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Feminine Frontiers: Navigating the Economic Fallout – A Gendered Analysis of the Russia-Ukraine Crisis

Introduction

The invasion of Ukraine by Russia offers a serious threat that could spark an immediate humanitarian as well as economic shock, even if the globe has not yet fully recovered from COVID-19's impact on society and the economy.¹ The protracted conflict between Russia and Ukraine has caused tremendous suffering and portends a bleak future for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and its vow to "leave nobody behind" among those who are vulnerable. This research's major goal is to offer a comprehensive knowledge of how the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has affected SDG advancement globally and how it had a very serious negative economic impact on women in the region.²

Two years have passed since Russia began its full-scale assault on Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The invasion has caused the Ukrainian people enormous misery over the past 24 months, with thousands losing their lives, millions losing their homes, and vital civilian infrastructure being completely destroyed.³ Women and girls in Ukraine are suffering significant effects, such as increased gender-based violence and human trafficking, as well as the loss of essential occupations and increasing levels of unemployment. The widespread devastation of infrastructure has made it difficult for many people to access healthcare, survivor services, and other essential types of support.⁴ The triple obligation of UN Women, which includes standard support, UN system interaction, and operational functions, remains to be fulfilled in Ukraine in

order to mobilize critical and ongoing efforts for gender parity and the equal rights of all women and girls.⁵

The paper highlights the severe economic impacts of the Russia-Ukraine conflict on women, emphasizing increased gender-based violence, human trafficking, loss of essential occupations, and rising unemployment. It criticizes the shortcomings of UN Women in providing essential economic support for women in the region, attributing the failure to address displacement, limited involvement of women in decision-making, and the persistence of gender inequalities.

What are the economic impacts of the Invasion on Women?

Over the past ten years, Ukraine has made significant strides toward eliminating gender disparities.⁶ In fact, since the Maidan movement in 2013—also referred to as "the revolution of dignity"—women in Ukraine have taken an increased interest in politics, the economy, and society.⁷ On March 3, 2020, the COVID-19 epidemic reached Ukraine, endangering the minimal progress that had been accomplished in terms of women's rights, notably in terms of economic empowerment and access to healthcare.⁸⁹ Due to the prolonged restrictions on mobility, Ukrainian women are now more likely than women in many other countries to experience subjective poverty and economic insecurity. They also have lower employment rates, less access to medical care, and higher exposure to physical and psychological domestic abuse.¹⁰ These adverse effects are much more severe for women who are members of minority groups, such as Internally Displaced People (IDP), Roma women, and especially women with disabilities.¹¹ These marginalized groups have faced additional difficulties relating to residence registration, a lack of employment and other means of support, and restricted access to healthcare and social services.¹² The protracted conflict has not been only observed by Ukraine's women. Ukrainian women have been fighting in the armed forces, the territorial defense forces, and on the political

and economic front lines from the start of the conflict.¹³ As physicians, nurses, hospital employees, and volunteers, they have also helped save lives. Large-scale rallies demanding the end of the war have been organized by those who reside abroad.¹⁴

Decision-makers have typically left women on the sidelines, whether on relief efforts, contentment-making, or other issues that directly affect their lives, neglecting their considerable contributions and their added burdens.¹⁵ The difficulties faced by women in influencing political and administrative decisions have been made worse by the consolidation of power and the rise of military involvement at official decision-making levels. Traditional gender norms and stereotypes frequently linked with leadership roles endure as power becomes more concentrated and military engagement increases, posing obstacles to women who want to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes.¹⁶ The deeply ingrained male-dominated structures in these domains frequently support underrepresentation and impede women's progress, further marginalizing their ability to influence strategic choices and policy.¹⁷ Gender inequality is made worse by the militarization of decision-making, which makes it harder for women to claim leadership roles in these crucial areas. This claim emphasizes the enduring reality that women are routinely ignored or excluded in a variety of societal contexts. In social, political, and economic arenas, women frequently find themselves marginalized or shut out of opportunities and decision-making processes.¹⁸ This trend is a reflection of larger structural problems like power imbalances, discrimination based on gender, and deeply ingrained cultural norms that support the marginalization of women. The tendency for women to fall behind persists despite efforts to address gender inequality, underscoring the continuous need for coordinated efforts to promote gender equity and inclusivity in all spheres of society. The absence of women's participation has also failed to ensure that their goals and needs, notably those of the most

vulnerable and marginalized, are met and consequently alleviated.¹⁹ Historically, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has been characterized by heightened geopolitical tensions, military conflicts, and economic turmoil. As these events unfolded, women often found themselves marginalized and disproportionately affected by the consequences of political decisions and armed conflicts. Throughout history, the formal decision-making processes during crises have predominantly involved male perspectives, leaving women at a disadvantage.²⁰ The absence of women in key decision-making positions has perpetuated a gender gap, hindering the recognition and prioritization of their unique needs and challenges. Despite global efforts to address gender inequality, the crisis underscored the persistent struggle for women's inclusion and the necessity for concerted endeavors to ensure their voices are heard and their concerns are addressed in times of upheaval.²¹

