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Interview with Maryna Shevtsova: A Feminist Reading of the Russian War of Aggression in Ukraine

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Teresa Degenhardt: Your recent book is called *Feminist Perspectives on Russia's War in Ukraine*. Can you please explain why a feminist perspective is important in this context?

Maryna Shevtsova: The first reason, as much research confirms, is that in this war, as in all wars, women and other vulnerable groups, including queer people, Roma communities, and people with disabilities, are among those most severely affected. These are the same groups that already experienced structural inequalities in so-called peaceful times. Yet despite being disproportionately impacted, they are largely excluded from discussions about post-war recovery. And when I say *post*, the term should be placed in parentheses, since the full-scale invasion is ongoing. Nevertheless, recovery efforts are proceeding in parallel, as Russia continues to attack civilian targets and critical infrastructure that must be rebuilt or repaired as quickly as possible. Much of this reconstruction burden falls on the shoulders of women and other marginalised groups. Yet they remain excluded from decision-making processes. We see a striking absence of gender mainstreaming or even a basic gender lens in recovery policies, and the situation is worse for queer people. For instance, among the military administrations currently operating across Ukrainian regions, only two out of 23 are led by women. This systematic exclusion offers a clear and direct answer to why a feminist perspective is missing, and why it is so urgently needed.

The second reason lies on the discursive level. This war has been framed by the Kremlin, the Russian Orthodox Church, and their main supporters as a crusade to defend "traditional family values." As scholars such as Peter Kratochvil and Mila O'Sullivan have noted, this framing encompasses everything from the reinforcement of rigid gender roles and the restriction of reproductive rights to the intensification of reproductive pressure on women. It also fuels attacks on the LGBTQ+ community, as well as on feminists and queer activists, the groups that have long stood at the forefront of resistance to Putin's regime. This logic of "defending tradition" is typical of contexts where civic space is shrinking and authoritarian power seeks to delegitimise dissent. We see attacks against gender and sexual equality and queer rights in Europe and in the US which has turned from being the major ally to the main opponent of LGBTQ+ rights. This, of course, affects the situation of feminist and queer communities in Ukraine. This is why, again, a feminist perspective is needed.

Third, this war has also paradoxically created spaces for emancipation and visibility for women and queer people. On the one hand, Ukraine now has one of the highest numbers of women serving in the defence forces globally—more than 70,000 in various positions as of 2025. On the other hand, women are also highly active in civil society and the diaspora. Many of them were forced to flee the country, often with children, and have since become the most vocal and engaged actors abroad, partly because they take on an enormous amount of unpaid labour in sustaining these networks. This reminds us that women are not only victims or passive recipients of violence; they are also active agents of resistance and transformation. Their agency must be recognised, and their voices must be heard.

Finally, I would like to point out that when studying Central and Eastern Europe, and Ukraine in particular, there is a strong tendency to prioritise Western perspectives, especially within mainstream political science and international relations. Even within feminist scholarship, Western voices often dominate the discussion. This is something I have been reflecting on in conversations with colleagues from Central Eastern Europe and other feminist collectives. The title of our book, *Feminist Perspectives on Russia's War in Ukraine: Hear Our Voices*, captures this concern well. The call to "hear our voices" is not metaphorical—it is literal. It means: nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine.

This stance is crucial to challenge persistent inequalities over who gets to speak *for* Ukrainian women, *about* Ukrainian women, or even *instead of* them, when they are absent from international debates. It is also a way to confront the problem of academic extractivism, or the tendency to use local scholars, activists, and knowledge as raw material for building Western careers or theories, while excluding the grounded perspectives that emerge from Ukraine and the broader Central and Eastern European region. Too often, these contributions are overlooked simply because they are written in other languages or because they do not fit neatly within dominant Western frameworks. Acknowledging and engaging with these locally grounded knowledges is essential if we are to produce genuinely inclusive and decolonial feminist scholarship.

TD: So many important points! Can you please tell me how the attack by Russia on Ukrainian soil changed the life or the situation of women and LGBTQ+ people?

