

Joint Master in Global Economic Governance and Public Affairs

Women and War - Beyond Victimhood : A Compative Analysis of Female Combatants in Ethiopia and Ukraine

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Elevator Pitch

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Abstract

This thesis aims to analyze the role of women in combat and their active participation in war efforts beyond their traditional representation as mere passive victims. The dissertation does so by examining the case studies of Ethiopia and Ukraine in order to attempt to provide an all-encompassing analysis of the phenomenon.

Themes such as *masculinisation* of women are developed, with the objective of aiding in understanding the treatment and perception of women who partake in war efforts and the changes in their identities they perform in order to be accepted.

The lack of literature available on the matter of women combatants is mitigated by taking into account multiple secondary sources from a variety of authors, nationalities and view points. Based on the data found the qualitative analysis is developed.

What is lacking is effective implementation of policies protecting and including women in the military. Women do not feel welcomed and only appear to be included out of necessity by governments and militant groups.

The unstable sociopolitical landscape seems to portray a future culminated by conflicts worldwide, therefore women will be needed at all stages of war, thus effective change must be made to accommodate the transition.

List of Acronyms

TPLF - Tigray People's Liberation Front

EPRDF - Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front

LOAC - Law of Armed Conflict

AFU - Armed Forces of Ukraine

PRIO - Peace Research Institute Oslo

UNIDIR - United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research

DDR - Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration

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1. Introduction

The thesis will dive into the topic of women and war, specifically on the portrayal of women as more than mere victims of conflicts, but rather as proactive actors in war efforts. It will do so by beginning with a global view of the phenomenon to then move to a comparative qualitative analysis of secondary sources investigating the case studies of Ethiopia and Ukraine.

The main problem in the investigation is the fact that there is an utter lack of data available on women combatants and the role that women play in conflict. However, the deficiency in the literature available is in of itself a result and a starting point for a further discussion into the reasoning behind such absence.

When referencing women in war contexts, one will picture them as victims, and rightfully so, as according to the UN Population Fund, women's wellbeing, physical, psychological and reproductive is critically threatened in times of conflict. Evidently, warfare reportedly raises the frequency of sexual violence, resulting in increases in cases of sexually transmitted infections such as HIV and AIDS, as well as unwanted pregnancies. However, a highly under explored and under researched angle is the depiction of women in war not solely as powerless victims but as to all effects and purposes, combatants.

As will be discussed in the written work, the challenge for women does not cease once they have accessed the military. In point of fact, female combatants continuously need to prove themselves throughout their career, oftentimes by minimizing their feminine traits in exchange for more masculine, social acceptable ones. According to Judith Butler, American feminist philosopher and gender studies scholar, gender requires a doing. As per her view, gender is an inherently performative and unstable act, in which one acts out expectations of gender *normativity* in order to sustain comprehensible identifications of binary categories of man and woman. Female combatants seem to identify with this concept of performing gender in order to achieve a professional and social reward. Thus,

adapting their clothing, speech, mannerisms, distorted hierarchies of gender and age and were determined not to let their femininity present as weakness. This perpetrates a well established trend of women performing in all aspects of life and in most careers.

According to American political theorist, feminist writer, and professor Cynthia Enloe “To mobilize a nation for war one must, on the one hand, activate the image of the heroic male protector, and on the other, the undifferentiated passive mass of “womenandchildren” in need of protection” (Enloe, 1990, p. 13, cited in Ericsson, 2016, p. 8). This quote perfectly encapsulates the reasoning being this specific subject choice of researching women and war with particular focus on looking beyond victimhood.

Evidently, when researching the subject of female combatants, one will find an abundance of literature depicting women as merely passive, powerless victims of war, whether it be physically, emotionally or sexually. This depiction however, does not reflect the reality of the phenomenon. It is true indeed that, as mentioned, war impacts women disproportionately, and this thesis attempts in no way to minimize such suffering.

However, women are not only victims of war, they are also active combatants and fighters. They are soldiers, equal in abilities and experience as their male peers. Other who do not partake in the fighting directly, contribute in a myriad of other ways to the war efforts. These women are soldiers often disregarded by history, contemporary media and journalism. They are not viewed as reputable of attention, thus are casted aside for news that can be more sensationalized.

Additionally, from this poignant quote one could interpret a critical comment towards policy makers, who attempt to incentivize the masses into participating in the war efforts by building upon existent gender norms and furthering such gender stereotypes and fixed roles, ultimately enforcing the oppressive status quo.

Evidently, the thesis in question aims to dive further into this underrepresented side of war from a gendered perspective, analyzing the extents of female participation in active combat and the correlation of such involvement on the conflict’s severity, if any.

In the dissertation, the case studies on Ethiopia and Ukraine will specifically be taken into account as they provide two very different perspectives, thanks to the geographical as well as cultural differences. As it happens, Ethiopia has a turbulent history of violent conflicts, both against regional as well as international forces, while as is known, Ukraine is currently engaged in active conflict. This enriches the discourse as it supplies two distinct standpoints.

The thesis will begin by analysing the literature available on the subject of female combatants and the research on the case studies of Ethiopia and Ukraine, pointing out the research gap and limitations of the data at hand.

It will proceed by looking at the relationship of women and war and the invisibility of female combatants. It will continue by examining the extents of women's contributions to war and whether their participation in militaries has any impacts the conflict itself.

To continue, the case studies will be considered, taking into account one country at a time to then compare the two and identify potential commonalities in addition to the differences. Following the comparative analysis, a discussion on the future of women fighters will be conducted, guiding the reader to the conclusive remarks.

The written work will highlight a necessity for greater action from policymakers in regards to the matter at hand. Women must be included in war efforts and their work must be regulated, valued and respected. Women in combat must feel safe to be part of the army without their work being disrupted by violent acts, sexism or other impediments. True equity will be reached when female combatants will feel comfortable enough to not have to hide their feminine traits in order to be accepted and taken seriously in a military context. The military world was not made to fit women but women are now needed, therefore, the least that can be done by authorities is to reshape the system so that women do not need to reshape themselves to fit in.

2. Literature Review

Female combatants have existed throughout history in a variety of forms and roles. During the First World War a major shift took place in proving to the western world the true value of women, as they were able to offer precious service in a variety of war efforts.

Female members of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) appear to have prioritized their commitment to the cause above expectations of female behavior in a rejection of popular conjectures of female desires.

Combatant women appear to identify with this concept of performing gender for a professional and social reward as their participation required a shift in verbal and non-verbal behaviors to integrate into the military unit. They adapted their clothing, speech, mannerisms, distorted hierarchies of gender and age and were determined not to let their femininity present as weakness.

The existence of female fighters, as both active conflict participants and demilitarized combatants, has required renegotiations of gender performances in Tigray in present and past conflicts. Patriarchal forces will continue to dominate international relations, especially regarding the start of war, the conduct of war, and the infliction of death and destruction. This is not because of their preconceived assumptions about gender and masculinity but rather because institutional structures, both domestically and internationally, assure the continued dominance of patriarchal values and male advantage in decision-making over all other genders, rendering the latter submissive. However, the agency demonstrated by Ukrainian and Ethiopian women in present and past conflicts, offers a rebuttal to patriarchal schemes in numerous ways.

2.1 Challenges and Limitations

In reference to the research gap encountered, there is an overall deficiency in data available on women as combatants rather than as victims of war. The overwhelming majority of written reports are speaking of women suffering from mental, physical and sexual abuse in conflicts.

The data on female combatants is incomplete, dated and often unreliable. Not all of the blame is to be placed on gender bias and sexism however, as the unofficial roles played by soldiers, especially women in wars renders the recording of their contributions harder to perform. Among the statistical deficiencies there is the fact that as it happens, in various cases there is no distinction between female combatants who actively participate in war efforts and women who hold positions other than soldier.

Furthermore, when taking a closer look at the case studies, what is missing from the literature available on the subject is mainly recent updates on female fighters in Ethiopia, evidently, most academic journals provide contextual data but insufficient current evidence. As a matter of fact, no historical data is available for women casualties of war events for the modern period of Ethiopian history.

Conversely, due to the ongoing war in Ukraine and the fact that it is a European country, there is far more literature available on the topic.

