would like to thank Info Sapiens, which conducted the quantitative and qualitative fieldwork, Discover.AI, who carried out the analysis of online narratives and Anna Korbut, who carried out the in-depth interviews with key experts and contributed to the analysis and reporting. The author is grateful to George Ferguson, Ellie Haworth, Anne Liedloff, Tania Nikitina, Sanjib Saha, Sonia Whitehead and Emebet Wuhib-Mutungi for their review and input into the research.

The author would also like to thank all research respondents who participated in the research.

**Author:** Sally Gowland

**Commissioning Editor:** Sonia Whitehead

**Copy editor:** Lorna Fray

**Designer:** Marten Sealby

**Cover image:** A Ukrainian woman uses a mobile phone during a vigil held in solidarity with Ukraine outside the United Nation University in Tokyo. (Tomohiro Ohsumi/Getty Images)

**Registered charity number (England & Wales):** 1076235

**Company number:** 3521587

**Registered office:** Broadcasting House, Portland Place, London W1A 1AA

**Tel:** +44 (0) 20 7481 9797

**Email:** [media.action@bbc.co.uk](mailto:media.action@bbc.co.uk)

**Web:** [bbcmediaaction.org](http://bbcmediaaction.org)

©BBC Media Action 2023