MS: These groups were already among the most vulnerable even before the full-scale invasion. From an intersectional perspective, it is important to distinguish between the experiences of women in smaller towns and rural areas, single mothers, carers of elderly people or persons with disabilities, and those with non-heteronormative sexualities. These are precisely the groups that have been most severely affected. The inequalities they faced were already exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which had not yet fully subsided when the invasion began. For many, the pandemic had devastating social and economic consequences that deepened existing vulnerabilities.

When the war started, women made up the vast majority of refugees, since men of military age were not permitted to leave the country. Many women fled with their children, elderly parents, or other relatives. Yet in Ukrainian public discourse and media, their situation is not always represented with sufficient nuance. Women are sometimes portrayed as the "lucky ones" who managed to escape the hardships of war. While it is true that they are not being bombed daily, much less attention is given to the profound difficulties of displacement—arriving in a country where one does not speak the language, facing economic precarity, or negotiating a fragile sense of belonging. Some discussions have also highlighted racialised dynamics in the reception of refugees: Ukrainian women, being perceived as "whiter," are often more readily accepted than refugees from the Middle East or North Africa.

However, remaining under-discussed are the persistent inequalities that shape these women's everyday lives abroad. In many host countries—such as Italy, Spain, or Poland—the largest share of support for newly arrived refugees is provided not by the state but by the Ukrainian diaspora. This burden once again falls primarily on Ukrainian women who are already living there, often working in low-paid and care-related sectors. Italy, for instance, has long been a major destination for Ukrainian labour migration, particularly in domestic and elderly care, while in Spain, many Ukrainian women work in hospitality and service industries. The arrival of new refugees means even more unpaid or underpaid work for these migrant women. It also creates conditions that heighten risks of human trafficking, psychological exhaustion, and depression. Many women have found themselves torn between two worlds—caring for others in the host country while worrying about family members and partners still in Ukraine, including those serving on the front lines.

But I would like to speak also about the emancipation of women. Women who have actively joined the military and continue doing so. Women who took on roles in local governance, you know, filling the places men had to leave. At the same time, Russia's attacks on a lot of infrastructure, the destruction of kindergartens, the destruction of hospitals, of the homes for elderly people, mean, again, that women have to fill those gaps too. Education in Ukraine is more than 80% feminised (the share reaches 98% in pre-school education) because this is an area which is largely underpaid.

The Ukrainian government often likes to boast about the resilience of its citizens, which is, of course, commendable and true. Yet much of this resilience is built on women's shoulders. Neither school nor higher education ever stopped: there were no interruptions in teaching, even during blackouts, without electricity, or in inadequate shelters. Lessons, lectures, exams, master's and bachelor's thesis defences—all of this continues thanks to the women working in education, who are largely underpaid. Now even those limited salaries are being cut. Hardly anyone, except perhaps a few NGOs, pays attention to the enormous burnout in this field. The fact that many positions have been eliminated means that people are now teaching 10 or 11 classes per week, often without stable electricity or heating. This issue has not been properly addressed. Neither education nor the care sector are priorities for the Ukrainian government at the moment.

The military is not really adjusted for women. Just last year they started designing proper uniforms tailored for women, even though women have been active in the military since 2014. There is still no law or policy to prevent sexual harassment and gender-based violence in the military. But for some reason, the Ministry of Defence does not want to adopt a policy. Anecdotally, a lot of women face very negative treatment when they go to recruitment centres, wanting to join the army. So on the one hand, we have the situation where men are basically caught on the street and forced to serve and join the army, while on the other hand, women are rejected, or the conditions created for them are difficult. It's very difficult for women to join the military. I have colleagues who tried to do that and faced obstacles. This is something that is not talked much about at an official level because it might be seen as critical of the Ukrainian government and the military. But we have to be critical. This is how Ukraine should be different from

Russia: for our ability to freely criticise the government and address issues.

