
Law, War, and Gender-Based Violence: Addressing Sexual Harassment in the Ukrainian Armed Forces Amidst Ongoing Hostilities

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ABSTRACT

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has reshaped the gender dynamics in Ukrainian society, accelerating women's integration into the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) and intensifying debates over discrimination in the military. By early 2025, more than 70,000 women were serving in the AFU, including thousands on the front line, which reflected both urgent wartime mobilisation needs and the longer-term advocacy efforts preceding the invasion. While the expanded enlistment has challenged entrenched gender roles and formal barriers to service, it has also exposed persistent shortcomings in institutional culture and legal mechanisms for addressing sexual harassment. This article examines how the war has magnified these tensions while generating momentum for reform. Drawing on an analysis of legislation, policy initiatives, and interviews with gender advisors, it explores proposed changes to military disciplinary rules, the role of the gender advisory network, and responses to internal military violence, highlighting prospects for a longer-term transformation of gender hierarchies in post-war Ukraine.

KEYWORDS

women in the military, sexual harassment, gender advisors, AFU, Ukraine

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INTRODUCTION

Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine, besides causing immediate effects such as casualties, destruction, and displacement, has significantly changed the gender dynamics within Ukrainian society (PHILLIPS & MARTSENYUK, 2023; STRELNYK, 2024; TRISKO DARDEN, 2023). The war has reshaped women's roles in both military and civilian sectors, creating new forms of agency with potential implications that may extend into the post-war period and contribute to a broader societal transformation, as evidenced by experiences in other national contexts (AROSTEGUI, 2013; BERRY, 2018; BRANNON, 2023; TRIPP, 2015; WOOD, 2008; YADAV, 2021). In the absence of conscription requirements for women, many have voluntarily joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU). By January 2025, the AFU totalled approximately 880,000 personnel, with over 70,000 women, including around 5,500 on the front lines.¹

These numbers show a 20 percent increase since 2022, highlighting both the extent of women's participation and its rapid growth during the war.² However, the expansion of women's roles in the AFU has been shaped not only by the immediate national security threat but also by a longer-term process of contestation.

Advocacy efforts and research, including the Invisible Battalion campaign launched in 2015, helped advance positive changes within the security and defence sector and shaped public perceptions of women in the military (INVISIBLE BATTALION, N.D.; MARTSENYUK ET AL., 2016). Coupled with ongoing mobilisation and increasing (wo)manpower demands, these initiatives gradually created momentum for institutional reform. This led the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine to revise regulations on combat positions and, in 2018, implement legislative reforms that guaranteed equal service opportunities for men and women.³ A set of further regulatory updates, finalised in 2022, removed the remaining formal restrictions and established parity in military service.⁴ Moreover, the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the "Istanbul Convention") during the first year of the full-scale invasion (VERKHOVNA RADA OF UKRAINE, 2022) indicated that, despite the demands of wartime governance, addressing gender-based violence remained firmly on the legislative agenda.

The heightened visibility of the AFU during wartime has brought public attention not only to narratives of heroism and the shared cause of protecting the nation by both women and men but also to instances of discrimination and sexual harassment,⁵ as well as the inadequacy of the existing legal mechanisms available to female soldiers seeking justice (SKIBICKA, 2022; SOKOLOVA-STEKH, 2023). One account poignantly described women in uniform as “fighting two enemies at once – Russia, obviously, and the stereotypes and stigma faced every single day” (BOFFEY, 2023). As pre-full-scale invasion research by the Invisible Battalion astutely pointed out, “Wider enrollment of women in the military challenged the cult of hegemonic masculinity. Nevertheless, it is difficult to argue about the effectiveness of such changes in combating sexual harassment. As the number of women in the security and defence sector increases, so does the number and risk of sexual harassment [cases]” (HRYTSENKO ET AL., 2021, P. 15).

The growing willingness of Ukrainian servicewomen to speak publicly about sexual harassment since the full-scale invasion may have signalled a gradual shift in institutional culture, which contrasts with the silence that marked the war’s initial stages.⁶ However, existing procedures remain poorly equipped to handle such cases (HRYTSENKO ET AL., 2021), and most such incidents continue to be reported through civil society hotlines rather than the mechanisms established by the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine (NAKO, 2023). The fact that many Ukrainian women are risking their lives defending their country – while simultaneously facing risks of institutional violence – stands in stark contrast to dominant gender norms and the early depictions during the full-scale invasion that cast women primarily as civilian victims and men as defenders and combatants (UN WOMEN & CARE INTERNATIONAL, 2022). Women’s presence on the front lines and the resulting push to address sexual harassment may reflect not only the militarisation of their lives but also the broader societal transformations prompted by the conflict (PHILLIPS & MARTSENYUK, 2023). By situating sexual harassment within the broader reconfiguration of gender roles during the war, this article aims to analyse whether these developments signal a deeper transformation of institutional culture and societal gender hierarchies, and how emerging legal and institutional mechanisms seek to address discrimination and gender-based violence within the AFU.

