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The Forgotten Lives: Connecting Gender, Security, and Everyday Livelihoods in Ukraine's Conflict

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Recent debates within Women, Peace and Security (WPS) scholarship (e.g., Bergeron, Cohn, and Duncanson 2017; Elias 2015; True 2015) have underlined the need to position the WPS agenda in the context of broader feminist security analysis as defined by early feminist international relations scholars (e.g., Tickner 1992). More precisely, this requires integrating feminist security studies (FSS) and feminist political economy (FPE). At the center of these largely theoretical reflections is a concern that gender-responsive peace-building efforts have too often been undermined by postwar neoliberal economic processes. This essay provides an empirical contribution to this debate, taking the case study of Ukraine as an atypical example of how WPS has been adopted and implemented for the first time during an active conflict. The integration of FPE and FSS proves especially relevant for a country in conflict, where economic austerity policies come along with increased military expenditure. The essay illustrates that the bridging of security and economy is entirely absent in Ukraine's WPS agenda, which has largely prioritized military security while failing to connect it to the austerity policies and the gendered structural inequalities deepened by the ongoing conflict.

Within WPS scholarship, calls for reconnecting security and economy have come mostly as a reaction to the lack of progress in WPS

implementation. As a response, a group of WPS scholars (e.g., Bergeron, Cohn, and Duncanson 2017; True 2015) have advocated a new approach based on the assumption that the transformative potential of the WPS agenda lies in women's economic empowerment. This involves women's active participation in peace processes and peace building, which is preconditioned by their access to economic and social rights. These scholars express concern that even if the WPS agenda were fully implemented, gender-equitable peacebuilding would be unlikely to occur because even the best peace agreement can be (and often has been) radically undercut by the political economic processes of postwar reconstruction (Bergeron, Cohn, and Duncanson 2017, 3). The following findings from Ukraine not only reinforce these concerns but further imply that the merging of FSS and FPE is all the more urgent in a situation of an active conflict.

Since the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014, Ukraine's government has shifted its economic focus to state security by building up its defenses while diverting resources away from the public sector through extensive state reforms guided by foreign-driven austerity policies (see O'Sullivan 2019). This shift in spending, typical for war economies, indicates the clear linkage of security and economy and the need for an integrated FSS and FPE analysis of the situation.

A closer look reveals that the economic processes in Ukraine entwined with the ongoing conflict have had strong gendered impacts. Gender-based violence in various forms — from physical and sexual to economic violence — has become part of the everyday reality for many women. Economic insecurity is especially felt by women displaced from the conflict-affected areas who lack access to paid work, social services, basic goods, transportation, and basic reproductive infrastructure such as hospitals, schools, and kindergartens (see Dutchak 2018; Lucas, Rohwerder, and Tull 2017; WILPF 2017). Domestic violence and tensions in the family also occur as a result of changing gender roles. For example, displaced men previously employed in Eastern Ukraine's dominant economic sectors of industry or mining are not well equipped to find other work (WILPF 2017, 13). Austerity policies have led to reduced public spending in areas such as health, education, transportation, and social well-being. This has disproportionately affected women in two ways: first, women and their families tend to be the primary beneficiaries of social welfare spending, and second, women tend to be employed in the sectors where the most job cuts have taken place (WILPF 2017, 2).

From the everyday FPE perspective, the conflict has thus been about “a problem with jobs, with strategies for surviving for the next year, how to organize everyday life, how to organize the life of school children who are in between the contact line.”¹ In this respect, incorporating the view of FPE into Ukraine’s WPS approach helps uncover the close interconnectedness of the gendered conflict and the economic processes that deepen the gendered structural inequalities in the country. Therefore, any response to the conflict through the government’s WPS agenda would require addressing the clearly interlinked peace-building and state reforms steered by foreign-driven economic policies.

However, a closer scrutiny of Ukraine’s WPS agenda reveals that the government has largely failed to consider the gendered economic impact of the conflict and austerity measures. In 2016, Ukraine became the first country to adopt a National Action Plan (NAP) on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 during an open conflict. The NAP covers the key areas of concern, setting six priorities for action: peacekeeping and peace-protecting activities, women’s participation in peace building, prevention of conflicts and violence, the protection of women and girls affected by conflicts, providing assistance to and rehabilitating people affected by conflicts, and monitoring the NAP until 2020 (Cabinet of Ministries of Ukraine 2016).

Although the NAP includes activities such as “needs assessment for population in conflict situation regarding medical, humanitarian assistance, educational and administrative services, employment, primary and secondary legal aid” (Cabinet of Ministries of Ukraine 2016), it does not explicitly link them to the economics of the conflict and austerities. Such a link is also missing in the state reforms, which lack integration of peacebuilding issues and have been implemented without a sectoral gender-based analysis (Lamakh and Dmytriyeva 2017, 23). At the regional level, attempts to localize the NAP similarly separate the WPS agenda from the conflict’s socioeconomic implications, as is apparent from the statement of a local official: “What can we do about 1325, when we are losing all the social services and women with children have no means of subsistence?” (Lamakh and Dmytriyeva 2017, 22). The NAP’s inattention to Ukrainian economic policies thus sharply contrasts with the gendered economic effects of the conflict and state reforms.

The NAP’s implementation has focused on gender equality in the defense and security sectors. In a situation of continuous armed conflict

1. Interview with CSO representative, Kiev, April 2018.

with Russia, the WPS agenda has been proudly centered on women in the security forces and their role in the country's ability to defend itself (O'Sullivan 2019). Ukraine thus seems to resemble what feminists have long emphasized, namely, the trade-offs between military and social spending and the unequal gender impacts of increased military spending (True 2015, 423). While some acknowledge that a lot of money goes to the war in Ukraine (see also Warren et al. 2018, 32),² others explicitly use the term "militarization of the economy," which, along with inflation, makes gender equality questions seen as secondary and "untimely" (Khromeychuk 2018, 53). To use the explanation of the organizers of a feminist march on International Women's Day in 2015: "War leads to an increase in violence against women perpetrated by the military from both camps; the devaluation of women's labour and the heroicisation of male defenders encourages the silencing of such important problems as domestic violence, discrimination against women in the labour market, and so on" (Khromeychuk 2018, 53). Indeed, as a result of the war, the mainstream Ukrainian discourse is militaristic and nationalistic, including among some feminist groups,³ and the talk about stopping the war and reaching peace is about accepting Ukraine's position.⁴ Such discourse has restricted peacebuilding in Ukraine, diverting attention from the WPS agenda to the military while leaving women's socioeconomic conditions unaddressed.

This short commentary illustrates that in times of conflict and nationalistic inclinations, there is little space made for a broader feminist security. Ukraine's WPS agenda is missing the security-economy nexus, giving priority to the military form of security. This is especially problematic as the gendered economic policies are adopted here during an ongoing conflict but their harmful consequences are ignored, which further intensifies the conflict's gendered impacts. The silencing of these consequences at the expense of state security limits women's economic power and hence their access to peacebuilding. This, in turn, can have a further impact on gender inequalities all across the Ukrainian society and thus limit the prospects for a stable peace.

2. Interview with representative of international organisation, Kiev, April 2018.

3. Interview with CSO representative, Kiev, April 2018.

4. Interview with a Researcher, Kiev, April 2018.

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