Overall, when it comes to female fighters there is an utter lack of publications on the matter, due to unavailability of data and to it being seen as a rather marginal issue.

2.2 Female Fighters

According to Thomas and Wood's findings in *The Social Origins of Female Combatants* and *Women on the frontline: Rebel group ideology and women's participations in violent rebellion*, there are relatively more female fighters among rebel groups in countries with higher rates of female participation in both education and within the labour force and where there are lower fertility rates. Additionally, as per their initial assumptions, the authors found the prevalence of female combatants to be strongly linked to *proxy indicators of societal gender equality* (Thomas and Wood, 2017, p.2).

Peacetime gender hierarchies are commonly reproduced in wartime settings, furthering the preexistent gendered division of labour (Luciak 2001, Reif 1986).

Shifting traditional gender roles can contribute to the enhancement of women's participation in activities and roles typically reserved for men. An example of this, is the

case of the Taiping Rebellion in China, which liberated women from their roles as solely homemakers, allowing them to take part in political and military domains (Liao, 1990).

Thomas and Wood also enumerate three mechanisms linking the amalgamation of women in economic and social institutions and the rate at which armed groups enlist women in combat roles. These include, firstly, that educated and or employed women are more skilled and therefore more appealing for rebel groups. Secondly, enhanced cross-gender connection and socialization in socio-political and economic spheres during peacetime, increase the likelihood of men perceiving women as their equals in performing the same duties and tasks. Thirdly, women with higher levels of education and who are more integrated into the workforce, thus are more immersed in the political life, can have facilitated access to join rebel organizations.

As explained in *Women in Military: Breaking Barriers & Shaping the Future*, the role of women in military operations is evolving and there is a need for future shaping and breaking down of barriers of sexism and gender inequality. Women's contributions have been invaluable in and out of combat, starting from their assistance outside of active warfare during the first and second World war to today's active fighting in armies. Ultimately, the benefits of enabling women's participation in armed forces is mutually beneficial as it contributes to strengthening national defense while simultaneously aiding in the advancement of a more just society.

As enunciated in *Challenging the Invisibility of Women Combatants Five Steps Towards Gender-Responsive DDR*, the steps begin with including former combatant women in peace talks and DDR negotiations. They continue with explicitly mentioning female combatants in DDR provisions and involving gender experts in DDR teams. Additionally, adopting gender-responsive budgeting and tracking its effective implementation is necessary, as well as addressing masculinities in the programs. This last point includes addressing violent masculinities and providing appropriate guidance.

2.3 The cases of Ethiopia and Ukraine

Ethiopia

In *The overlooked roles of women in the patriotic resistance movement in Bure Damot, 1936–1941*, Ejigu, the authors, focuses on the underrepresented role of women in Ethiopian history and their role in national politics. Female fighters actively took part in combating fascism and contributed to the development of patriotic sentiments and resistance in the area. Women also took part in the intelligence service, by acting as spies and provisioning duties. According to the study, they vigilantly acted in the underground service and provided necessary supplies to resistance fighters. Fascists withdrew from Ethiopia in 1941 “[...] in particular as a result of the inclusive efforts made by women patriots” (Ejigu, 2023, p.13).

In connection to the aforementioned statements, in the study *Women and warfare in Ethiopia - A Case Study of their Role During the campaign of Adwa, 1895/96 and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-41*, Adugna takes into account the role of women in both Italo-Ethiopian conflicts, considering primary and secondary sources.

Women played a significant role in the mobilisation of troops, raising the morale of fighters, organisation and transportation of supplies and provisions, gathering intelligence information, nursing the wounded, as well as in the actual fighting. Ones that did not actively participate in combat had to carry the burden of men’s work at the home front.

In peacetime, women glorified valour and patriotism through their reverence for brave warriors. This may be linked to the fact that women related to brave warriors by either blood or marriage would be considered as privileged in society. For instance they could inherit military holdings and instruments in the absence of a male successor or when he was a minor.

Conversely, cowards were insulted and equated to women, evidently, according to a decree issued by Emperor Menelik in 1888, “The man who handles a lance and does not come to his expedition is a woman and no more a man. He shall be called by the name of his wife and have no share of their common wealth. She may take everything”.

In brief, according to the report, the fascist occupation of Ethiopia greatly increased the rise of prostitution and as a direct consequence the spread of venereal disease.

Additionally, a large number of abortions was performed, which led to significant deaths due to unsafe procedures.

On the other hand, according to the study, the Italo Ethiopian wars in 1935-41, left a lasting legacy on the life of Ethiopian women. Their status in military affairs was promoted, traditional division of labour was developed, the political role of women was enhanced and women were given greater access to employment in business occupations such as restaurants and bars. Evidently, in the 1957 parliamentary elections, Ethiopia elected its first woman Prime Minister.

According to the written work *Women in Ethiopia*, during the imperial regime, elite women, begun women's branches of the Ethiopian Red Cross society and the Ethiopian patriotic association. The goal of these organizations was to use them for political means to mobilize women for the Italo-Ethiopian war. However, as these organizations were closely linked to the state, they failed in bringing the women's agenda into regulations or national policy.

Additionally, as per the report, during the mid 60s, militant groups developed among students aimed at setting female students free from gendered exclusion of women from politics. The movement was known as the 'battle against ignorance and exploitation'.

Later in time, women played a crucial role in the armed struggle against the Derg regime. Female combatants made up one third of the total fighters in the TPLF. Women's activism flourished under the rule of the democratic political system of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), especially during the period after 1991, when new civil society organizations developed, although the government began pressuring this groups and adopted a constraining law in 2009.

In accordance to Francesca Baldwin's written work on female combatants in Ethiopia, female soldiers actively constructed and re-constructed their identities during the conflicts

in response to the existent masculinised military structures. She explores the composite phenomenon of masculinisation in testimonies of female fighters in the early stages of the war, together with the strategic choices they made in regards to their identity constructs and societal roles.

When speaking of the concept of androgyny the author quotes Netsannet Asfar stating “People have learned to see leadership not as a gender issue, but as a capacity issue that men and women can have... All of us have the same cause, the same motivations, everyone has qualities, man or woman, therefore it did not come as a surprise if a woman had such motivation, or would make such strong fighters and very good commanders”.

Ukraine

According to the research presented in *Surviving patriarchy : Ukrainian Women and the Russia-Ukraine War*, women in Ukraine continue to be largely excluded from decision-making on matters pertaining peace negotiations, war, and humanitarian assistance.

As per official government figures, the number of Ukrainian women serving the military is currently more than 70,000, of which over 20,000 are in combat roles, and 5,500 are fighting in the trenches. The increase in the amount of women in these roles is a direct consequence to the 2016 law which gave men and women equal rights to take part in combat missions.

Among the social impacts of war enumerated by the study there is sexual violence, with Russia being accused of perpetrating sexual violence as an weapon of war against Ukraine. Related to this, human trafficking of Ukrainian women has also been increasing, especially aimed at women fleeing Ukraine due to the war as they lack the appropriate means to travel. *Care International* states that 90 percent of the total Ukrainian refugees are women and children, and that women and girls make up 65 percent of the internally displaced. According to the UN Special Representative on sexual violence in conflict, the augmenting incidence of trafficking of women and children in the country represents “a crisis within a crisis” (Sen, 2022).

As pointed out in Sara Stan's work *Women at the Frontlines: Representations of Ukrainian female soldiers in online news media*, throughout Ukrainian history, female fighters have mostly been recruited because of necessity rather than credentials. While previously women had only served limited positions in the military, since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the war in Donbas and now the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the role of women in the military has shifted.

As a matter of fact, the article *Exploring women's resistance against occupation and war in Ukraine*, aimed to analyse the impacts of gender inequality on the Ukrainian army, taking into account both primary and secondary sources. The paper distinguishes between armed and unarmed resistance of women. In reference to the unarmed resistance, the author underlines the fight for freedom and the goal to regain occupied territories in Crimea and Donbas. As stated, the majority of women were involved in this type of opposition in Ukraine.

The article *Ukrainian wartime policy and the construction of women's combatant status* examines the role of gender in the connotation of people as civilians or combatants in the conflict in Ukraine. Furthermore, it argues that certain decisions taken by officials affected by gender bias have created a uncertainties in regards to the combatant status of women.