An ongoing research project called "Invisible Battalion" is available in both Ukrainian and English language online. This is a collaborative research project involving several Ukrainian scholars, studying Ukrainian women in the military since 2014-2015. The last part of this project is related to sexual harassment and violence in the military. It is very challenging to research, as there are difficulties reaching out to respondents. People are afraid to talk, and now when the war is really ongoing and in full scale, women, but not only women, as sexual harassment in the military applies to all the other groups too, depend on their commander, on their seniors, so they are obviously very careful voicing criticism—you don't know how it will affect you.

TD: A persistent problem in all military forces. Maryna, can you tell us how ideas about femininity and masculinity are manipulated by the state in this conflict?

MS: Even though much more will be said once the war is over, what we can already see clearly is that in terms of masculinity, nothing is particularly surprising. There is a strong appeal to the ideal male citizen, the Ukrainian man who is ready to drop everything and join the military, or at least the territorial defence forces, or volunteer in some way. Government campaigns focus on encouraging mobilisation and conscription, celebrating patriotic men ready to die for their country. There is also a softer touch of humanity: soldiers are often shown with kittens, rescuing pets from burning buildings, or holding children. This helps to humanise the image of the Ukrainian soldier in contrast to the Russian one. Yet none of this is new; such portrayals have accompanied almost every war. What is more concerning, as Olena Strelnyk and Sarah Phillips (2025) point out in their recent article, is the manipulation of ideas of the "good citizen" and "taxpayer" in Ukraine.

On the other hand, the ideas about Ukrainian femininity needed to be adjusted because women too needed to join the military and because it's the 21st century. So President Zelensky has changed his address to refer to defenders twice, first as a male noun and then as female noun. Furthermore, if they do postcards or promotional material, they always try to represent women in uniform.

However, there is a second layer, this expectation, which is always on women and never on men, of taking on the care of people coming back with severe damage or disabilities. Ukraine has a huge number of people coming back from the front who are in need of intensive healthcare, mental healthcare, but also people who are missing hands and legs. Women are expected to take care of these seriously injured men. There are already some success stories of women fundraising for the highest technological processes or prothesis or surgery for their friends or colleagues or partners. There are strong narratives that support the view that women are expected to stay forever with these men. There are reports from hospitals about a wedding or engagement of a woman with a veteran soldier coming from war with severe disabilities. It is absolutely not clear how this will be supported financially by the state. We don't have infrastructure, and Ukrainian cities are not accessible for people with mobility issues. The scale of this catastrophe is still to be evaluated.

Another thing to mention is, of course, that until the full-scale invasion, Ukraine was the capital for European surrogacy and reproductive technologies. There is a certain hypocrisy on the part of European institutions, because we know that in the EU, commercial surrogacy is forbidden, yet it is OK for EU citizens to go to Ukraine and do surrogacy there. Ukraine was one of the major suppliers of surrogate babies to the EU. Now, first with COVID, and second with the full-scale invasion, this became a problem, but the clinics are still there. Now they are promoting their services with a discount or even for free: i.e., they freeze the reproductive material, biological material. There are already stories of women who froze their biological material and that of their partners, so that if their partners died in war, they could get pregnant with their babies. We will hear more and more of these stories, and they are fundamentally praised and normalised and expected. There are already court conflicts between, for example, the parents of a soldier killed in war, and his fiancée, or his wife or widow, over who has the right to use the biological material. This is another thing that is not really discussed much. Western countries are to blame because the industry existed to support the huge demand from Western countries, and there were no proper regulations. While surrogacy is a complex issue, as are the assisted reproductive technologies, the way it is being handled and run is completely unregulated.

I cannot call it a black market, because Ukraine has technically allowed it, but it is extremely problematic. This is something that needs to be discussed as part of the recovery, when we discuss healthcare generally and the healthcare of women specifically. But it's really not discussed enough.

TD: There were a number of rapes by Russian soldiers reported internationally, like Bucha, for instance. What can you tell us about the issue of sexual violence in general, and violence against women or LGBTQ+ people more specifically?

