

# GENDERED PROTESTS: MOTHERS' CIVIC ACTIVISM AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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**The dramatic events of the Euromaidan protests, from November 2013 to April 2014, and the consequent armed conflict in the east of Ukraine have led to civil society activation, including women's activism. I focus on how ideas and expectations about women's roles as mothers frame mothers' activism related to war issues and the image of mothers during wartime in general. The structure of the article is as follows: In the first and second sections of the article, I examine the theoretical background and the sociopolitical context of mothers' civic activism in Ukraine. I evaluate how ideas about femininity and motherhood are represented in the form of public gender ideals and expectations and how they were (re)constructed during the Euromaidan protests, which were the immediate precursor to the armed conflict in the east. In the third and fourth sections, I analyze how the activism of soldiers' mothers' groups, as well as discourses and media representations of this activism, constructs ideas about women's roles as mothers. Applying the concept of gendered social movements developed by Rachel Einwohner, Jocelyn Hollander, and Toska Olson, I evaluate how this activism is gendered. First, it is gendered by common identities as mothers and by maternal images, as in the names of their organizations, all of which include references to "mothers." Second, it is gendered implicitly in its goals and, more specifically, in its reflection of traditional gender stereotypes and expectations about care as women's primary responsibility. Third, it is gendered in its tactics, through the use of slogans highlighting motherhood as the basis for the claim to be active in the public space. Fourth, this activism is gendered by the rhetoric that**

**activists use, with their claims that, for instance, “women are natural peace builders.” Finally, this activism is gendered in the ways it is represented and reported in the media. Thus, the images of “good” and “bad” mothers are constructed in the media as related to women’s “roles” during war.**

**Keywords:** Gender Ideals and Expectations; Civic Activism; Motherhood; Maternal Activism; Gendered Social Movements; War; Ukraine

This article focuses on mothers’ activism and discourses related to this activism in the context of the war in Ukraine from 2014 to 2018. My data are mainly from 2014–2015. This was a period of both sporadic activity of soldiers’ mothers’ groups and the establishment of their organizations. This period is remarkable for frequent mothers’ protests: The beginning of the war in Donbas,<sup>1</sup> the eastern part of Ukraine bordering Russia, between Ukraine’s armed forces and pro-Russian separatists represented by the self-proclaimed states of Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR, in Ukrainian and Russian) and Luhans’k People’s Republic (LNR), was marked by an aggravation of public concern about the beginning of hostilities and possible mass mobilization, on the one hand, and the weak combat readiness of the Ukrainian army, on the other. This triggered an increase in protest activity among mothers’ groups, and during this period activities of mothers’ groups and organizations were more visible in public and media spaces. For instance, in June 2014 in Rivne, Chernivtsi, and L’viv oblasts in western Ukraine, mothers of conscripted soldiers resorted to blocking passage to/from military training grounds. Mothers demanded a meeting with the leadership of the military units and complained about the unsatisfactory provision of personal protection for soldiers (Stadnyk 2014).<sup>2</sup>

The mothers’ groups and organizations that were most visible in public and media space during the studied period of time were the nationwide “Defense” Union of Mothers (Soiuz materiv “Zakhyst”); the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers of Ukraine (CSMU) (Komitet soldats’kykh materiv Ukraïny); the Union of Wives and Mothers of the ATO Participants (Ob’iednannia druzhyn i materiv biïtsiv uchasyukiv ATO), and the regional L’viv Charity Fund “Soldiers’ Mothers for a New Army” (LBF “Soldats’ki materi – za novu armiïu”). Only one of them, Soldiers’ Mothers for a New Army, had existed before the war in Donbas (since 1999), while the other three emerged after the beginning of the war.

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<sup>1</sup> The Ukrainian government and state officials used the term “antiterrorist operation” (ATO) until April 2018. Later it was renamed Operation of the United Forces (OUF) (Operatsiia ob’iednanykh syl). The clarification of the concept of war is beyond the scope of this research. In using the term “war,” I proceed from the fact that there is an armed conflict in the east of Ukraine. The violent confrontation in the region began in mid-April 2014. In September 2014 both sides signed a cease-fire agreement, but as of 2019 the fighting has not stopped in the region.

<sup>2</sup> Later, with a positive shift of the situation in the army and the strengthening of pro-Ukrainian public attitudes, the activities of maternal groups went into an institutionalized channel, mainly related to support of the military, and not with the criticism of the war or the bad governance of the armed forces.

My research question is how the mothers' movement related to the war is gendered. I focus on what ideas and expectations about women's role as mothers frame mothers' activism related to war issues and the image of mothers during wartime in general. The structure of the article is as follows: In the first and second sections, I examine the theoretical background and the sociopolitical context of mothers' civic activism in Ukraine. I evaluate how ideas about femininity and motherhood are represented in the form of public gender ideals and expectations, and how these were (re)constructed during the Euromaidan (or Maidan) protests (November 2013–April 2014), which were an immediate precursor to the armed conflict in the east.<sup>3</sup> In the third and fourth sections of the article, I analyze how the activism of soldiers' mothers' groups, as well as discourses and media representations of this activism, constructs ideas about women's roles as mothers. Applying Rachel Einwohner, Jocelyn Hollander, and Toska Olson's (2000) concept of gendered social movements, I evaluate how this activism is gendered by common maternal identities and by the activists' goals, tactics, and protest repertoire, and how nonparticipants in mothers' activism describe it.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND DATA

The impact of war and militarism on gender ideologies and women has been the focus of numerous works demonstrating how gender matters in war making and in discourses on war (Christensen 2010; Cockburn 2007, 2012; Enloe 1983, 2000; Segal 1995; Sjoberg 2014; Yuval-Davis 1997). In times of war traditional representations of female and male roles can be fixed, since in most countries, including Ukraine, women are not conscripted. Therefore, it is the duty of a man as a citizen to defend his country during war, to die or kill for the sake of his motherland or nation. It is the civic duty of women to support men who are at war, and mothers are a particularly key part of such support. This scholarship explores how manhood and womanhood (and motherhood) are constructed during wartime based on the essentialist ideas that men are protectors while women are protected and that men are naturally linked to warfare

