

Testing the Norms of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda: Ukraine’s Decolonial Feminist Response to Russia’s Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

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ABSTRACT	This study examines how Ukraine's feminists responded to Russia's use of conflict-related sexual violence during 2014–2024, including whether the new norms of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda proved helpful. Drawing upon online research, our study finds that the responses of Ukrainian feminist organisations after the full-scale invasion in 2022 were prompt, inventive, and wide-ranging. Considering the decolonial critiques, we find it remarkable that Ukrainian feminists were able to strategically use the new norms against CRSV while adding their own more empowering language to enlist international support. This gave the activists enough leverage to insist that the Ukrainian state make bureaucratic and legislative reforms. The Ukrainian feminist successes do not mean that there are no problems in these norms or the Women, Peace, and Security agenda, but instead suggest how feminist criticism may help activists figure out how to navigate this complex environment and democratise the state of Ukraine.
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INTRODUCTION

In the first several years after Russia launched its full-scale invasion in 2022, the most prominent gender-related issue for international observers has been conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). In June of 2022, soon after reports of CRSV came from Bucha (and other places such as Irpin and Mala Rohan), the Secretary General of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE, 2022) called out “sexual violence against women and girls, including rape, torture, trafficking and sexual exploitation occurring in Ukraine.” Human Rights Watch’s (2023) annual report on human rights singled out CRSV in Ukraine, the only gender-related issue they raised. By 2024, United Nations Ukraine (2024) documented over three hundred CRSV cases since 2022. In 2025, the European Court of Human Rights (2025) in *Ukraine and the Netherlands v. Russia* (IBID., ARTICLE 46-2 (C) (III)), found that sexual violence in Ukraine was “widespread and systemic” from the outset of the war in 2014, but “following the February 2022 invasion [such violence became] part of a military strategy to dehumanise, humiliate and break the morale of the Ukrainian population, as individuals and as a community, and to assert dominance over Ukrainian sovereign territory.” It concluded that the rape of women from February to September of 2022 – when Russia was expelled from the Council of Europe – was “systematic,” constituting “a weapon of war... an act of extreme atrocity that amounts to torture.”

To investigate the impact of such international attention from the perspective of Ukrainians, this article investigates how Ukrainian women and feminist organisations framed the issue and responded to CRSV during Russia’s war in Ukraine from 2014 through the middle of 2024. In the first two years after the full-scale invasion – when a rapid and comprehensive response was most needed – international organisations provided crucial resources, and Ukraine’s government implemented unprecedented bureaucratic and legislative reforms. However, observers argue that most of the direct support for survivors of CRSV and advocacy for reform has been provided by feminist and women’s organisations in Ukraine, not by government institutions or international organisations (E.G., GRUZINA, 2022; KRIVONOS ET AL., 2024; LEVCHENKO, 2024).

We find that Ukrainian feminists drew upon their three-plus decades of organising against gender-based violence (STRELNYK ET AL., 2025, P. 3) to mobilise quickly and effectively after the start of the full-scale war. Within months of the full-scale invasion, they created roadmaps of helpful information, documented and advocated for prosecution of CRSV, provided humanitarian assistance and psychological support, and raised awareness of the problem. To the extent possible in the context of our research conducted in 2024, we looked back at the activism since 2014, finding that some new organisations responding to CRSV were created after 2014, and others, founded much earlier, changed their agendas to better meet the needs of women impacted by the war, especially by CRSV.

In this way, this article contributes to the little existing research on this issue. Most notably, 25 important actors involved in responding to CRSV in Ukraine were interviewed in the book *Ukraïna ne movchyt'. Khronika protydyi SNPK (2022–2024 rr.)* [Ukraine is not silent. Chronicle of counteraction to the CRSV (2022–2024)] (LEVCHENKO, 2024).¹ The interviews point to the steep learning curve Ukraine has gone through in order to quickly build the systems of support that CRSV survivors need, from the initial emergency responses in the spring of 2022 to the more advanced institutionalised cooperation between government institutions, NGOs, and international actors.

The analysis here also speaks to broader theoretical debates. First, as we elaborate below, scholars have argued that Ukraine's civil society, especially the feminist component, had been hamstrung by the legacy of Soviet imperialism, NGO-isation, and language/regional divides until 2014, but after the 2014 Revolution of Dignity, it has been transformed by self-organising, which suggests that the NGOs were no longer substituting for a weak state but supporting democratisation (E.G., SHAPOVALOVA & BURLYUK, 2018; CHANNELL-JUSTICE, 2022). We find that the women's and feminist organisations' rapid and comprehensive response to CRSV was not just an upswell in light of the terrible war, but built upon this self organising, and the first two and half years of their efforts support the claim that this mobilisation supports democratisation, as the activists pressured the state to pick up responsibility for CRSV – and it did.