Since the adoption of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda through a series of United Nations Security Council resolutions, the roles

of women in war and peace contexts have received growing scholarly and policy attention worldwide (O'SULLIVAN, 2019; OTTO, 2010; SHEPHERD, 2016; SINGH, 2017). Within this framework, women are no longer viewed solely as victims of armed conflict but increasingly recognised as political and social actors whose experiences of war, while often marked by heightened vulnerability, can also generate new forms of agency (DUNCANSON & WOODWARD, 2016; KIRBY & SHEPHERD, 2024).

At the same time, feminist scholarship cautions that such recognition of women's agency unfolds within institutions historically structured by patriarchal power relations. The military, in particular, has long been identified as one of the state's most powerful sites for reproducing gender hierarchies and subordinating women (ENLOE, 1983; MACKENZIE, 2015). Defence and security institutions have traditionally been male-dominated, with the masculinisation of armed forces sustained not only through men's numerical dominance but also through organisational structures, practices, and symbols rooted in masculine norms (COCKBURN, 2001). Through processes of socialisation, discipline, and control, military institutions function as sites for the production and reinforcement of masculine identities (CONNELL & MESSERSCHMIDT, 2005). Traits culturally associated with masculinity, such as strength, toughness, and courage, are privileged, while those traditionally coded as feminine, including emotionality and care, are often devalued (CARREIRAS, 2017). These dynamics contribute to the maintenance of a hypermasculine institutional ideal that marginalises individuals who do not conform to dominant gender norms, most often women and minority personnel (COHN, 1997; ENLOE, 1983; CONNELL & MESSERSCHMIDT, 2005). Within this context, militarised masculinity has emerged as a particular hegemonic form closely associated with combat, aggression, authority, and the normalisation of violence (BELKIN, 2012; BASHAM, 2013). Such norms reinforce hierarchical relations not only between men and women but also among men themselves, privileging those who embody dominant martial ideals (CONNELL & MESSERSCHMIDT, 2005; KRONSELL, 2005).

The persistence of these gendered hierarchies has significant consequences for organisational cultures within armed forces. Research shows that masculinised, male-dominated occupations, including the military, tend to exhibit higher rates of sexual violence compared with civilian settings (STANDER & THOMSEN, 2016). Although policy reforms in many countries have formally expanded opportunities for women and minority groups

to serve in the military openly, sexual harassment and discrimination remain pervasive within military institutions (BONNES, 2019; WADHAM & CONNOR, 2023; NAKO, 2023).

The modern nation-state is built upon the sacrifices of those who fight on its behalf, with the military embodying the state's monopoly on legitimate violence and placing the use of force at the centre of the political order (MARVIN & INGLE, 1999; SASSON-LEVY, 2017). Because soldiers are expected to risk and often sacrifice their lives for the nation, they frequently occupy a privileged moral position within society. Acts associated with military violence are therefore often legitimised or tolerated as necessary components of the state's defence. However, violence within military institutions is not directed solely outward towards external enemies; it also operates internally as a mechanism of discipline and hierarchy (SASSON-LEVY, 2008). Within this structure, combatants are idealised as embodiments of loyalty, courage, and sacrifice, serving as key reference points for both military and national identity. Non-combatants, in turn, position themselves in relation to this idealised warrior figure, whose glorification reinforces the association between combat service and the highest form of civic duty (SASSON-LEVY, 2002; DUNCANSON, 2013). When a nation's political goals rely on military superiority, its ideals of masculinity become even more militarised, motivating men to enlist, and conversely, militarised values reinforce the centrality of the armed forces (GOLDSTEIN, 2001). Servicewomen's encounters with militarised masculinity show that while militarism is celebrated for patriotism, sacrifice, and defending the nation, it may simultaneously draw attention away from internal harms such as harassment or hazing. Official stories tend to minimise these abuses, emphasising discipline and loyalty while avoiding systemic accountability. In this way, the military reproduces itself not only through its defensive role but also through cultural ideas that normalise violence and reinforce masculine authority (STACHOWITSCH, 2012). Another effect of militarisation is the strengthening of political and military elites, which in some contexts enables the military to assume ruling power. National security rhetoric, combined with secrecy and censorship laws, further restricts freedoms of speech and movement, including those necessary for addressing discrimination and gender-based violence. As a result, militarised societies often become less democratic (COCKBURN, 2001).

Official narratives of sexual harassment shape how such practices are understood but often rely on denial or the displacement of responsibility. Such narratives commonly invoke a “zero-tolerance” rhetoric or attribute sexual harassment to a few isolated offenders (MACKENZIE, GUNAYDIN & CHAUDHURI, 2020). In doing so, they diffuse accountability, transforming violence into a collective concern without individual responsibility, while reinforcing the bonds of military fraternity (WADHAM, 2017).