3. Research Methodology

The dissertation focuses on to what extent women are legitimately considered as fighters and what role gender plays and has played in combat, specifically in Ethiopia and Ukraine in the last 30 years.

For this end, the research design applied in the thesis is based on secondary data collected from a variety of existing sources pertaining to the domain of interest. The qualitative analysis takes into account collected material from books, journals, websites and articles written around the same subject.

For the purpose of this thesis, a series of sources were taken into consideration coming from a variety of geographical origins and authors. Most originate from english speaking

sources, which creates obvious bias as the author of this thesis does not speak either native language of the two countries chosen as case studies.

For Ukraine, some sources are from the country itself, either because of the authors' nationality or the publishers'. In the case of Ethiopia, where there was a significant lack of research available, sources originating from other countries were taken into account, while trying to pick ones that had interviewed Ethiopian nationals.

Initially, the plan was to use the Women in Armed Rebellion Database (WARD), however, it was found to be dated and incomplete, thus rendering the data unreliable. Due to this, the decision was made to focus the research on a qualitative analysis rather than a quantitative one.

Additionally, the embassies contacted for both countries either did not provide responses or the answers did not provide the relevant information for the purpose of this thesis. Because of this reason, the dissertation in question is based on secondary data.

Out of the results of the initial research, any opinion pieces were filtered out, as well as articles that were deemed irrelevant due for other reasons, despite filling the formal search criteria.

The choice of this specific analysis was made in order to comparatively analyze the subject of female combatants and to underline the deficiency of data available on the subject.

Furthermore, the work aims to inspire further investigation in the subject and for researchers to dive deeper into the matter, in order to understand the reasons for the data deficiency and especially its implications so as to mitigate it.

Among the aims of the dissertation there is the comparison between the status of female combatants in Ethiopia and Ukraine, their treatment and perception, and whether or not there is data available. The methodology took into account a variety of sources, governmental, historical and political in order to have an all-encompassing picture of the situation. Thus, common points and differences between the two were identified and conclusions were drawn.

3.1 Limits of Data Collection and Representation

As mentioned, the main issues encountered in the study are the lack of data obtainable, specifically in reference to female combatants instead of female victims of war. In addition, the data that is accessible is often dated, unreliable and under researched, meaning it is researched and written by a limited number of authors. This causes ethical issues as it furthers bias considering the limited number of viewpoints available, as was the case for literature on Ethiopia. In order to broaden the viewpoints and field covered, historical sources were included in the literature considered. Regardless, the fact that such data is unprocurable, offers depth to the discussion and provides inspiration for further research. Finally, the dissertation is also partly speculative due to the unreliability of certain statistics due to the different parameters considered, the unofficial sources and the ever-changing nature of the topic.

Ultimately, it is also important for a researcher to be aware of and consider one's own bias. It is easy to forget how one's own world views, values, and use of language plays in. As stated by Foucault, language is never free from subjectivity. In the case of this paper, the researcher's own bias as a white female is relevant to mention. Another important bias to consider here is gender bias.

Additionally, the risk for the possibility of confirmation bias, considering the formulation of the thesis title and topic and human error must be taken into account.

In order to attempt to mitigate such risks, the literature taken into account, both during preliminary research and the ones quoted in the thesis derive from a variety of sources, authors, origins and belief systems.

4. Women and War

The following subchapters develop the themes of the invisibility of female combatants from a gendered perspective and the effects of female participation on conflicts. The second subchapter looks at implications of female inclusion in combat considering its social, economic and cultural consequences and whether it relates to conflict severity.

4.1 The Invisibility of Female Combatants

The phenomenon of the invisibility of female combatants refers to the fact that female soldiers participating in armed conflict, whether engaged in active combat or not, are oftentimes under estimated, overlooked and excluded from formal recognition and support.

Regardless, women combatants are a reality, the notion of women being the victims only in conflicts does not reflect the role women play in them. In the context of the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC), women combatants in the military are accorded prisoner-of war status when captured. If they belong to a militia group, the threshold of protection is minimal. Women combatants from Joan of Arc, to the Dahomey in West Africa, to the combatants in Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) face unique challenges. Any solutions to helping women settle back in society should consider how the experience of war affects them.

The article *Women Combatants - Myth or Reality?* mentions two cases, the first one being the case of Dahomey, present day Benin, this example offers evidence in support of the argument that armies are strengthened by the involvement of women. In this context, women proved to be physically and emotionally capable of participating in war on a large scale, long-term and well-organized basis. Furthermore, the case of Columbia is taken into account, where according to estimates, more than 1 out of 4 combatants is a woman (Tabak, 2022). Here, Professor Shana Tabak acutely observes that “The existence of female combatants in conflicts worldwide is a phenomenon that is under-documented and under-analyzed” (Thuku, 2022). When speaking of the Colombian groups FARC and the ELN (Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional), Tabak states that women become feminist soldiers due to the fact that it causes some disintegration of gender societal barriers and lessens male opposition to women in combat. Other reasons for such choices include, the desire to join a partner, avenge past crimes, escape from domestic violence, fear of guerillas, scarcity of better options for survival, and to gain a sense of empowerment from the lifestyle change and a newfound sense of purpose.

Although it is not the focus of this specific study, it seems appropriate to mention that only in the year 2000, the UN adopted the Security Council Resolution 1325, marking a breakthrough as it officially recognized sexual violence during conflicts. According to Tabak, it was the first fundamental step towards recognizing the disproportionate impact that conflicts have on women. It sheds a light on a crucial, underdeveloped subject, demanding greater visibility for women by the public and increased participation of women in decision-making in relation to conflict prevention, mitigation and resolution. This point is of interest as the most covered subject in relation with women and conflict is sexual violence and even in that case there are few policies in place for the protection of women and the prevention of violence. So, if even when a matter is spoken about there seems to be no interest in effectively addressing it, what hope is there for under researched and underrepresented matters.

In her book *Women and War*, Jean Bethke Elshtain develops her theory on the lack of attention given to women in combat, here she analyses the neglect towards women's war stories by referencing myths of women as 'Beautiful Souls' and 'Good Mothers' in contrast to the ones depicting men as 'Just Warriors' and 'Good Soldiers' (Kartashova, 2020, p. 22). According to her, despite women's involvement and suffering endured in conflict, men remain "the historic authors of organized violence" this is due to the fact that, paraphrasing the author's words, since women are seen as entirely exterior to war while men are interior to it, the latter have always been the official war story tellers (Kartashova, 2020, p. 23). This creates clear biased narratives in recollections of wars as well as of historical events as a whole. The author goes one step further and states that even a man who has never been to war has more 'legitimacy and social endorsement' in writing about war than any woman does (ibid). Therefore, the masculine identity holds the connotation of higher credibility from a social standpoint than any female one ever could.

Women have historically been active in warfare, yet their roles often get downplayed or ignored in standard historical narratives. While women have served as soldiers, they are frequently left out of popular stories and reports of war, where they are recast as supporters, wives, or passive bystanders instead of as independent individuals making

conscious choices during conflict. This overlooking is rooted in enduring cultural beliefs that connect femininity with peace and nurturing, therefore, women's involvement in violence is often seen as abnormal. Consequently, public awareness and popular culture often fail to envision women in roles beyond those of *love interest* or *mother* in wartime. However, the situation is much more complicated. For women who take on active combat roles, the consequences are significant, especially after the conflict has ended. Once fighting stops and their military duties are no longer required, women often experience social exclusion. In times of post-war instability and nation-building, societies usually try to reinforce traditional gender roles to restore order and unity. This return to conventional roles supports the idea of a peaceful, organized society, while also marginalizing the women who challenged those norms during the conflict.

Thankfully, there is literature available on potential ways to cope with the issue and attempt to enhance awareness on the matter and improve and develop women's participation in combat.

The article *Challenging the Invisibility of Women Combatants* looks at research from the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) and the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR). It examines how women have been integrated into Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs over time and suggests five key steps to make these processes more inclusive and responsive to gender dynamics.

Historically, DDR initiatives have largely ignored women combatants, as many have believed that armed conflict is mainly a male activity. This belief, that men dominate combat roles and frontlines, has led to women being systematically left out of reintegration support. As a result, women are significantly underrepresented in DDR efforts, these programs aim to support ex-combatants as they transition back into civilian life, while also dismantling armed groups and managing the disarmament of weapons and ammunition to prevent future conflict.