Second, feminist theorists have been critical of the emerging international norms related to sexual violence and conflict. Western feminists took up the issue after noticing the rapes during the Bosnian war in the early 1990s (and also those in Rwanda), and their attention to it, on top of the long-term efforts of feminists from the rest of the world, led to new international norms and laws that cast rape in war as a crime against humanity and a war crime in the Rome Statute establishing the International Criminal Court in 1998.² However, feminists from Southeast Europe, especially Bosnia, have argued that there are costs in the process of consolidating norms and laws against CRSV: individual women's experiences and agency were erased, leaving the women as mere victims and creating a colonial orientation toward women in postsocialist societies and a hierarchy of gender-related problems with CRSV at the top (HROMADZIC, 2007; SEE ALSO MILENKOVSKA, NO DATE). This critique has been consolidated in the broader peace literature. As summarised by Smith (2025), the shift from "war rape is natural" to "rape is [always a] weapon of war" "has constrained legal recognition, obscured lived experiences, and reproduced narrow narratives of ethnic hatred and gendered violence." Similarly, Haastrup (2022, p. 65) argues that "the issue of SV [sexual violence] ... has a seemingly outsized position," sucking up most of the air available for gender-related issues and casting women as victims.

These dynamics have been exacerbated with the expansion of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda – from its inception in UNSCR 1325 in 2000 – to include sexual violence in conflict.³ Feminist scholars from outside of Central and Eastern Europe have argued that the Security Council, as a venue for great powers, makes "strange bedfellows" for feminists (SAPIANO & RAGHUVANSHI, 2024). While most UN entities have moved to a concept of CRSV that includes sexual violence by civilians during a time of war,⁴ these critics have argued for an even broader concept of conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and for queering the agenda (BENIGNI, 2016; HAGEN, 2025). As Sasunkevich (2024, p. 363) notes, there remains a "feminist critical approach to peace building" outside of formal UN spaces, one that is more intersectional, more focused on the long term, and more responsive to indigenous knowledge and initiatives.

But there are additional problems in the Women, Peace, and Security agenda specific to Ukraine. While the agenda has strengthened norms

against sexual violence in war, and most European countries, including Ukraine, have made commitments to address CRSV within their National Action Plans for Women, Peace, and Security, Ukrainian feminists argue that the agenda is “Western-centric” (POTAPOVA & O’SULLIVAN, 2024). As O’Sullivan and Krulišová (2023, p. 626) point out, the region of Central Europe and Eastern Europe “has neither been a site of WPS knowledge nor has actively shaped the WPS norms at the UN and beyond” (SEE ALSO SANTOIRE, 2023). Hendl et al. (2024, pp. 185–186) argue that the agenda has proven to be ineffective in addressing the complex issue surrounding Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, caught up as it is between Russia and Western imperialities. On the one hand, increasingly since 2014, Russia’s representatives have been calling for a very limited understanding of sexual violence in conflict, one that does not include their use of such violence in Ukraine (JOHNSON & OLIINYK, 2026). On the other, Western feminist peace activists and networks who were crucial to establishing the agenda have repeatedly failed to see Russia as a colonial power (FEMINIST INITIATIVE GROUP, 2022; JOHNSON, 2023).

We found that Ukrainian organisations often chose the middle-of-the-road concept of CRSV, especially in English — in what appears to be a strategic move which allowed them to pull in international support and put the most pressure on the state — while sometimes adding their own more empowering and more expansive language. This shows how local activists, in the right circumstances, can leverage the new norms, even as such norms may be limited. The Ukrainian feminist successes do not mean that there are no problems in these norms or in the Women, Peace, and Security agenda, but instead suggest how feminist criticism may help activists figure out how to navigate this complex environment and democratise the state of Ukraine.

In the following, we provide the context of Ukrainian feminism (including the obstacles, accomplishments, and scholarly debates), describe our method in more detail, and then present our findings. Finally, we discuss the role of international actors, including transnational feminist groups, and the impact of this pressure and activism. In the conclusion, we point to some lessons for scholars of gender-based violence and Central and Eastern Europe.

FEMINIST ORGANISING BEFORE AND AFTER THE WAR: WITH OR WITHOUT THE STATE

To create an analytical framework to assess the Ukrainian feminist response to Russia's use of sexual violence, we briefly describe the emergence of organisations that came to play a role in this and summarise the debates in the scholarship on feminist organising.

