



Lessons Learned from Members of the Verkhovna Rada:

Gender Equality as an Element of the Democratic Project
and Russia’s Exploitation of Anti-Gender Equality
Messages in Hybrid Warfare



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Executive Summary

This study found that some members of the Ukrainian Parliament (Verkhovna Rada) still think about gender in stereotypical ways. While this is not unusual, these views can still affect how members of parliament understand and apply gender equality. This could ultimately limit the benefits of gender equality for both women and men as well as society as a whole. Research also shows that gender stereotypes can be used by Russia in its information war to create confusion and division in Ukraine and elsewhere.

Three Key Findings

1. Gender Stereotypical Roles in Lawmaking Topics:

Men are seen as linked to issues like national security and defense. Women are connected to human rights, gender and LGBTQ rights, and humanitarian issues, like children taken by Russia. While women are starting to work more on “male” topics, men are rarely perceived as working on “female” topics. This version of gender equality mainly involves including women in areas traditionally seen as male, but not the other way around.

2. Gender Stereotypical Roles in Family Responsibilities:

Both men and women showed concern for how much pressure women face in caring for children and family — especially during evacuations and separations. However, there was little mention of how men might also struggle with these family responsibilities. This may mean that women are still expected to take on the primary role of taking care of children and the home, while they are also taking on more public duties. In contrast, men are not expected to do more at home. This creates a double burden for women and can also limit the role of men with their children and family.

3. Recognizing Hostile, but not Benevolent Sexism:

Lawmakers recognize harmful, aggressive sexism (like rude comments or excluding women) as a problem. But they often don't see that treating women as saints or focusing only on their roles as mothers and caregivers also limits gender equality. Women are still expected to care for others — while maintaining their “caring caregiver” status — even when they take on leadership roles. Women who fail to maintain a “caring caregiver” are more likely to face hostile sexism. Hostile and benevolent sexism work together to maintain gender stereotypical roles and associations. This undermines gender equality for women and men and also contributes to a double work burden for women.

Other Research Findings

1. Russia uses anti-gender equality messages as part of its hybrid war strategy against Ukraine and the West.

2. “Benevolent sexism” (polite but limiting views about women) supports traditional stereotypes and as a result can undermine gender equality for both women and men.

Recommendations to Improve Equality and Resist Disinformation

1. Promote Equal Roles and Use Counter-Stereotypical Representation:

Encourage equal representation of men and women in all topics and challenge stereotypes by using counter-stereotypical representation. For example, use men to lead efforts to address children taken by Russia, and use women to lead efforts to support national security.

2. Start Important Conversations:

Talk about difficult topics that reveal how gender stereotypical roles and associations limit both men and women. These topics can include real policy considerations in Ukraine including Martial Law and Paternity Leave.

3. Use a Gender Equality Framework:

Always consider how laws and policies affect both men and women and whether they reinforce stereotypes and limit real or perceived opportunities.

Introduction

This study draws on the same primary qualitative data set as the study titled, “The work of female MPs under martial law in Ukraine” (2025)¹. The study was prepared in collaboration between the Parliamentary Centre (Canada) and the Agency for Legislative Initiatives (Ukraine) under the auspices of the Parliamentary Accountability for the Security Sector Project, Phase II (PASS II) with financial support from Global Affairs Canada’s Peace and Stabilization Operations Program (PSOPs).

After reviewing the interview data, a gendered theme emerged within the examples and narratives of men and women serving in the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian Parliament). There was a consistent gender stereotypical association in the domains of work (in the Verkhovna Rada), family responsibilities and the effects of the full-scale invasion reflected in the interviews with women and men. This presented a demand for a deeper look and specialized analysis of the experiences and perspectives reported by members of the Verkhovna Rada (MPs) — including in relation to the Russian aggression. As such, a targeted inductive analysis of the primary interview data, supplemented by a desk review of existing research on gender in/equality and hybrid warfare strategies (coming from Russia) are presented in this study.

The aim of this study is to reveal how members of the Verkhovna Rada understand and support gender equality and whether this understanding provides a sufficient bulwark against anti-gender equality Russian hybrid warfare efforts. The findings can therefore be used to shape and inform legislative approaches, international understanding and most notably, strategic communication in Ukraine and beyond. As the geopolitical context begins to rapidly shift, there is a growing need to effectively mitigate against hybrid warfare that continues to undermine Ukrainian security, present a barrier to peace, and divide and confuse international actors.

¹ [Experiences of Female and Male Parliamentarians During Martial Law in Ukraine, 2025.](#)

Methodology

Fourteen in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of parliament (MP); nine women and five men between July to November 2024. The MPs interviewed came from four parliamentary parties (factions), seven from the majority party and seven from opposition parties. The interviews were conducted and transcribed in the Ukrainian language by researchers from the Agency for Legislative Initiatives and used as part of the data set for the publication, “The work of female MPs under martial law in Ukraine”. The interview transcripts were later translated into English for the purpose of this targeted study. The study was produced in both English and Ukrainian to ensure access to the findings by Canadian, European, other democratic partners, and the broader international community alongside the Ukrainian government, civil society and public.

Interviews were analysed and triangulated using inductive narrative analysis to enable the organic emergence of patterns and themes within the interview transcripts; and discourse analysis to highlight the overall meanings conveyed in the socio-cultural, political and historical context of the full-scale invasion. The analysis aimed to first identify thematic patterns from the interviews and then couple those patterns with an analysis of how anti-gender equality messages are used as a strategy of Russian hybrid warfare. Finally, the analytical findings were reviewed and validated by the original research team at the Agency for Legislative Initiatives to ensure a high-level of accuracy. This included validating interviewee quotes and objective data points originating from the primary interview data in the Ukrainian language.

While this study used a rigorous analytical process, it is not statistically significant nor representative. This is a qualitative study with inherent limitations. Nonetheless, the findings of this study can provide insights and nuance into the thinking, experiences and perceptions of the Verkhovna Rada based on a series of in-depth interviews with male and female members of the Verkhovna Rada (MPs). While this may or may not reflect a generalized reflection of organizational culture within the Verkhovna Rada, the findings can still provide meaningful acumen in two areas. First, the findings can provide strategic insights for the Verkhovna Rada and the government of Ukraine into how to combat Russian hybrid warfare targeting gender equality in Ukraine, and countries associated with the Western democratic alliance. Second, the findings can also provide guidance on how to advance gender equality in policy and law-making in Ukraine and beyond.

Overview: Gender Equality and Conflict

A growing body of evidence finds that **countries with higher levels of gender equality also benefit from greater levels of positive peace**. Countries that refrain from imposing rigid gender roles — or limits in the range of “social attributes and opportunities associated with being female and male [...]”² also enjoy more stable governments, economic conditions, and labor productivity, and are better able to reduce poverty, improve health and education, and mitigate the negative effects of climate change.³

In contrast, **higher levels of gender inequality are associated with conflict, war and instability**.⁴ In fact, the larger the gender gap between the treatment of men and boys and women and girls in a society, the more likely a country is to be involved in intra- and inter-state conflict, to be the first to resort to force in such conflicts, and to resort to higher levels of violence.⁵

² “Gender,” Glossary, European Institute for Gender Equality, March 2025.

³ See consolidated research and reports such as Dugarova, “Gender Equality as an Accelerator”; Lopez-Claros, A., Amanda Ellis, and Ruth Halperin-Kaddari, “The Gender Equality and Governance Index: Empowering Women for the Prosperity of Nations” (Global Governance Forum, 2020); Milner, Allison et al., “Gender Equality and Health in High-Income Countries: A Systematic Review of Within-Country Indicators of Gender Equality in Relation to Health Outcomes” *Women’s Health Reports*, 2, No. 1 (2021), 113-23; Ward, John et al., “Evidence for Action: Gender Equality and Economic Growth,” (Chatham House and VividEconomics, 2010).

⁴ Cohen, Dara Kay and Sabrina M. Karim, “Does More Equality for Women Mean Less War? Rethinking Sex and Gender Inequality and Political Violence,” International Organization (2021), 1-31; Hudson, Valerie M., Donna Lee Bowen, and Perpetua Lynne Nielsen, *The First Political Order: How Sex Shapes Governance and National Security Worldwide* (Columbia University Press, 2020); Sjoberg, Laura, *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War* (Columbia University Press, 2013); Hudson, Valerie M. et al., *Sex and World Peace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Melander, Erik, “Gender Equality and Intrastate Armed Conflict,” *International Studies Quarterly*, 49, No. 4 (2005), 695-714; and Caprioli, Mary, “Primed for Violence: The Role of Gender Inequality in Predicting Internal Conflict,” *International Studies Quarterly*, 49, No. 2 (2005), 161-78.

⁵ Hudson, V.M. et al., *Sex and World Peace*.

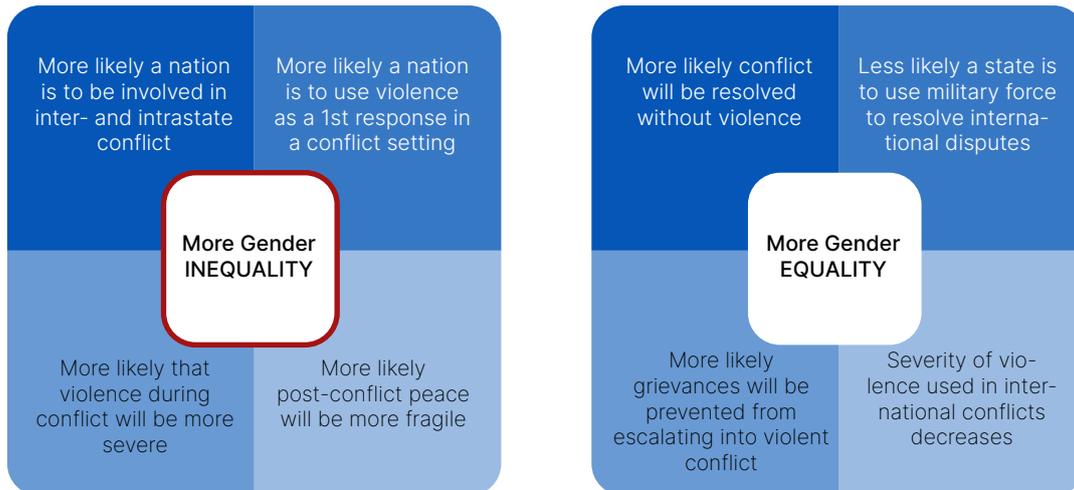


Diagram 1: Macro-level Gender Equality vs. Gender Inequality⁶

While no society in the world has achieved gender equality, democratically governed societies continue to advance gender equality alongside other human rights principles, through research, education and awareness, and positive actions. These efforts are underpinned by the presence of a robust civil society, free media and equal access and accountability to laws publicly known, impartially applied and consistent with normative standards (the Rule of Law).