Since the 1980s, DDR programs have shifted from a strict focus on security to a more holistic approach. Modern DDR now includes efforts to promote reconciliation between

former combatants and local communities, along with rebuilding the social and economic foundations of communities affected by conflict. Recent changes have also expanded DDR to include tools like weapons management and community violence reduction, especially where traditional DDR methods cannot be used.

This changing approach has gradually increased the recognition of women's roles in armed conflict. Research on 372 non-state armed groups from 1946 to 2015 found that 63 percent involved women in various roles with them contributing to armed groups as combatants, spies, couriers, translators, cooks, nurses, recruiters, and more. Notably, 45 percent of these groups had women in leadership roles, showing that their involvement reaches both operational and strategic levels.

Women's roles in conflict and peace-building have important implications. Studies indicate that female combatants are linked to longer civil wars, and voluntary female participation can boost the success of rebel groups. Significantly, when women participate in peace negotiations, the agreements they produce are more likely to last. Their involvement broadens the focus of peace talks to include issues such as sexual and gender-based violence and the need for social services for affected populations.

Importantly, including female ex-combatants in peace processes helps ensure that the needs and concerns of marginalized women are addressed. Their unique experiences allow them to effectively advocate for more inclusive and thorough post-conflict recovery measures. Therefore, there are a variety of reasons in favor of the promotion of more gender inclusive armies, aside from moral 'obligations' of fairness. From the research available one can conclude that women being precious assets to conflict management, at different stages of war and in different roles.

4.2 Implications of Female Participation in Conflicts

The following section of the written work dives into the implications of female participation in conflicts from both qualitative and quantitative secondary sources.

Looking at conflict through a gender perspective shows that military ideas are deeply rooted in constructed views of masculinity and femininity. This is especially clear in the expectations placed on soldiers, as a matter of fact, traits such as stoicism, endurance, physical strength, and risk-taking are celebrated as masculine ideals. In contrast, traits typically seen as feminine such as fear, gentleness, and submission, are used to undermine or insult opponents, often through “effeminisation”. This brings us to the argument that the presence of female soldiers who engage in violence, lead operations, and take on demanding physical tasks challenges these gendered narratives. Their involvement disrupts the military hierarchy that favors masculinity, pushing them to navigate power and belonging constantly. In doing so, they challenge traditional gender norms and must fit into male-dominated military environments, where becoming a soldier means changing behavior and, often, identity.

In order to understand this transformation in identity, three key theories are particularly useful: *performativity*, differential consciousness, and liminality.

Judith Butler’s theory of *performativity* suggests that gender is not something one is born with but that is created through repeated actions, both verbal and nonverbal, that align with societal norms. For female combatants, this meant intentionally adopting the traits, language, and appearance associated with being soldiers, creating a new identity that matched military masculinity.

The second concept, *differential consciousness*, looks at how people living under oppressive systems must adapt their identities to shifting power dynamics. For women in combat, this meant highlighting traits like leadership and combat experience in certain contexts, such as strategic meetings, while downplaying their roles as mothers or wives. In different situations, they could switch roles and present themselves as spies, educators, cooks, or activists, depending on what worked best. This ability to change identities was supported, and sometimes required, by the male-dominated structure of the military.

Liminality, the third concept, expands on this aforementioned concept, by describing gender identity as a transitional and uncertain condition, situated “betwixt and between” traditional categories. It suggests that identities are influenced by context and shaped by time, space and relationships. Viewed this way, the identities of female combatants are not

fixed but constantly evolving, recognizing female soldiers as operating in a liminal space allows us to see gender identity as an ongoing process rather than a static label.

If one sees the gender identity of female combatants as liminal, then their actions and transitions should be viewed not as binary shifts but rather as fluid performances of multiple, overlapping roles. These are not straightforward paths but adaptable strategies.

Masculinisation, seen here as distancing from femininity, appears as a conscious effort by women to fit into military culture. Women have identified that there are pre-established ways of being a soldier, and have comprehended that they, as women, do not fit such societal molds. This has let them to reshape the ways they present themselves, the way they are viewed and ultimately their identities in order to fit in the space that was not created to cater to them.

According to the 2024 publication *Women in Military: Breaking Barriers & Shaping the Future*, integrating women into the military has wide-ranging effects on several key areas. From a national security perspective, including women expands the talent pool, increases the adaptability of armed forces, and ultimately improves defense capabilities.

Economically, their involvement boosts the skilled labor force and supports workforce growth, leading to greater financial empowerment and stability for female service members and their families. Beyond these tangible benefits, the military plays an important role in promoting social progress by breaking down traditional gender barriers, thus encouraging inclusivity, equality, and opportunity. Incorporating women into military service advances gender equality while also strengthening national security, supporting economic growth, and enhancing social unity.

In rural and conflict-affected regions, women frequently excel compared to their male counterparts in community engagement. Their ability to communicate well, especially with local women and children, is crucial for gathering intelligence that is vital to mission success. Women are also reportedly effective in covert operations, seamlessly blending into local populations while gathering essential information.

By accepting women into its ranks, a nation accesses a broader spectrum of talent while setting a strong example for future generations. Female soldiers serve as role models,

motivating young people, particularly girls, to explore careers in defense and national service. Militaries that promote gender diversity also improve their global reputation, projecting values of progress, inclusivity, and resilience to the world.

Women's contributions go beyond their physical presence in operations. Their insights enhance decision-making processes, adding diversity of thought to leadership and strategy. Seeing women proudly wear the uniform and represent their country sends a powerful message that courage and skill are not defined by gender.

As a series of scholars have hypothesized, prevalence of female combatants in rebel groups increases conflict severity.

From a quantitative perspective, the findings of *Hell Hath No Fury: The Influence of Female Combatants on Conflict Severity* do not show a clear cause-and-effect relationship between female combatants and the intensity of conflict. As it happens, results indicate that a one-unit increase in the prevalence of female combatants increases battle deaths by 50.2 percent, holding all other variables constant. However, while a connection exists, its meaning can be viewed in different ways, due to this future research could explore the connection further. Even though a correlation was found, the study's tests of causal mechanisms did not provide strong evidence to support the suggested explanations. The specific ways in which female combatants might lead to greater conflict severity are still unclear.

This research also emphasizes that women are not just victims in conflict; they actively participate as well. This change in perspective has wider implications beyond academic debate. The traditional divide of victim versus actor, which often treats men and women differently in research and policy, needs careful scrutiny and challenging these gendered beliefs should guide policy and practice. For instance, the author suggests adopting gender-neutral definitions of sexual violence and ensuring proper support for female ex-combatants DDR programs (Steenbergen 2021; Hauge 2020). Neglecting the complexities of gender roles in conflict by overlooking either women's active roles or men's victimization, can have significant real-world effects.

Ultimately, considering the absence of a clear cause-effect relationship between female participation and conflict severity, integrating women into military service still appears as being a crucial step toward overall national development. This strengthens defense capabilities, supports economic stability, and promotes social equality. Acknowledging and welcoming gender diversity allows armed forces to tackle changing security challenges more effectively while fostering a society that values fairness and opportunity. The advantages of including women extend well beyond the battlefield as they help create a more just and resilient society by challenging outdated norms and opening doors for future generations. When a nation fully embraces women's participation in its military, it not only boosts its security but also reinforces its commitment to equity, strength, and shared prosperity.

5. Case Studies

This section will be focusing on the case studies of Ethiopia and Ukraine taking into account secondary sources and a qualitative analysis. In Ethiopia's case two conflicts will be taken into account, due to them being rather short conflicts compared to the war currently ongoing in Ukraine.

5.1 Ethiopia's Case

For Ethiopia's case study, the Badme War and the Tigray war have been taken into account as they constitute two among the most recent conflicts that have occurred in the country. Evidently, the Eritrean-Ethiopian War also known as the Badme War, took place from May 1998 to June 2000. The Tigray War on the other hand, occurred 20 years later, from 2020 to 2022. These two conflicts were also selected due to the fact that upon researching the subject, these historical occurrences provided the most comprehensive information in regards to female combatants.