POST-SOVIET FEMINIST ORGANISING BEFORE 2014

The feminist organising in Ukraine in response to the war faced long-term challenges. Soviet imperialism had crushed independent organising, and many women in the newly independent Ukraine rejected the Soviet commitments to women's emancipation (E.G. HRYCAK, 2006; PHILLIPS, 2008; FABIAN, HRYCAK & JOHNSON, 2016). It had also left Ukraine in a deep economic depression, forcing it to renege on its welfare state promises, and Ukraine became – and then remained – one of the poorest countries in Europe. Sarah Phillips (2008) found that women individually and then new organisations were forced to fill in the gaps of the failed welfare state, suggesting that these organisations were facilitating the neoliberal state. To survive, Ukrainian organisations began to take advantage of the availability of Western support, finding connections with Western foundations based in Moscow and Western capitals. But as elsewhere in the region and the world in general, such alliances required that many women's organisations formalise as NGOs, which, in turn, left them disconnected from local issues and simultaneously undermined grassroots groups (HRYCAK, 2006, p. 72). As Shevstova noted – in her June 18, 2024 book launch through the Aleksanteri Institute in Helsinki – these problems remain: Ukrainian “civil society is very NGO-ised and very neoliberal.”

One exception to this NGO-isation that is relevant to organising against CRSV is FEMEN, a “sextremist” organisation founded in 2008 that performed radical and attention-grabbing activities such as topless protests on issues such as sex trafficking (CHANNELL-JUSTICE, 2014). Troubling to many NGO feminists, FEMEN augured a type of more radical activism that spoke to the “rising agitation, even panic, around the female body as the most prominent site for social movement in the first two decades of the 21st century of Ukraine's politics” (ZYCHOWICZ & TCHERMALYKH, 2022, p. 172).

FEMEN attracted international attention, but Russian coercion drove them into exile in Paris in 2012.

Before Russia's invasion in 2014, Ukraine's women's movement was divided. Hrycak (2010, p. 49) found that the post-independence organisations split into three strands which rarely collaborated: those committed to Soviet models of emancipation, activists for Ukrainian independence, and scholars who explored feminist theory and believed the movement should focus on changing the curriculum in universities to address gender issues rather than politics. For Zhurzhenko (2001, p. 2), these ideological differences could be mapped in terms of the historical divide between the western part of Ukraine, where there was a long-term nationalist sentiment, and the south and east, where there was longer-term and more direct Russian control marked by coercive Russification. In eastern Ukraine, scholars founded the most successful of the Russian-language gender studies centres, the Kharkiv (originally Kharkov) Gender Studies Center. For Zhurzhenko (ibid., p. 10), this centre's Russian-language use reflects not only the Russian-language context of much of academia in Ukraine in the early 1990s, but also an ideological commitment to "post-Soviet" feminisms and a critique of the nationalism of Ukrainian feminisms.

The issue that most united feminist groups in Ukraine, especially those with foreign partners or funders, was violence against women (later recast as gender-based violence), which led to the establishment of several organisations that later took up the issue of CRSV (Barrett, Habibov & Chernyak, 2012). One of the most prominent feminist organisations in Ukraine in the 1990s was La Strada Ukraine, an affiliate of a European network of organisations working against trafficking in women. According to Gruzina (2022), Women's Perspectives, organised in 1998, "was one of the first feminist organisations in Ukraine" and its goals included fighting against violence against women. Another important early organisation was the Women's Information Consultative Center, founded in 1995, whose main goal was to disseminate information about women's human rights inside and outside Ukraine. All three organisations became members of Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE), a network of European women's NGOs working toward raising awareness of gendered violence. Their activism was powerful, leading to the passage of Ukraine's 2001 Law on the Prevention of Family Violence, the first specific legislation in the

region to address domestic violence (HRYCAK, 2010; FABIÁN, HRYCAK & JOHNSON, 2016). But there were also critiques claiming, much like the critiques of CRSV, that gender-based violence was too prominent an issue in feminist organising in Ukraine, and that this focus too contributed to the NGO-isation and neoliberalisation of Ukraine's politics (PHILLIPS, 2008).

FEMINIST ORGANISING DURING AND AFTER THE REVOLUTION OF DIGNITY

Ukraine's civil society, including feminist organising, shifted dramatically with the protests on the Maidan in 2013–2014, laying the groundwork for its response to CRSV. As Channell-Justice (2022) chronicles, wide swaths of Ukrainian society began to self organise. “At a fundamental level, self-organization is the idea that if something needs to be done and there is a person who has the capacity to do it, then it simply should be done, rather than waiting for someone else (particularly a state body or political figure) to do it” (IBID., P. 5). In an argument resembling Phillip's (2008) critique of early mobilisation, Channell-Justice (2022, P. 13) argues that such self-organisation emerged out of state weakness, and while it is fluid and grassroots, such volunteerism can serve the neoliberalisation of the state that international donors desired. Volunteerism is also gendered, with men often mobilised around militarism, and women around caretaking (even as there has been a counter-narrative about women in Ukraine's military) (IBID., PP. 15–16). But after the sustained protests on the Maidan in 2014, self organisation “contributed to the reorganization of the state and the reconceptualization of citizenship,” suggesting the possibility of changing the state, not just being co-opted by it (IBID., P. 26).