Impacts of the Invasion on Women Beyond the Immediate Consequences

Sexual Violence: Since the Russian encroachment, there have been reports of women being assaulted after their husbands were killed, as well as reports of women being raped in front of their family members—a deliberate strategy to shatter the Ukrainian family unit, break the morale of the women, and promote a sense of despair and futility.²² Multiple allegations of sexual violence have been made to the national hotline set up to track cases of domestic assault, human trafficking, as well as gender-based violence. According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, as of 3 June 2022, the Human Rights Monitoring Group had discovered 124 alleged acts of sexual violence connected to hostilities in Ukraine.²³ Health hazards are high for rape victims, whether they are in Ukraine or among those seeking refuge abroad. They are very susceptible to internal injuries, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted illnesses like HIV.²⁴ All of

these would require specialized medical care, which would not be available given the ongoing conflict.

Education: Over 1,800 educational institutions have been harmed or annihilated since the Russian invasion, corresponding to the Ukrainian Ministry of Education. Both sides of the conflict utilize additional educational institutions as information hubs, refuges, supply hubs, or for military operations.²⁵ Consequently, millions of boys and girls have been denied access to quality education during the previous eight months, with young females, particularly at risk of missing years of education and social advancement. According to Save the Children, girls are 2.5 times more likely than boys to miss school in violent conflict zones like Ukraine. It has previously been demonstrated that the COVID-19 epidemic illustrates how disruptions to education make it more challenging for females to return to school when the crisis has passed.²⁶ The health of the girls themselves will suffer if schooling is neglected because they will be more likely to experience gender-based violence as rape is used as a strategic tool for a conflict that will leave women and girls with early pregnancies, and sexually transmitted diseases that can also lead to death. The welfare of her own family, her neighborhood, and the overall economy are also affected, as well as their ability to support themselves financially and in other ways.²⁷

Food Security and Energy Crisis: Ongoing conflict has significantly disrupted export and production processes, leading to a scarcity of essential commodities. This, in turn, poses an additional challenge to the issue at hand, contributing to price hikes due to the shortages. Food costs in Ukraine have increased by 50% since the start of 2022, but crude oil prices, which are already up by 33%, are expected to increase by more than 50% by the end of 2024.²⁸ Women in patriarchal societies are expected to reduce their own consumption to spare food for other household members when there is not enough to go around.²⁹ In Ukraine, this tendency is

painfully evident and contributes to the deterioration of anemia and malnutrition among women and young girls.³⁰ The women of Ukraine are not only dealing with the worsening food and energy crisis, but they also have no reliable assets to fall back on because their access to resources like land or financial credit, as well as formal employment, is now more restricted than ever.³¹

How is UN Women helping?

In Ukraine, gender discrimination is pervasive. The media and educational curricula foster old, patriarchal attitudes and values, which have a restricted definition of gender.³² Women's participation and involvement in conflict resolution have been constrained by the ongoing violence in eastern Ukraine, which has reinforced gender stereotypes that emphasize males as guardians and heroes and women as caring supporters.³³ The restricted participation of women in conflict resolution in eastern Ukraine is rooted in the enduring violence that has solidified gender stereotypes. The ongoing conflict has perpetuated traditional societal norms, portraying men as protectors and heroes, while relegating women to roles defined by nurturing and support. These entrenched gender stereotypes create barriers for women seeking active roles in conflict resolution, as they face societal expectations that may undervalue their contributions and potential impact. The normalization of these stereotypes further limits the diversification of perspectives and strategies in addressing the conflict, hindering the comprehensive inclusion of women in peacebuilding efforts. The government and development partners consistently underinvest in programs that highlight women's involvement in gender equality, the economy, peace, and security.³⁴ The underinvestment in programs showcasing women's participation in various domains, including gender equality, the economy, peace, and security, can be attributed to a combination of systemic issues and priorities within the government and development

partnerships. Firstly, there exists deep-rooted gender biases and entrenched patriarchal norms that undervalue the significance of women's roles in these areas. Secondly, resource allocation is being influenced by existing power structures and traditional notions of gender roles, leading to a lack of emphasis on women's contributions. Additionally, limited awareness and understanding of the multifaceted benefits of women's involvement is contributing to the consistent underinvestment in such programs. Efforts to address this issue would require a shift in societal perceptions, policy priorities, and a commitment to recognizing and promoting the crucial roles women play in fostering gender equality, economic development, and sustainable peace and security.