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<sup>3</sup> The Euromaidan protest began on November 21, 2013, at Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) in Kyiv, as a peaceful protest after the Ukrainian government appealed the suspension of the signing of an Association Agreement with the European Union, instead choosing closer ties with Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union. Soon, protests in other regions of Ukraine grew. Eventually, peaceful protests turned violent. By April 2014, more than 100 people were killed in Kyiv and other cities as a result of clashes between protesters, on the one hand, and the police and internal troops, on the other. Some protesters were killed by still unidentified snipers. In March 2014, following the seizure by armed men of key buildings in Simferopol', the capital of Crimea, and the subsequent referendum, Russian president Vladimir Putin signed a law formalizing Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Following the Maidan violence, then president Viktor Yanukovich left Kyiv in the end of February and the Ukrainian parliament declared the president unable to fulfill his duties. Following Yanukovich's flight and the subsequent installation of a new government in Kyiv, armed groups seized control of towns in the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhans'k, where many people supported Yanukovich. This led to armed confrontations with the Ukrainian Armed Forces, which very quickly turned into military offensives.

while women are linked to peace. Some recent work related to war and gender indicates that traditional stereotypes have strengthened during the military conflict in Ukraine as well (Ukrainian Centre for Social Reforms 2016:6–7).

The majority of works on the topic of Soviet and post-Soviet mothers' activism and militarism examine the case of Russia (Caiazza 2002; Danilova 2004; Elkner 2004; Colin Lebedev 2011; Zdravomyslova 2000, 2007). My research looks instead at the case of Ukraine; specifically, it focuses on the discourses and practices of women's groups and organizations acting "as mothers" in Ukraine, whose activism in its multiple forms was a reaction to the armed conflict in Donbas.

My data come from the following publicly available sources: the website and Facebook page of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Ukraine,<sup>4</sup> the Facebook page of Soldiers' Mothers for a New Army,<sup>5</sup> and the website of the Union of Wives and Mothers of the ATO Participants.<sup>6</sup> I also analyzed numerous media texts selected by the keywords "a mother of a soldier" (in Ukrainian) and by the names of the organizations chosen for this study and their leaders (in Ukrainian and Russian). I selected 15 media texts published in 2014–2018 that are relevant to the research subject from international media resources (Deutsche Welle, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty), Ukrainian national media (*Fakty*, *Gazeta.ua*, *Glavkom*), and some regional media (information agency Galinfo, ChaRivne.info, L'viv newspaper *Ratusha*). These sources include both interviews with soldiers' mothers and texts about mothers' appeals, rallies, and protests. I also draw upon the publicly available results of all-Ukrainian surveys, conducted from 2016 to 2018 by UNFPA Ukraine (UNFPA Ukraine 2018) and the Information Analytical Center Ratingpro (Sotsiologichna hrupa Re tynh 2016), to describe the context related to public ideas about gender relations and expectations about women's roles.

In this article my theorizing proceeds from a social constructivist perspective on gender as a set of social and cultural expectations that are associated with sex, femininity, and masculinity, and that are constructed at both the individual (micro) level (Hollander 2013; West and Fenstermaker 2002; West and Zimmerman 2002) and the institutional (macro) level (Dalton and Fenstermaker 2002). Constructing gender, or "doing gender," means creating differences between girls and boys, and women and men, that are not natural, essential, or biological (West and Zimmerman 2002:13). My research focuses on the meso level of "doing gender," that is on the experiences of groups, communities, and organizations, and the interactions between them in the process of constructing of gender differences.<sup>7</sup> I borrow the concept of "gendered social movements" developed by Einwohner, Hollander, and Olson

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<sup>4</sup> <http://mater-ua.com/rus/?id=0>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/ЛБФ-Солдатські-матері-за-нову-армію-1722885111263791/>.

<sup>6</sup> <http://familyato.org/ua/>.

<sup>7</sup> The distinction I draw here between the macro, meso, and micro levels of constructing gender differences is theoretical and analytical but not empirical. As Candace West, Don Zimmerman, and Sarah Fenstermaker have argued, at any given moment, theoretical attention may focus on different levels of concerns, but both interaction (micro level) and social structure (macro level) serve as manifestations of one another (Symposium 2002:101).

(2000) and apply it here to the analysis of mothers' activism in Ukraine. A social movement is gendered when "some aspect of the movement constructs differences between women and men and/or elicits a certain set of social meanings because of its association, actual or assumed, with femininities or masculinities" (Einwohner et al. 2000:682).

Civic activism and social movements are gendered in their patterns of mobilization, political and cultural opportunities, intramovement dynamics, strategies, and tactics (Einwohner 1999; Einwohner et al. 2000; McAdam 1992; Taylor 1999; Zemlinskaya 2010). Moreover, Einwohner, Hollander, and Olson argue that *all* social movements are gendered, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Movements are gendered in their composition when they directly concern gender and explicitly focus on women's or men's issues (e.g., the pro-choice movement). Movements are gendered in their goals: some movements seek to change gender hierarchies, others reflect traditional gender stereotypes, but both address the social meaning of gender. Movements are also gendered in their tactics, namely in protest marching, slogans, language, and clothing used as part of their repertoire. Movements can also be gendered based on the collective or individual identities they claim. For example, members of peace movements often use feminine or maternal images in the names of their organizations (such as Another Mother for Peace<sup>8</sup> or Women's International League for Peace and Freedom<sup>9</sup>). Finally, movements are gendered because they are evaluated in terms of gender even if individuals or organizations are not purposefully behaving in a gendered manner (Einwohner et al. 2000:684–690).