After Russia's annexation of Crimea and support for the proxy regimes in eastern Ukraine that came only a few months later, women self-organised – and then formalised organisations – to respond to those displaced by the war as well as address other war-related needs, such as creating a database for missing persons (BENIGNI, 2016, P. 65). Benigni notes that this response included attending to CRSV: long-standing women's organisations, such as La Strada and the Ukrainian Women's Fund, “stretched... their staff and funding... to respond to new needs, for example PTSD among women, men and children (e.g. demobilize combatants and their families), conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence,

and human trafficking affecting impoverished and displaced peoples. The Kharkiv Human Rights group... started to document cases of sexual and gender-based violence” (IBID., PP. 65–66). She assesses that most of the response to CRSV in the early years of the war came not from the Ukrainian state, but from international organisations and NGOs that “stretched” themselves (IBID., PP. 75–76).

Scholars argue that the ideology of Ukrainian feminism also changed. Channell-Justice (2017) documents feminists at Euromaidan re-orienting themselves toward Europe, seeing it as offering a more progressive and promising future regarding women’s rights. Strelnyk, Yuzva, and Zlobina (2025, P. 7) argue that feminists also came to believe in the possibility that the Ukrainian state could represent their interests and that “the construct ‘post-Soviet society’ is no longer relevant for the analysis of Ukrainian society, which, in fact, has already completed the transition.” Others point to a more intensive decolonial reconsideration of past dynamics, and then a clear separation from Russian feminists (KOTLIUK, 2023; HRYTSENKO, 2022A, 2022B). Mayerchyk and Plakhotnik (2019) argue that the events at Euromaidan allowed a new feminist activism to emerge and circulate throughout Ukraine, but it was infused with militarised nationalism: “never before has the combination of feminism and militarized nationalism been so much normalized in public discourse” (IBID., P. 65); see also O’Sullivan (2019). Sasunkevich (2024) – as a participant observer in an unnamed small peace dialogue from 2017 to 2019 – found that solidarity was still difficult to build, especially when the Russian language was used.

FEMINIST ORGANISING AFTER 2022

In the face of the full-scale war, women’s and feminist organising has been transformed again. The most remarkable aspect was the immediate and widespread self-organising. As Phillips and Martsenyuk (2023, P. 6) summarise, the self-organising activities included the following:

providing meals, clothes, medicines, protective gear, logistics, information, support, and fuel delivery; identifying and helping vulnerable individuals; documenting war crimes; and others. Ukrainian women living abroad organize fundraisers and awareness-raising campaigns, contributing their various organisational, creative, business, and linguistic skills to the resistance effort... Women who were forced

to become refugees advocate for the needs of the Ukrainian community back home and abroad by organizing fundraisers, concerts, and marches... Ukrainian refugee women have organized several visible protests abroad to attract the attention of the international community to the importance of #SupportUkraine, #StandwithUkraine, and #SaveUkraineNow.

These responses were essential forms of support for Ukrainians. As Gorchynska (2023) explains, “[t]he large international funds that were supposed to help them were too slow and bureaucratic, they had difficulty reaching certain groups or needs: for example, those living in small towns, villages, closer to the front or under occupation.” After that first spring, the global attention waned, and even more was left for Ukrainian women themselves to do in terms of managing the society outside of the fighting itself (which women also did but in lower numbers than men).⁵ As Krivonos et al. (2024) note, “[w]ith insufficient state support, the burden of survival is placed on Ukrainian refugee women themselves... there is a danger of undervaluing the enormous communitarian reproductive paid and unpaid labor done by Ukrainian workers before and during Russia’s invasion.”

This self organising occurred alongside and in conjunction with existing women’s and feminist organisations. In their analysis of the post-2022 organising, Potapova and O’Sullivan (2024) found that

local civil society groups, specifically women’s rights, feminist, and LGBTQI organizations, were among the first to respond to the immense humanitarian crisis caused by the invasion. In the first few months most organizations switched their operations to the evacuation of civilians, operating shelters for the displaced, [and] providing immediate humanitarian, medical, and other types of assistance. Their connections to communities on the ground, understanding of needs, and access to solidarity networks locally and internationally made them effective responders – as has been the case in many other crises settings.

Gruzina (2022) and Strelnyk et al. (2025) made similar claims about feminist organisations’ responsiveness. The key gendered problems for feminist activists during the war included CRSV, but also other problems such as:

the growth of GBV [gender-based violence]... the increased burden of reproductive work on women; a deepening feminisation of poverty; an increase in the share

of vulnerable groups of women (e.g. widows and single mothers); a predominant share of women with children among war refugees; an increasing burden on feminised fields of employment (education, health care, social work); as well as a decrease in the political and expert visibility of women (Strelnyk et al., 2025, pp. 18–19).