In order to understand the following analysis, one should bear in mind the following, the Ethiopian-Eritrean War was, as mentioned, a two-year conflict, beginning in May 1998.

The dispute originated from a border dispute over the village of Badme, hence the name of the war. The discord ultimately ended in a standstill with no true winner on either side.

The Tigray War on the other hand, was a civil war which begun in 2020. It was fought by Eritrea and the Ethiopian federal government on one side and the TPLF on the other. It took place in the Tigray region of Ethiopia and ended in a peace agreement between the sides.

To gain a clear understanding of the Tigray conflict, one must begin looking at 1974. That year, a military government known as the Derg took power in Ethiopia with support from the Soviet Union. In response, a group of politically engaged students in the Tigray region formed the TPLF, this organization emerged as a force against the Derg's harsh rule. They particularly opposed its violent campaign known as the Red Terror and pushed for regional autonomy and self-determination for the Tigray people. Over the next seventeen years, the TPLF transformed into a well-organized and effective insurgent group. By working together with other revolutionary groups in Ethiopia, the TPLF played a crucial role in overthrowing the Derg in 1991. At its peak, women made up about one-third of the TPLF's members, a notable fact that has often gone unrecognized (Baldwin, 2022).

Evidently, among the TPLF's main military strategies, there was the inclusion of women in combat roles. Women fighters could, and were expected to, fight on equal footing with men and their contributions went beyond the battlefield, as women involved in non-combat roles were also recognized as combatants. They were trained as technicians, drivers, medics, and political organizers at both local and regional levels. This approach to women's involvement was unprecedented in Ethiopia during the late 20th century, where men were typically the sole holders of military and political positions (Baldwin, 2022).

Wartime pressures shaped and redefined gender identities, once naturally fluid and unstable. This led Ethiopian women to take on various roles during the war, working as educators, activists, healthcare workers, as well as soldiers.

For many who joined the armed struggle in its early days, when female combatants were still uncommon, this change was a purposeful performance aimed at gaining respect, status, and acceptance. Judith Butler's idea of gender as a "stylized repetition of acts"

resonates here as early female fighters mentioned making deliberate choices to hide signs of femininity and to adopt behaviors and appearances similar to their male counterparts (Baldwin, 2022).

One veteran, Lemlem, reflected on these early initiatives: “If we met [other combat women in the early days], the first thing we gave each other was words of encouragement: ‘Never show you’re tired. Don’t let them make you carry less.’ There was no way we’d stay behind in war. Even if men had to stay behind for some reason, we were in every battle. In addition to our own guns, female fighters always helped with the heavy gun” (Hammond, 1989). To function well within mixed-gender units, women often felt they had to make their gender invisible. They would do this by changing their voice, language, clothing, and even how they walked until they were no longer easily recognized as women.

Saba, another combatant, took pride in adopting a look and style that made her indistinguishable from male soldiers. Even today, rural Tigrayan women wearing trousers are often referred to as *tegadalit*, meaning female fighters.

This shows a trend of women feeling the need to hide their femininity in order to be taken seriously as fighters and the fact that their concern was mirrored by societal expectations and male peers.

However, despite this process of masculinization, biological functions tied to gender remained significant. Female fighters were expected to avoid combat during menstruation and to take a break for two years if they became pregnant. In a post-war study, four out of twenty interviewed women admitted to having abortions to stay active in combat. Many kept their menstrual status secret for fear of being excluded from battle (Baldwin, 2021).

Lemlem and her comrade Limy stated: “The TPLF had a clear policy that if a woman was menstruating, she didn’t have to fight. This meant we never told him [the physician] until later because we didn’t want to be excluded... Personally, I don’t want to have children because I believe that it hinders my activity” (Hammond, 1989). Therefore, in spite of their attempts to conceal their gender identities as much as possible, their physiological .. caught up to them eventually.

Two main points emerge from this analysis. First, the gender identities of female combatants are inherently fluid and unstable. Second, their self-presentations were carefully constructed in response to male-dominated power structures. These women found ways to adapt their behavior and identity to navigate power systems that favored masculinity. Through *masculinisation*, female soldiers gained social acceptance, legitimacy, and broader roles in combat. Although they were often celebrated as icons of women's empowerment, their experiences also highlight the paradox of that empowerment. This being that their acceptance into military structures often depended on maintaining the very gender hierarchies they seemed to challenge.

As previously mentioned, women made up about one-third of the active fighters in the TPLF during the civil war. They held various roles, including soldiers, technicians, political educators, health workers, strategists, generals, logistical support staff, and community project coordinators (Baldwin, 2022). This wide participation marked a significant change in gender roles, not just in Tigray but throughout Ethiopia. In a society that had been largely feudal and patriarchal, where women were mostly limited to domestic roles and excluded from politics and warfare, the TPLF provided women the chance to participate equally with men for the first time.

This change was partly driven by ideology as the TPLF's Marxist roots encouraged a shift in traditional gender roles. However, including women was also, and arguably mainly, a practical necessity since the TPLF faced the larger and stronger Derg regime.

Women fighters often referred to their involvement in the war as a 'dual struggle', one to free Ethiopia from the Derg, and another to achieve greater gender equality. Many felt that their active participation would lead to lasting changes in gender norms and aid in boosting women's representation at all levels of society. Nonetheless, as can be argued, their role in the military framework required them to constantly navigate their identities and expressions of gender (Baldwin, 2022). Their participation in combat reshaped both their personal identities and the wider understanding of femininity and these changes did not

follow a straightforward path toward gender equality. Instead, women navigated a complex and often conflicting process, balancing new opportunities with the limits of a militarized setting, they made intentional choices about how to present themselves for professional growth and social acceptance.

A key part of TPLF military policy was officially including women in combat roles with men, however, the term *combatant* included more than just those on the battlefield. Women who supported the war effort in other roles such as technicians, drivers, health workers, and grassroots political organizers were also considered fighters. Some acted as local mediators, connecting the TPLF with village communities to understand needs and discuss military occupation terms. These women's ongoing work with the TPLF, often in remote and mobile settings, placed them firmly in the category of female combatants. Many advanced in rank, gaining influential leadership positions in both the political and military sides of the movement, which challenged and expanded traditional views of women's roles in armed conflict.

This brings us to the concept of androgyny which refers to the mix of masculine and feminine traits within a single identity. According to androgyny theory, individuals can embody both masculinity and femininity at the same time. This concept challenges strict cultural definitions of male and female, focusing instead on an individual's abilities rather than gender assumptions, especially regarding work and leadership roles. This idea often appears in the experiences of female fighters, particularly when discussing leadership in military and political contexts. As former combatant Netsannet Asfar shared: "People have learned to see leadership not as a gender issue, but as a capacity issue that men and women can have... All of us have the same cause, the same motivations, everyone has qualities, man or woman. Therefore, it did not come as a surprise if a woman had such motivation, or would make such strong fighters and very good commanders" (former combatant Netsannet Asfar as cited by Baldwin, 2021).

Importantly, androgyny does not mean ignoring or diminishing gender. Instead, it combines traditionally masculine and feminine traits to create effective identities, especially in combat roles. Female fighters often described themselves as assertive, independent, and ambitious; qualities typically seen as masculine, while also embracing

aspects of womanhood. They expressed this through creating women-only discussion groups, starting political organizations, and mentoring girls within the TPLF to help them see their potential.

Crucially, the androgynous identity among female combatants was not fixed but rather fluid and ever-changing, navigating between familiar roles like mother, wife and less familiar ones such as soldier and commander. Their identities were thus constantly shaped by evolving circumstances and environments. This flexible way of expressing gender also had a political purpose beyond personal identity, it allowed women to enter spaces traditionally held by men, giving them the tools to advocate for gender equality even outside the military. In support of this argument, here is an excerpt from a popular song sung by female fighters capturing this sentiment:

“Women! Get up off your knees;
We knelt beneath the feudal’s rule;
We were only speaking tools.
Now we as well as men have guns,
And one day we’ll be free”.

The careful creation of such androgynous identities helped women position themselves within male-dominated military structures, first to gain social and professional recognition, and later to assert political power. Androgyny allowed them to operate effectively as women in masculine political environments and to promote policies based on their own experiences (Baldwin, 2021).