Feminist approaches tend to be ambivalent when it comes to the role of the ideology of motherhood and maternal identities in women's activism. In liberal feminist thought, female gender roles assigned to the private sphere were seen as an obstacle to women's civic participation. The feminist political thought of the last two decades is based on criticism of the public/private dichotomy. For instance, Marilyn Friedman (2005) argues that citizenship is not confined to the public sphere and that citizenship practices of the public sphere are related to the conditions in other social spheres, such as that of the family. Birte Siim, who summed up the differences between feminist approaches to citizenship, names one of these explanatory models "maternalist-communitarian." This model is represented by feminist scholars who focus on the positive implications of motherhood on women's political roles, specifically in a context of war (Siim 2000:34–36). While men have been constructed as naturally linked to warfare, women have been constructed as naturally linked to peace (Yuval-Davis 1997:94), and motherhood is often considered to be what determines these differences. The origins of this approach can be traced back to Sara Ruddick's concept of "maternal thinking," in which she referred to the contradictions between mothering thinking and military thinking. Ruddick argued that

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<sup>8</sup> A grassroots antiwar advocacy group founded in 1967 in opposition to the United States' war in Vietnam.

<sup>9</sup> A nonprofit, nongovernmental organization established in 1915, which has national sections in 37 countries with headquarters in Geneva and maintains a United Nations office in New York City.

mothering begins at birth and promises life, while military thinking justifies organized death; a mother preserves the body and nurtures physical growth, while the military endangers soldiers' bodies, minds, and consciences in the name of victory (Ruddick 1989:148). In a similar vein, Jean Bethke Elshtain considers motherhood the basis of women's political roles rather than a barrier to their political participation, and she emphasizes the importance of family values for women's political identities (quoted in Siim 2000:34). Indeed, Cynthia Cockburn (2007), who conducted research on women's antiwar activism in 12 countries, notes that she often heard the terms "motherhood" and "care of others" when discussing women's motivation for antiwar activism. Janice Nathanson (2008) argues that women acting in public as mothers exemplify, in fact, the very core of feminist ideology—that the personal is political. They contribute to the reframing and valuing of motherhood by expanding its boundaries (from private to public), while according to the patriarchal ideal "good mothers" stay at home, mind the children, and keep out of politics.

### THE SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT OF MOTHERS' ACTIVISM IN UKRAINE

In contemporary Ukraine, while some steps toward enhancing gender equality have been taken in recent years by both the state and the public, traditional gender expectations and stereotypes of femininity and motherhood are still dominant in public attitudes. After the collapse of the USSR, in the context of the nation-building process the notion of "tradition" was invoked as a key part of the process of reconstructing a pre-Soviet past for the Ukrainian nation. At the ideological level, in the Ukrainian historical and cultural context, the image of *Berehynia* (literally, "the one who protects, takes care of") represents the cult of motherhood. *Berehynia* emerged as a symbol of Ukrainian femininity in the Ukrainian national renaissance during the late 1980s and was designed to recreate the myth of Ukrainian matriarchy—namely, the myth of the exceptionally high position of women in traditional Ukrainian culture as opposed to patriarchal Russia. Against the background of an almost complete absence of historical and ethnographic research on the status of Ukrainian women, male writers Vasyl' Skurativs'kyi (in 1987) and Vasyl' Ruban (in 1992) were the first to put forward the idea of the Ukrainian primordial matriarchy, which then allowed historians and ethnographers to legitimize the image of *Berehynia* as a symbol of Ukrainian femininity (Kis' 2005).

This image became one of the central elements of official state ideology during the 1990s. The process reached its peak at the time of the establishment of the Independence Monument on the main square in Kyiv in 2001. The young Ukrainian nation was visualized in the image of a young woman dressed in national costume. This symbol not only embodies the independent Ukrainian nation, but also reproduces, according to then president Leonid Kuchma, "the image of our Ukrainian family's *Beheginia*," which is "the essence of the national idea" (Vystup Prezydenta Ukraïny 2001). In fact, as Oksana Kis' has shown, the image of *Berehynia* is based primarily on the cult of motherhood, but not explicitly on the idea of women as persons with full

and equal rights. The high symbolic status of the mother is intended to compensate for the painful reality of women's lack of rights and, at the same time, to reimpose a patriarchal model of motherhood as a woman's only public role (Kis' 2005).

Sociological data confirm that traditional ideas about motherhood and femininity remain dominant in Ukraine. The study "Masculinity Today: Men's Attitudes to Gender Stereotypes and Violence against Women" conducted in Ukraine by the United Nations Population Fund in 2018 showed that men's attitudes toward women's roles are mainly traditionalist. Sixty-nine percent of respondents supported the idea that a woman's most important role is to take care of her home and cook for her family, and 63 percent agreed that care for young children is women's responsibility. A quarter of respondents thought that if there are children in the household, women should not work at all outside of home (UNFPA Ukraine 2018:66). This and other studies point to existing inequality in daily practices of women and men related to childcare: in 60 percent of Ukrainian families women provide most of this care (Sotsiologichna hrupa Reïtynh 2016).

The dramatic events of the Euromaidan protests from November 2013 to April 2014 led to the activation of Ukrainian civil society, including women's and maternal activism and its public visibility. On January 28, 2014, about 50 women gathered at the barricades on Hrushevs'kogo Street in the center of Kyiv, the epicenter of violent confrontation between protesters and the Berkut militia,<sup>10</sup> and asked the Berkut not to use force against activists taking part in the protests. In their hands, they held placards: "There's no such thing as 'someone else's children'" and "Don't shoot at the hearts of mothers" (Kozachenko 2014). On other occasions, mothers organized common prayers in Kyiv, kneeling and holding icons and placards with appeals to the Berkut not to use violence against the protesters.