Despite the scarcity of systematic global research on military institutional abuse, Western armed forces have increasingly faced internal reviews and organisational inquiries into sexual harassment since the late 1990s (ARBOUR, 2022; CALKINS ET AL., 2021; MINISTRY OF DEFENCE, 2019). The engagement of defence institutions with issues of diversity and discrimination must also be understood within the broader context of the past five decades, during which shifting social and political conditions, such as increased women’s representation in the public sector, evolving civil-military relations, and technological advancements, have shaped institutional priorities and practices (ENLOE, 2007; KING, 2013). Nevertheless, the denigration of women and sexual minorities remains deeply embedded in military culture, with relevant reforms typically arising only in the wake of a scandal, an investigation, and public pressure (WADHAM & CONNOR, 2023).

Given their long-standing reputation as resistant institutional terrains, militaries are particularly challenging environments for examining progress towards gender justice. For feminist scholars, state armed forces often serve as a barometer of women’s broader social and economic status (KENNEDY-PIPE, 2017). In this context, addressing gender-based violence within military structures provides a critical lens through which to examine gender dynamics and assess both the limits and possibilities of not only institutional but also societal transformation. This concern is underscored by the frequently cited observation that women in uniform may face a greater risk of sexual violence from fellow service members than from enemy forces (HILLMAN, 2009; WADHAM, 2017).

The question of how militaries respond to organisational violence during ongoing hostilities therefore offers a further valuable vantage point for examining what Wadham (2017, p. 241) describes as the “liberal potential of authoritarian institutions in liberal democracies.” Concurrently, wartime conditions may further complicate efforts to address such issues. Media

coverage of sexual harassment within the security sector during a full-scale war may remain limited due to concerns that a public discussion of its internal abuses could damage the military's reputation or undermine morale (NAKO, 2023, P. 64).

These tensions are not unique to Ukraine. Internal violence within militaries worldwide remains a persistent problem. A recent UN report on women in defence highlights that efforts to address sexual harassment and abuse within armed forces have achieved only limited success:

Despite efforts to address sexualized misconduct and abuse within armed forces, this remains a pervasive problem. Many countries have strengthened complaint and accountability mechanisms, but these are only effective when combined with enforcement measures and efforts to transform institutional culture. Given that harassment and discrimination undermine the welfare of women in the military and perpetuate a culture of impunity, more effective preventive measures and robust enforcement are unequivocally necessary (UNITED NATIONS, 2024, P. 15).

One institutional response to the persistent problems of discrimination and gender-based violence within military institutions has emerged through the implementation of the WPS agenda by NATO member states and partners. Since 2007, NATO has progressively developed mechanisms to operationalise the UN Security Council Resolutions on WPS, placing gender advisors and gender focal points at the centre of these efforts (BASTICK & DUNCANSON, 2018; GORDON & LEE-KOO, 2025; MORRISON, 2023). Within this framework, gender advisory networks are tasked with integrating gender perspectives into military planning, organisational policy, and operational practice. Their responsibilities may include advising commanders on gender-responsive decision-making, supporting the recruitment, retention, and advancement of women, and strengthening institutional mechanisms to prevent and address discrimination and sexual harassment.

In this sense, gender advisors and focal points function not merely as technical specialists but as actors embedded in broader processes of institutional reform. As Shepherd (2021) argues, the WPS agenda carries an expectation of a deeper structural transformation rather than symbolic inclusion alone. Gender advisors are therefore positioned to translate these normative commitments into everyday institutional practices. Their role has attracted increasing scholarly attention, particularly regarding their

potential to challenge entrenched norms within armed forces, including militarised masculinities and hierarchical gender orders (LEE-KOO ET AL., 2022). At the same time, research indicates that the transformative potential of gender advisory networks is often constrained by the very institutional environments in which they operate (GORDON & LEE-KOO, 2025). Militarised workplace cultures, limited institutional resources, unclear career pathways, insufficient training, and inconsistent leadership support can significantly restrict their effectiveness. Consequently, despite the presence of formal policy frameworks and official commitments to the WPS agenda, the work of gender advisors is frequently slowed, marginalised, or diluted in practice.

Situating gender advisors and focal points within this broader institutional context is essential for understanding their role in Ukraine's defence sector. As they are tasked with advancing gender-responsive reforms within historically masculinised and hierarchical military structures, their capacity to influence change may depend not only on legal mandates but also on organisational receptivity, political will, and the broader institutional momentum for reform. Against this backdrop, this article examines the factors driving legal amendments addressing sexual harassment in the Ukrainian military during the fourth year of Russia's full-scale invasion. It focuses on proposed revisions to the military disciplinary framework aimed at tackling discrimination and gender-based violence, as well as the emerging role of the gender advisory network introduced through recent legislative initiatives. The article concludes by considering the broader implications of these developments for gender dynamics within the armed forces and the evolving gender order in post-war Ukrainian society.

Methodologically, this research combines an analysis of legal and regulatory frameworks, policy initiatives, media sources, and survey data with qualitative evidence. The empirical component is based on nine semi-structured, in-depth online interviews with gender advisors and gender focal points.⁷ The interviews were conducted anonymously to ensure confidentiality and to encourage candid reflections on sensitive institutional dynamics. The participants were recruited through snowball sampling, whereby each interviewee suggested subsequent potential participants with relevant expertise and professional experience.

