

MASCULINITIES AND PUTIN'S WAR IN UKRAINE: MAKING THE CONNECTION BETWEEN MEN'S GENDER AND THE CURRENT CONFLICT

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Abstract

The war in Ukraine is largely being discussed in gender-neutral terms. Where it is gendered, it is primarily in the context of the impact on women and their role in protecting and caring for children. But this war is overwhelmingly gendered: it is an invasion conceived principally by one man and the men around him, is being fought largely between men, and is part of a wider masculinised system and process. This article explores the connections between masculinities and the Ukraine-Russia war, in particular President Putin's construction of militarised nationalist masculinities and the impact of this war on the lives of men and their partners and families. A greater focus on men's gender in the context of this current conflict, and war more broadly, has several implications for work on gender equality, peace, and security.

Keywords: Ukraine; masculinities; Putin; gender; gender equality

INTRODUCTION

The mainstream discussions on the Russian invasion of Ukraine in political, policy, and media circles are primarily gender-neutral. Where this war is gendered, it is largely in the context of a “war on Ukrainian women.”¹ But men are the predominant actors in the current Russian-Ukrainian war: men primarily conceived it, are implementing it, fighting against each other, and dying as a result.² This assertion is not made in any way to diminish the equally severe impact that this war is having on women, as well as on children³ and on civilians more broadly.⁴ Today in Ukraine, we are seeing heroic military and civilian actions by both men and women.⁵ But the conventional framing of this conflict renders men's gender invisible within it – arguably a reflection of the socially accepted ubiquity of men's violence, aggression, and armed conflict.⁶

Feminists and gender equality activists and practitioners have made significant gains since 2000 to increase the focus on ‘gender’ during and after war and conflict, reflected in the landmark United Nations (U.N.) Security Council Resolution 1325 heralding the creation of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda.⁷ This has also been supported by significant scholarship on gender and conflict.⁸ Although men are gendered actors in conflict, in much these efforts, gender is largely a placeholder for women.⁹ The four pillars of the WPS agenda – prevention, protection, participation, and relief and recovery – are far from fulfilled, requiring much stronger political will and resources from governments and donors.¹⁰ However, although WPS theoretically considers gender to include men and boys, there is little specific focus on men in practice.¹¹

This means that an analysis of masculinities – male-gendered ways and social expectations of

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being and acting – is often absent from our analysis and understanding as a driver of conflict and war.¹² It also means we may default to simplistic assumptions about gender roles in war, such as that women are naturally the peacemakers and men are the war-mongers.¹³ Some prominent female war leaders, such as U.K. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher,¹⁴ often do support war, and over one hundred thousand women signed up for action during World War I.¹⁵ Moreover, there is a long tradition of some men and women supporting pacifism and anti-war movements, and men can and do play an important role in conflict prevention.¹⁶ These oversights in our analysis have implications for how we seek to understand war, prevent it, mitigate its effects and respond to its impacts, with attendant consequences for all of us.

More recently, there has been a growth in research and practice focusing on masculinities, war, and peacebuilding.¹⁷ Though remaining at the fringes of the gender and conflict debate, this work has sought to understand how and why war and violent conflict are wrapped up with male aggression and masculinity.¹⁸ International Conferences have aspired to deepen understanding of these masculine linkages and their implications for conflict and peace.¹⁹ An important limitation of this work, in which I have also been complicit,²⁰ has been its predominant focus on behavioural change among individual men in communities rather than on challenging structural power or seeking to work with men in political and military leadership positions. Equally, while rightfully placing men's use of force in the context of patriarchy and women's rights,²¹ there has been less epistemological space to focus on men's vulnerability and powerlessness in war.

This article seeks, in particular, to expand the discussion on those latter two issues – men's structural power and the impact violent conflict has on men – in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war. While focusing mainly on current events, my analysis can arguably be applied to any other current or recent conflict. The article's genesis has been my desire to make sense of what masculinities have to

do with the war in Ukraine, informed by my prior work on promoting more equitable and non-violent forms of manhood in conflict, post-conflict, and peacebuilding and the constraints of these efforts.