Women's access to employment and income has been restricted, gender disparities in employment and advancement have been worsened, and there is now horizontal and vertical occupational gender segregation in the labor market because of persistent gender imbalance in economic opportunities and discrimination.³⁵ Women are disproportionately represented in traditionally 'female' vocational fields such as education, health care, social security, public administration, and administrative and support services, which are also characterized by lower pay. Women tend to hold lower-level positions due to vertical segregation; men predominate among top managers in both the public and private sectors of the economy.³⁶ Most of the care and household work is performed by women, who have little control over assets and useful resources. Little has been done to date to assist women who face multiple forms of discrimination, particularly if they are elderly, disabled, members of a minority ethnic group, or have been internally displaced due to armed conflict.³⁷ In Ukraine, 90% of occurrences of violence against women are due to gender-based violence. Gender equality and the state of women in the nation have suffered greatly because of political unrest and conflict.³⁸

Since 1999, UN Women has worked in Ukraine to support the nation's efforts to advance gender equality and empower both women and men. UN Women has been expanding its presence and activities since 2015. To better address urgent and life-saving humanitarian needs, UN Women encourages gender mainstreaming in humanitarian need assessments and planning.³⁹ UN Women is in favor of more involvement by women, especially those who experience double discrimination because of their ethnicity, age, disability, or other factors. UN Women promotes and supports the implementation of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda, which it believes will help with recovery and peacebuilding efforts.⁴⁰ To promote inclusive development and efficient implementation of the National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security, UN Women strengthens the capacity of state institutions.⁴¹

As a response to their most pressing requests for information and capacity building, UN Women concentrates on community-level consultations and training for women activists. To assist in identifying the main dividing lines and, most crucially, a common ground for action, UN Women supports groups of women engaged in the conversation in and with the eastern region.⁴² UN Women works to advance gender equality, women's rights, and national reforms that will last for a longer period. UN Women has played a crucial role in advancing gender equality and women's rights in Ukraine, contributing to the nation's broader efforts toward sustainable and lasting national reforms. By addressing gender issues and advocating for women's empowerment, UN Women has become an integral part of the United Nations Country Team in Ukraine. Through collaboration and close partnerships, UN Women works to integrate gender considerations across various UN activities in the country. This collaborative approach aims to ensure that gender equality becomes a central focus in national initiatives, policies, and programs, reflecting a commitment to fostering comprehensive and enduring social transformation. By leveraging its

expertise and networks, UN Women contributes to the creation of a more inclusive and equitable society in Ukraine, aligning with the organization's global mission to achieve gender justice and promote women's active participation in all aspects of life. To support efforts to mainstream gender issues in UN activities in the nation, UN Women collaborates closely with the UN Country Team.⁴³

The Shortcomings/Weaknesses of UN Women and UN in General

Since the conflict, more than 1.5 million people—two-thirds of them women and children—have been internally displaced and struggle to access housing, employment, and healthcare and UN Women failed to resolve this issue of displacement.⁴⁴ This has had a significant negative impact on women's equality, community security, and the resilience of vulnerable populations like internally displaced people. Both locally based and internally displaced women are mostly responsible for caring for children, elderly family members, and people with disabilities due to a lack of access to social and childcare services and strained community resources, which makes it more difficult for them to find jobs and UN Women as well as the structural issues of international politics failed to provide proper care and in-time emergency help for the displaced women and children.⁴⁵

Women continue to play a relatively small role in decision-making about peacekeeping and recovery. Only 12% of the seats in the parliament and 11% of the ministerial positions are held by women. Families torn apart by conflict, youngsters kept apart from their families, or women—often with young children or elderly relatives—forced to flee their homes and communities all have little ability for support from state authorities and civil society organizations.⁴⁶ UN Women works with the government, parliament, civil society, and women's organizations to support projects and initiatives in many thematic areas, fully aligned with

Ukraine's national development priorities as well as the new challenges, but it still fails to achieve its basic goals, which further deteriorates the economic standing of women in the area.⁴⁷

What can be done?