Ukraine ranked slightly better than the Russian Federation in the Gender Inequality Index (GII) in 2022.⁷ However, in contrast to Russia, Ukraine has made evidenced efforts to advance gender equality in law and policy and foster women’s participation before and during the full-scale invasion. For example, Ukraine instituted a mandatory minimum quota for women (positive action) in 2019 at the nomination stage of elections in Ukraine.⁸ One male MP remarked during his interview:



I think somewhere around the seventh convocation they stopped perceiving a female MP as some kind of exception. This is when it was perceived internally that this is not a question of gender, but of professional training and the ability to convince voters. So, the situation is generally improving. I think that this was greatly facilitated, including by the deliberately introduced quotas adopted during the eighth convocation. It works. Such processes need to be pushed and coordinated.

⁶ Crespo-Sancho, C., “The Role of Gender in the Prevention of Violent Conflict.” Background paper for the United Nations-World Bank Flagship Study, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*. World Bank, Washington, DC. (2017).
⁷ “Gender Inequality Index”, Human Development Reports, UNDP, March 2025.
⁸ “The current legislation on electoral process in terms of gender equality does not ensure transformation of the legally mandatory 40% gender quota in the electoral lists of parties into the actual representation of women in the quantity of 40% in electoral districts” Levchenko (2021), in Lesko, N., Khomyshyn, I., Skochyliias-Pavliv, O., and Lukanova, H., “Realising Women’s Political Rights in Ukraine,” *Journal of Education Culture and Society*, No. 1 (2023).

Similarly, one of the MPs, a woman, who was responsible for advancing quotas noted:



[...] quotas would give us the opportunity to move to normality faster. It should be a temporary phenomenon in our politics. [...] before the war, we had a society where 55% of the population were women, 45% men. And the representation was 11% percent [women]. Well, something was probably wrong. Therefore, we had to look for ways to give [women] the opportunity for self-realization [as members of parliament].

As well, efforts to advance gender equality prior to the full-scale invasion were acknowledged by both men and women. For example, the following two quotes illustrate the gains made prior to the war, and the value they were perceived as bringing in the context of the full-scale invasion.



[I]n this convocation of the Verkhovna Rada the percentage of female MP is higher than in the previous one. This has been a trend in several convocations, but in this convocation this trend is well preserved. [...] It seems to me that Ukraine is moving on a healthy track, when issues of real equality, at least in the legislative body, are gaining more weight.



We made not only important changes in the legislation to increase the presence of women in government bodies, but also to sort out all these post-Soviet stereotypes in the most conservative power structures, where [...] women were banned from more than 300 professions in our armed forces or other power structures. So, we removed these obstacles.

During the full-scale invasion the Istanbul Convention was ratified — ten years after signature. Prior to that, the Orthodox church made a concerted effort to thwart ratification and at least to some extent, make “gender” a proxy against European integration⁹ — an approach very much supported by Russian interests.¹⁰ And indeed, one male member of parliament interviewed noted that the full-scale invasion itself created the possibility to finally ratify

⁹ Elsner, Regina, “Ukrainian Churches and the Implementation of the Istanbul Convention in Ukraine: Being Europe Without Accepting “Gender”, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 20, No. 3 (2022), 63-76.

¹⁰ “Ukraine is geographically and culturally situated between two competing hegemonic powers — Russia and Western Europe. Russia sees Ukraine (a member of the former Soviet Union) as its ‘eternal province’ which must adopt the Russian alternative version of ‘modernity’, and reject everything Western European, given the cultural and historical importance of Ukraine to Russia. On the other hand, Western Europe sees Ukraine as a periphery of Western Europe, to advance Western cultural and socio-economic systems, and to move Ukraine from a post-communist regime to ‘liberal modernity.’” Lartey Asuinura, E. and Kipo-Sunyehzi, D., “Russia-Ukraine war from a gender perspective.” *African Social Science and Humanities Journal*, 5 (2024), 278.

it, — potentially revealing how the conflict may have reinforced a commitment to Western democratic values including gender equality.



[...] during the full-scale invasion the Istanbul Convention was adopted, which could hardly have been adopted by this convocation of parliament at any other time.

All of this is in sharp contrast to countries that actively seek to enforce both rigid and traditional gender stereotypical roles; confining women to the home and family and making them responsible for the reproduction of society through childbirth, and holding men to a version of masculinity that valorizes dominance and aggression and makes them exclusively responsible for the provision and protection of the family and by extension the nation. This represents both a domestic policy approach in Russia as well as a central strategy of hybrid warfare undertaken by Russia. For example:

Policy changes [in Russia] since 2011 support [...] claims of a conservative and gendered ideological turn. Presaged by the maternity [family] capital program announced in 2006, such policies include restrictions on abortion starting in 2011. [...] The regime has also prosecuted feminist activists, from the arrest and jailing of several members of Pussy Riot in 2012, to the labeling of the domestic violence support groups ANNA in 2016 and Nasiliu.net, “No to violence” in 2020 as foreign agents.¹¹

Unlike Ukraine, Russia has not ratified the Istanbul Convention. In contrast, Russia has attempted to weaken violence against women protections. Notably, the Russian Duma (parliament) passed a law in 2017 to define domestic violence as an administrative offense, rather than a crime, if the first incident of violence did not lead to serious bodily injury (loss of sight, hearing, fractures, threat to health, and life).¹²

Thus, anti-gender equality efforts, as evidenced above, represent both a de-jure domestic approach in Russia, as well as the socio-cultural rhetoric that is explicitly used as a strategy of hybrid warfare. As such, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine is more than a conventional war, it is also an explicit effort by Russia to impose a specific understanding of “[...] **traditional values, the meaning of gender, sexuality, womanhood and manhood [...]**”.¹³

¹¹ Johnson, Janet Elise, Novitskaya, Alexandra, Sperling, Valerie, and McIntosh Sundstrom, Lisa, “Mixed signals: what Putin says about gender equality,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, (2021), 1-2.

¹² Włodkowska, A., “What Remains Unseen: The Russia-Ukraine War from the Gender Perspective,” in “War in Ukraine: The World Responds”, *Columbia Journal of International Affairs*, 75, No. 2, (Spring/Summer 2023).

¹³ Kratochvíl, Petr, and Mila O’Sullivan, “A War like No Other: Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine as a War on Gender Order.” *European Security*, 32, No. 3 (2023), 350.

Thematic Patterns in the Interviews

Three thematic patterns emerged from the interview data. These patterns reveal a high level of awareness of and support for gender equality, while simultaneously shedding light on some of the most deeply held, and indeed globally represented gender stereotypes attributed to and associated with men and women. This may reflect a conscious or unconscious limit in the level of support for *de facto* gender equality from some members of the Verkhovna Rada. Or, given the strength of the global association of women with motherhood and caretaking, and men with providing and protecting, it may reflect a more broadly held acceptance of some gender roles, and by extension, a limit in how gender equality is understood and operationalized.

In either case, **limits to how gender equality is understood and operationalized can provide space for Russia to engage in hybrid warfare intended to sow division and confusion.** In the context of the full-scale invasion, Ukraine represents both a sovereign country with its own history and culture as well as a proxy for democratic values — a bulwark, even, for the democratic project’s goal of advancing fairness, inclusion and equality. In contrast, Russia represents a primeval understanding of state power, embracing Thucydides’ assertion that, “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must”.¹⁴ This approach to state power, as will be shown, is underpinned by an essentialist belief that men are strong and women are weak. In other words, where men do what they can and women do what they must. Thus, Russia and Ukraine are differentiated by their values, attitudes and beliefs at the personal and political level. Using interview narratives complemented with secondary research, this study will argue that the presence of gender stereotypical associations and thus an evidenced limit in the understanding of gender equality provides rhetorical space for Russia to exploit. Russia can and does capitalize on gender stereotypes to promulgate anti-gender equality disinformation and propaganda as a strategy of hybrid warfare.

What is most notable about the sum of these narratives, even while limited, is the **apparent flexibility that exists for women serving in the Verkhovna Rada in contrast to the lack of flexibility present for men.** That is, women *can* work on topics of security, national defense and armaments, even if they are sometimes met with doubt, or have to work to prove themselves. On the other hand, there was a general lack of reference to men’s involvement or engagement on topics typically associated with women like gender and sexual equality as well as abducted children and other humanitarian issues. Here it is interesting to note that while there was a lack of reference to men’s involvement in legislation related to humanitarian issues, the original research study from which this analysis is formed found that

¹⁴ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, bk. 5, ch. 89. (c.455—c.400 bc).