These observers also pointed out the risks of such retooling and the resulting new focus on immediate humanitarian assistance for the future of the women's movement as a whole and the issue of gender equality (E.G. *IBID.*, 2025, P. 41).

While not eradicating them completely, the full-scale war also undermined ideological divides. The Moldova-born, Russian speaker, Irina Zherebkina, a cofounder of the Kharkiv Gender Studies, organised a conference calling for “solidarity, internationalism, anti-nationalism, and nonviolence” (GESSEN, 2023), see also (KHARKIV GENDER STUDIES, 2022; JOHNSON, 2023). Without acknowledging the reality of Russia's violent aggression and the risk of Ukraine's annihilation, this anti-militarist call landed wrong-footed for many Ukrainian feminists, who published their own Ukrainian feminist manifesto (FEMINIST INITIATIVE GROUP, 2022), which Zherebkina did not sign (SEE ALSO POTAPOVA & O'SULLIVAN, 2024). While Zherebkina remains more socialist and pacifist than most Ukrainian feminists, she also came out against Russia's war, which has impacted Kharkiv greatly.

This brief history and summary of the literature points to several issues to consider in our analysis of feminist responses to CRSV. The Soviet allergy to feminism explains why we are expansive in our understanding of what constitutes feminist organisations; women's organisations that do feminist work may not necessarily self-identify as feminist, though this was less true of the last decade. The emergence of NGOs as the dominant organising structure, their embrace of the issue of gender-based violence, and the professionalism required to address CRSV led us to focus on NGOs, but not exclusively so. Many feminist activists in Ukraine and Central-Eastern Europe called for mutual aid, namely a more reciprocal and horizontal relationship between the one providing and the one receiving aid at this particular moment, recognising that at another moment the situation could be reversed. Given the emergence of self-organising in Ukraine and the feminist call for mutual aid, we came to see that the best NGO

response would be one that combines the professionalisation and the self organising of feminism in Ukraine, with some sense of mutual aid and not just top-down humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, we were curious as to how feminist initiatives would deal with language and other ethnic and regional differences, including those beyond the Russian-speaking population, such as those of Crimean Tatar, Roma, or Jewish identity. Finally, we expected that organising against CRSV would be different in the period before 2022 than afterwards.

METHODS

To examine the feminist response to CRSV in Ukraine, we started with the women's and feminist organisations referenced in this scholarship on Ukrainian feminism and those listed in the reports we found on Russia's use of CRSV in Ukraine. We then examined all of those groups' websites and social media to see if they mentioned projects broadly connected to CRSV. The terms we used in our search were the following: 1) violence (наси́льство), 2) women in captivity (жі́нки в поло́ні), 3) women affected by war (жі́нки, які постраждали від війни), 4) CRSV (ЧПІК), 5) sexual violence (сексуальне наси́льство), 6) wartime violence (воє́нне наси́льство), 7) gender-based violence (гендерно зумовлене наси́льство), and 8) victim of violence (жертва наси́льства). We used these search terms in English and Ukrainian to be expansive but found that most of the Ukrainian organizations were running their websites and social media in Ukrainian. We then followed the organisations' partners (and their partners, etc.) in a snowball sample until we reached dead ends.

Building on the questions raised by other scholars of Ukraine's feminist mobilisation, we analysed the organisations as to the following: 1) how the organisations framed the problem of CRSV; 2) what activities connected to CRSV did they engaged in; 3) whether they refocused on CRSV after the initial conflict in 2014 and especially after the start of the full-scale war in 2022; and 4) how ethnically intersectional their framing was. We note here that we found Facebook to be the social media platform most often used. Almost all the organisations also had Instagram pages. Many used YouTube to post information, and some also used Telegram, Patreon, LinkedIn, Twitter, and TikTok. Facebook seems to be the most conducive to organisations, but feminists were trying to reach a broad range of Ukrainians through multiple platforms.

While we acknowledge that relying on online sources may lead us to miss initiatives that work without an online presence, online activism was central in Ukraine in 2022–2024. Infrastructure for online life had been created during the COVID pandemic, and many institutions in the shifting war zone chose to operate online to limit risk and to reach Ukrainians across the country as well as Ukrainians abroad (UNDP, 2024). The bigger methodological issue is researching organisations' activities in 2014–2022 from the vantage point of 2024. Some organisations may not have survived, and others may have deleted or archived their posts, but given the reality that the war started in 2014, we wanted to try to capture these activities.