MEN, MASCULINITIES AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE: EXPLORING THE CONNECTIONS

In the run-up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and during the current conflict, there has been a significant focus on trying to understand the actions and motivations of Russian President Vladimir Putin.²² He has been talked about *inter alia* as a dictator²³ and a tyrant.²⁴ Focusing on getting inside Putin's mind is not a new pre-occupation for the West.²⁵ While this has provided important analysis, there has been less mainstream talk and focus on how Putin performs and represents an alpha male²⁶ – a radical version of hypermasculinity.²⁷ Soon after Putin first became president before the turn of the millennium, images of him practising judo and being bear-chested on horseback or while walking along the Siberian river were widely circulated as part of a carefully stage-managed approach to present his strongman persona.²⁸ These images remain on Putin's current official Presidential website.²⁹ In addition, there was a strong emphasis in Putin's image and actions on heterosexuality and homophobia.³⁰ This public relations approach fundamentally shaped the Russian discourse around gender and being a man, with Putin valued at home for this masculinist persona,³¹ laying the groundwork for mainstream support for his military actions to come.

There has also been limited focus on Putin enacting hegemonic masculinities – an “ideal type of masculinity that imposes on all other forms of masculinity (and femininity) meanings about their own position and identity.”³² Putin began in the widely feared Secret Service of the Soviet Union, the KGB, which, renamed the FSB, has had a central duty of suppressing opposition to the state since its formation.³³ The KGB clearly supported Putin's ascent to the presidency, and he was also approved

by Russia's rich and powerful oligarchs, whose interests he protected in return for staying out of politics while bankrolling Putin's circle.³⁴ Putin has since consolidated his dominance by eradicating his opponents, undermining democratic structures, controlling the press, and preventing free speech.³⁵ Indeed, Putin has sought to eliminate any threat to his hegemonic position. Political opponents have ended up dead, or in the case of Alexei Navalny, his most prominent political opponent, arrested and imprisoned on various trumped-up charges.³⁶ Putin has also sought to display his dominance over others not only in his own country but abroad, such as in the poisoning by two suspected Russian military intelligence officers of former Russian spy Sergei Skripal, and his daughter, with Novichok, in Salisbury, UK, in 2018.³⁷ As Wojnicka et al. note, not only does Putin personify hegemonic masculinity, but this "particular type of gender ideology is one of the main factors which has led to the current invasion of Ukraine."³⁸

An understanding of Putin's current absolute power – a salient component of achieving and maintaining hegemonic masculinity – is further instructive for interpreting the current Ukraine invasion. Putin has been described as the archetype of the "strongman ruler," as Gideon Rachman notes in *The Age of the Strong Man*,³⁹ often admired by other contemporary authoritarian leaders, such as Xi Jinping in China, Viktor Orban in Hungary, Boris Johnson in Britain, Donald Trump in America, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil; all of whom have equally sought to promote a 'tough guy' focus within their authoritarian and 'cult of personality' leadership styles.⁴⁰ The ultimate goal of strongman leaders, which Putin has come close to achieving, is the complete identification of the nation with their leadership; without Putin, there would be no Russia.⁴¹ This war in Ukraine is entirely of Putin's making.⁴² And therefore, as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has said - as have other senior intelligence officials – Putin alone is the only person that can ultimately end Russia's aggression.⁴³ As a sign of his absolute power, even senior members of Putin's inner

circle have limited influence, as reflected in Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, when meeting his Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Kuleba for negotiations, being unable to make critical decisions to deescalate this conflict.⁴⁴ This authoritarianism has been contrasted with Zelenskyy's leadership, who is seen as a 'man of the people' and is said to employ a less hierarchical and more cooperative (rather than one-man governance) leadership style.⁴⁵