The gender discourses of the Maidan protests have been examined in a number of works that reveal the contradictory positions on women's role in these protests (Bureïchak and Petrenko 2014; Khromeychuk 2016; Maierchuk 2014; Martsenyuk 2014; Onuch and Martsenyuk 2014; Phillips 2014). According to surveys, women comprised 41–44 percent of participants in the early days of the protests and on days of larger, more organized protests (i.e., November 24, December 1, December 16, and December 31, 2013). After the beginning of violent confrontations between protesters and militia in January–February 2014, the share of women in the protest encampments was only 12 percent (Onuch and Martsenyuk 2014:88). In many ways, the stereotypical societal gender norms and expectations were reproduced on the Maidan. Olga Onuch and Tamara Martsenyuk found that most interviewees and some focus group participants reported that after January 16, 2014, (when the protests became more violent) the Maidan became divided along gender lines. Protesters explained that women would help during the day, cooking and providing medical care, while men "provided security, threw 'Molotov cocktails' and engaged in fighting." Some female focus group participants mentioned, with annoyance, that their husbands for-

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<sup>10</sup> Berkut was a special police unit at the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine that was responsible for public safety and the fight against organized crime. It was eliminated for exceeding authority after the Maidan protests.

bade them to go to major protest sites. Others remembered how they went to the Maidan during the daytime and begged the police on behalf of their “sons and husbands” to refrain from using violence (89–90).

The role of female activists as “quasi mothers” was also frequently discussed by respondents in studies of the Maidan. Some female activists joked that they took it upon themselves to “mother” male activists, making sure “they had enough to eat” and that they “had warm clothes and tea” (Onuch and Martsenyuk 2014:91). Gender expectations towards woman-mother as a caregiver for not only her own but other women’s children was a way of legitimizing women’s participation in the protests, while their “biological” maternal role limited women’s ability to participate in the protests more actively. Onuch and Martsenyuk observed that this problem was a typical one among female activists who were the partners of male activists. These female activists said that they had to stay at home with children because they could not convince their partners to do so. One woman even reiterated that she “wanted to go throw some Molotov cocktails” but she could not do it “while holding a baby” (91).

Most male activists did not see anything odd about discussing women as “helpers,” “supporters,” “mothers,” and “daughters,” referring to themselves as those “who fought” and to women as “mothers and daughters” whom they were protecting (Onuch and Martsenyuk 2014:92). This rhetoric about women’s need for male protectors was constantly reproduced during the Euromaidan protests. In early December 2013, Emily Channell-Justice photographed a poster on the skeleton of the unfinished New Year’s Tree, or *ialynka*, in Independence Square in Kyiv. The poster was drawn in Ukraine’s blue and gold colors and decorated with a small bouquet of yellow flowers tied with blue and gold ribbons; the text read, “Boys, protect Ukrainian girls!” This sign was symbolic of the linkage between women and nation, not least in its placement next to the monument in Independence Square, itself topped with a *Berehynia* (Channell-Justice 2017). Thus, stereotypical societal gender norms and expectations were reproduced on the Maidan as practice and as discourse. Mariia Maierchuk calls it a parade of masculinity and everyday misogyny that “reached its apogee in the sandwich kitchens, in the jokes about women from the Maidan’s stage, in widespread ridicule and the rhetoric of ‘real Cossacks who do not stay at home like women’” (Maierchuk 2014).

Thus, the Maidan protests provided women with the space and opportunity to showcase women as political actors (Martsenyuk 2014). But in the context of war maternal activism may have reinforced the gender expectations of women/mothers as supporters of their men/sons. Consequentially, the narrative of women without agency has been deepened and women have been further subordinated to the priorities of the state (Women’s International League 2014:3).

The first soldiers’ mothers’ organization in Ukraine was established in 1990, during the late Soviet period of the democratization of society when public criticism of the problems in the Soviet army—in particular, violence (*dedovshchina*) and non-combat deaths—increased. The head of the Organization of Soldiers’ Mothers of Ukraine from 1990 to the present is Valentyna Artamonova, who is also currently a



member of the Public Council for the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense. One of the studied organizations—L'viv Charity Fund "Soldiers' Mothers for a New Army"—was founded in 1999 and its activity was focused on violence in the army, as well as support for servicemen.

The dramatic events on the Maidan and subsequent armed conflict in Donbas created a new context for mothers' activism in Ukraine. During war, attitudes towards both gender roles and citizenship invariably undergo transformation. Defending one's country has been seen as the ultimate duty of the citizen—to die (and to kill) for the sake of the homeland or nation (Yuval-Davis 1997:89). Historically, women's obligation as citizens during wartime has been to aid the war effort through providing patriotic support for their male family members' military service (Abrams 2007:852). Citizenship becomes a highly gendered phenomenon in wartime in most countries, including Ukraine, where bearing arms on behalf of the state is the men's obligation, whereas women are almost never subject to mandatory military service (852–856). The issue of women's participation in the armed forces is one of the most deliberated in public discussions in Ukraine. As of November 2017, 24,298 women serve in the army and about 6,000 women have participated in the antiterrorist operation (ATO) in Donbas in 2014–2017 ("Poltorak nazvav" 2017). At the same time, women-combatants were often volunteers and officially held the noncombatant positions of cooks, accountants, and so on that are allowed for women in the Ukrainian military forces (Martsenyuk et al. 2018:20).<sup>11</sup>

## MOTHER'S ORGANIZATIONS AND GROUPS: SOURCES AND DATA

During 2014 and 2015, different mothers' groups were active in connection with the armed conflict in Ukraine. The political landscape of mothers' activism in Ukraine was complicated in ways that are often challenging for researchers. In her analysis of the Russian Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, Elena Zdravomyslova emphasized that the reference to the symbolism of motherhood in the name of the organization was indicative and this symbolism appealed to the popular belief system whereby a "mother's destiny" is to preserve human life (2007:219). This strong symbolism of the maternal figure and the image of the "grieving mother" can be used as an instrument of political manipulation. For instance, there have been cases of "fake" soldiers' mothers in Ukraine—for example, Mariia Tsipko and Nina Prudnikova (a deputy from the pro-Yanukovych Party of the Regions in Sevastopol City Council). The media has reported that Prudnikova is not a soldier's mother, because she has two daughters (Kazans'kyi 2014). Both women supported the Berkut militia during the Maidan protests, and Mariia Tsipko also actively participated in a number of pro-Russian actions in Luhans'k and Sevastopol (Krupina 2014).