However, only a few of these women were later acknowledged for their roles during the war and moved into formal political positions, these women were often viewed as exceptional, different from their peers. For most female combatants in Ethiopia however, the post-war period brought new struggles, with demobilization policies frequently failing to support or build on the progress women had made during the war. For example, one significant wartime policy, women’s right to plough land, was severely limited after the conflict ended. Some research indicates that women who strayed from traditional gender

roles faced social rejection and economic marginalization, sometimes forced into low-wage jobs or even prostitution (Baldwin, 2021).

Female veterans who returned to their communities often found systems that did not recognize their specific needs, for instance, not only was their psychological trauma disregarded but they were often expected to provide emotional care for male veterans in their families. Moreover, despite claims that the war promoted gender awareness and equality, post-war ethno-nationalist policies have drawn criticism for reinstating harmful traditional practices, such as bride abduction, forced marriage, and female genital mutilation, as a way of reinforcing ethnic boundaries.

Nonetheless, on the upside, there were notable increases in female participation at the grassroots level, with more girls attending school and greater involvement in women's organizations in the years after the war (Baldwin, 2021).

However, the failure to fully recognize and support the complex gender identities and needs of female veterans has allowed restrictive post-conflict policies to become normalized. This situation can be seen as a form of systemic violence against women, an important concept when considering the connection between gender identity and meaningful, safe reconstruction.

Clearly, further research is essential to understand the long-term effects of war on female veterans.

Among the issues encountered by women at different stages of war, is the fact that oftentimes there are challenges in turning the skills, networks, and combat identities gained during the war. This is especially true as fighters, leaders, or members of the women's wing, into real political gains or pro-women reforms within the TPLF/EPRDF party after the conflict. Over time, their political influence declined for several reasons, evidently, outspoken female leaders were either sidelined or co-opted by the TPLF, as there was little room for independent women's organizing. The TPLF also allied itself with more conservative forces in Ethiopian society. This case of *Front Lines and the Home Front: Three Papers on Women's Contributions to Non-State Armed Groups and the Gender*

shows the challenges women face in using their wartime roles for political influence after conflict (Matfess, 2021). It points to broader issues like the nature of political alliances and limits on civic freedom.

Overall, the lack of numerical data and information available in reference to female fighters in Ethiopia was compensated with a rather theoretical and historical approach to the analysis. This deficiency can be attributed firstly to the rather trivial perception of the subject at hand, secondly to the difficulty in recording certain data, both quantitative and qualitative. Thirdly, fact that Ethiopia is an African country and therefore oftentimes disregarded as subject for media coverage, especially by major news outlets. The language may also play a role as this type of analysis requires interviews to the combatants themselves so researchers should have to speak Amharic or other native languages, even having a translator may inherently affect the reliability of the information recorded. All in all, for a variety of reasons, in the case of Ethiopia there was not enough literature available on the subject, due to this the sources considered are historical and from a small sample of authors.

5.2 Ukraine's case

In reference to Ukraine, the discussion will be focusing on the Donbas War which began in 2014 and is ongoing as what is known as the Russo-Ukrainian War. This specific case study was selected due to the fact that it provides useful contextualization to the current conflict and because it contributes recent data and therefore allows for more accurate basis for a comparative analysis with the case of Ethiopia.

As Ukrainian soldier Olga Vesnianska states, "I'm fighting two enemies at once. One is obviously Russia. And the other is the stereotypes and stigma we face every day as female soldiers. The only place I can say I didn't see that stigma, but a sense of equality between combatants, was at the front line. On the front line, we're all focused on one thing - fighting for our country" (European Union, 2023). This phrase attributes a new connotation

to combat, as a unifying force, bringing together men and women for one common objective, fighting for their country.

In order to briefly contextualise the phenomenon, Beginning in 2014, Ukraine has faced acts of Russian aggression, starting with the occupation of Crimea, followed by the seizure of the Donbas region, and escalating into a full-scale war. In response, various forms of women's resistance emerged, playing a crucial role in building social, national, and international support.

Anders Åslund (2018) described the early stage of Russian aggression, noting that the occupation of Crimea began on February 27, 2014, when Russian special forces in disguise, took control of the regional parliament in Simferopol, the act was described as being sudden and unprovoked. With Ukraine's armed forces unprepared, the takeover occurred nearly without bloodshed and a month later, Russia formally annexed Crimea (Åslund, 2018, p. 4). Women from both Ukraine and Crimea had to confront the new reality of occupation, which inspired them to participate in various forms of resistance (Koshulko, 2020). As the occupations in Crimea and Donbas began, the Ukrainian army was not yet ready to defend the country, and most of the male population was not mobilized, it was due to this that women stepped forward to contribute to national defense. According to Mila O'Sullivan (2019), this moment marked the beginning of women's active involvement in political and social spheres to support their country (O'Sullivan, 2019, p.22). Their efforts challenged the traditional silence around women's roles in resistance, emphasizing their significant, but often overlooked contributions.

The study *Exploring Women's Resistance Against Occupation and War in Ukraine*, looks at women's resistance practices, both armed and unarmed, as expressions of dissent and efforts to change the socio-political climate during the occupation and war in Ukraine. These actions often resulted in serious consequences for the women involved, including repression, persecution, imprisonment, and death. Women frequently operated in environments where they were seen as vulnerable, yet they showed remarkable courage, motivated by feelings of solidarity and heroism. Patrick Tucker (2019) documented the experiences of Ukrainian women veterans. He highlighted that hundreds of women left

behind their everyday lives to resist Russian-backed forces in eastern Ukraine, taking on key combat roles even without having any military background nor having received any prior training (Tucker, 2019).

The resistance included women from various ethnic backgrounds, though most were Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar, the indigenous people of Crimea (Bowring, 2018, p. 23). From 2014 to 2021, women engaged in both armed and unarmed resistance against the occupation and war. While Crimean Tatar women primarily engaged in unarmed resistance, Ukrainian women took part in both armed and non-violent efforts. Unarmed resistance involved advocating for freedom, territorial integrity, and human and women's rights within the occupied regions (Klymenko, 2019).

The war sparked a new wave of female fighters, primarily volunteers motivated by a strong desire to defend their country, ultimately playing a vital role in changing the image of the Ukrainian military (UN Women, 2016). Often volunteering without formal contracts, they took on various roles, but despite their contributions, they initially faced gender-based restrictions that barred them from official combat positions. Over time, some became professional soldiers and officers (Koshulko, 2018).

A number of women joined the frontlines to fight alongside or to fill in for their fallen husbands, sons, or fathers. An example of one such woman, known as R_23, was a journalist who volunteered for the army and rose to become an officer and commander of a self-propelled artillery unit. She represented Ukrainian women's achievements in international forums, advocating for their right to serve in combat roles and challenge existing gender norms. Her personal sacrifice included postponing motherhood to continue her service and resist Russian aggression (Koshulko and Dluhopolskyi, 2020).

This last point is particularly interesting as it relates to an underrepresented sphere of this already under-researched topic, being a soldier and a mother. Future research might seek to focus on such a topic and discover whether there are specific services available to combatant women who also wish to have families.

A compelling point when speaking of Ukraine, is the rather novel concept of including women in combat roles. As it happens, when Ukraine gained independence in 1991, women were mostly only able to partake in supporting roles within the military. It was only in 2016 that combat roles actually became available to women and as of 2022, female soldiers in the country have the opportunity to serve in any role in the military (Mathers and Kvit, 2023).

On October 11, 2021, Ukraine's Ministry of Defense issued Order No. 313. This order listed 100 professions and required women aged 18 to 60 in those fields to register with their local military enlistment offices (Ministerstvo Oborony Ukraini, 2021). The professions covered a wide range of skills, from medical areas like dentistry, pharmacy and physical therapy. It also included women with backgrounds in science, such as chemistry, biology, and physics, along with engineers, computer scientists, and software developers. Women working in finance, management, telecommunications, postal services, translation, and interpretation were included as well, as were cooks and those involved in livestock processing.

This classification reveals how the Ukrainian government's view of women's roles in national defense is changing, unlike men, who usually have to enlist based on age, women must register based on their professional skills. In point of fact, Order No. 313 is the first mobilization policy that distinguishes women based on their occupational value to the military effort, marking a broader understanding of what useful wartime expertise looks like. Notably, the listed professions span various social classes, from high-level managers to slaughterhouse workers, highlighting a more inclusive, though practical, view of women's roles during wartime.