An essential part of Putin's performance of hegemonic masculinities has been a focus on nationalist masculinities.⁴⁶ As noted above, attributing masculine characteristics to his country has allowed Putin to present himself as a saviour-hero, fitting his pre-occupation with restoring Russia's national strength.⁴⁷ His public disdain for the West, evidenced for example, by the Salisbury poisoning in the U.K., and perhaps by the fact of his being ridiculed in Western media,⁴⁸ reinforces this image that he is the protector of the Russian state. Putin's historical denial of Ukrainians having the right to their own statehood⁴⁹ is partly due to this display of nationalist masculinities. It is also reflected in Russia's lack of serious intention during peace negotiations with Ukraine, and their macho posturing and dominant positioning. As Mykhailo Podolyak, an adviser to the Ukrainian president said, the Russian side has never truly been interested in a peaceful settlement.⁵⁰ The reports that Putin apparently rejected a peace deal brokered by his chief envoy to Ukraine, Dmitry Kozak, early in the invasion, that would have satisfied his demand that Ukraine stay out of NATO, is a further reflection of his performance of masculinities. Backing down would be seen as weak and would question his nationalist assertion that Ukraine posed an "existential threat" to Russia.⁵¹

A celebrated aspect of this hegemonic nationalist masculinities created by Putin's regime is militarised masculinities – what the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) refers to as acquiring and proving one's masculinity through military action and combat.⁵² For Putin, militarised masculinities have been embodied in previous acts of political violence, such as annexing the Crimean

Peninsula from Ukraine in 2014⁵³ or earlier brutal crackdowns on independence movements in Chechnya and Georgia.⁵⁴ In this context, the war in Ukraine is a further assertion of this militarized masculinities. Putin arguably always intended to invade Ukraine, and meetings with many Western political leaders (mainly male) flying in to try to dissuade him otherwise⁵⁵ was all for show on his part and to shore up his sense of superiority and reinforce Russian strength. Putin's desire to fulfil an ideology for an expanded Russian Empire has also been said to be based on a personal sense of humiliation and inadequacy.⁵⁶ My in-depth research with men has found that when men feel emasculated – when their masculinity is under threat or is being challenged – they can react with both anger and violence.⁵⁷ It can be argued that, as the head of one of the world's largest military powers, Putin is therefore using war and Russia's full military might – in addition to other ideological drivers – to prove his manhood, and in doing so, causing untold human suffering and destruction. That this can be the ramifications of one man's sense of inadequacy is deeply troubling. It also has implications for how we perceive leadership in our societies and seek to deescalate this war, as I explore below.

A further key expression of Putin's hegemonic masculinities, and that of his key lieutenants in the Kremlin, is the complete lack of respect shown for the lives of their own Russian soldiers, who were ill trained, ill prepared, ill equipped and then left without any military support or even sufficient means of sustenance.⁵⁸ I have struggled to process the many videos of captured young male Russian soldiers calling their mums, crying, explaining they are alive, that they thought they were going to a training camp in Russia or would be welcomed as liberators in Ukraine, and instead are being sent to their death.⁵⁹ These men have conducted atrocities and war crimes, and I do not seek to justify their actions. But it is equally clear that many of these men are simply "cannon fodder," in the words of one captured Russian soldier.⁶⁰ Putin's desire to hide the truth of the deaths of Russian soldiers from

the Russian public, and presumably their own families, further reinforces this reality.⁶¹ In the theatre of war this callousness towards one's own soldiers is described in the media as a strategic miscalculation.⁶² But this should be called out as enacting the ultimate form of hegemonic power: having a blatant disregard for the lives of countless other men, many poor and from lower classes, fighting on your behalf, seeing their lives as expendable and meaningless in your crusade to be a strong and powerful man.