Our choice to conduct online research was also driven by concerns for our own well-being and legal status and our not wanting to take up activists' time or energy during an active war, commitments that we assert are also part of feminist methodologies of the region (JOHNSON, 2009; CARROLL, 2022; SEE ALSO DALL'AGNOLA, EDWARDS & HOWLETT, 2022), even as we commend others who have conducted feminist fieldwork in Ukraine recently (E.G. DEAN, 2024). This project is a collaboration between a US-born scholar (Johnson) without heritage in the region who was trained to study Russia and a Ukrainian immigrant now in law school. As a result of this project, Tsiko has become part of the legal activism in Ukraine, joining JurFem, an organisation we examine below. As part of building feminist solidarities during this war, we attempted to enact an "affective dialogue" in which emotions and power are fully taken into account (SASUNKEVICH, 2024). To check our findings, we spoke with other scholars of Ukraine, such as those at the Association for the Study of Nationalities, but also with activists from Ukrainian organisations when we encountered them in public places (e.g. Project Keshet Ukraine when they made a presentation at the Gender and Transformation in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia Workshop in May 2024) or in the context of fieldwork in neighbouring countries (e.g. in Latvia in 2024).

In this project, our methods are mostly inductive, attempting to follow the advice of decolonial feminist scholars from Central-Eastern Europe. Hendl et al. (2024, p. 189), though refusing to name all the problematic texts, call out the predominant international relations scholarship for its epistemic imperialism and essentialism, including its "lack of knowledge of women's resistance against the ongoing legacy of rape and sexual violence perpetrated by the Russian army... in countries they have occupied

and colonized.” Shevstova (2024), in the first book on the full-scale war from a feminist perspective, calls scholars of Ukraine to shift their research practices, including not starting with Western theory but with Ukrainian experience and collaborating with Ukrainian researchers (SEE ALSO KRIVONOS ET AL., 2024). As asserted by Phillips and Martsenyuk (2023, p. 4), scholars of Ukraine “must attend to the ways that women concomitantly resist the war and resist gender violence, and the strategies they use to fight for their rights, as Ukrainian citizens, and as women.” Sasunkevich (2024, p. 363) explains that a decolonial feminist approach to peace-building requires responsiveness to indigenous knowledge and initiatives. We heed the insights of Potapova and O’Sullivan (2024), for whom “a decolonial feminist vision of peace(s) entails conceptualizing peace as plural in the context of Ukraine’s double coloniality,” by considering Russian and Western imperialism and using the lens of intersectionality.

CASE STUDY: FEMINIST ORGANISATIONS RESPONDING TO CRSV

In the spring of 2024, we identified 10 organisations whose work connected to CRSV was visible online (see Table 1). These organisations included the three long-term stalwarts of Ukraine’s struggle against gender-based violence: La Strada Ukraine, Women’s Perspectives (which founded the Woman for Woman platform), and the Women’s Information Consultative Center (WICC). Two other such groups had deep roots in Ukraine: Project Keshet Ukraine, a part of a transnational Jewish feminist organisation founded at the end of the Cold War, and the Ukrainian Women’s Fund, founded in 2000. SEMA Ukraine, established in Ukraine in 2019, is the organisation most directly connected to the issue of CRSV as an affiliate of the transnational SEMA Global Network of Victims and Survivors of Wartime Sexual Violence. Reflecting the professionalisation of Ukraine over the last decade, the Ukrainian Women’s Lawyers Association established the platform JurFem in 2017 to connect women lawyers. The last two organisations – the Feminist Workshop, a feminist community based in Lviv in western Ukraine, and FemSolution, a grassroots organisation founded by women students at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy in Kyiv to fight against sexism in the academy – were founded in the period after the Revolution of Dignity, representing a new generation of more openly feminist and more horizontal activism in Ukraine. Rounding out the list is FEMEN, which many may not see as a Ukrainian organisation since their exile, but which we include because they came up in our snowball sample.

There are many other women's organisations in Ukraine, some of which have provided support related to CRSV – e.g. Women's March (Marsh Zhinok, which has provided legal counselling) and Sphere (Sfera, which is intersectional in its inclusion of LGBTQ justice), but these organisations did not appear as focused on CRSV in our sampling of online messaging as the selected ones. We also found some international organisations that partnered with Ukrainian entities, most notably, the All Survivors Project (ASP), founded in 2016 through the UCLA School of Law, but did not include them as they are not Ukrainian.