My research focuses both on the sporadic activity of mothers in spontaneously formed groups and on the more or less systematic activity of organizations and

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<sup>11</sup> After the study by Martsenyuk et al. was completed, the list of positions allowed for women in Ukrainian army was significantly expanded.

groups. These groups have very different material, organizational, and human resources. For example, only the Union of Wives and Mothers of the ATO Participants, founded in March 2015, has a very well-developed website where all its documents are available, such as registration certificates, statutes, membership data, and so on. It lists 16 women as members of its leadership team and has 12 branches nationwide. The mission of the organization is defined as follows: "We, women from the families of the fighters in the Russian-Ukrainian war, have united for the advancement of an active, nationally conscious civil society capable of controlling the actions of the authorities and actively influencing the development of Ukraine as a peaceful, sovereign, democratic state."<sup>12</sup> The head of the organization is Nataliia Moskovets'. The organization's activity focuses on four main dimensions: the protection of women's rights at national and local levels, social support for mothers of dead soldiers on a peer-to-peer basis, activation of public participation in social and legal processes, and social support for the ATO/OUF veterans in their reintegration in society. The organization has wide contacts with state institutions including the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Social Affairs, and the State Employment Center.

The Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Ukraine has a less active website and there is no available information about the history of the organization or its mission. Its main content is news about current problems in the Ukrainian army, such as social protection of combatants, data about their health conditions, and military and non-combatant casualties. It had a Facebook group as well, but it appears to have been hacked in 2018. The head of the CSMU is probably Oksana Klymenko who officially is a press secretary of the organization. She is also the author of a blog about problems in the Ukrainian army in one of the large national media resources under the moniker "the mother of a Ukrainian soldier."<sup>13</sup>

The CSMU is a nonprofit organization seemingly founded in 2014 after the armed conflict in the east of Ukraine started.<sup>14</sup> Its main goals are raising awareness of human rights issues in the Ukrainian army, fighting for peace, and promoting democracy and human rights in Ukraine's military forces. Other goals include establishing civilian control over the rights of servicemen, searching for missing and dead soldiers in the ATO/OUF zone, and providing social and legal protection for soldiers. The organization works to disclose information about dead and wounded soldiers in the ATO/OUF zone and about noncombat deaths related to suicides and alcohol usage. The organization collects information about missing soldiers from the soldiers' mothers and wives, as well as mothers' complaints about violations of soldiers' rights in the army. This information is used to ground criticism of state military policies and ap-

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<sup>12</sup> The Union of Wives and Mothers of the ATO Participants, "Pro nas/Misiia." Accessed September 15, 2019. <http://familyato.org/ua/pro-nas/misiia.html>.

<sup>13</sup> <https://korrespondent.net/user/66270948/publication/>.

<sup>14</sup> I have been unable to obtain precise information on the timing and circumstances of the organization's founding. My attempts to contact the organization to clarify this information via their publicly available email address have been unsuccessful.

peals to the president and the Ministry of Defense calling for improvements in food provision and living conditions for soldiers in the ATO/OUF zone.

The other two groups have no official websites. From other open sources, it is known that the Fund "Soldiers' Mothers for a New Army" was established in 1999 by Alla Murtazina and officially registered in L'viv region. Now its head is Ol'ha Tymyk.

The leader of the "Defense" Union of Mothers is Nadezhda Kuramshina. Officially, the Union was registered in Kyiv in 2017, but from 2014 to 2017 its activity was realized mainly in Dnipro, a city in the central region of Ukraine. Some media have reported that Kuramshina is a "fake" soldier's mother, but from other media and informal sources it is known that she is in fact a mother of a participant of the ATO/OUF.

Despite my focus on how gender ideas and expectations framed their activity repertoire, it is important to describe these groups' political positions for better understanding the context. These organizations and groups represent different positions related to the war. While L'viv Fund "Soldiers' Mothers for a New Army" and the Union of Wives and Mothers of the ATO Participants strongly oppose the separatists in eastern Ukraine and do not use antiwar rhetoric or strong criticism of state military politics, the leader of the "Defense" Union of Mothers has a contradictory image as a supporter of separatists because in 2015 she met with the Donetsk People's Republic's leader. As for the CSMU, it is very careful not to make any statements about the war and used antiwar rhetoric only at the beginning of its activity. For instance, in July 2015 the CSMU used antiwar rhetoric: "The war has been going on in the country for more than a year and has turned into a disaster, which is due to the authorities' militant mood and war propaganda in society. Endless mobilization does not stop the war, but only brings sorrow and suffering over the loss of the loved ones."<sup>15</sup> Later, the organization changed the focus of its criticism from the war to state defense policy.<sup>16</sup> Thus, on January 29, 2016, the Committee posted a Facebook post entitled "In the Armed Forces of Ukraine drunkenness and crime are flourishing." It noted that "The government and the armed forces have always told us that our army has changed for the better, and it's a time of real commanders and professionals.... And we really wanted to believe it. Unfortunately, the real situation in the army is completely different, and the real situation is being carefully hidden from us." Furthermore, it claimed that there was a "suppression of the truth about the losses in the Armed Forces of Ukraine in the bloody massacre in the south east by our new government."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The Union of Soldiers' Mothers of Ukraine, "Neboevye poteri sredi uchastnikov ATO v 2015 godu." Accessed July 20, 2019. <http://materi-ua.com/rus/>.

<sup>16</sup> The reason probably is that in 2015 the Security Service of Ukraine investigated the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers for publishing documents of ATO fighters who died, violating laws of the protection of personal data.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/materi.ykraunu/?fref=ts>. Accessed March 5, 2016.

## ACTIVITY REPERTOIRE OF MOTHERS' GROUPS AND ITS GENDERED ASPECTS

During 2014 and 2015, different mothers' groups were active in connection with the armed conflict in Ukraine. The organizations analyzed in this study used different tactics in their activity that are the result of their different positions toward the war and state policies in the military sphere.<sup>18</sup> For example, the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers and the "Defense" Union of Mothers actively used confrontational forms of actions in 2014 and 2015 that focused on criticism of the state military policy. In 2014 Nadezhda Kuramshina of the "Defense" organized a picket near the Presidential Administration: "We want to meet with him and show evidence of abuse by the ATO leadership." She meant the lack of food and military provision of soldiers (24 Kanal 2014). In 2015 Kuramshina as the head of the organization appealed to the court. The organization demanded that the inaction of the president of Ukraine in organizing the country's defense be declared unlawful, aiming to obligate the president to introduce martial law nationwide or in particular regions.