60% of draft humanitarian laws were registered by male MPs.¹⁵ In other words, some of the narratives, from both women and men, reflect women's increased work on topics associated with men. In contrast, neither men nor women mentioned men's engagement on topics typically associated with women — regardless of whether men were more numerically involved (in the case of humanitarian laws). As such, this analysis does not dispute that both men and women participate in the process of reviewing, debating and voting on legislation concerning all topics brought within the Verkhovna Rada, but rather to highlight the nuance of who is perceived to be principally associated with specific topics. Here there seems to be a more significant gender division for men, than for women.

Yet, while women are emerging into non-traditional domains, interview data from both men and women also suggests that women are still expected to be the primary, perhaps even exclusive, caretakers of children. This includes, in some narratives, the planning, coordination and “worry” in relation to ensuring the safety and well-being of children during the full-scale invasion. In contrast, men — fathers, grandfathers, uncles and brothers — were generally not associated with being responsible for children within the interview data. This phenomenon could certainly be linked to the practical implications of Martial Law — where men between 18 and 60 years of age were forbidden to leave the country without special permission — including men in the Verkhovna Rada.¹⁶ However, this policy approach also reflects a traditional association — where men are protectors and women are caretakers. As such, this theme may highlight the possibility that the role of men, whether in the private or public sphere, remains relatively unchanged while the role of women has expanded. Indeed, this represents a recognizable global trend in the advancement of gender equality — where increasing women's rights, responsibilities and opportunities equates to a *de facto* double work burden (private and professional) for women because men have not expanded their roles and responsibilities in the private sphere.¹⁷

Finally, narratives reveal **the presence of benevolent sexism within the Verkhovna Rada.** While there was strong recognition of the harms of hostile sexism, benevolent sexism was generally not recognized. Benevolent sexism refers to the reverence and protection uniquely awarded to women. Even while it may appear “benevolent”, it can and does undermine efforts to advance gender equality and contribute to gender role conformity as the analysis will later show. Moreover, benevolent sexism is also a reflection of gender stereotypical associations — where women are revered as mothers needing protection and men are strong protectors and providers (of women and children).

1. Gender stereotypical association with legislative topics

The most significant thematic pattern involved the ways in which gender stereotypes appear to inform the specific legislative topics associated with or linked to the work of men and women in the Verkhovna Rada. Three out of the six men, and five out of the eight

¹⁵ [Experiences of Female and Male Parliamentarians During Martial Law in Ukraine, 2025.](#)

¹⁶ Under Martial Law women with or without children had the right to leave Ukraine. During the first half of 2022, female MPs and male MPs from 60 years and older were allowed to cross the border based on need. Thereafter, **all MPs, men and women along with civil servants**, were not allowed to cross the border without explicit permission. Content provided by the Agency for Legislative Initiatives (Ukraine).

¹⁷ Trasowech, J. “The Value of Invisible Work: Women and the Double Burden,” DePaul University, Creating Knowledge, *The LAS Journal of Undergraduate Scholarship*, 16, (2023), 73-80.

women interviewed noted that topics like security, national defense, intelligence, and armaments are more associated with men while human rights, women's rights, gender equality and LGBTQ rights as well as humanitarian issues (including abducted children), are more associated with women. For example, one male parliamentarian connected certain topics with women's specific interests' and possibly nature:



We have more women involved in bullying/harassment. Perhaps precisely because they encounter it more often. This does not mean that men are excluded from these processes [...]. Issues of defending gender rights — this is also the greater nature of women. I mean leadership on these topics. And so, in principle, in the protection of human rights in general, women are more actively involved.

A **gender stereotype** is a generalized view or preconception about attributes or characteristics, or the roles that are or ought to be possessed by, or performed by, women and men. A gender stereotype is harmful when it limits women's and men's capacity to develop their personal abilities, pursue their professional careers and/or make choices about their lives.

United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights.

Similarly, a woman serving in the Verkhovna Rada noted a pattern that suggested the possible prioritization of men engaging on topics of arms supply, while also acknowledging that she did not know whether it was intentional.



I cannot tell you whether men deal exclusively with issues of arms supply, but it looks like this. In particular when there were delegations to the United States of America, there were a majority of men. Perhaps there was one woman, perhaps there were several, but I do not exclude conditional distribution. But I was not a witness to it [conditional distribution].

Notably, the full-scale invasion was credited with providing an increased opportunity for women to learn about and be involved in legislation and committee work related to security and national defense. For example, one MP, a man, noted:



[Women parliamentarians] have learned the specifications of Western weapons, probably faster than some of our military.

On the other hand, a more typical association was also relayed by a male MP, but alongside recognition that women are increasingly working in non-traditional topics.



[...] indeed, topics that are much more accepted by women. The topic of the abduction of Ukrainian children, of course, when a woman talks about it, it sounds more powerful. And similarly, when we talk about the topic of military weapons, when a man who served speaks, well, it is accepted from him. This is probably information that is somehow different than from a woman. But we see a lot of women advocating for the supply of weapons, and this also works.

Here it is worth highlighting one of the arguments being made — that it sounds more powerful for women to talk about the abduction of children. This framing is consistent with gender stereotypical roles where women are globally associated with nurturing, caregiving and motherhood as a principal identity. Yet, it might be interesting to consider whether men talking about abducted children could be a strategic way to bring more attention to the topic because it is unusual — or indeed, a counter-stereotypical association. On the hand, it stands to reason that a man who has served would be viewed with more credibility on topics like weapons. Yet, by the same logic, this *should* also be true for a woman who has served in the military even while this possibility was not mentioned.

In two other interviews, different women from the Verkhovna Rada highlighted both the challenges and opportunities present.



I think this is a sector [security] that requires a woman to constantly prove that she can understand this, because all the generals are not ready to listen to her right away, are not ready to hear her right away. And for those, maybe, who have a little experience and who maybe they know a little, then this allows you to get some kind of advance trust.



For the longest time in the defense sector, especially on the part of the military generals, there is very often a prejudice against women politicians who are involved in the defense sector. In order to correct this, you either never succeed, or it takes a longer time for the woman to gain credibility. And then the perception is leveled. Or you never succeed. We have no other choice. [...] Let's be frank, one thing is true for women, and another for men.

While interviewees referenced the increased role of women in non-traditional or non-typical areas of legislation and committee work, there was no reference to how men serving as MPs in the Verkhovna Rada were engaging more robustly on topics like gender equality, women's and LGBTQ rights.

And then there was one interviewee, a woman, who noted the importance of learning about the specifics of military equipment — who did not mention gender as a relevant component, only the importance of the task at hand.



[W]e all had to learn to understand weapons, to describe a military situation. I'm joking, but I never thought that I would know how many tanks are in service in the Bundeswehr, what types of tanks they are and what condition they are in for example. Everyone had to learn to understand this. Well, okay, not everyone. From my distorted perspective, everyone should have [learned this], but obviously [they did] not.

Similarly, another woman in the Verkhovna Rada explained topics in relation to parliamentary diplomacy — and highlighted the importance of being able to engage in the full range of relevant topics.



It's not like women go around talking exclusively about deported children, torture, or refugees, and men talk about weapons. We all learned all the names of weapons, and then we started learning all the technical characteristics of our energy system. That is, based on the challenges, everyone continues to learn.

While these narratives are not statistically representative of the men and women serving in the Verkhovna Rada, they nonetheless signal the presence of gender stereotypical role association held by both men and women. Here there are a couple of relevant threads — first, both men and women reference women's emergence into non-traditional topics. This seems to be explicitly linked to the full-scale invasion and the need for an “all hands-on deck” approach to identifying and securing needed ammunition and weapons. The second thread is one in which women are associated with topics like abducted children, human rights, gender equality, women's rights, LGBTQ rights and humanitarian assistance by both men and women. While the quotes do not consistently reflect all of these topics — one person may reference LGBTQ rights and another human rights — the connection is that all of these topics are readily associated with gender stereotypical topics inasmuch as they are linked to care and advocacy for those in need. The third thread is a thread of omission — men are not referenced in relation to the aforementioned topics. In this case, what is said is just as important as what is not said.

Implicit bias refers to the automatic and unconscious process of assigning a stereotype and/or linking negative or positive attitudes to a particular group, or to an individual associated with a group based on prevailing social hierarchies.

Kang, J. Implicit Bias: A Primer for Courts, (2009).

To the extent that gender stereotypical associations are present, there is the possibility that they can result in limiting support for and willingness of men to actively engage on topics associated with women — whether consciously or unconsciously. Indeed, implicit bias research shows that regardless of our consciously held world view, our individual behaviors and practices are likely to reflect prevailing stereotypes and attitudes without our conscious awareness.¹⁸ Moreover, if topics like gender equality and LGBTQ rights are understood as constituent of the democratic project, then this association could arguably limit both the advancement of gender equality as well as democratic principles. Finally, and most notably, this association provides a space for Russian hybrid warfare efforts targeting human rights, gender equality and LGBTQ rights.

2. Gender stereotypical association and the personal impact of the full-scale invasion

According to eight MPs, three men and five women, one of the impacts of the full-scale invasion primarily affected women. The impact that women are described to have

¹⁸ Research shows that, “[i]mplicit biases may oppose a person's adopted worldview, but because they are not consciously controlled, they may nonetheless be reflected in their behavior — including in the professional realm”, Halilović, M., Huhtanen, H. *Gender and the Judiciary: The Implications of Gender within the Judiciary of Bosnia and Herzegovina*, DCAF: Geneva (2017).

experienced also highlights the presence of a double work burden. This occurs when gender equality efforts are focused on women's participation in the public and professional realms while men are generally omitted from expected change in the private sphere, specifically in sharing childcare and household responsibilities.¹⁹

When asked about the personal impact of the full-scale invasion eight MPs described the hardship and stress that women serving in the Verkhovna Rada experienced due to their role as mothers and caregivers. Here it is important to highlight what was not mentioned during interviews — and that is the stress and responsibility men experienced in relation to the full-scale invasion and associated worry and stress for their families (partners and children). This omission could signal a number of different interconnected realities. It could signal reverence for women who are mothers, and their special role caring for their children — an association consistent with gender stereotypical associations. Similarly, it could signal a reluctance by men to talk about their experience of stress and worry — also consistent with gender stereotypical association inasmuch as men are associated with being strong and stoic in their role as protectors. And, it could signal the practical reality of Martial Law — that men were simply unable to leave (while women in the Verkhovna Rada were eventually able to evacuate their children) and as such, could rely on their partners to evacuate with their children. This also means that the stress and worry for women with dependent family members and children, particularly if their partners were called to military service, would have initially been significant as they would have been unable to evacuate loved ones.