The interviews were analysed using an interpretive thematic approach that identified recurring patterns concerning gender dynamics

within the AFU, institutional responses to discrimination and sexual harassment, and the shifting role of gender advisors and focal points. Through an iterative close reading and a comparison of the transcripts, the themes were developed in dialogue with the article's broader analytical framework, enabling the empirical findings to inform the assessment of both institutional practices and potential legislative changes to the disciplinary statutes.

The research is further informed by the author's insider-outsider positionality. Having worked with military institutions since the onset of the full-scale invasion, the author possesses a contextual familiarity with and a professional access to them that facilitated trust-building and recruitment. At the same time, the author not being a service member and not occupying a formal position within the gender advisory structures of the AFU allowed for an analytical distance and reflexivity in interpreting the participants' accounts. This dual positioning shaped both the access to the field and the interpretation of the findings.

The article aims to contribute to the scholarship on women's integration into the military through a critical feminist lens by examining the case of addressing discrimination and sexual harassment within the AFU. It should be noted that this research focuses on internal military violence – acts committed by personnel against their fellow service members – while not covering certain forms of gender-based violence, such as conflict-related sexual violence.

While feminist scholarship emphasises that any empowerment gained through women's participation in the military is inherently fragile and shaped by complex power dynamics (COCKBURN, 2001; DUNCANSON, 2017; ENLOE, 2000; SEAGER, 1999), this work does not assume that military service constitutes the primary or sole pathway to empowerment or changes in the gender order. Instead, it emphasises the importance of viewing women's experiences of military service as potential sites of transformation, where traditional gender binaries may be challenged.

The article is organised as follows. It begins by framing women's enlistment in the AFU as both a response to national security threats and a catalyst for legal reforms, examining current mechanisms for addressing discrimination and gender-based violence along with their shortcomings.

The next section focuses on the proposed amendments to the Disciplinary Statute and the Internal Service Statute of the AFU, highlighting their potential benefits and limitations. This is followed by an analysis of the gender advisory network established within Ukraine's defence sector in line with NATO policies that assesses its current role and future prospects in addressing sexual harassment. The article concludes by reflecting on the broader implications of women's wartime integration into the military and their potential impact on the post-war gender order in Ukrainian society, while calling for further scholarly engagement with these issues once the reforms addressing gender-based violence in the military are fully implemented and their effects can be evaluated.

WOMEN IN THE AFU AND THE DRIVE FOR REFORM

As Segal (¹⁹⁹⁵) observed three decades ago, women's contributions to the military are often remembered selectively. During crises, their prior service is highlighted to justify their effectiveness in various roles. Yet, once the conflict subsides, a form of "cultural amnesia" emerges, with the women's participation minimised or erased entirely – until "a new emergency arises, [and] history is rediscovered" (^{IBID, P. 761}). This framework underscores the interplay between military needs, societal structures, and cultural norms: while the latter two often constrain women's participation, acute security threats can temporarily overcome these barriers. The Ukrainian case exemplifies this dynamic, as the existential threat posed by the Russian aggression that started in 2014 has both expanded and legitimised women's roles in the armed forces, even as gendered hierarchies within the military and society remain entrenched.

Motivations for women to join the AFU may be diverse and, at times, deeply personal (^{MIERIEMOVA, 2025}). For some, their enlistment is driven by a sense of civic duty or a desire to defend their country (^{BARKHUSH & OLLEY, 2025}), while for others it stems from a significant personal loss. The death of a husband, father, or son at the front often becomes a pivotal moment that converts grief into a commitment.⁸ While enlistment motivations differ, women's collective participation in the armed forces during the war has had a transformative impact. Voluntary enlistment not only heightened societal demands for their full integration but also revealed divisions between those with prior military experience and those entering the AFU from civilian life.⁹ Their greater representation in the AFU simultaneously

increased women's exposure to discrimination and gender-based violence, which showed that military service can pose a direct threat to servicewomen's safety. Furthermore, at the level of smaller units below the General Staff, non-normative forms of masculinity become more prevalent.¹⁰

Research presented in 2021 by the Invisible Battalion initiative identified sexual harassment as a persistent and systemic problem within the Ukrainian military (HRYTSENKO ET AL., 2021). The data on the prevalence of sexual harassment in the military at the time remained extremely limited, with publicly accessible statistics both scarce and inconsistent. The reporting was further hindered by the absence of anonymity and confidentiality, which could place victims at risk of negative consequences for their careers, reputation, status, and/or personal safety. The study connected such behaviour to broader structural and cultural factors, including deep-rooted misogyny, toxic masculinity, gender discrimination, and remnants of Soviet-era professional norms. It also noted that sexual harassment was often accompanied by related forms of misconduct such as abuse, homophobia, transphobia, and violence among servicemen. While emphasising that such issues are not unique to Ukraine and exist in armed forces worldwide, the research highlighted the lack of effective institutional mechanisms for addressing sexual harassment, noting that the complaint system within the AFU remains "fully controlled by the internal military hierarchy" (IBID., P. 22). As one of the interviewed gender focal points aptly observed, "If women are familiar with military culture, they are used to this hierarchy."¹¹