In this context, it is important to acknowledge the powerlessness many male combatants will feel. Russia has mandatory conscription, and many of their combatants in Ukraine are frightened teenage boys forced into a war they never thought they would be in.⁶³ On the other side, Ukrainian men of 'fighting age' cannot leave the country.⁶⁴ These realities have been described as a form of "gender-based violence inflicted on men by political leaders."⁶⁵ Reports frequently describe the Russian troops as demoralized and exhausted.⁶⁶ They appeal to others back home in Russia not to join the war.⁶⁷ The recent so-called "partial mobilization" by Putin has led many men to fight against their will. Harsh penalties were rushed through the Russian Duma for those failing to report for military duty, surrendering or refusing to fight.⁶⁸ Many men and families are choosing to flee. In men's desire to fulfil the masculine norms around being the breadwinner in the family – an enactment of manhood I have found to be very pervasive in my conversations with men⁶⁹ and have felt myself acutely – other men come forward to fight in this war, even despite the risks. Videos circulate of mobilized soldiers in Russia appealing to the authorities to pay money to their families.⁷⁰ Reports from Syria, where Russia is said to be recruiting a militia to fight in the war, document men being offered large sums of money, including death benefits, to travel to Ukraine.⁷¹ As one Syrian man said in response to Russia's financial offer: "That is more than I could ever earn in Syria. That is putting a value on my life, I know, but that's what life is worth these days. If I die there, at least my family can live."⁷² In a context where men feel they have nothing to lose, life is tragically cheap.

A gender-neutral approach to war also necessitates that discussion and analysis of deaths and related human rights concerns focus on the number of Ukrainian civilian casualties.⁷³ This often includes the number of women and child fatalities explicitly. Men remain predominant in armed forces⁷⁴ and are considerably more likely to die from conflict, whether violently or from other causes.⁷⁵ Combatant fatalities are an accepted part of war. But by not gendering the combatants, who are primarily men, the loss of human life among this group becomes less remarked on as a tragedy of individual lives lost and more as an account of war statistics. Male soldiers, over 61,000 of whom are estimated now on the Russian side to have died, are simply represented as a number of fallen manpower next to the number of destroyed aircraft and tanks⁷⁶ as if there were an equivalence. While civilian lives lost are rightly seen as murder, the death of soldiers is seen as combat losses.⁷⁷ The mainstream media has even glorified this killing, with videos of moving Russian tanks successfully exploding under headings such as 'gotcha.'⁷⁸ This has been further fed by thousands retweeting the many graphic videos of Russian soldiers being blown up.⁷⁹ This is not to excuse the actions of Russian troops nor to dismiss the understandable desire of Ukrainians to celebrate progress against their aggressor. But in failing to gender these Russian and Ukrainian soldiers, we do not see the humanity behind their uniforms and the impact their loss of human life will have on those left behind. These soldiers have parents, partners, and children. The heart-breaking text message – read aloud by the Ukrainian Ambassador to the U.N. Sergiy Kyslytsya, at the U.N. General Assembly Emergency Meeting on the war – which was sent by a Russian soldier to his mother moments before he was killed describing the horror unfolding and how terrifying and brutal the situation is – encapsulates this reality.⁸⁰ It reminds us of the harrowing testimonies from soldiers, doctors, mothers, wives, and siblings of the lasting effects of war in Svetlana Alexievich's extraordinary book, *Boys in Zinc*, about the Soviet Union's so-called 'peace keeping

mission' in Afghanistan between 1979–89.⁸¹ This is the human cost of the socially accepted ubiquity of men's violence and armed conflict.

While men are principally the primary combatants, women are also directly involved in fighting in Ukraine, undertaking leadership roles in their communities, collecting and passing on intelligence, gathering evidence on war crimes, and taking up arms.⁸² This includes many prominent female politicians, such as Maria Lonova MP, the Speaker of Ukrainian Women's Congress, who have chosen not to leave Ukraine even though they could. This reflects forms of female enactment of masculinities⁸³ and women's multiple roles in this contemporary conflict. Despite this, the coverage of these women in the context of the war often reinforces stereotypes that conceal their contribution to resisting the Russian invasion.⁸⁴ Acknowledging this is important both in challenging notions of traditional gendered images of warrior men and supportive women and ensuring that women's diverse roles are reflected in future peacebuilding and reconstruction. It has been exclusively men who have sat at the negotiating table between Russia and Ukraine.⁸⁵