Nonetheless, the narratives do show specific reverence for women who are mothers — by some of the women and men interviewed. The quotes also reveal a suggestion that the impact of the situation was particularly difficult for women. The female MP quoted below illustrates this point.



The [greatest impact] is everything related to the family, primarily with children. [...] women had an additional challenge if there was no husband [...] they would actually be the only ones in the family, right? That is, they would be responsible for children, for housing, for animals, well, for everything, right? At this moment there was the impossibility of evacuation, because you have to be in Kyiv, because you have to make decisions about mobilization, about the introduction of martial law and the like. And in fact, there is no one to ensure the safety of the family. It is relevant for both men and women, but it was much more difficult for women to do it.

Another woman noted just how unique the full-scale invasion was for members of the Verkhovna Rada and for the institution itself. She disclosed her responsibility to care for and indeed, protect from danger, a non-child family member.



I had to take my [family member] with me to work, because I live [high up in an apartment tower], and I could not leave my [family member] when there were explosions and who knows what [...] I dragged my [family member] with me to work. [...] At that moment, it was probably the only time in the last five years when we were allowed to enter the Rada with family members.

¹⁹ See, Rebrey, SM, "Gender inequality in Russia: Axial institutions and agency," *Russian Journal of Economics* 9, No. 1 (2017), 71-92.

The following narrative highlights an association between women and motherhood, and thereby, the stress of having a child in the context of the full-scale invasion — from a male MP. By omission, this quote also reveals an absence of acknowledgement that men — fathers, grandfathers, uncles, and brothers — might also feel deep worry for their children. While men undoubtedly felt worry and stress for their family's, the lack of reference to this reality in combination with the direct expression of reverence for women who are mothers is consistent with gender stereotypical association. Moreover, this lack of association with men as caring caregivers might also suggest a complementary gender stereotype — that men are expected to be stoic and strong. In other words, the opposite of women.



[...] women are primarily mothers. And of course, when you are a mother and when you have a child, especially a young child, then of course you worry about them very much. I know many women MP who tried to send their children to a safer place with their mothers, and grandmothers. It is clear that they were worried. It is clear that they also went at the slightest opportunity to see their children.

The reflection below by a male MP has a similarly strong association of women with children and motherhood, even while there is a tacit acknowledgment that men also have children.



I think that if we talk about the difference between women and men, there is a certain problem with going abroad for women who have children, as far as I understand. Although men also have children abroad, I guess.

Another quote, from a female MP, further emphasizes the association of women's responsibility for children. This quote also highlights the specific limits faced by men in the context of Martial Law — whether they are mobilized or not, men of draft age could not leave. In this context, an amendment was made to accommodate the presence of women in the Verkhovna Rada and enable them to take their children out of Ukraine.



[There has been a] small relaxation in case a female [MP] needs to leave with a child if there is no one to take the child except the female MP. If the father is mobilized, even if he was not mobilized, then he cannot leave. Who can take the child? No one else [...] Then they made an amendment so that it is possible for a woman to leave with a child.

This quote, from a woman serving in the Verkhovna Rada reflects both the legal reality — that only women (or men more than 60 years old) are able to evacuate children under Martial Law. However, it also emphasizes the theme that women are particularly affected by being separated from their children.



We also evacuated the children. For every mother this is a big task. The problem is being separated from your children. [...] Fear for the life and health of your loved ones and, of course, great concern for those who went to the army.

The reflection below, from another woman, adds nuance to the narrative, suggesting that male MPs could relax after sending their wife and children abroad — while female MPs did not have the same possibility to alleviate stress and worry. In contrast, it is also notable that the speaker does not acknowledge the stress for men associated with not being able to evacuate their families due to Martial Law. This omission, suggests again, the gender stereotype associated with men to be strong and stoic.



[...] for the first time women in parliament, MPs, who had especially young children, could not leave — nor their husbands. This was the most acute issue for all women. And I remember what a stress it was, it was just despair for many women who did not understand what to do with their children [...].

She later noted that:



[...] this aspect of security is important because unlike the male [MPs], who could absolutely calmly send their wives with children abroad and feel half the stress — we had a completely different experience.

This point is made clear in a quote by another female MP, highlighting the plan and implementation to evacuate loved ones before the full-scale invasion. This quote also signals an interesting reversal of roles where the father assumes the primary care tasks and the mother stays behind to engage in national defense. This represents an exception as well as an indication of what is possible in the context of gender equality — a context in which the person best suited is responsible, not the person with the appropriate sex and gender.



I sent my children from Kyiv in advance [of the full-scale invasion], both the children and the father. And so, when it was necessary to concentrate solely on work and think about what to do, I didn't have to worry about my family as a mother first. This significantly distinguished me from many others at that time, who had children nearby [and worried]. It was a conscious conversation [with my husband] that if something happens [full-scale invasion], then I would have to work, and would not be able to think about the safety of my family.

Altogether these narratives suggest a theme where women are primarily associated with the care and safety of children. This association was reinforced with the adoption of Martial Law which forbid men from leaving, even to evacuate their families. In other words, Martial Law in Ukraine is also consistent with gender stereotypical associations. This should not be taken as a criticism of the Law or lack of acknowledgement of the enormous complexity that resulted from the full-scale invasion — but a reflection of the strength of gender stereotypical associations and the possible ways in which these associations are reflected in policy without conscious awareness.

By omission, these narratives reveal that men in the Verkhovna Rada are largely unacknowledged in their role as fathers — by women or men. This analytical finding is not meant to suggest that women should not be associated with the responsibilities and worries of motherhood when they have children. Rather, that the absence of a similar association for men as fathers, may reflect a limit that can translate into policy and practice. In other words, if women are assumed to be best positioned to care for children, evacuate families and speak about abducted children — and men are not — then that will likely inform how laws and policies are crafted and implemented. And indeed, the formulation of Martial Law may well be, at least in part, a reflection of that association.

3. Recognition of sexism by men and women

Seven MPs, three men and four women, acknowledged the presence of sexism within the Verkhovna Rada — at least in previous convocations. While specific examples were not provided, some interviewees suggested previous incidents where specific comments or language was delivered in a hostile manner. This can be understood as *hostile sexism* which is manifested as insults, disrespect, and intentional exclusion.²⁰ Other interviewees applauded the progress made on this, while one MP acknowledging that there can still be an undercurrent or “hidden” element of sexism. We might understand this as a form of *benevolent sexism* where women are treated with extra consideration, support and protection.²¹ Benevolent sexism can be seen in the previous comments about women’s special role as mothers and caregivers alongside specific references to the leadership and work undertaken by women on gender equality and LGBTQ rights.

The following quote highlights the presence of sexism — including from leadership — by a female MP.



We periodically see sexist behavior, in particular from leadership. [...] Women, have always encountered some kind of sexism in different variations.

Similarly, this reflection from a male MP illustrates both progress and the continued possibility of “relapse”. Here the word formally is perhaps important, revealing the distinction between public behavior, and personal attitudes and values.



Formally there is all the observance of equality. Well, obviously, there is a certain rudeness, when colleagues of the MP can complain about some such relapses, the attitudes reflected from above, but it is still more of a relapse. And we must give credit, because basically there is an effort to stay within the limits of correctness.

²⁰ Glick and Fiske (2001), as cited in Jones, Stewart, King, Morgan, Gilrane and Hylton, “Negative consequence of benevolent sexism on efficacy and performance,” *Gender in Management: An International Journal* Vol. 29 No. 3 (2014), 171-189.

²¹ Ibid.

Another male MP makes a similar reflection — acknowledging progress, while leaving space for cases of sexism to occur. This quote reinforces the possibility that at least for some, public behavior may be distinct from personal attitudes.



[There has been a] gradual movement towards maintaining gender balance, at least in the highest legislative body. It is supported by us, and we have seriously strengthened it. [There is the] exception of some unfortunate cases of sexism or some similar things. [...] It has consequences even for those MPs who are somehow overlooked. In fact, it is almost excluded in our work, at least for today.

A woman serving in the Verkhovna Rada further reinforces this distinction — noting that there is a “fear” of publicly expressing sexist attitudes which serves as a constraint.



I would say that compared to what was five years ago, the progress [on sexism] is obvious, that they are afraid to express certain things, because they will be punished for it. It seems to me that we have made progress on this process of enlightenment among MPs. Obviously, there are some things that [...] well, they are heard in some places, but, well, it's true, they are downright wary about this. They are just like, can this be said or not? Is this, like, worth it or not? Well, such wariness and sensitivity to this issue has appeared. I am really super optimistic.

Indeed, there is often a gap between public behaviour and comments and those made in smaller or private contexts. Efforts to advance gender equality (or any social-policy change) often start with public statements and obligations — which thereafter can facilitate individual and collective social change.

Similarly, another interviewee, a man, noted that while there have previously been “bad situations”, at present there is an overall climate among MPs to confront sexism directly. Here again, the assertion that there are MPs who would intervene suggests the presence of MPs who might engage in sexist rhetoric.



There were several cases [of sexism], if I'm not mistaken, even in the parliament hall. But I don't remember it for quite some time now. Somewhere in the beginning, when there was also the IFDA [Interfactional Deputy Association] for Equal Opportunities, they questioned someone and there were some bad situations. But I don't remember it being right in the meeting hall for a very long time. If something had happened, there would definitely be many active deputies who would say what was happening.