The policy shows a significant shift in Ukraine's acknowledgment of women's potential contributions to military operations while also highlighting the pressures on the country's mobilization goals. As Jennifer G. Mathers noted, this reflects a time of desperation: "Even the women have to fight. That's a psychological and symbolic change" (Luxmoore, 2022). This requirement raises deeper questions about whether women's main value in wartime comes from their civilian expertise or from serving as combatants.

At the time of this policy change, women made up over 54 percent of the Ukrainian Armed Forces' civilian workforce, but only 900 women held command roles as officers (Mos'ondz, 2021). In September 2022, the Armed Forces announced mandatory registration for women in the designated professions. However, Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov later amended Order No. 313 to postpone its enforcement by a year, setting a new date of October 1, 2023 (Kyiv Post, 2022). Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Maliar explained that during this extension, registration would remain voluntary for women, she stated, "There are no restrictions for women," adding that this time could allow lawmakers to consider making women's military registration optional (Kyiv Post, 2022).

On paper, the 2021 registration effort indicates a shift toward recognizing women's military contributions across various fields, including newer areas like cyber warfare, this is in direct contrast with the traditional support roles women have historically held in the Ukrainian Armed Forces. However, confusion surrounding the policy's implementation and its subsequent amendment reflect a lasting reluctance to formally require women, even those highly qualified, to serve (Darden, 2023).

In accordance with claims from the Ukrainian non-profit organization Legal Hundred NGO, as of June 2021 there were 31,757 women serving in the Ukrainian military, constituting 15.6 percent of the total number of individuals serving in the military. Comparatively, there were 14,000 women serving in the military forces in 2014 and just 1,800 in 2008 (Legal Hundred NGO, 9 June 2021). This data serves to show how rapidly the number of female soldiers has grown in recent years in the country and that the policy instituted in 2016 likely facilitated this shift. This novelty can also offer a partial explanation for the lack of data available in reference to female soldiers in Ukraine and the deficiencies in policies tending to women combatants specifically.

The declaration of martial law by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on February 24, 2022, complicated the role of women in Ukraine's military further. Evidently, while martial law restricts men from leaving the country and mandates their service, it reinforces traditional

gender roles by sidelining women's potential and framing them as mainly non-combatants and victims of war, rather than active participants.

Ukraine's approach to mobilizing women has been shaped by deep-rooted gender norms in military institutions. Since the conflict began in 2014, military policies have consistently placed women in subordinate positions. This includes limiting them to contractual roles, failing to formally recognize their combat contributions, and excluding them from combat veteran status. These gendered structures treat men as the default soldiers while framing women as secondary participants, useful mainly when male resources are depleted.

Ultimately, this policy framework enforces conscription on civilian men while keeping most women's combatant status voluntary, thus reinforcing a gender divide that continues to hinder meaningful reform within Ukraine's military system.

Taking into account the example of Ukraine, as specified by UN Women, when Russia initiated its military aggression in 2014, thousands of Ukrainian women joined the armed forces to defend their country. Many began training as the war unfolded and wore uniforms initially made for men, such as Iryna Klochko, interviewed in 2024 by UN Women.

Klochko is an intelligence analyst with the Ukrainian air intelligence unit.

In compliance with her statements from the interview, the majority of women who join the army have trouble with the uniforms, as mentioned, the bulletproof vests are not made to fit women and thus hurt when worn all day. Quoting Klochko, "All military clothes and equipment are made for men. You wouldn't be able to move quietly, because your trousers are so large, they would rustle." What appears to be, at first glance a trivial comment on clothing, actually represents a much broader discussion. The shortage of female uniforms available is due to the fact that there has not been any need for them previously. What is key to understand is whether the absence of women in the Ukrainian military is an insignificant detail or whether it is a sign of a much broader gendered exclusion. Klochko recently joined the *Veteranka Movement*, a Ukrainian organization committed to the empowerment and unification of female veterans. In compliance with its efforts to advocate for military women's rights, the organization arranges free of charge tailoring

workshops to design military uniforms for women. *Veteranka* also advocates to institute standard uniforms for women in military service. Therefore, the organization compensates for what could be considered to be a deficiency in the national system which fails to provide appropriate resources to its female soldiers.

In the first year after the start of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine in February 2022, the number of Ukrainian women in the army doubled, from around 32 thousand to over 70 thousand. However, it is of note that in 2023 due to the forces having grown overall, women comprised 10 percent of the total military personnel (Ringis & Golovin, 2023). By September 2024, the overall tally of women in the AFU was approximated to be at 68 thousand, 5 thousand of which engaged in active combat (Ministerstvo oborony Ukraïny, 2024).

Conversely, one might argue that women combatants are in fact increasingly represented in international media coverage in the case of today's Russian invasion of Ukraine. Headlines from France 24 and the Washington Post respectively report, "Women rush to Ukraine's defense" (Agence France Press, 2022) and "Ukrainian women stand strong against Russian invaders" (O'Grady and Khudov, 2022). Furthermore, USA Today States "Ukrainian women are volunteering to fight, not flee" (Miranda, 2022).

As is argued by Darden in "Ukrainian wartime policy and the construction of women's combatant status", these are just a number of instances which draw attention to women's militarization in Ukraine while simultaneously underpinning the view that women's participation in combat is exceptional and thus newsworthy (Darden, 2023). If the headlines had men instead of women in these titles, they would not be as attention grabbing, as they would likely be considered by readers as plain, discernible statements. Evidently, they would see the militarization of Ukrainian male soldiers as obvious and predictable consequences of the Russian invasion.

Therefore, the mere fact of female soldiers defending their country is a clear contrast to the de facto gender norms and roles, portraying women as victims of war and men as

protectors and combatants. What has and is occurring in Ukraine with the militarization of women represents a phase of institutional as well as cultural shift consequent to the conflict.

Ukraine's case mirrors a global phenomenon of women being welcomed into militaries while steadily being banished to roles that exclude them from active combat (Darden, 2015). This ultimately renders women's part in the military and in the context of war as ambiguous, while they are formal members of militaries.

On a positive note, in spite of the challenges encountered by women in partaking in the military, according to the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as of March 2025, almost 70,00 women serve in Ukraine's Armed Forces, with around 5,500 fighting on the front lines. This number represents a 20 percent increment from 2022. This shows a desire and a determination to serve for their country regardless of any barriers.

According to the literature analyzed, providing interviews to female soldiers in the country, gender holds a major role in their service. Firstly, mobilization itself is affected, as some women are rejected on the sole basis of gender. Secondly, throughout their active armed service, multiple female soldiers experienced inappropriate advances and disrespectful treatment by male peers and superiors (Andrianova, 2025).

The study *Ukraine's "Invisible Battalion": Perceptions and Treatment of Gender in the Donbas War*, aspires to counter the male-dominant discourses of war, adopting a feminist veterans' studies perspective. This aims to assert that an analysis of individual recollections by female soldiers can aid in underlining gender discrimination occurring in Ukraine's military, as well as encouraging behavioral and policy shifts.

Following the study *Women at the Frontlines: Representations of Ukrainian female soldiers in online news media*, among the primary stereotypical ways in which women are represented in times of war is in the depiction of passive victim.

Pursuant to some of the articles analyzed during the course of the dissertation, it becomes apparent that female soldiers are not exempt from this stereotypical form of portrayal. For

instance, in the article '*They Expected Me to Die on My Own*': *Life as a Ukrainian P.O.W* (Gall, 20 June 2023), female soldiers are solely depicted as victims.

On the one hand, the entirety of the women mentioned in the study are victims, evidently, they have all suffered abuse and violence as prisoners of war in Russia. On the other hand, no female voices are heard in the article, and no pictures are included either. Female soldiers are only mentioned twice and very briefly. This occurs firstly as “hundreds of female soldiers and wounded are among the prisoners of war”, and a second time as violence against Ukrainian captives is mentioned “including the wounded and pregnant female soldiers” (Gall, 21 Jun 2023). In both cases, women are mentioned together with wounded soldiers, as if they are one collective of victims.