**TABLE 1: FEMINIST ORGANISATIONS IN UKRAINE WORKING AGAINST CRSV
BY TYPE OF ACTIVITY (DATE ESTABLISHED)**

Names of organisations (date founded)	Roadmaps	Humanitarian Aid	Psychological Support	Legal Support	Awareness Raising
FEMEN (2012)					X
Feminist Workshop (2014)		X	X		X
FemSolution (2016)		X	X		X
La Strada Ukraine (1997) ⁶	X			X	X
Project Keshet (1989)		X	X		X
SEMA Ukraine (2019)	X		X	X	
Ukrainian Women's Fund (2000)				X	X
JurFem (2017)				X	
Women's Perspectives (1998) and its Woman for Woman platform (2020)		X			
WICC (1995)				X	X

Finally, we identified but did not include in our detailed study two feminist networks focused on the war or CRSV. In 2016, WICC co-founded the Women Peace Dialogue network to foster feminist conversations about peace in countries of the former Soviet Union, especially between Ukraine and Russia. They had a twitter presence in 2017–2018, showcasing meetings in Kyiv and abroad, including one related to Ukraine's UNSCR 1325 National Action Plan. As of the summer of 2024, we found no online presence of this network, but heard from its member Marta in Latvia that the members of the network were still communicating with each other via email, and there had been a meeting of it in Tbilisi after the full-scale invasion. In 2021, WICC created another network, the Mozhu [ICAN] network, to digitally link the actors involved in the implementation of UNSCR 1325.⁷

FRAMING OF THE PROBLEM

In examining how these ten Ukrainian feminist organisations addressed and focused on CRSV, we found that they all used a remarkably similar language in both their Ukrainian and English language texts. When writing in Ukrainian, the organisations often used the Ukrainian acronym for CRSV (СНПІК: Сексуальне насильство, пов'язане з конфліктом) (SEE ALSO LEVCHENKO 2024), but also the terms “sexual violence” (сексуальне насильство), gender-based violence (гендерно зумовлене насильство), and “women affected by war” (жінки, які постраждали від війни). In English-language materials, we found that the organisations almost always used the term “conflict-related sexual violence” (CRSV). Our findings thus suggest a strategic use of the concept of CRSV, especially for international audiences, but that the Ukrainian organisations were not limited to only this term when writing in Ukrainian. The use of the term CRSV obviously contrasts with Russia's language of “sexual violence in conflict” that marks most of the UN Security Council resolutions, but it contrasts less with some other concepts, such as conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

There were some variations and elaborations in their framing of the problem, however. On the one hand, FEMEN described CRSV as an intentional and integral weapon of war, arguing that the victims are unarmed civilian women who are often viewed as “possessions or extensions of the enemy, vessels into which man plants his seed and potential offspring” (FEMEN, 2022, PARA. 3). This language oversimplifies the problem in ways that

many scholars have criticised. On the other hand, some acknowledged that CRSV is often underreported or ignored due to fear or shame. La Strada, for instance, mentions that this topic is perceived as taboo in Ukrainian society (UKRAINIAN WOMEN'S FUND, 2023). This framing underscores that what these women endured was not ordinary violence or random terror, but a deliberate crime that could have been prevented by Russia. By choosing this language, the organisation reminds the audience that CRSV is not an incidental outcome of war; it is a crime that demands formal recognition.

By 2022, reflecting the self-organising ethic and feminist decolonial approaches of the previous decade, the Ukrainian organisations also demonstrated their commitments to terms that highlight the survival of victims. In Ukrainian, the organisations often use terms like “someone who was harmed” (постраждала) instead of the more passive “victim” (жертва). This choice is intentional. For example, SEMA Ukraine, in a Facebook post dated July 1, 2025, describes assaulted Ukrainian women as “those who suffered from the crimes of russia’s (sic) war against Ukraine” (постраждалих від злочинів війни росії проти України). On its English-language website, JurFem refers to people affected by CRSV as “survivors of CRSV” while in Ukrainian, they use terms like “one who suffered” (потерпіла) rather than victim (жертва), (JURFEM, 2025B). This survivor-centred wording avoids portraying the women as helpless and instead emphasises their strength and agency. It frames the women as having active voices in their own recovery. By using this language, Ukrainian women’s organisations reinforce the message that sexual violence is a war crime, and those affected deserve recognition and, more importantly, tangible support.

ACTIVITIES

By 2024, in accordance with the activation of Ukrainian civil society more broadly, we found that these organisations were engaged in five types of activities, almost all of them in more than one: (1) developing on-line roadmaps that provide information to women suffering from CRSV about where to get support; (2) providing direct humanitarian assistance, such as clothes, food, and apartments for relocated women; (3) providing mechanisms for psychological support, whether it is a group workshop or a private meeting with a psychologist; (4) providing legal support such as documenting cases of CRSV to support prosecutions or developing

a legal framework for responding to CRSV; and (5) fostering awareness through online or street actions. Below, we discuss these activities in more detail. While some of this activism was self-organising or was basically a “stretching” of already existing NGOs – given the inclusion of the fourth and fifth set of issues – we do not see the feminists letting the state off the hook, but instead temporarily stepping into an urgent situation.