MS: Of course, the issue has been there from the very beginning. It has been presented somewhat one-sidedly, as the focus has mostly been on women being raped, while other groups are rarely mentioned. When it comes to documenting sexual violence or conflict-related sexual violence against LGBTQ people, this work is carried out predominantly by NGOs. We have reports from occupied areas describing torture, sexual violence, and even killings of LGBTQ people. These reports usually come from NGOs that maintain contacts in those regions and collect information through anonymised networks. Although international organisations are trying to help, their efforts are insufficient. To protect their networks of monitors and ensure their security, they must operate with caution. Much more funding and far greater technological support are needed.

Progress is largely due to activists and scholars, but also to a new generation of Ukrainian femocrats, women who have been in Ukrainian politics for the last 10-15 years or who pushed for and achieved the ratification of the Istanbul Convention to adopt a National Action Plan for Women, Peace, and Security (WPS). This enabled organising shelters for survivors of domestic or gender-based violence, training police, or social workers and psychologists, the judges, etc. There's always a problem of police, judges, and social workers/psychologists who are not coordinated and have different views on the issue.

Yet this is still not enough, even if we consider only the violence coming from the Russian side. What is discussed far less is the rise in gender-based and domestic violence within Ukraine itself, linked to the growing militarisation of society. This increase is not only due to veterans or soldiers returning home on leave or after demobilisation, but also to the general tension and anxiety among men who fear being mobilised and therefore spend more time at home. The streets of even the largest Ukrainian cities are often empty—not because of bombings, but because people are afraid of patrols that might force them into conscription. This situation has led to a rise in domestic violence, which remains largely unacknowledged at the governmental level. Officials avoid addressing it, fearing that doing so would appear to discredit the army or Ukrainian men, as if acknowledging these problems would equate them with Russians.

Although I understand their reasoning, I think they are creating a bomb ready to explode later. This merits more cooperation from the international community; the humanitarian organisations need to have a careful understanding of the local context—why local officials are reluctant to name things the way they should be named.

TD: I wonder whether you have any trust in international criminal justice?

MS: International organisations and experts provide legitimacy by documenting cases. The reports by locals unfortunately are often seen as biassed. There are questions around who the people are who are collecting this data. If UN or UNHCR or OSCE speak of genocide or of a number of raids, then people agree it is true. We need these actors for recognition. Of course, I remain very critical of them because they tend to reproduce the same hierarchies. They are more likely to recognise as victims and survivors those who they expect to be, as they might not have the time, patience, knowledge, or sensitivity to approach certain things in the nuanced, sensitive, sensible manner that is needed. This is why they need to engage more with the work of the people on the ground. I remain very critical because their engagement is limited because of their lack of knowledge of the language, knowledge of the people, and the same local organisations tend to be involved with international organisations. Usually these are very competent organisations, but sometimes because of the above issues, much work on the ground is overlooked. There are grassroots organisations, local mobilisations that may not have access to international resources because of how they expect the project management to be run, or because of their level of English, which may not be perfect, because they do not write funding applications, or because they don't have the right connections. Many people have written about that, and Ukraine is no different at all.

I think it is very important for us to work with other countries who have similar experiences. such as, for example, cooperation with Colombian colleagues. They had a lot of problems, and they continue having issues with transitional justice and with their Truth Commission, La Comisión de la Verdad. They can tell us how they made sure that LGBTQ victims were included, that the issue of transphobia was included in the reports and became part of the process of transitional justice. We have talked to people from Kosovo, from Bosnia, but I think we need more dialogue with the so-called Global South, or global majority, a term that I prefer. I think it is useful to learn from each other's mistakes, and push the big organisations to listen to people on the ground who do not fear getting their hands dirty.

TD: Thank you Maryna. So finally, how can we provide solidarity to women in Ukraine? Or to LGBTQ+ communities?

MS: First of all, I would like to underscore that solidarity is not an event or putting an avatar on Facebook, even if it is appreciated. Solidarity is continuous action.