The representatives of the Soldiers' Mothers for a New Army, on the other hand, took the view that protests and criticism of the state are unconstructive and harmful in times of war. For example, in August 2014 in L'viv many people received text messages informing them about the (probable) casualties in the Armed Forces of Ukraine during the ATO. The text messages were signed by "The Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Ukraine" but it was unclear who really sent these messages. A representative of the regional military registration office said that the information was false and had evidently been spread in an attempt to destabilize the sociopolitical situation in the region and to obstruct the partial mobilization (Petryshyn 2014). The representatives of the L'viv Charity Fund "Soldiers' Mothers for a New Army," when asked to comment on this case, emphasized that its members were opposed to aggravating public discontent in wartime. In addition, they emphasized that their goal was to defend the rights of servicemen and their families by providing material and medical support (Petryshyn 2014).

### MOTHERS WHO ARE (NOT) SUPPORTING THE WAR

The history of the debate about women's roles in war and militarism shows that mothers' activism works both in support of and against militarism and their sons' patriotic duties, but gender ideologies are often central to the arguments on both sides. Women involved in both kinds of movements argue that as mothers they have a duty to their country, their nation, and their sons. Mothers' activism in support of militarism in many cases results from the attempt to protect their homes, families, and communities. In contrast, mothers opposing the military may argue that, because they are life givers, they are more caring than men are—but they, too, hope to protect their home, families, and communities (Caiazza 2002:113–115).

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<sup>18</sup> Here and hereafter in the text I mean both politics related to the war in general and politics related to military forces in particular (e.g., mobilization, provisions, etc.).

The analysis of published interviews with mothers of soldiers shows that they are usually against their sons' military service: they ask them not to go to war (Kostiuk 2018; Turlik'ian 2018), are categorically against it (Stadnyk 2014), or sometimes even use manipulation or hide call-up papers from the military registration office (Necheporenko and Kuz'menko 2018). Cases where a mother has demanded her son not to go to war ("I will not let my son go to war") symbolically represent "mother's power" in the private sphere, where she is able to influence the decisions of her adult son. In the tradition of Ukrainian society, adult children usually maintain a close relationship with their parents and are sometimes economically dependent on them: according to survey data, 46 percent of respondents aged 25 to 29 live with their parents (*Ukrainske pokolinnia Z* 2017).

Similarly, in 2014, against the background of concern about possible mass mobilization, the CSMU made a post on their organization's website with advice about how to illegally avoid "forced conscription"—for example, by buying a medical certificate of poor health, avoiding getting call-up papers from the military office, giving a bribe, and even committing crimes because people under criminal investigation are not subject to being drafted.<sup>19</sup>

At the same time, many mothers act in support of their son's military duty. Moreover, mothers' support can in fact be a part of an ideological instrument of political and military mobilization (Christensen 2010; Enloe 2000:244–260) and militarization as a tool for cultural governance in a broader sense (Alexander 2010:71). The image of the "good mother" is constructed in wartime to represent the mother who does not resist her son's participation in war, but instead supports him through volunteer activities. In a passive sense, as Lorraine de Volo has argued, mothers are mobilized as they are honored for the sacrifices—their children's lives—that they have made for the "greater good" (1998:241). For instance, in August 2014, archbishop of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, Lubomyr Huzar, said the following: "If mothers don't bless their children for the war, there will be ... no state. They have to understand that the situation in the whole world is that people ... go to war to protect, in fact, their mothers.... We cannot say ... let other people's children go to fight. All must fight.... Everyone must answer this appeal because we must protect our own" (Pashchenko 2014).

As a consequence, mothers who "don't allow" their sons to go to war sometimes are blamed for destabilizing the situation. For instance, one of the participants of the ATO/OUF said in an interview with *Gazeta.ua* that: "The mothers of guys who are serving there [in the OUF zone] are not out on the streets or organizing rallies. They go to church and pray for their children to come back alive. Every day I hear that soldiers' mothers are blocking roads. People say they get from 300 to 500 dollars for such protests" (Lipich 2014).

I noted earlier that Sara Ruddick emphasized the contradictions between maternal thinking and military thinking and how she considers maternal practice to be a

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<sup>19</sup> The Union of Soldiers' Mothers of Ukraine, "Pamiatka po spaseniiu synovei i muzhei ot mobilizatsii." Accessed July 20, 2019. <http://materii-ua.com/rus/?id=100>.

“natural resource” for peace politics. Mothers’ groups in Ukraine often use essentialist rhetoric about the “natural desire” of mothers to save lives and to build peace. Against the background of prevailing traditionalist views about the role of women in Ukraine and the image of *Berehynia*, such rhetoric can legitimize women’s activism in peacebuilding. For instance, in 2015 a number of seminars in the framework of the program “Peacebuilding in Ukraine” took place in the country. Zinaïda Fedoruk (one of the coorganizers of the seminars in the city of Ivano-Frankivs’k) said in an interview that “A woman is a life giver. A woman is *Berehynia*. She is not created to destroy. A man-peacekeeper must kill, but a woman must save” (Fedorak 2015). In public discussions of the social roles of women the image of *Berehynia* is widely used, including in the context of peacebuilding and even female servicemen. For example, competitions called “*Berehynia* in Uniform” are regularly held by the armed forces of Ukraine (Ministerstvo oborony Ukraïny 2019).

Meanwhile, Ruddick (1989) argues that women’s peacefulness is as mythical as men’s violence. Women usually justify their militarism in the same way that men do, in terms of loyalty and patriotism, and can even support organized violence (Blee 1997; Christensen 2010; Koonz 1997; Ruddick 1989).