In final analysis, although throughout history women have actively resisted war and occupation, their contributions are often overlooked and underestimated. This makes the current research both timely and fundamental for Ukraine and the global community.

Importantly, many among the women interviewed in *Exploring women's resistance against occupation and war in Ukraine* did not see themselves as feminists, nor did they aim to become champions of gender equality, they merely viewed themselves as ordinary citizens and patriots. Nonetheless, their acts and bravery rendered them into extraordinary figures such as soldiers, veterans, volunteers, and advocates for gender equality. Regardless of their intents, they contributed to breaking down gender stereotypes within the post-Soviet Ukrainian military and among enemy forces. Through ongoing resistance, Ukrainian women have begun to reshape societal and military norms, affirming their rightful place alongside men in defending their homeland.

5.3 Comparative Analysis

This section will attempt to draw conclusions of the findings of the literature examined from Ethiopia and Ukraine.

In final analysis, it can be stated that in Ethiopia the military could be considered as being more gender equal in terms of inclusivity and treatment, comparatively to what was highlighted by the case of Ukraine. This can be attributed to the Marxist ideology on which the TPLF bases itself, regardless, according to the literature there is some equality within the army as well as levels of recognition for female combatants in the post-war period. However, the lack of evidence and statistical data on the subject renders the analysis highly misleading and at times speculative.

The lack of data for the country can be attributed to mere sexism, however, racism and Eurocentrism need to be taken in to account as well. The topic, which is under researched in itself, attracts even less attention due to the geographical and political context of the country, which may partially justify the lack of interest shown by researchers. Ideally, the topic of female soldiers and combatants would be deemed to be relevant by researchers, while keeping this in mind however one should consider the marginal financial gain that can be derived from such research. Additionally, the available research resources are likely to be devoted to other uses, especially considering the financial state of the country under analysis. Due to this, the author recognizes her own privileged position and perspective while researching and discussing this thesis topic.

The case study of Ukraine on the other hand, provides an entirely different situation. Clearly, the conflict under analysis is highly researched and receives particular media attention and coverage. The reason behind the availability of evidence can be explained by the fact that it is a European country and the fact that the war in question is covered by a great number of sources and news outlets. The media coverage between the two conflicts is not comparable, additionally the global support received by Ukraine from the global community has been significant, also economically.

Regardless of such attention, the Ukrainian government is not far ahead of the Ethiopian one in reference to the gender equality within its military forces. In this case this can be attributed to the fairly recent independence of the country, however, as the female combatants appear to be necessary to the army at this time, Ukraine should adapt to such

change more rapidly than it has. At the same time, once again the country understandably has other priorities at the moment, considering the ongoing conflict and the relevant expenses associated.

In summation, in both cases the participation of women in combat is mostly out of necessity rather than an expression of interest in equality or inclusion from the countries. Interestingly, in both cases the *masculinisation* of women is an important issue that is highlighted in the literature.

Therefore, not only the women are for the most part included out of necessity, but they also do not feel comfortable nor welcomed in the spaces that were not made for them to begin with and are not shifting to accommodate their presence. The women feel the need to hide their identities in both cases.

6. Future for women fighters

Women fighters are part of the future, regardless of any barriers that may be placed in front of them. Aside from a just change it is a necessary one, seeing the current state of the global sociopolitical landscape. An increased need for combatants will render any person able to provide a necessary service useful, regardless of their gender.

In brief, having more women in armies worldwide normalizes their presence and creates a precedent for future generations, similarly to how it has occurred in other careers, it will happen, and is happening, in the military as well.

Besides, there is a great need for implementation of effective policy changes in order to actually include women in militaries without them feeling the need to hide their femininity and gender identity.

As mentioned, taking into consideration the current state of the world, there will likely be more conflicts in the near future, thus more need for combatant women. Therefore, if this shift continues to unfold, it is our duty, as the society, as well as the governments' to effectively make militaries more inclusive and safe for women.

It is key for women to be viewed as combatants equal to their male counterparts because “If women are predominantly imagined as victims, they can only be taken into consideration in this capacity when the post-war order is designed” (Pauls, 2022). This means that the shift needs to occur before, during and after the war has taken place in order to change the status quo, if not, as had happened throughout history, the post war period will look no different from the prewar period in reference to the gendered division of labour and the societal perception and treatment of women.

It is not only about taking women more seriously as efficient soldiers but also about considering their added value in other stages of conflict. For instance, in the period antecedent to the conflict, meaning negotiating ceasefire and peace agreements.

According to the International Peace Institute, women’s participation in peace negotiations increases the probability of agreements lasting at least two years by 20 percent and a peace agreement lasting 15 years by 35 percent.

Still, the Council on Foreign Relations found that women have made up an average of under 15 percent of negotiators between 1992 and 2019 (UN, 2024).

Thus, excluding women, regardless of its motivations, whether it is sexism or other reasons, is not beneficial for any one. As has been proven time and again, women provide an added value that must be respected and credited.

Ultimately, either the governments and militant groups are going to change their ways and welcome women, by accommodating the differences between the genders in a respectful and inclusive way or the women are going to force their way through ‘the door’ as they have already done in many other contexts throughout history. Either way, change is going to occur.

7. Conclusion

The thesis aimed to develop the concept of women combatants and the perception of women beyond simply the role of victims of war. This was examined by taking into account two very different case studies providing two varied political, historical and geographical perspectives, offering stimulating results and basis for further discussion and research.

As stated throughout the written work, there is a dire need for more research on the subject of female combatants on a global level. It was useful to take a look at two very different case studies, not only geographically but in terms of media coverage because all in all, they do not appear as being as different from one another as one may have initially expected. One could justify this absence in literature available by arguing that the concept of female fighters is a fairly new one but that is not at all the case as female combatants, whether formal or informal, have always been a reality.

Female combatants are a reality and they have existed since the dawn of time, they simply have never seriously been considered as such and valued for their efforts. Including women in war efforts is mutually beneficial and should be enabled not only because it is fair and just but because women provide substantial benefits. As seen, these include combat and not combat efforts, as well as diplomatic peacekeeping attempts.

The research proved that there is a deficiency in policies which aim at either incentivizing female inclusion in war efforts or in protecting women within militaries or any sort of attempt to make the military safer and more equal for women.

Although in both countries female combatants served and have served, such data is not available on official government websites, this renders it to some extent unreliable and proves a broader problem, this being that it is not a subject that is prioritized by policymakers or other relevant authorities.

Future research

It would be of interest for future researchers to consider case studies from other continents, such as America and Asia, as the work will likely yield different results from the ones found in this dissertation. The comparative analysis might be interesting in complementing this thesis, providing a global overview of the subject, furthermore, it might incentivize officials to take inspiration from policies implemented by other governments in order to improve gender equality within the military.

Additionally, this research takes into account soldiers fighting domestically for their countries, whereas further research might center on female combatants fighting abroad. This would allow for a more complete picture of the totality of women fighting for their countries, statistics which may then be compared through time, seeing whether the numbers have increased or not.

Besides, further studies might seek to focus on the treatment of female soldiers within the army and whether there have been changes in such practices. One might do so by considering perceptions of shifts as well as policy changes if any. Interviewing officials, soldiers as well as policy makers and civil society might provide a general overview of the situation.

Future research might also care to understand to what extent the ideology of a specific militant group correlates to the participation and amount of women in their armies, such as for instance the fact that the TPLF in Ethiopia had Marxist roots and their army comprised of 1/3 female fighters.

Ultimately, the research is useful as it provides further insight into the highly under researched subject and offers a comparative analysis of two countries, that, to the authors knowledge, had not yet been researched and juxtaposed in reference to this specific topic. Clearly, the nature of the subject renders the discussion at times speculative and theoretical, however, the dissertation still offers valuable insights into the question and on the role and perception of female combatants in modern times. Furthermore, it offers a

closer look into the under-researched status of affairs in Ethiopia, as well as realistically pointing out deficiencies encountered in Ukrainian policies and regulations.

In final analysis, as Honorable Judge Njeri Thuku eloquently phrased it, “These women epitomize why the discussion on women combatants needs to go on and it is also a paradigm shift from focusing on women as only victims to being victorious in their causes”. Women are not only powerless victims, au contraire, they are fighters, combatants and they provide valuable contributions to all stages of war efforts.

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