In the current international discourse, Ukrainian women are gaining visibility and recognition for their resilience, activism, and contributions to various fields.⁴⁸ The global community is increasingly acknowledging the crucial role women play in shaping Ukraine's social, economic, and political landscapes, particularly in the context of ongoing conflicts and geopolitical challenges.⁴⁹ Ukrainian women's voices are being amplified on international platforms, shedding light on their experiences, perspectives, and efforts to promote gender equality, peace, and human rights. This recognition reflects a broader acknowledgment of the importance of inclusivity and diverse perspectives in discussions surrounding global affairs. Women from Ukraine must be represented on platforms that make decisions about de-escalation, conflict prevention, mitigation, and other activities.⁵⁰ To address the multifaceted challenges faced by women in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, a collaborative effort involving various actors is crucial. Immediate humanitarian aid should be delivered by international organizations, supported by governments, to provide essential resources and support for internally displaced women and children. Governments, international organizations, and civil society groups need to collaborate on establishing and strengthening mechanisms to prevent and address gender-based violence, ensuring that international trials consider a gendered perspective. Educational initiatives and economic empowerment programs targeted at Ukrainian women and girls should be implemented by a combination of governments, NGOs, and international organizations, with a focus on tailoring solutions to the specific needs arising from conflict disruptions. Efforts to

increase international recognition of Ukrainian women's contributions should involve diplomatic channels and collaboration between governments, NGOs, and the media. UN Women, in collaboration with national governments and civil society, should take a lead role in addressing its shortcomings and effectively incorporating diverse stakeholders' voices. Governments and international organizations should collaborate to ensure comprehensive reporting on gender statistics and data, with a focus on accountability for crimes against women. Sustainable agriculture and food security initiatives can be implemented through collaborations between governments, NGOs, and international organizations, promoting gender-responsive agricultural systems. Overall, a coordinated effort involving governments, international organizations, civil society, and UN bodies is essential to implement these recommendations effectively, with mechanisms including diplomatic channels, collaborative projects, and targeted programs.

Strengthening the network and resources of civil society organizations that could aid women whose lives have been disrupted by the conflict requires national and international efforts. These organizations could provide assistance to women whose lives have been upended by the conflict.⁵¹ Accountability can both serve as a deterrent for the crimes committed against Ukrainian women and aid in the reduction of sexual assault during times of peace. In order to secure accountability for sexual and gender-based crimes in Ukraine, both domestically and internationally, is urgent.⁵² All war crimes must be examined from a gendered perspective at international trials, and judges' rulings and sentences must take this into account. Investments must be made in educational initiatives that specifically benefit Ukrainian women and girls.⁵³ By focusing on the unique nutritional requirements of women and girls, the right to food is promoted and protected. To mainstream women activists, internally displaced people (IDPs), medical professionals, and those engaged in combat on the front lines, the international community, and

national forces must actively listen to their needs and concerns.⁵⁴ The characterization of UN Women's inability to deliver as a failure stems from a critical assessment of its performance in meeting the needs and concerns of key stakeholders, including women activists, internally displaced people (IDPs), medical professionals, and those engaged in combat on the front lines. The primary criterion for evaluating this is the concept of mainstreaming, which involves integrating gender perspectives into the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programs in all political, economic, and societal spheres.⁵⁵

UN Women, being a prominent international organization dedicated to advancing gender equality and women's rights, is expected to play a pivotal role in mainstreaming the concerns of diverse groups of women affected by conflicts, such as those in Ukraine. The failure, in this context, is attributed to the organization's inability to effectively incorporate the voices and needs of these stakeholders into its activities and initiatives. This could result from a range of challenges, including insufficient representation, limited engagement with grassroots movements, bureaucratic hurdles, or inadequate resources dedicated to addressing the multifaceted needs of women in conflict zones.

Conclusion

Due to a lack of access to resources, increased unpaid work, and increased vulnerability to sexual harassment and assault, Ukrainian women are bearing an unfair share of the burden of Russia's military invasion.⁵⁶ Political leaders have not taken responsibility for enacting policies that will guarantee that the concerns of women are heard. At the same time, no accountability has been demonstrated on a global scale to defend and protect the women who are disproportionately

impacted by the crisis in Russia and Ukraine. It is a constant pattern in most international conflicts that women are an afterthought.

The analysis shows that in order to achieve peace and security for the people of Ukraine and abroad, women must be represented in all decision-making platforms on de-escalation, conflict prevention, mitigation, and other procedures because they continue to endure different and additional responsibilities of war.⁵⁷ According to the UN report, the global community should advance the right to food by focusing on the unique nutritional requirements of women and girls and hastening the transition to more egalitarian, gender-responsive, and sustainable agricultural systems.⁵⁸ In addition, UN Women and the Global Crisis Response Group urge world leaders to increase reporting on gender statistics and data broken down by sex as well as guarantee all people have access to affordable and sustainable energy.⁵⁹

The war has had a significant negative impact on local communities' resilience, social cohesiveness, and sense of security, particularly among women and girls.⁶⁰ The burden of caring for children, people with disabilities, and older family members has increased for local women because of limited access to social services, especially schools, and strained community resources. Women must be represented in all decision-making forums on de-escalation, conflict prevention, mitigation, and other processes for the sake of peace and security for the people of Ukraine and beyond, as they continue to face different and additional responsibilities of war, and also because they are equal stakeholders in everything.

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