As the conflict continues, the scale of the atrocities and war crimes undertaken by the Russian forces have become more evident, including torture and massacres of civilians and indiscriminate attacks on densely populated areas.⁸⁶ There has also been widespread rapes and sexual exploitation. Sexual violence against women and children by combatants, particularly as an act of rage and revenge by men against the 'enemy' they are fighting, has been used in countless previous conflicts,⁸⁷ including during and after World War II (1939–1945),⁸⁸ the Vietnam War (1955–1975),⁸⁹ the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan (1979–89),⁹⁰ the War in the Former Yugoslavia (1991–2001),⁹¹ and during the Rwandan genocide (1994),⁹² among others. A recent comprehensive synthesis of research conducted by WILFP on men, masculinities, and armed conflict in Afghanistan, Cameroon, Colombia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) found men's use of gender-based violence, in particular sexual

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violence, against women and girls during wartime to be widespread and normalised and “emblematic of the psychology of violent masculinities being both heightened and deployed in armed conflict.”⁹³ As such, while acknowledging how many men become victims of war, it is also important to highlight that many men are simultaneously perpetrators of violence and the necessity of holding them to account during and after the conflict.

On the Ukrainian side, we have seen pictures of the immense suffering and hardship of women and children fleeing the Russian invasion and becoming refugees or those remaining in Ukraine sheltering in basements from Russian bombs.⁹⁴ But in not gendering men, we have talked less about the impact on these women and children because it is generally men left behind in Ukraine – their husbands, lovers, fathers, friends, and children. Many women feel tremendous guilt, having been the ones to escape.⁹⁵ Many women will never see their male partners again. Many Ukrainian children will never know their fathers.

Similarly, on the Russian side, following the partial mobilization, we have seen many pictures of Russian fathers – many of whom may never return alive – saying goodbye to their children and families.⁹⁶ This is of critical importance given the evidence of the benefits of positive father involvement in their children's lives.⁹⁷ As a result of World War II, 2.5 million children in Germany lost their fathers, most of whom grew up with single mothers, often accompanied by financial hardship, and reported consistently more psychiatric symptoms than those who did not lose their father.⁹⁸ If history repeats itself only to a small extent, there can be life-long consequences for both Ukrainian and Russian mothers and children.

It is also important to acknowledge the impact and suffering of these men in Ukraine. I have found masculinities associated with male stoicism and a desire not to show weakness.⁹⁹ We know that even trained soldiers have debilitating post-traumatic stress disorder related to what they witness and experience in war.¹⁰⁰ In Ukraine, we hear stories

of men who were practicing lawyers just months ago and are now manning lookout posts with AK47 assault rifles.¹⁰¹ We can only imagine what impact being asked to kill may have when you have received little or no training on decompartmentalizing your actions.¹⁰² Equally, we see Ukrainian men in tears following a Russian attack that has killed their friends or family members.¹⁰³ Many men will be traumatised by what they witness and experience. Research often focuses solely on the health impacts of war on the civilian population,¹⁰⁴ but we know that those who fight face substantial physical and mental health outcomes, ranging from injury, lifetime disabilities and illness, to depression and anxiety.¹⁰⁵ A discussion on this is essential not only given the long-term impact on these men themselves but on the manifestations for others. Our research in the Eastern DRC found that men's experiences of violence in conflict and war made them more likely to use violence against others, including their intimate partners,¹⁰⁶ mirroring other findings on this potential cycle of violence.¹⁰⁷ Male combatants struggling to process their experiences may kill again once they return from the battle field.¹⁰⁸ This is not in any way to diminish the terrible suffering of women and children or to suggest that all these men will go on to use violence, but that men will be equally traumatised and that their experiences can inform a cycle of violence affecting everyone.

But this war is not only about Putin's inadequacy or desire to 'prove his manhood.' It is also about wider systems enmeshed with practices and representations of masculinity associated with power, violence, and control.¹⁰⁹ As Raewyn Connell has noted, it is important to look at the masculinised culture of the military, economics, and politics in relation to the Ukraine war.¹¹⁰ There is a history of a culture of masculinities within armies and military forces and in their decisions.¹¹¹ Militaries can construct and institutionalize hegemonic masculinity, where one's peer group and military community of practice is fundamental to reinforcing masculinities.¹¹² The military can form and reinforce the link between masculinities and nationalism.¹¹³ The