In Ukraine, in some cases mothers’ groups have supported militarism as well. In August 2015 the “Defense” Union of Mothers invited women leaders of Ukraine to cooperate in developing a program to stop the war in Donbas. Its leader Kuramshina said, “We need to stop this madness, we must defend our territories. We will advise our president how to do this. Maybe it will be violently. However, we, the mothers, have already agreed on the violent ways of mopping-up the territory. And I think that all the inhabitants of Donbas know where to hide from the bombing.... I think that the president as the supreme commander should make one single decision which is to liberate the territory from invaders” (“Soiuz materei ‘Zashchita’” 2015). The wives of famous Ukrainian politicians, including the president’s wife, Maryna Poroshenko, were invited to this event. Kuramshina expressed hope that after this meeting the female participants would “come home and influence their husbands. We women know how we can influence our men” (“Soiuz materei ‘Zashchita’” 2015). This statement, as in a case with the mother’s influence on her adult son’s decisions, is the evidence that symbolically women—wives and mothers—have power in the private sphere that can influence (male) decision makers in the public sphere.<sup>20</sup>

### SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT OF WAR MATTERS

As Amy Caiazza has argued, because traditional ideas about gender are essential to the arguments of mothers protesting war, their opposition to military service is more likely to play an influential role in societies where those gender ideologies are dominant. They are more likely to fit their ideological opportunity structures because mothers support traditional gender ideologies: that motherhood is women’s primary role and that mothers protect their children. As a result, mothers’ groups can get support from many women and men (Caiazza 2002:115).

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<sup>20</sup> There is a Ukrainian proverb: “Man is the head. Woman is the neck that moves the head.”

Caiazza focuses on gender ideology but does not take into account the sociopolitical contexts of war. To gain public support, mothers' initiatives must resonate not only with gender ideology but also with public attitudes towards state military policies and war in general. In May 2014, when the active fighting in eastern Ukraine started, activists of another movement, the Cause for Truth (*Dilo pravdy*), organized a "Mothers against War" rally in Kyiv. The activists constructed the image of women as naturally linked to peace and motherhood as what determines antiwar activism. The activists came with placards that read "Mothers have no nationalities," "Mothers against war!," and "The Third World War is on the doorstep (*u poroga*), pray for peace!" Here is the opinion of one of the participants of this rally: "For me, reluctance towards war is natural: this is something I've been taught since childhood. The worst thing that happens on earth is war, since many innocent people are killed. I was surprised when we came upon a huge number of people who were aggressive towards us. Their main arguments were: 'If someone came to your house to kill your wife, would you endure this?,' 'If one does not take up arms, it will be like Crimea,' and 'If I had time, I would go.'" Another activist said: "We were surprised at how quickly, within a week, the opinion of ordinary people in Kyiv has changed. A week ago, they agreed with us and supported our actions against the war, and now they are ready to fight with the people represented by the so-called 'separatists' from the east. There were some who wanted to call the police and used foul language against us" (Fedorak 2015). In this case public concern about a possible widespread war affected public attitudes toward the antiwar slogans that were probably perceived as threats to national and personal security.

Another example is related to the head of the "Defense" Union of Mothers Nadezhda Kuramshina. In December 2015, with the head of the pro-Russian antiwar movement "Antivoina," Viktoriia Shilova, she visited the DNR and had a meeting with the pro-Russian leader of the republic, Aleksandr Zakharchenko (TK Union 2015). Commenting on the meeting to a DNR journalist, Kuramshina called the armed conflict in Donbas an "oligarchs' war" and said that her organization's activity was not related to political issues but was aimed at stopping this war because "only women can demand peace" (News-Front 2015). The visit caused accusations of cooperation with the separatists and probably marked the beginning of a decline in Kuramshina's visible public activism.

### MOTHERHOOD IN CONSTRUCTING OTHERNESS

The images of motherhood and mothers were used actively in the processes of constructing "us" and "them." Motherhood has been a part of othering politics both in traditional media and in social media discourses of the war in Ukraine. For example, an article posted in April 2015 on the website of the separatist DNR/LNR news agency Antifashist.com, call representatives of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Ukraine "killers' mothers." The CSMU's criticism towards state defense policy in Ukraine was sarcastically described in the following way: "killers' mothers ... are trying to appeal to the very people at whose call they sent their sons off 'to whack the separatists'" (Shkoda 2015).

It is notable that supporters of both the pro-Ukrainian position and the separatist LNR and DNR have used gender ideology of mothers' responsibility for war and peace in their rhetoric. On January 13, 2016, the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Ukraine posted on its Facebook page information about the living conditions of one of the brigades of the Armed Forces of Ukraine in the Luhansk region. In response on the post, commenters representing both pro-Ukrainian and proseparatist positions blamed mothers for the conflict in Donbas. One Facebook user with a woman's name, seemingly a supporter of the DNR and LNR, wrote in her comment: "That is precisely stated: 'Peace will come to Ukraine when the Ukrainian mothers love their sons more than they hate Russians.'" Another user, with a pro-Ukrainian position, responded: "I would paraphrase—Peace will come to Ukraine when Russian mothers no longer keep silence about the deaths of their children...! When Russian women protest against their husbands and sons going to war!"<sup>21</sup>

### MATERNAL IDENTITY AS A TOOL OF PEACEBUILDING

Maternal identity often defines the key slogans, theses, and tonality of public appeals. Here is a fragment of an open letter to Russian president Vladimir Putin made by representatives of the "Defense" Union of Mothers in July 2014:

You were also born of a woman-mother, who probably once was proud of her son. Today she has nothing to be proud of. The blood of our children, husbands, mothers—and not only Ukrainian—is on your hands. By not stopping hostilities, you are depriving us of the future. We raised our children for happiness, peaceful life; we want to hear the cheerful laughter of our grandchildren. Think of how many young children can no longer love, cannot become fathers, cannot say the word "mother." Think of those broken maternal hearts that will never be able to live as before, because they are buried alive with their dead sons! ("Materi ukrainskikh soldat" 2014)

Mothers in Ukraine also use their shared maternal identity as a potential resource for overcoming the conflict between Ukraine and Russia and for building solidarity with Russian mothers. In September 2014 mothers of Ukrainian soldiers called upon Russian servicemen's mothers to resist a bloody war with Ukraine unleashed by the Kremlin and to call for the withdrawal of Russian troops from the territory of Ukraine. This was stated in an open appeal from the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Ukraine to the head of the Union of Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia, Valentina Mel'nikova. The appeal was released at a press conference in Kyiv: "We, the mothers of the servicemen of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, appeal to mothers of the Russian Federation servicemen with a request to recognize the persistent illegal criminal actions of Russia on the territory of our state, supporting the DNR and LNR terrorist organizations with the funding, supply of weapons, heavy equipment, manpower... We call on you to resist the war, contribute to the immediate cessation of hostilities, the withdrawal of Russian troops from the territory of Ukraine." The

<sup>21</sup> In 2018 this Facebook page was hacked so the link to the post and responses is not available.