In contrast to hostile sexism, another woman serving in the Verkhovna Rada highlights the presence of a “feeling” that comments, behaviors or the lack of support are based on sexist attitudes.



That is, there are such moments when you feel that in the process of promoting your draft law, it [sexism] comes across, but I don't want to say sexism, because it is very, very hidden. But such elements are sometimes present at the level of feelings. You don't understand why, what it is, but arguments are put forward, and there is the feeling that these arguments are not substantiated. This is the feeling that it is probably because you are a woman, and these are just some people's attitudes.

Finally, one female MP identified sexism, or the use of gender-based stereotypes, but argued that they are principally coming from women. She notes that somehow it has been easier to overcome gender-based stereotypes with men.



We encountered gender stereotypes. And the funniest thing was that we encountered them because of the articulation from women, not men. It was somehow easier with men in terms of gender stereotypes.

The presentation of these quotes is not meant to suggest that the Verkhovna Rada has a unique problem with sexism, harassment or discrimination against women. On the contrary, the interview data are unequivocal — tremendous progress has been made, and as a result there seems to be **a current culture that actively condemns explicit or “hostile” sexism within the Verkhovna Rada**. Rather, the quotes signal the importance of maintaining and reinforcing the progress made in terms of addressing gender stereotypes and advancing gender equality — and here again, the importance of men's involvement in that effort. Moreover, the focus on hostile sexism as emblematic of sexism or harassment can obscure the harm and discriminatory effects of benevolent sexism.

To be clear, sexism exists in every corner of the world. It also specifically exists within parliamentary systems in European democracies. Take for example research that revealed that:²²

- › **85.2%** of female MPs in Europe who took part in the study reported hostile sexism (psychological abuse) during their time in office;
- › **67.9%** reported being subject to comments about their physical appearance or based on gender stereotypes;
- › **58.2%** reported being targeted by sexism online.

This data also reveals the presence of less direct forms of sexism — comments based on gender stereotypes that ostensibly serve to limit the roles, responsibilities and opportunities for both men and women even if they may appear reverential and positive. And perhaps most notably, those **women active in efforts to advance gender equality and combat violence against women were often singled out for sexist and harassing attacks**.

²² “Sexism, Harassment and Violence Against Women in Parliaments in Europe,” Issue Brief, Inter-Parliamentary Union, (2018).

Discussion and Analysis

What meaning can we draw from the sum of these interviews that can contribute to strategies to secure Ukraine's integrity and sovereignty and strengthen the Western democratic alliance's support to and for Ukraine?

What we see from the narratives is an understanding or approach to gender equality that leaves space for Russian exploitation using anti-gender equality disinformation and propaganda. This understanding and approach, whether conscious or unconscious, is not unique to Ukraine, but Ukraine is in a uniquely precarious position. Inasmuch as Ukraine is geographically located between Russia and Western Europe and thus perilously situated between two competing world views, **Ukraine's position on gender equality is strengthened with clarity and resolve and hindered by ambiguity.**

The understanding and approach to advancing gender equality reflected in the narratives of MPs, as is common across the world, appears to be focused on the rights of women while omitting the importance of gender equality for men. Women's rights efforts around the world are often focused on integration, representation and participation — moving women into the public and professional spheres, into non-traditional domains and into leadership and decision-making. Indeed, interview narratives reflect a genuine commitment to expanding the understanding of women in the Verkhovna Rada, their capabilities and value, and the importance of their integration into non-traditional domains like security and defense. However, these efforts have largely ignored the double work burden that women experience as their responsibility and commitments in the public and professional spheres increase. This phenomenon is mirrored across Western Europe, with the exception of some of the Nordic countries.²³ Yet, in order to continue to advance gender equality there is a need for men to become increasingly involved in care work in the home, with children and family — just as women have become increasingly involved in providing for their families and protecting their families (directly or indirectly). As well, men's active participation, even leadership, on topics stereotypically associated with women is also important — just as women have moved into domains stereotypically associated with men. In other words, **gender equality involves the process of expanding the roles, responsibilities and opportunities for both women and men.**

MPs also reflected a consistent commitment to safeguarding against hostile sexism — disrespectful and insulting comments and behavior intended to alienate and isolate women. At

²³ In Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden part of **parental leave is reserved exclusively for the father and another part for the mother.** The reserved months reform has been widely viewed as a success both by researchers and policymakers. It has changed both expectations and fathers' behaviour to be involved in childcare from an early age of the child. This policy is rooted in a long-standing commitment to advance gender equality. See, Duvander, Ann-Zofie, et al., "Parental Leave Policies and Continued Childbearing in Iceland, Norway, and Sweden," *Demographic Research*, 40 (2019), 1501–28; and Duvander, Ann-Zofie and Mats Johansson, "What Are the Effects of Reforms Promoting Fathers' Parental Leave Use?," *Journal of European Social Policy* 22, No. 3 (2018), 319–30.

the same time, both men and women expressed reverence and applaud for women in their unique role as mothers and the unique responsibility they have for the well-being of their children. Yet, there was limited mention of the role or experience of men in the Verkhovna Rada who are fathers. Research shows that this protective and reverential approach to women operates in tandem with hostile sexism to undermine gender equality and reinforce a gender hierarchy — where women need protection and men are the protectors.²⁴ This means that women have the possibility to expand their roles and responsibilities, so long as it is not at the expense of their unique and central responsibility to care for the safety and well-being of children. In contrast, men appear to be more constrained by rigid gender stereotypical associations. This means that there are limited changes to their roles and responsibilities in both the private sphere with children and family and in the public sphere in Verkhovna Rada.

A growing body of research has evidenced Russia's consistent use of anti-gender and sexual equality disinformation and propaganda as a central element of their hybrid warfare strategy. The stereotypical association of women as caring mothers who are in need of protection and reverence; and men as strong and courageous protectors provides ample space for Russia to exploit. This includes reinforcing a one-dimensional version of manhood that prioritizes strength, stoicism and leadership and associate's weakness with women, children and being gay. As such, the extent to which men and women are believed to be born into a fixed and traditional understanding of roles, responsibilities and characteristics based on their sex — gender stereotypical roles — represents an opportunity for exploitation.

Russian Hybrid Warfare: Strategic use of gender stereotypical associations

"This is the war [waged by Russia] where the main instruments of struggle are not only weapons, but also **disinformation, political propaganda**, economic pressure, and terror."²⁵ The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) recognizes that conflict is increasingly fought using innovative methods that don't involve lethal or kinetic force. Hybrid warfare is thus defined as "an interplay or fusion of conventional as well as **unconventional instruments of power and tools of subversion** that are synchronized to exploit the vulnerabilities of an antagonist and achieve synergistic effects."²⁶

A central feature of non-kinetic and non-economic hybrid warfare in Ukraine is disinformation. This is false information that deliberately **targets and exploits socio-cultural cleavages with the intention of "creating social tension, polarising society, instilling fear in the population or undermining their trust in government"**.²⁷

²⁴ Glick, P., "Backlash and the Double Bind", Research Symposium, Gender and Work: Challenging Conventional Wisdom, Harvard Business School, (2013), 2-7.

²⁵ Inna Shinkarenko, Nataliia Komykh, "A visual text of the Russian-Ukrainian war: gender optics," *Interdisciplinary Studies of Complex Systems*, No. 24 (2024), 197.

²⁶ Bilal, A, "Hybrid Warfare — New Threats, Complexity and Trust as the Antidote, NATO Review online, (2021), March 2025.

²⁷ Giannopoulos et al., (2020), cited in, Freedman, Jane, Gjørsv, Gunhild Hoogensen, and Razakamaharavo, Velomahanina Tahinjanahary, "Identity, stability, Hybrid Threats and Disinformation," *Icono 14: Comunicación y tecnologías emergentes*, 19, N.1 (2021), 49.

Anti-gender equality messages are a primary element of Russian disinformation. This includes propaganda asserting the natural and fixed roles and responsibilities of men and women based on gender stereotypical associations. For example, during a speech at the Valdai Discussion Club in Sochi, Putin said liberals in the West are looking to terminate designations like “mother, father, family or gender differences,” something he called “basic”.²⁸ Similarly, Putin stated, “I uphold the traditional approach that a woman is a woman, a man is a man, a mother is a mother, and a father is a father” at his December 2021 nationwide news conference, reinforcing the notion of fixed gender roles.²⁹

Consistent with this, sexual orientation is also a central element of anti-gender equality disinformation from Russia. Rhetoric from Putin consistently frames being gay as antithetical to traditional manhood. In other words, to be gay is to be feminine, and therefore weak — and it is unnatural as men should want and need women. As such, “Ukraine is posited by Russia as feminised and torn between a masculine Russia defending traditional values, and a sexually degenerate Europe, referred to by Putin as “Gayropa”.³⁰

Indeed, research shows:

*Russian and pro-Russian [...] information sources have portrayed Western Europe and “European values” as a threat to their own “traditional” gender norms and regimes, through, for example the promotion of homosexuality and the breakup of the “traditional” family. [And] as such Russian [hybrid warfare] initiatives [in Ukraine have] appealed to conservative values and opinions regarding family life and sexuality to try and convince Ukrainians of the dangers of Europe and its promotion of “sexual deviance” and the abolition of traditional gender norms and roles.*³¹

Given Russian priorities, it should not be surprising that during the full-scale invasion of Ukraine the Duma extended the scope of the Russian “gay propaganda” law. This included forbidding the public portrayal of “non-traditional sexual relations” to any age group — rather than only minors. Attempting to highlight Ukraine as pro-democracy, a Ukrainian MP in the Verkhovna Rada introduced a bill to legalize same-sex partnerships and afford them the same legal rights — she explained:



*Because Putin made homophobia such a big part of his political agenda and [Russian] national ideology, people automatically associate him with homophobia. So, if we are different from him, then we should be different in that area as well.*³²

²⁸ “Putin blasts cancel culture, calls gender fluidity ‘crime against humanity,’” [The Hill](#), (22 October 2021), March 2025.