The enactment of martial law and mobilisation increased the total personnel of the AFU from 246,000 to approximately 700,000 during the first two years of the conflict (SLOVO I DILO, 2025), while the full-scale invasion also led to a 40% rise in the representation of women (Suspilne News, 2023). The influx of individuals from the civilian sector with no military background, alongside the greater visibility of female service members, has brought issues of discrimination and sexual harassment to the forefront. The invasion thus acted as a catalyst for change, challenging the traditionally rigid defence institution.¹² "Military culture began to develop from scratch,"¹³ under close societal observation, with incidents of discrimination and sexual harassment exposed and brought into the public spotlight (BOFFEY, 2023; SKIBICKA, 2022; SOKOLOVA-STEKH, 2023). At the same time, scholars caution that a wartime recognition of women's contributions

may prove temporary: although the public approval of and respect for both male and female combatants are currently high, such attitudes may shift once the hostilities end (KHROMEYCHUK, 2018; MARTSENYUK ET AL., 2019).

Soon after the full-scale invasion, however, the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence's leadership remained largely inactive on the highlighted issue of gender-based violence. The only response came from a then Deputy Minister of Defence, who publicly appealed to women experiencing harassment to write directly to her, promising she would "contact the police and bring them by the hand to investigate it" (50 VIDCOTKIV, 2023). This personal call, however, underscored rather than resolved the absence of mechanisms to address sexual harassment in the military.

Gender-based violence in the AFU remains a form of "latent criminality,"¹⁴ with its true scale difficult to determine due to a combination of several factors, including survivors' reluctance to report incidents and the complexities of identification and information-gathering processes. According to NAKO's 2023 monitoring of recommendations and research results from the Invisible Battalion cycle, the Ministry of Defence reported¹⁵ that between 2018 and 2022, there were no recorded appeals regarding sexual harassment or gender-based violence in the Ukrainian Armed Forces to the Ministry of Defence hotlines (NAKO, 2023, P. 51). Simultaneously, in 2022, the civil society organisation "La Strada – Ukraine," operating the National Hotline for the Prevention of Domestic Violence, Trafficking in Persons, and Gender Discrimination, received two appeals concerning sexual violence in the context of military service: one reported the rape of a servicewoman, and the other involved sexual harassment by a commander (IBID., P. 52). The hotline of the civil society organisation Legal Hundred reportedly received 136 appeals related to non-statutory relationships, with 85 from men and 51 from women in 2022 (IBID., P. 53). Most of these cases involved issues with the command, including complaints about leadership actions, bodily harm, and threats. Significantly, only one appeal, submitted by a woman, concerned sexual harassment. By July 2023, the Ukrainian Women Lawyers Association "JurFem" had received ten appeals from servicewomen regarding sexual harassment during their military service (IBID., P. 51).

These data suggest that affected servicewomen are more likely to seek support from public organisations than to report incidents within

their work environment. Many female service members hesitate to report such cases to their commanders or to law enforcement due to concerns about potential negative consequences within their units, as the resulting internal investigations, often overseen by the commanders themselves, are frequently perceived as biased, and as protecting perpetrators and reinforcing informal norms of “male solidarity” (IBID., P. 52).

In its recommendations, the Invisible Battalion’s research on sexual harassment in the AFU suggested limiting commanders’ involvement in the handling of sexual harassment cases to ensure maximum impartiality (HRYTSENKO ET AL., 2021, P. 26). However, to this day, the commander remains the “key figure in the functioning of the military unit”¹⁶ and retains full control over sexual harassment cases – a situation that cannot guarantee impartial consideration. The identification of discrimination and gender-based violence within existing mechanisms may also be limited due to several factors, including commanders’ reluctance to disclose information about incidents, internal silencing within units, and a general lack of awareness among commanders and personnel regarding what acts constitute sexual harassment.¹⁷ It should be noted that victims of sexual harassment include not only women but also men and members of the LGBTQIA+ community – an issue often misunderstood by commanders, who tend to frame sexual harassment solely as a “women’s problem.”¹⁸

Reflecting the urgency of the issue, a petition was registered on the official website of the President of Ukraine, demanding the implementation of the mechanism to combat sexual harassment and gender-based violence in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and an end to the impunity of perpetrators (PETITION TO THE PRESIDENT OF UKRAINE, 2024). The petition successfully gathered more than 25,000 signatures, and at the beginning of 2025, a draft law was registered in the Ukrainian Parliament to introduce amendments to the Disciplinary Statute and the Internal Service Statute of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. It was aimed at improving mechanisms for maintaining military discipline and preventing discrimination and sexual harassment (VERKHOVNA RADA OF UKRAINE, 2025A).