It is important to stress the need to challenge systematic inequality when we try to challenge institutions and policies or even research practises. We need to centre the agency of Ukrainians. Although this may appear easy, for some reason, three and a half years into the war, it's still not there. Even if we speak about feminist solidarities and feminists and queer activists, we still have discussions and panels on Ukraine without Ukrainians. We still have a preconceived understanding of what's going on, especially people who have been working on the Central Eastern Europe region or, say, Eurasia, and have spent time and effort on Russian studies. They are influenced by Russian propaganda—the so-called soft power. It might be very difficult to decolonise their perspectives on the region and see the complexity not only across the region, but also within Russia. Russia is often perceived just as Moscow, or St. Petersburg, or the Eastern parts with Slavic Russians, without understanding the complexity of the regions and the other fights and struggles. We need to invite Russian feminists to the table. We tend to invite Russian Slavic feminists, and do not see the many other active movements, such as in Bashkortostan or in Tatarstan or in Chechnya. Somehow, it's always people from the imperial centres. This is not to say that none of them is good, or they are not trying to fight the regime, but if we speak about inclusivity, we need to move beyond the centres.

Second, it is important to place some emphasis on long-term support, funding, and institutional support for organisations working on the ground. Donors prefer working with projects, creating a perpetual grant-writing application culture, rather than building work in the field where it is most needed, such as education or care, or in documenting the crimes committed. It is not a financial problem, but an issue of trust—donors don't trust what local people do with the money.

Local colleagues who are based in Ukraine tend to import certain concepts or certain ideas from Western literature, drawing on scholars who are based in the West. We do it for two reasons. First, of course, these are well-established concepts and it makes sense to use them. Second, because you're pushed in that direction—you cannot not quote certain people, and you cannot not use certain complex concepts. The problem is that this erases a more nuanced understanding of what is going on. Just to give a very simple but also a very complex example, let's think about the concept of nationalism. It is a loaded concept in Western Europe, especially because of the German past. At the same time, nationalism is a bad word used by Russia as the central concept to justify the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Now, I do not work on nationalism. I work on the LGBTQ+ movement, queer migration, and gender more broadly, but for the last 12 years, I have been asked about nationalism, especially right-wing nationalism. What about nationalism? And it is very difficult to explain in five minutes, or sometimes in even a shorter time, what Ukrainian nationalism actually is, how it is being shaped, or what Westerners label Ukrainian nationalism. For example, in Ukraine, there is a struggle to switch to the Ukrainian language as the language of communication. From the moment of independence in 1991, Ukrainian has been the official language of Ukraine and the only one, as in many other countries. Nobody problematises Italian as the national language of Italy, or English of the UK, or Russian of Russia. Nobody questions why Russian is the only national language in Russia. But there is this big hostility about the Ukrainian language. There are many questions about that. Nobody wants to understand how the Russian language was imposed, or how the Ukrainian language was cancelled. In the last 300 years, the Ukrainian language was banned on the territory of Ukraine from 130 to 170 times according to various historical sources.

Now there is an attempt to reclaim the language which everybody speaks anyway, because it was a

language of education. It creates the idea of Ukrainians becoming right-wing nationalists and Nazis. And these labels are attached very easily.

This is just one example. The same can be said about *homonationalism*, a concept easily applied across Central and Eastern Europe, where local activists use the idea of Europeanisation to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights. Yet it is something much more nuanced. To understand it, one has to go there, talk to people, read local news, and grasp the country's history. This, I believe, is the most straightforward yet also the most complex form of solidarity. If you decide to write about a country and cannot do all this, then at least try to practice co-authorship: engage with local scholars instead of merely interviewing them and then writing about them in your own article. Try to write something *together*. This is relatively easy to do, and people are often open to it, yet it remains rare. There are still few examples of co-authorship as a genuine practice of solidarity in academia. It is crucial that we invite colleagues and say, "Let's try to understand things together." Through such practice, we might begin to challenge the rigid academic structures that continue to persist.

TD: Thank you very much Maryna for all these very important insights.

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