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male soldier, represented as a hero and warrior, is a fundamental representation of masculinity.¹¹⁴ Army recruitment in the U.K. has been linked to increased violence and aggression among new recruits.¹¹⁵ Equally, there are nuances worthy of greater understanding, such as researchers finding that integral to the warrior hero identity among young male army recruits can be qualities that are more inclusive and egalitarian, such as empathy, collegiality, and caring. Whilst conscription is a reality in many countries, there is also the allure of the military for men, particularly young men, presented as adventure¹¹⁶, camaraderie,¹¹⁷ risk-taking,¹¹⁸ and using force.¹¹⁹ Appeals are made to duty, honour, and patriotism to motivate soldiers to fight in war.¹²⁰ In other words, men are not just sent into conflict. Many also buy into these prevailing discourses (which are precisely designed to elicit their support).

The global arms industry is continuing to expand,¹²¹ valued in 2019 at at least \$118 billion.¹²² Eighty seven percent of arms spending is accounted for by the G20 countries.¹²³ Twelve billion bullets are produced every year.¹²⁴ Despite the strict rules to regulate arms sales in the global Arms Trade Treaty, arms sales continued to increase even as economies contracted due to COVID-19.¹²⁵ While countries understandably seek to defend themselves, the biggest growth in arms imports has been in Europe,¹²⁶ and this has likely further increased due to military spending on the Ukraine war. The current U.K. government is undermining the international Non-proliferation treaty (NPT), signed by 191 U.N. member states,¹²⁷ boycotting recent NPT negotiations and announcing its commitment to increasing Britain's stockpile of nuclear warheads.¹²⁸ As the Gender Equality Network for Small Arms Control (GENSAC) notes, the close real and symbolic links between masculinities and arms are reproduced in popular culture and reinforced by arms manufacturers, almost always owned and run by men.¹²⁹ There is a need to challenge global military expenditure and the masculinised culture within this industry and to allocate more resources to peace and reconstruction.

Finally, there is a growing focus on the fact that, while we did not cause this war, the West has turned a blind eye to Putin's increasingly despotic and hegemonic militarized behaviour. For example, his position may have been inadvertently emboldened by the international communities' more muted response concerning the annexing of Crimean Peninsula,¹³⁰ or his military actions in Chechnya and Georgia.¹³¹ There has also been political expedience on the part of the West in maintaining the status quo with Russia. For example, the Mueller report found clear Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, but limited action was taken.¹³² In 2020, the U.K. Intelligence and Security Committee released a Russia report finding substantial evidence of Russian interference in the British economy and politics, but this fell largely on deaf ears.

Moreover, a strong man worldview has in many ways been employed by our politicians to advance their arguments, arguably furthering Putin's agenda to destabilise the West (even if inadvertently) – the need for Britain to reassert its 'rightful' place in the world which underpinned the Brexit result, for example.¹³³ Equally, the belief in a return to 'traditional' American values was a key driver in the election of Donald Trump as U.S. President. Studies show societies continue to believe men are more suitable leaders than women, reflecting a broader belief in 'strong man' leadership despite this being ill-suited for many of today's global challenges.¹³⁴

IMPLICATIONS: WHAT DOES THIS MEAN? WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

The above analysis necessitates a shift in discourse around gender, war, and conflict to include a greater focus on masculinities. This shift should seek to further the work on understanding how norms of being a man and masculinities, and displaying strong man and hegemonic masculine leadership, contribute to war and violent conflict and can equally be an entry point to challenge these norms and prevent and mitigate such violence.¹³⁵ We accept

men's violence as inevitable by not gendering men in this context. As part of this work, there is a need to move beyond the tokenistic inclusion of men in the Women, Peace and Security agenda and to better conceptualise how men and masculinities fit with this agenda's four pillars to promote gender equality and feminist peace.¹³⁶ Equally, caution should be applied in promoting a parallel men, peace and security agenda, as has been advocated,¹³⁷ and instead, we should seek a broader conceptualisation of gender in the context of peace and security in which all sexes and gender identities find their place.