“STATUTES DEFINE DRESS, HYGIENE, AND SLEEPING, BUT NOT WHAT SEXUAL HARASSMENT IS”¹⁹

Improving regulations on individual conduct and corporate ethics – particularly regarding sexism, sexual harassment, psychological and sexual violence, and discrimination in recruitment, service, and decision-making – was identified as a 2023 task for the Ministry of Defence and the AFU under the National Action Plan on the Implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (CABINET OF MINISTERS OF UKRAINE, 2020). In line with this commitment and following pressure from civil society that culminated in a petition, bill #13037 proposed amendments to the military disciplinary framework (VERKHOVNA RADA OF UKRAINE, 2025A). The bill was subsequently adopted by Parliament, which thereby enacted the amendments, and entered into force in March 2026 (VERKHOVNA RADA OF UKRAINE, 2026). The revisions to the articles of the Disciplinary Statute and the Internal Service Statute of the AFU have broadened the definition of military discipline to encompass compliance with gender equality legislation, as well as the prevention of and response to discrimination, gender-based violence, sexual harassment, and violations of sexual freedom and sexual inviolability.²⁰ While the new version of Article 4 of the Disciplinary Statute does not specify which acts constitute each category, the amendments indicate that such “improper conduct” may be expressed verbally or non-verbally (e.g., through words, gestures, body movements, etc.). The law further provides protections for whistleblowers, ensuring that those who report such incidents cannot face disciplinary measures or dismissal, and broadens reporting channels to commanders, military authorities, law enforcement, and other state institutions.²¹ Additionally, it mandates that a service investigation may be initiated either independently by the commander or upon referral from the unit responsible for ensuring gender equality or a gender advisor/gender focal point,²² with a provision for the latter to participate in the investigation.²³ The explanatory note accompanying the law linked it to international commitments, referencing the 2024 Washington Summit Declaration, which introduced NATO’s updated WPS Policy aimed at mainstreaming gender across all activities and structures. The law is also framed as compatible with NATO standards on gender equality and with UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (VERKHOVNA RADA OF UKRAINE, 2025A).

Before the law introduced amendments to the disciplinary framework, AFU servicemembers affected by sexual harassment in the military

had two primary options for reporting incidents of sexual harassment: they could report them to their commanders, who could themselves be implicated as perpetrators, or to law enforcement authorities.²⁴ A further channel was the Ministry of Defence hotline, but it ultimately rerouted complaints back into the chain of command (HRYTSENKO ET AL., 2021, P. 21). Even when reports were submitted, the cases often fell apart due to a lack of witnesses or physical evidence (NAKO, 2023, P. 59). By contrast, a central principle of anti-gender-based violence reforms in many Western militaries has been the removal of crime reporting and case management from the chain of command to ensure independent oversight.²⁵ In Ukraine, an alternative civilian pathway for addressing sexual harassment cases outside the military chain of command may soon be realised under the recently approved Law “On the Military Ombudsperson”²⁶ (VERKHOVNA RADA OF UKRAINE, 2025B).

The newly adopted law retains commanders’ involvement in the reporting and investigation process, which is consistent with the existing military disciplinary framework, but raises concerns that the new provisions could perpetuate systemic barriers. However, the inclusion of a gender advisor or focal point within the response mechanism offers a measure of optimism to most of the respondents of this research, as it may open new opportunities for identifying and investigating cases of discrimination and sexual harassment in the military, though not without acknowledging the challenges that remain to be overcome.

THE GENDER ADVISORY NETWORK IN THE UKRAINIAN DEFENCE SECTOR

In line with Ukraine’s NATO aspirations, the process of establishing gender advisory roles in its defence sector started in 2018, when a then Deputy Minister of Defence appointed gender focal points within the Ministry of Defence, subordinate military administrative bodies, and higher military education institutions (ALINEA INTERNATIONAL, 2023). At that time, Ukraine’s participation in NATO’s Partnership for Peace Planning and Review Process included the objective of building such a network, which was also outlined in the country’s first National Action Plan for implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (SUSLOVA & ROOS, 2018). In 2020, full-time gender advisory positions were established within the AFU commands, and from 2021 onward, commanders have been appointing gender focal points in military units (ALINEA INTERNATIONAL, 2023; 50 VIDCOTKIV, 2024).

In March 2025, Ukraine's General Staff introduced the position of Gender Advisor to improve coordination between the Ministry of Defence and the different branches of the military (GENERAL STAFF OF THE ARMED FORCES OF UKRAINE, 2025). According to the current appointed Advisor, the Armed Forces currently have seven full-time gender advisors appointed in the AFU commands and 766 gender focal points, whose role is described as that of "a mediator who communicates with everyone to help an individual resolve their problem" (ZMINA HUMAN RIGHTS CENTRE, 2025). This description bears resemblance to the Model Regulation on Gender Advisors, approved by Ukraine's Government, which defines their main duties as providing consultations and offering recommendations to the leadership on implementing state policy on equal rights and opportunities for women and men, as well as preventing gender-based violence and discrimination (CABINET OF MINISTERS OF UKRAINE, 2020).