²⁹ “Vladimir Putin, the czar of macho politics, is threatened by gender and sexuality rights,” [The Conversation](#), (11 April 2022), March 2025.

³⁰ Edenborg (2017), quoted in, Kratochvíl and O’Sullivan, “A war like no other: Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as a war on gender order,” *European Security*, 349.

³¹ Freedman et al, “Identity, stability, Hybrid Threats and Disinformation,” *Icono 14: Comunicación y tecnologías emergentes*, 56.

³² Reid, Graeme, “Russia, Homophobia and the Battle for ‘Traditional Values,’” [Human Rights Watch](#), (17 May 2023), March 2025.

This quote illustrates a key strategy to mitigating against anti-gender equality disinformation and propaganda — unequivocal and open support for democratic principles that include gender and sexual equality.

Indeed, if Russia, in its implementation of the “strong do what they will” identifies Ukraine as an “eternal province” and is attempting, by force, to impose Russian socio-cultural, political and economic values and ensure the rejection of everything Western European³³ Ukraine is put in the difficult position of having to choose with clarity and resolve.

Moreover, to the extent that Western Europe, among other western democracies, sees Ukraine as a bulwark for democracy and the socio-cultural values that go with it, Ukraine’s rejection of Russian anti-gender and sexual equality represents readiness to join Western Europe and the democratic alliance.

Gender and sexual equalities are an important part of the EU project, but they are even more centrally posited in the Russian counter-narrative, in which they become the fulcrums of the resistance against the spread of Western values and against the Europeanisation both within Russia and without. In this sense, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is not a simple power grab, but an attempt at countering the centripetal tendencies that are not primarily military, but cultural [despite all the Russian talk about the danger of “NATO expansion”].³⁴

As such, the fight for “hearts and minds” by Russia includes explicitly fostering distrust and even disgust for the ideas of multiculturalism, inclusion, and gender and sexual equality. These narratives, used in the context of hybrid warfare aim to “create a real political and cultural alternative to Western liberal democracy that is modeled after Putin’s Russia, focusing on traditional imaginings of masculinity and femininity, the family unit, and other conservative Christian imagery”.³⁵ Consider the hypermasculine images of Putin that have been used to emphasize Russian strength and the role of a “real” man³⁶ in contrast to the specific ways in which Western European, and even current Ukrainian leaders, have been depicted as feminine and gay — meant to signal weakness. These images and narratives are intended to produce an explicit and implicit association of manhood as one-dimensional — the dominant, aggressive, and unwavering head of the family, and protector of the nation. As such, gender equality and the possibilities that come with it for men and women, to see themselves as more than one-dimensional, represents “Eurosodom” according to Russian hybrid warfare tactics.³⁷

³³ Ernesticia and Kipo-Sunyezi, “Russia-Ukraine war from a gender perspective,” *African Social Science and Humanities Journal*, 278.

³⁴ Kratochvíl and O’Sullivan, “A war like no other: Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as a war on gender order,” *European Security*, 360.

³⁵ Cushman, Grace, “Eurosodom: Examining Weaponized Sexuality and Gender-Based Narratives in Russian and Pro-Russian Disinformation,” *graduate thesis*, (University of Texas at Austin, 2020), 7.

³⁶ “[...] the real man version of masculinity, [...] idealizes aggression, social respect, toughness, strength, heterosexism, sexual potency, and stoicism”, cited in, Huhtanen, H., and Johnson-Freese, J., “The “Real Man” and National Security,” *Orbis*, 68, No. 2, (2024), 276-293.

³⁷ Cushman, Grace, “Eurosodom: Examining Weaponized Sexuality and Gender-Based Narratives in Russian and Pro-Russian Disinformation,” 8.

Hybrid warfare can be seen applying the logic of “gender hierarchy”, where men, by their very nature, are the leaders and women, by their nature, are the followers. This is also referred to as the “first political order”.³⁸ Men are the stoic providers and protectors, and women are revered for their role reproducing and caring for the next generations — for which they must be protected by strong courageous men. Here there is an explicit attempt to equate gender equality with the downfall of “true Christian European civilization” based on the “natural” gender hierarchy created by God.

It is clear that gender equality is considered a threat to the hierarchy of power and wealth in Russia — established on the backs of broad social inequality. Indeed, if “the masculine monopoly on political power comes to an end and the time for a mixed democracy opens up, the more [society] establishes [gender] equality, the more it respects individual” human rights.³⁹ This is why **broad social inequality is fuel for the centralized authoritarian leadership model in Russia — a model that is antithetical to the democratic values of fairness, equality and inclusion.**

Here it is worth reflecting on a comment provided by one of the women serving in the Verkhovna Rada:



Some of the topics that I deal with are very divisive. This includes women’s rights and [minority] rights. There, communication with society is one of the important areas of work. Our task is not only to change the legislation, but also to change public thinking on this issue.

She goes onto explain how, as a member of an opposition party (faction), her main task is communication:



[...] because I must convince society so that it can then put pressure on the ruling party to adopt the laws that I promote.

She later explains how this relates to conditions of support:



This our main lever of pressure, that what we promote are the requirements of the International Monetary Fund, the requirements of the European Union, etcetera. And this is our lever of pressure, the lever of influence, let’s call it that. That is, these initiatives very clearly coincide with the approach of our Western partners — which has become more important, because we are financially dependent on them.

These quotes undoubtedly reflect a common reality — that advancement of legislative topics by minority political parties will need the support of the majority party to be successful. Yet, two ways of gaining majority party support are reflected: first, by garnering public

³⁸ Hudson, V. M., et al., *The First Political Order: How Sex Shapes Governance and National Security Worldwide*.

³⁹ Agacinski, S., 2001. *The Parity of the Sexes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. viii, 24.

support and second by gaining the support of desirable international donors. Here it is also worth noting that the Verkhovna Rada, in the context of the full-scale invasion, gives priority to legislation addressing security and defense, finance and restoration efforts. Nonetheless, this quote also highlights another challenge, one that is not unique to Ukraine — the challenge of advancing the democratic values of equality, fairness and inclusion, in particular gender and sexual equality.

The narrative themes reflected in the previous section note the presence, among both men and women, of a model of gender equality where women with hard work can move into the public sector including policy on national defense and security. Yet, women appear to remain principally responsible for advancing fairness, equality and inclusion within the Verkhovna Rada — alongside primary responsibility for the care of children and dependent family members. In contrast, men are largely omitted from narratives related to advancing human rights, gender equality and LGBTQ rights within the Verkhovna Rada — or playing a conscious and recognized role as fathers. To be clear, this is not to say that men are not working in these areas professionally or privately — but rather, that the narratives do not recognize men in these areas. Indeed, the narratives show men acknowledging and supporting women's additional burden of responsibility for motherhood and care work (benevolent sexism) and holding the line against hostile and overt forms of sexism while continuing to legislate in traditional domains (security, defense, intelligence, etc). In other words, men are supportive, positive and appreciative of women and their expanded roles and responsibilities in the Verkhovna Rada and beyond. Yet, neither women nor men openly reflected on the ways in which the roles and responsibilities of men have expanded or might need to expand in order to advance gender equality and ease the double work burden women face. Here it is worth repeating that there is nothing particularly unique about this perspective or context. Indeed, the socio-cultural and practical challenges involved in advancing gender equality are present across democratic contexts.

Yet, this gap between the advancements made by women to enter non-traditional domains and the limited changes made to notions of manhood represent fertile ground for Russian disinformation campaigns.

Perhaps not ironically, recent research in Russia highlights the importance of understanding gender equality as something that benefits and includes both women and men in the private and public spheres. Indeed, the following excerpt can provide key insights on how to more effectively advance gender equality in Ukraine based on the limits experienced in Russia:

On the one hand, women engaged in paid labor, but on the other, — men did not engage in unpaid labor — so domestic chores and childcare remained a female domain. It resulted in a double burden and promoted the conservation of patriarchal values in key public institutions — state governance, academia, and after the collapse of the USSR — corporate governance. Women are overburdened by the double shift of paid and unpaid labor, and underpaid. [...]

Governance also remains a male field, where women account for deputies, and mostly administrative jobs, and have low decision-making capabilities, both in state and corporate governance. As a result, there are few women in decision making positions in state and corporate governance and in academia. [...]

The author goes on to state that:

Fatherhood empowerment is the most effective and the most under evaluated resource for economic and demographic potential. Concerning economic benefits, inclusive fatherhood is essential for unburdening women [...]. [...] inclusive fatherhood is one of the pillars of human capital development. It also positively impacts men, as the more they are involved in domestic affairs, the less they choose antisocial and dangerous behavior patterns, including alcoholism. Thus, inclusive fatherhood prolongs men's longevity. It also decreases the divorce rate and increases the chances of having more than one child, thus stimulating childbirth (Duvander et al., 2019). [...] balanced gender time allocation on paid and unpaid leave reduces the gender wage gap and stimulates birthrates as the Northern Europe example shows.⁴⁰

If men are not actively engaged in advancing gender equality through their own development and progress, women are left with a double work burden. In the context of the Verkhovna Rada, female MPs might also experience a greater sense of responsibility for upholding democratic principles like gender equality and LGBTQ rights — at least in terms of their association within the Parliament but perhaps also in the eyes of the public. As research shows, advancing gender equality is good for women, good for men and good for society — including economic indicators. That means that the extent to which Ukraine aims to be a part of the Western democratic alliance and join this on-going process of advancing gender equality, the parliament, among others, will need to actively engage men. And men will need to lend their voice to the democratic project — and explicitly counter the Russian hybrid warfare narratives that pit men and manhood against fatherhood, human rights, gender equality, LGBTQ rights, and overall fairness and inclusion. Indeed, research documents how **“hypermasculine posturing and appealing to male anxieties [i]s integral to the wider purchase of [...] narratives that fuel anti-democratic sentiments and demand a radical transformation of politics and society or a return to a time when women, and minorities, had limited rights”**.⁴¹

Gender Equality — Addressing Hostile and Benevolent Sexism

Gender equality is a socio-cultural, political, and economic goal that envisions a world in which people, irrespective of the sex they are born with, have equal and fair access to rights, opportunities, responsibilities and conditions. The goals of gender equality represent the basis of the so-called “gender ideology” Russia has actively tried to undermine at home and abroad.⁴²

⁴⁰ Rebrey, “Gender inequality in Russia: Axial institutions and agency,” *Russian Journal of Economics*, 86.