Ukrainian mothers were pleading with their Russian counterparts: "We urge the Russian mothers to take their children, who 'accidentally strayed' into Ukraine, and the bodies of the deceased soldiers. We call on the Russian Federation people to open their eyes, to strive to not be afraid to discover the truth, to hear us in unity against violence, tears, sorrow, blood, and grief of war," their statement said ("Soldiers' Mothers of Ukraine" 2014).

With the same appeal a group of mothers conducted a rally in Rivne in Western Ukraine in March 2014, going out into the streets with children holding placards with slogans such as "Mothers against the war," "Putin, hands off Ukraine," and "For peace and unity." Mothers protested on behalf of their children; one mother put a placard with the slogan "Uncle Putin, guard the human being in yourself" on a stroller. The mothers stated the following in an open letter: "Ukrainian wives and mothers appeal to you with hope and faith. With the hope that you will hear the prayer of the millions of Ukrainian women's hearts. With faith in your mother's compassion and love, that is the most holy and selfless love on the earth!... Show your position to the Russian authorities by going out on the streets of cities and villages. Because there is nothing holier on Earth than maternal love and stronger than maternal prayers. We, Ukrainian mothers, are against the war. We believe that you support us" (Kravets' 2014).

## CONCLUSION

The dramatic events of the Euromaidan protests and the consequent war in the east of Ukraine have led to civil society activation, including maternal activism. Gender ideas and meanings of femininity and masculinity are transformed during wars, and the current armed conflict in Ukraine is no exception: Men's citizenship has become associated with military service and defense of the state, women, and children, while women's citizenship is associated with women's support for soldiers. In applying the concept of gendered social movements (Einwohner et al. 2000), I have demonstrated how values, ideas, and expectations about gender relations are (re)constructed in the context of the war in Donbas through the example of mothers' civic activism in Ukraine. The mothers' activism related to the war is gendered in different ways, explicitly or implicitly. First, it is gendered by members' common identities as mothers and by maternal images, as in the names of their organizations, all of which include references to "mothers." Second, it is gendered implicitly in its goals, and more specifically, by reflecting traditional gender stereotypes and expectations about care as women's primary responsibility. Third, it is gendered in its tactics, through the use of slogans highlighting motherhood as the basis for the claim to be active in public space. Fourth, this activism is gendered by the rhetoric that activists use, with their claims that, for instance, "women are natural peace builders." Finally, this activism is gendered in the ways it is represented and reported in the media. Thus, the images of "good" and "bad" mothers are constructed in the media as related to women's "roles" during war.

Although women's and men's roles are usually essentialized during wartime, a mother's figure has powerful symbolic meaning. While "real men" cannot protest war or even criticize the situation in the army because this would challenge traditional norms of masculinity, women, especially mothers of soldiers, have this symbolic option. Mainly mothers conducted protest actions related to the lack of support for military forces during the period examined in this article. Women, including mothers, had a unique role in organizing assistance to soldiers including purchasing first aid kits, body armor, and ammunition in the beginning of the war.

With the strengthening of the combat capability of the Ukrainian army, the tension in society with regard to possible mobilization and widespread war significantly decreased. A significant number of the ATO/OUF participants and veterans encouraged the creation of a great number of civic organizations, including organization of mothers of soldiers involved in the armed conflict. The transition from protest activity and sporadic activity of mothers' groups to the development of the organizations and their constructive cooperation with governmental institutions on issues of peace and security began.

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## ГЕНДЕРИРОВАННЫЕ ПРОТЕСТЫ: ГРАЖДАНСКИЙ АКТИВИЗМ МАТЕРЕЙ И ВОЙНА В УКРАИНЕ

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Драматические события в Украине, связанные с протестами на Евромайдане с ноября 2013 по апрель 2014 года, и последующий вооруженный конфликт на востоке Украины привели к активизации гражданского общества, в том числе и женского активизма. Я сосредотачиваюсь на том, какие идеи и ожидания относительно роли женщин определяют материнский активизм в контексте войны. Я рассматриваю теоретические основы и социально-политический контекст гражданской активности матерей в Украине; оцениваю то, как идеи о роли женщин и материнстве представлены в форме общественных гендерных идеалов и ожиданий и как они изменялись во время протестов на Евромайдане, которые были непосредственным предшественником войны на Донбассе. Далее с применением концепции гендерированных социальных движений я анализирую, как активность групп солдатских матерей и ее репрезентации в средствах массовой информации формируют представления о роли женщин во время войны. Во-первых, активизм солдатских матерей гендерирован включением материнской идентичности и образа матери в названия организаций. Во-вторых, он косвенно гендерирован в своих целях, которые отражают традиционные идеалы и ожидания в отношении заботы как главной ответственности женщин. В-третьих, в тактике материнских групп и организаций заложены гендерные аспекты, связанные с использованием лозунгов и требований, в которых отчетливо артикулируется роль матери. В-четвертых, этот активизм гендерирован риторикой активисток, связанной с «природной» ролью матерей в построении мира и защите жизни. Наконец, активизм «гендерирован» внешней оценкой, в частности образами «хороших» и «плохих» матерей во время войны.

**Ключевые слова:** гендерные идеалы и ожидания; гражданская активность; материнство; материнская активность; гендерированные общественные движения; война; Украина