Yet, even as the legislation and intention seem to converge, important gaps remain. As the Gender Advisor of the AFU General Staff acknowledged, "There is no state budget for training gender advisors/gender focal points, no institution that prepares them; all of this is informal education" (ZMINA HUMAN RIGHTS CENTRE, 2025). Additionally, unlike gender advisors, gender focal points are nominated personnel who perform their responsibilities on a voluntary, part-time basis alongside their primary professional duties, which raises concerns about their capacity to effectively handle cases of sexual harassment (ALINEA INTERNATIONAL, 2023). There are no clearly defined standards for the skills or competencies required of gender focal points, which results in many appointees lacking expertise in the assigned area.²⁷ At the same time, institutional knowledge is frequently lost during personnel rotations or transfers.²⁸

Initially established as a gesture towards NATO's gender mainstreaming policies (NATO, 2021), Ukraine's relatively new gender advisory structure within the defence sector continues to face significant growing pains. There is hope that the legal amendments to the disciplinary framework will drive meaningful change by introducing full-time gender advisor positions in military units, as these gender advisors would replace the focal points who currently shoulder these responsibilities.²⁹ Some respondents also emphasised that the authority of gender focal points largely depends on their personal qualities. In contrast, a formal recognition of their role in investigations of discrimination and sexual harassment could strengthen

their standing in the eyes of commanders.³⁰ Realising this potential, however, will require adequate funding, the establishment of clear competency standards, and the institutionalisation of training. As one respondent noted, “Gender advisors are extinguishing fires when what is needed is gradual and sustainable prevention.”³¹

While most of the interviewees supported the institutionalisation of full-time gender advisors as a step towards progress, they also acknowledged that discrimination and gender-based violence cannot be addressed through structural reform alone. As one interviewee noted, “Personnel have to be taught first, not pressured by means of the law.”³² Ukrainian wartime policy indicates that enshrining gender equality in law is not a panacea for deep-seated inequality (Trisko Darden, 2023). This is particularly evident when extraordinary circumstances, such as war, bolster patriarchal institutions like national militaries. Military culture is gradually evolving, including in its approach to countering sexual harassment. Yet, this process remains incomplete and requires sustained capacity-building – not only within the gender advisory network but across the entire military hierarchy, from rank-and-file personnel to commanding officers.

CONCLUSIONS

The rapid expansion of women’s participation in the Armed Forces of Ukraine during Russia’s full-scale invasion has brought renewed attention to discrimination and sexual harassment within military institutions while simultaneously creating momentum for institutional reform. As the war accelerated women’s integration into the AFU, it also exposed long-standing structural problems embedded in the military culture, including the persistence of gender hierarchies, weak reporting mechanisms, and the limited institutional capacity to address gender-based violence.

The increased presence of women in the military has simultaneously expanded opportunities for their participation and heightened their exposure to discrimination and harassment. Evidence from civil society monitoring and interview data indicates that sexual harassment within the AFU remains largely underreported and continues to function as a form of “latent criminality” shaped by hierarchical command structures, concerns about career repercussions, and a lack of confidential reporting mechanisms. The persistence of these barriers reflects broader

structural issues identified by previous research, including the concentration of investigative authority within the chain of command and the absence of clear institutional procedures for handling complaints.

At the same time, wartime pressures and growing public scrutiny have generated momentum for institutional change. Legislative amendments to the Disciplinary Statute and the Internal Service Statute of the AFU represent an attempt to expand mechanisms for addressing discrimination and sexual harassment. Parallel institutional developments, including the potential evolving role of the gender advisory network and the establishment of the Military Ombudsperson, may suggest a promising framework for oversight and accountability. Yet, these reforms remain at an early stage, and their effectiveness will depend on implementation, institutional resources, and the willingness of the military leadership to address entrenched cultural norms. While the introduction of gender advisors and gender focal points has increased awareness of gender equality issues within the defence sector, their effectiveness remains constrained by limited institutional support, insufficient training, and the voluntary nature of many appointments. Without clear authority, stable funding, and systematic capacity-building, gender advisors risk functioning primarily as intermediaries or crisis responders rather than as agents capable of driving sustained institutional change.

The scale of Ukraine's armed forces also indicates that the war is no longer fought solely by a small professional corps but has become a collective social endeavour involving a large share of society. In this context, the way discrimination and sexual harassment are addressed within the security and defence sector may shape broader societal understandings of gender equality and accountability. Debates surrounding gender-based violence in the military are therefore increasingly intertwined with wider discussions about justice and gender relations in Ukrainian civilian life.

Against this backdrop, examining how the Ukrainian military responds to discrimination and sexual harassment provides an important lens through which to assess whether wartime institutional reforms may contribute to broader transformations in gender relations. Women serving in the AFU occupy a uniquely transgressive position within both the military and society more broadly. Their presence challenges long-standing

masculinist narratives of war and creates potential openings for renegotiating gender roles during Ukraine's post-war reconstruction.