⁴¹ Homolar, Alexandra, and Löffmann, Georg, “Weaponizing Masculinity: Populism and Gendered Stories of Victimhood,” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, 16, No. 2 (2022), 131.

⁴² Korolczuk and Graff identified evidence of a state-sanctioned and officially approved anti-gender ideology since Putin's return to power in 2012. Korolczuk, Elżbieta, and Graff, Agnieszka, “Gender as “Ebola from Brussels”: The Anticolonial Frame and the Rise of Illiberal Populism,” *Signs. Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 43, no. 4, (Summer 2018).

Gender equality, as a goal or ideology, does not prescribe the characteristics, roles or responsibilities of individuals or groups but rather, aims to remove limits and barriers. In other words, if a woman wants to be a mother and undertake unpaid work, caring for their home, children and partner, why not? Similarly, in this world view, *men can make the same choice* — or, the couple whether they are opposite sex or same sex, can share the duties of bread-winning and caretaking.

The promotion and enforcement of rigid gender roles based on a traditional gender hierarchy is also an ideology. This ideology asserts the natural, unchangeable and necessary distinction between the roles of men and women. In this view of the world, there is no choice — there are only limits. In other words, you are born into your “job for life” irrespective of your interests, desire for education, or natural gifts and abilities. Moreover, your “natural” job for life is not influenced or informed by context or circumstance — so whether the economic or technological conditions of the 21st century demand flexible approaches to private and professional life is irrelevant.⁴³

Unfortunately, one of the ways gender equality is undermined and gender hierarchy is reinforced is by way of “a subjectively positive orientation of protection, idealization, and affection directed toward women”.⁴⁴ In academia this is called benevolent sexism — in simple terms it is a form of adherence to fixed gender roles and a traditional gender hierarchy. Notably, “regardless of whether women are treated as fragile and in need of [protection], or whether they are treated with hostility and disrespect, the end result is the same: women are treated as unequal to and in fact lesser than their male counterparts”.⁴⁵ Thus, benevolent sexism operates as a support for traditional masculine leadership styles and in opposition to so called “feminine” styles, like collaboration and inclusion.⁴⁶ This functions regardless of the individual’s actual sex — which importantly links back to the propaganda used by Russia depicting Western European men as weak *vis à vis* their “feminine” support for equality, fairness and inclusion.

⁴³ For example, traditionally male-dominated work has significantly contracted like, construction, manufacturing and other labor intense categories, while work that is stereotypically associated with women like healthcare and the service industry, has expanded. This is summarized in an article in the Economist, titled, “Men Adrift: Badly Educated Men in Rich Countries Have Not Adapted Well to Trade, Technology or Feminism.” The article highlights how men have not been interested or successful entering work associated with women due to, “challenges to their masculine identity.” “Men Adrift: Badly Educated Men in Rich Countries Have Not Adapted Well to Trade, Technology or Feminism,” The Economist, 28 May 2015.

⁴⁴ Glick et al. 2000, cited in Winter, Nicholas J. G., “Hostile Sexism, Benevolent Sexism, and American Elections,” *Politics & Gender*, 19, No. 2, (June 2023), 427.

⁴⁵ Jones, K., Stewart, K., King, E., Morgan, W.B., Gilrane, V., and Hylton, K., “Negative consequence of benevolent sexism on efficacy and performance,” *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 29 No. 3, (2014), 175.

⁴⁶ Winter, Nicholas J. G., “Hostile Sexism, Benevolent Sexism, and American Elections,” *Politics & Gender*, 428.

Research has identified three interrelated beliefs that altogether contribute to undermining gender equality and reinforcing gender hierarchy:⁴⁷

1. **complementary gender differentiation** — the belief that women and men have fundamentally different yet complementary traits, roles, and natures (perhaps even created by God);
2. **heterosexual intimacy** — the conviction that women should provide intimacy and support to men — to serve as the “helpmate” to men by enabling their paid professional work;
3. **protective paternalism** — the belief that women have a special status and need to be revered and protected by men.

This set of beliefs justifies hostile sexism directed at women who do not “play their part” — [...] women who have or seek power over men, who deny men intimate access, or who infringe on male authority.⁴⁸ On the other hand, benevolent sexism complements this punitive response by rewarding “women for conforming to stereotypes and roles that serve men’s needs”.⁴⁹ Together hostile and benevolent sexism are two sides of the same coin — conform and you will be put on a pedestal, fail to conform and you will be punished.

The links to Russian disinformation and hybrid warfare used against Ukraine are clear — they are also the beliefs that underpin Russian state values with respect to gender roles, women, motherhood, men and manhood.

Notably, research shows that:

*The nations in which people strongly endorse benevolent sexism are those where people most strongly endorse hostile sexism — the two go hand in hand. Further, national averages on both scales predict fewer women in high-level government and business roles. In short, high benevolent sexism nations exhibit more hostile sexism and less equality for women, suggesting that whatever protection benevolent sexism ostensibly offers, women fare less well in societies that strongly endorse it.*⁵⁰

This data should serve as further evidence of the importance of advancing gender equality for both women and men as well as the whole of society.

⁴⁷ Adapted from, Glick, Peter & Fiske, Susan & Saiz, José & Abrams, Dominic & Masser, Barbara & Adetoun, Bolanle & Osagie, Johnston & Akande, Adebawale & Alao, Amos & Brunner, Annetje & Willemsen, Tineke & Chipeta, Kettie & Dardenne, Benoit & Dijksterhuis, Ap & Wigboldus, Daniel & Eckes, Thomas & Six-Materna, Iris & Expósito, Francisca & López-López, Wilson, “Beyond Prejudice as Simple Antipathy: Hostile and Benevolent Sexism Across Cultures,” *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 79 (2000), 763-75.

⁴⁸ Winter, Nicholas J. G., “Hostile Sexism, Benevolent Sexism, and American Elections,” *Politics & Gender*, 430.

⁴⁹ Glick, P., “Backlash and the Double Bind,” Research Symposium, Gender and Work: Challenging Conventional Wisdom, Harvard Business School, 5.

⁵⁰ Glick, P., “Backlash and the Double Bind,” Research Symposium, Gender and Work: Challenging Conventional Wisdom, Harvard Business School, 5.

The full and meaningful opportunity for women and men to pursue their interests and preferences and apply their gifts and abilities for themselves, their families and society — and to choose — is foundational to the democratic project. As such, the active engagement of men in efforts to advance gender equality is integral to achieving higher levels of gender equality. Indeed, men, like women, must be encouraged and empowered to see themselves as more than protectors and providers. In order to advance gender equality, men must be willing to embrace their role as partners and fathers and engage in the direct care and responsibility of children — without being labeled feminine or weak. Men, like women, must be courageous enough to openly support all elements of the democratic project — equality, fairness and inclusion — including gender and sexual equality.

Recommendations — Policy and Practice in the Verkhovna Rada

The findings of this study, alongside current research showcasing Russia's use of anti-gender equality disinformation as a centerpiece of hybrid warfare, implies the need for a more inclusive approach to gender equality. In fact, the extent to which Russia is using disinformation and propaganda against the Western democratic alliance, there is arguably a need to improve efforts to advance gender equality more broadly. As such, these recommendations may be relevant for any country that wishes to advance democracy and build resilience against hybrid warfare tactics that exploit gender stereotypes.

Prioritization of Gender Parity and Counter-Stereotypical Representation

The goal is to advance associations that break out of gender stereotypical associations. This includes using counter-stereotypical representation alongside gender parity — or the equal numerical representation of men and women. One way to approach this recommendation is to reverse engineer the benevolent sexism framework to design counter-stereotypical associations. Thus, the goal is to avoid:

- › **complementary gender differentiation** — the belief that women and men have fundamentally different yet complementary traits, roles, and natures (perhaps even created by God);
- › **heterosexual intimacy and support** — the conviction that women should provide intimacy and support to men — to serve as the “helpmate” to men by enabling their paid professional work;
- › **protective paternalism** — the belief that women have a special status and need to be revered and protected by men.

In practice this could include three key areas within the remit of the Verkhovna Rada:

- › **Visible gender parity on topics with gender stereotypical associations that foreground the counter-stereotypical association.** This includes having both a female and male MP lead the effort to advance national security and defense, and secure international support for weapons and ammunition while foregrounding the female MP. Similarly, this includes having both a male and female MP lead the effort to advance human rights, gender equality and LGBTQ rights and secure international support to address humanitarian needs and the return of abducted children while foregrounding the male MP.
- › **Visible gender parity in the context of communications that foreground the counter-stereotypical association.** Whether print, radio, television, podcast, or social media, make an effort to engage both male and female MPs in communication. Foreground the counter-stereotypical individual in communication while using an inclusive approach that involve both men and women as well as minority groups.

For example, use a male MP with military experience to communicate about the importance of LGBTQ rights while also showcasing the involvement of women, ethnic/religious minorities and majority and opposition parties to the extent possible.