Work on engaging men in conflict, post-conflict, and peacebuilding also needs to be expanded to focus beyond enabling men to advocate for women's rights to recognise the suffering war also brings on men. Greater research is required to understand what men are experiencing and witnessing, and its immediate and longer-term implications for their health and wellbeing, including the potential linkages between experiencing and witnessing, and then using violence after the war has ended.¹³⁸ Policies and programme approaches are needed to address these implications. In particular, as we respond to this crisis and rebuild war-torn Ukraine after the conflict, support services, particularly psychosocial support, will be needed for male and female combatants.

Our focus and scholarship on masculinities and conflict also needs to give voice to the impact on everyone as a result of the massive levels of mortality and morbidity among male combatants and on men's separation from their families due to war. Moreover, as noted, men's ill-health impacts not only on men themselves but on their partners, children, and societies.¹³⁹ The impact of war is thus relational, not only individual. Our support to women and children impacted by the Russia-Ukraine war

should therefore not only recognise their critical individual needs, but also women and children's needs about the men and boys in their lives – mainly dealing with the loss of a son, partner or father, or adapting to the return of these men who likely have been deeply traumatised by their experiences.

We must ensure that Russian troops are held accountable for their atrocities, particularly rape and sexual violence. Globally, the impunity for using rape as a weapon of war must be tackled, and the international rules-based systems for accountability in war and conflict needs to be strengthened, not weakened.¹⁴⁰ In addition, a survivor-centered approach is essential to support those who have experienced abuse. And organisations that work to respond to and prevent sexual violence in conflict should be empowered.¹⁴¹

We urgently need to additionally support and expand the focus of work on militarised masculinities. Much work on men's use of violence has focused on individual men, often low-income men from the global South, rather than on men who hold significant power or on masculinities and patriarchy within political and military institutions. Feminist organisations, such as The MenEngage alliance and WILPF, have launched an initiative focusing on militarised masculinities and mobilising men for feminist peace.¹⁴² But the broader paradigm of work that focuses on ending men's violence doesn't truly embrace structural, militarised masculinities.

We need to call out President Putin for what he is – a man displaying hegemonic nationalist militarised masculinities using weapons and force to enact his sense of manhood and ideology. We also need to understand what this means in the current (and future) conflict. Men like Putin who enact hegemonic masculinities do not want to be emasculated by being seen to back down. They do not want to give in or show weakness. The more they are riled, the harder they will push back. As this war is not going to plan as Putin and his inner circle intended, arguably even more lethal Russian tactics are being unleashed on Ukrainian citizens.¹⁴³ The multiple stories of killings of scores of unarmed Ukrainian

*Feminist peace is related to three perspectives: peace as the absence of all types of structural violence; peace and security for all; and peace premised on the universal integration of a gender perspectives as well as equal participation at all levels and in all peace building processes. Source: <https://africanfeminism.com/what-feminist-peace-means-in-changing-contexts-of-conflicts/>

civilians as the Russian forces have retreated further reinforce this.¹⁴⁴ There is a real danger of nuclear war for the first time since the Cuban nuclear crisis in the 1960s.¹⁴⁵ Putin arguably needs an off-ramp. He will want to still claim 'success' even if the reality suggests otherwise. He will hopefully be held accountable for his actions by the International Criminal Court in the Hague, but diplomacy needs to find a way for him to climb down to end the violence, killing and destruction.

We must also change how we define leadership. Societal concepts of 'successful' leadership, that leadership needs to be hypermasculine and that men are inherently better leaders and decision-makers, must be challenged.¹⁴⁶ When the world is facing multiple ecological, developmental and humanitarian crises, it is soft power, not hard power, that the world needs.¹⁴⁷

Finally, we must have a serious discussion about manhood in our society. While continuing to stand in solidarity with the people of Ukraine, we must also continue to argue against mass killings, war crimes, and genocide. We have failed the promise of never again.¹⁴⁸ We need to challenge norms that equate manhood with conflict, promote versions of being a man that are more equitable and non-violent and acknowledges the challenges men may face in fulfilling societal expectations around their gendered role. We are already seeing the beginnings of an arms race in the West as an answer to this war, when we truly need to develop more caring forms of being human – caring of others and caring for our planet. With the ever-increasing impacts of climate change on all of us, time is running out.¹⁴⁹

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