At the same time, feminist scholarship cautions that any recognition of women's contributions during wartime may prove temporary. Although the public respect for both male and female combatants is currently high, historical experience suggests that such attitudes may shift once the hostilities end. Therefore, the growing number of women veterans is likely to make them an increasingly visible group in post-war Ukraine, yet existing veteran policies remain insufficiently developed to ensure that their voices, regardless of gender, are effectively incorporated into policymaking and public debate.³³

Overall, while the wartime expansion of women's participation and the emergence of new legal and institutional mechanisms may gradually reshape gender dynamics within the AFU, it remains too early to determine whether these developments will translate into deeper transformations of military culture and broader societal gender relations. Continued scholarly attention will therefore be necessary for evaluating the long-term effects of reforms addressing gender-based violence within the military and understanding how women's wartime integration into the armed forces may influence the evolving gender order in post-war Ukraine.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Ministry of Defence of Ukraine. (2025, March 8). Понад 5 500 жінок сьогодні служать на передовій – Сергій Мельник [Over 5,500 women are currently serving on the front line – Serhiy Melnyk]. <https://mod.gov.ua/news/ponad-5-500-zhinok-sogodni-sluzhat-na-peredovij-sergij-melnik>
- 2 Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, "Понад 5 500 жінок сьогодні служать на передовій."
- 3 According to the Law of Ukraine "On Amendments to Certain Laws of Ukraine Concerning the Provision of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men Throughout their Service in the Armed Forces of Ukraine and Other Military Formations," #2523-VIII, September 6, 2018.
- 4 According to the Order of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine "On Amendments to the Order of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine" #412/for official use only (DSK) dated June 20, 2012, #50, February 10, 2022.
- 5 In this article, "sexual harassment" is defined in accordance with the Law of Ukraine "On Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men" (2005, #2866-IV), which characterises it as actions of a sexual nature (that do not infringe upon a person's sexual freedom or sexual integrity) expressed verbally, nonverbally, or physically (including words, gestures, body movements, touching, patting, or similar conduct) that offend or humiliate a person's dignity and may create an intimidating, hostile, offensive, or degrading environment. The term is also used in line with the Law of Ukraine (2006, № 4797-IX) "On Amendments to the Disciplinary Statute of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the Internal Service Statute of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and the Disciplinary Statute of the Civil Protection Service regarding the improvement of mechanisms for ensuring military discipline and for preventing and combating discrimination and sexual harassment."
- 6 The Russian war against Ukraine began in 2014 with the illegal annexation of Crimea and the occupation of parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in eastern Ukraine. It escalated in February 2022, when Russia launched a full-scale invasion.
- 7 Unlike gender advisors appointed to the commands of various AFU branches, gender focal points are nominated personnel within military units who perform dual roles. They carry out gender mainstreaming functions on a part-time, voluntary basis alongside their primary professional duties.
- 8 Interview with Gender Advisor 3 of the Ukrainian defence sector, August 29, 2025.
- 9 Interview with Gender Focal Point 2 of the Ukrainian defence sector, August 21, 2025.
- 10 Interview with Gender Focal Point 2 of the Ukrainian defence sector, August 21, 2025.
- 11 Interview with Gender Focal Point 1 of the Ukrainian defence sector, August 21, 2025.
- 12 Interview with Gender Focal Point 5 of the Ukrainian defence sector, September 14, 2025.
- 13 Interview with Gender Focal Point 2 of the Ukrainian defence sector, August 21, 2025.
- 14 Interview with Gender Advisor 7 of the Ukrainian defence sector, September 16, 2025.
- 15 Upon a request for information dated January 16, 2023.
- 16 Interview with Gender Focal Point 7 of the Ukrainian defence sector, September 16, 2025.
- 17 Interview with Gender Focal Point 9 of the Ukrainian defence sector, September 20, 2025.
- 18 Interview with Gender Focal Point 9 of the Ukrainian defence sector, September 20, 2025.
- 19 Interview with Gender Focal Point 6 of the Ukrainian defence sector, September 15, 2025
- 20 Amendments to Article 4 of the Disciplinary Statute of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

- 21 Amendments to Article 87-2 of the Disciplinary Statute of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.
- 22 In Ukrainian, both roles are denoted by the same title – “радник з питань забезпечення рівних прав та можливостей жінок і чоловіків, запобігання та протидії насильству за ознакою статі.”
- 23 Amendments to Article 84 of the Disciplinary Statute of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.
- 24 Based on Article 110 of the Disciplinary Statute of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.
- 25 Interview with Gender Focal Point 2 of the Ukrainian defence sector, August 21, 2025.
- 26 Interview with Gender Advisor 8 of the Ukrainian defence sector, September 16, 2025.
- 27 Interview with Gender Advisor 3 of the Ukrainian defence sector, August 29, 2025.
- 28 Interview with Gender Advisor 4 of the Ukrainian defence sector, September 10, 2025.
- 29 Interview with Gender Advisor 3 of the Ukrainian defence sector, August 29, 2025.
- 30 Interview with Gender Focal Point 7 of the Ukrainian defence sector, September 16, 2025.
- 31 Interview with Gender Focal Point 2 of the Ukrainian defence sector, August 21, 2025.
- 32 Interview with Gender Focal Point 2 of the Ukrainian defence sector, August 21, 2025.
- 33 Interview with Gender Advisor 3 of the Ukrainian defence sector, August 29, 2025; Interview with Gender Focal Point 5 of the Ukrainian defence sector, September 14, 2025.

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