- ▶ **Visible gender parity in constituent engagement.** To the extent possible (most likely through party affiliation) work collaboratively across gender in the context of constituent engagement. Deploy collaboration, communication and coordination between men and women working in the Verkhovna Rada as a means to more effectively foster discussion, reflection and awareness on complicated and sometimes provocative socio-cultural political topics like gender stereotypes, LGBTQ rights, etc.

Capitalize on Provocative Topics to Advance Democracy and Build Awareness

- ▶ Martial Law is consistent with gender stereotypical associations. While Martial Law was approved by 75% of the Verkhovna Rada⁵¹, as noted during some interviews, the details and rationale of the law were not debated. This topic presents an opportunity to: 1) secure the attention of Ukrainians and the world, and 2) engage in a meaningful discussion about the constraints that come with legal mandates largely based on gender stereotypical role association. This discussion has the possibility to be authentic to the extent that both men and women within the Verkhovna Rada are willing to openly share their experiences and the challenges they faced. Here the goal is not to overturn or change how Martial Law is defined, but rather to use this concrete and visible example as a way to highlight how gender roles can constrain efficiency and effectiveness to the extent that it limits who does what, when and how based on sex and gender rather than the person best able. The goal is to open discussion and begin the process of generating a broader understanding of what is possible in society while recognizing that there is no clear and fixed immediate solution — but steps forward.
- ▶ Extended parental leave for men is another topic that can be used to generate engagement and discussion. There is evidence that parental leave for men, particularly if it at least a portion of it is obligatory, has physical and mental health benefits for men and their children, and contributes to alleviating the double work burden women often experience. This topic, like Martial Law, presents an opportunity to explore the ways in which gender roles constrain and limit — men, women, and society as a whole.

Assess Proposed and Adopted Legislation Taking both Men and Women into Account

The diagram below provides a framework to assess gender equality. The goal is to advance equal and fair rights, opportunities, responsibilities and conditions that will benefit women, men and society by capitalizing on the full range of talents and interests irrespective of sex/gender. What is most critical in this assessment is to consider the gender stereotypical associations for both men and women — and whether they are influencing or guiding policy and practice.

⁵¹ 310 MPs were present, 300 voted in favor, 10 abstained and 113 were not present. Provided by the Agency for Legislative Initiatives (Ukraine).

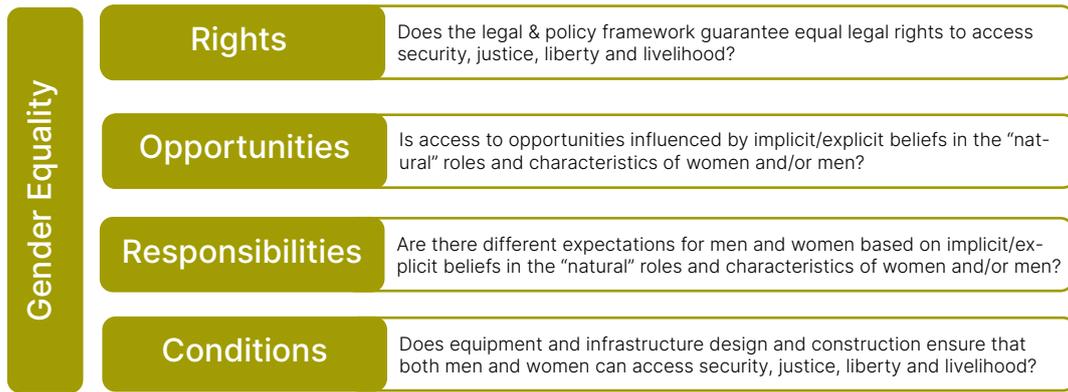


Diagram 2: Gender equality framework⁵²

⁵² Gender equality is defined as equal rights, opportunities, and responsibilities of men and women by the European Institute for Gender Equality — conditions have been added to this framework to facilitate a more comprehensive analysis of de facto gender equality.

Conclusion

Combatting Russian hybrid warfare that disseminates anti-gender equality disinformation will require Western Europe and Ukraine to double down on their efforts to advance gender equality while also actively communicating the benefits of gender equality for women, men, and society. This means identifying the ways in which men must also grow, develop and progress alongside women — and how there are real benefits for men who engage in direct care of their children among other unpaid work.⁵³ This means that men visibly advocate for and communicate about legislative topics that advance human rights, gender equality and LGBTQ rights. Men in the Verkhovna Rada may well experience disinformation and propaganda directed against them — but interview narratives remind us that women also experienced doubt and criticism about their fitness to work on national security and defense — and yet they persevered.

At present Ukraine is a bulwark for democracy. That means that what happens in Ukraine will matter geopolitically — indeed, failure could mean further erosion of democracy or even the emergence of a new world order guided by an autocratic view of leadership that normalizes domination and exploitation. Petr Kratochvíl, from the Centre for European Politics, and Míla O’Sullivan, from the Institute of International Relations Prague highlight this reality in the excerpt below from their article titled, “A war like no other: Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as a war on gender order”:

⁵³ There is “strong and consistent evidence that promoting gender equality leads to greater subjective well-being for men (and women) and that policies promoting gender equality generally improve the quality of life for everyone, not just direct beneficiaries of the policies (women). Audette, A.P., Lam, S., O’Connor, H. et al. “(E)Quality of Life: A Cross-National Analysis of the Effect of Gender Equality on Life Satisfaction,” *J Happiness Stud* 20, (2019) 2173–2188; This includes household work and childcare, a stereotypical “woman’s job”. Research shows that equally sharing routine housework is associated with less dissatisfaction than all other sharing arrangements. Barstad, A., Equality Is Bliss? Relationship Quality and the Gender Division of Household Labor,” *Journal of Family Issues*, 35, No 7 (2014), 972–992; and relationship quality which has important consequences for individual well-being including mental health, life satisfaction, physical health and mortality. See, Proulx C. M., Helms H. M., Buehler C., “Marital quality and personal well-being: A meta-analysis,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69, (2007), 576-593; Choi H., Marks N. F., “Marital conflict, depressive symptoms, functional impairment,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 70, (2008), 377-390; Fincham F. D., Beach S. R. H., “Marriage in the new millennium: A decade in review,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72, (2010), 630-649; and Rohrbaugh M. J., Shoham V., Coyne J. C., “Effect of marital quality on eight-year survival of patients with heart failure,” *American Journal of Cardiology*, 98, (2006), 1069-1072.

Russia's illiberal gender order which has produced the war on Ukraine is also a warning signal for the EU's security. The war represents a critical juncture for the role gender plays in European security and therefore also a new opportunity for moving European security to a comprehensive feminist [gender equality] security trajectory. The biggest security crisis in Europe since the Second World War is not a purely military conflict. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a continuation of the discursive and political struggle with Ukraine and Europe which was carefully built-up during Putin's rule. Already prior to February 2022, Russia's re-masculinisation grounded in Orthodox fundamentalism, homophobia and its neo-traditionalist ideology effectively contributed to sustaining public support for the aggression against Ukraine (Romanets 2017). It is this hypermasculine construction that enabled the invasion. [...] A recent report on antigender [equality] funding in Europe shows that Russia accounted for 26.6% of the total spending [...] (Datta 2021, 12). Russian anti-gender [equality] funding in Europe comes from entities linked to Russian oligarchs, dark-money laundromats and state-funded agencies and aims at supporting anti-EU, anti-liberal and anti-human rights actors and agendas (Datta 2021, 27). The Russian invasion of Ukraine is thus a dark reminder of the fact that the transnational anti-gender [equality] mobilisation must be considered a key factor affecting the EU's security. This requires strengthening democracies' resilience by confronting anti-feminist [gender equality] movements as part of strengthening the EU's security.⁵⁴

Moreover, as presented previously, gender equality is linked to less war and conflict, more stability and better outcomes in livelihood, education and health. By extension, we can imagine that societies with more robust gender equality are also those societies with the resilience needed to mitigate against hybrid warfare and the weaponization of equality, fairness and inclusion.⁵⁵

It is also worth highlighting that parliaments, just like society, are evolving, adapting, developing and indeed progressing — if they choose to. **This means that the Verkhovna Rada, as a centrepiece of democratic governance, has an important responsibility to lead efforts large and small to strengthen and advance democracy — including equality, fairness and inclusion.** The fact that doubt or resistance are sometimes reflected by constituents should not be taken a signal to simply stop working toward democracy, including gender equality and LGBTQ rights. Rather, doubt and resistance reflect a demand for thoughtful and open communication, discussion and debate informed by local realities as well as reliable research. The fact that people have concerns and worries in relation to socio-cultural and economic change is normal — and should be seen as such. This sentiment was eloquently made in one of the interviews with a woman in the Verkhovna Rada:

⁵⁴ Kratochvíl and O'Sullivan, "A war like no other: Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a war on gender order," *European Security*, 361.

⁵⁵ Freedman et al, "Identity, stability, Hybrid Threats and Disinformation," *Icono 14: Comunicación y tecnologías emergentes*, 38-69.



[Ukraine] bears the imprint of the Soviet era, because we have not changed significantly and no powerful liberal arts school have been created [...] [the] liberal arts [research and knowledge deficit] is very big problem for us. This directly affects how society thinks about social and political aspects of life. And, of course, about democracy [...]. We have a big problem with this. This lack of an elementary basic understanding [of democracy] leads to a very distorted image of both MPs and parliament as a whole. This threatens the stability of the state as a result.

In conclusion, **mitigating and building resilience against anti-democratic, and more specifically, anti-gender equality narratives is a key component of defending Ukraine, defending Western Europe and defending democracy.** This includes the courageous leadership of the men and women within the Verkhovna Rada, among others — and their willingness to openly advocate for and support equality, fairness and inclusion alongside efforts to foster understanding and awareness of the benefits of gender equality through discussion, debate and open-democratic communication.