(1) After the beginning of the full-scale war, two of the ten organisations started to provide roadmaps that serve the purpose of making it easier for women to seek appropriate help, whether psychological or legal. SEMA Ukraine's website provides an extensive collection of links to various resources, such as those providing psychological, medical, and legal support; the website even includes a list of support centres for survivors of sexual violence. La Strada's roadmaps were made available through webinars to highlight war-related issues and the resources that are available for women. This was perhaps the easiest kind of support to develop, but also an essential first step towards supporting women survivors of CRSV.

(2) More concrete was the humanitarian assistance provided by four of the ten organisations. In 2020, Women's Perspectives created the Woman for Woman platform to help women in emergency life circumstances, such as sexual and domestic violence. The platform amplifies the voices of women by publishing their stories on its website, but also allows Women's Perspectives to offer targeted assistance to those who articulate a need, such as for financial assistance, personal items such as hygiene products, or services. When a woman fills out a form asking for what she needs and tells her story, the organisation reviews the form to determine what assistance it can provide. With consent from the given woman, in addition to providing necessary help, the organisation also posts the story on its website. While it was not specifically focused on the war or CRSV when created, after 2022, their Woman for Woman Facebook page began to focus on stories of women who were internally displaced because of the war or were victims of CRSV. According to their website, some of the most common requests for help come from victims of domestic and sexual violence, women who suffered from the war, and women who currently live under occupation. The organisation also ended up providing some paid work opportunities to women relocated within Ukraine.

Similarly, by the spring of 2022, FemSolution started sending humanitarian aid to Ukrainian women impacted by war while also actively posting on their Facebook page regarding sexual violence during the war. They distributed medicine, hygiene products, baby food, and other aid they could acquire to women in both unoccupied and occupied territories (FARBAR, 2023). The Feminist Workshop too provided this kind of humanitarian help, but also babysitting services for women who were internally displaced to Lviv because of the war and apartments for activists through its project FemApartment.

Project Keshet has long been focused on gender-based violence in Ukraine and expanded the related work to include CRSV; for example, it held a 2023 workshop focused on preventing and responding to conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence, and the participants included women leaders of Ukrainian NGOs, leaders from the UN, and other women activists. However, their approach to humanitarian assistance was deliberately broader, with the understanding that those who had experienced CRSV should not be forced to retell their trauma but ask for any help that they might want. In 2022, Project Keshet provided small grants to displaced families, distributed hygiene products, but also rape kits, and then developed a project to distribute menstrual cups, a sustainable hygiene product. By 2024, they were distributing generators to hospitals and educational institutions as well as providing e-bikes for nurses to get around Donetsk. In an effort to create sustainable support for women during the war, Project Keshet's leader Vlada Nedak created the Women's Opportunity Fund to provide financial support in the form of grants to small businesses owned by women so that they could purchase equipment necessary for business development. In March 2024, the Women's Opportunity Fund was starting its fourth round with a plan to help 15 more grantees with 70 thousand Ukraine hryvnia (about \$1,786)

(3) After 2022, four of the ten organisations were providing psychological support, most commonly some type of trauma recovery service. Since SEMA Ukraine's original purpose was connected to sexual and gender-based violence related to conflict, psychological support was central to their efforts. They regularly helped facilitate various psychotherapeutic sessions and group meetings. This support continued into the summer of 2024. According to SEMA's Facebook post published on July 17, 2024,

through donations organised by Leopolis for the Future, SEMA Ukraine covered transportation expenses for ten women so that they could participate in a retreat called “Together for You,” which included psychological group sessions. Additionally, on July 10, 2024, SEMA Ukraine posted on Facebook about its organising an international forum on “Post-Traumatic Growth of Women Affected by Sexual Violence in the Context of Prolonged War – Let’s Go, Sisters!”

The other three organisations were more inventive. The Feminist Workshop held sessions of an activity called “Worshipping Lilith,” during which women gather and discuss various gender-related issues and personal experiences, including sexual violence, in an anonymous environment. Their series of presentations called the “(ir)relevant” project analysed various forms of violence during war, including sexual violence used by Russia’s military (GRUZINA, 2022). Every month up until Spring 2024, they posted a video on YouTube in a series called “Ukrainian Feminist Kitchen,” a project during which Feminist Workshop activists from all around the world – meeting via Zoom – cook traditional Ukrainian dishes and discuss feminist subjects. They argue that these kinds of interactions make it easier to discuss sensitive and difficult subjects. Similarly, in Fall 2022, FemSolution introduced a project called “How are you” on their Instagram page. Through a Google Form link, women and queer individuals were welcomed to share their problems, emotional states, and worries anonymously. This project aimed to create a guilt-free space where women could openly express their feelings, complaints, arguments, anger, or happiness, allowing them to release the internal pain they were experiencing.

In 2022, working with experts in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Project Keshet introduced a gender-responsive SMS communications network called FemSMS. FemSMS shares trauma-informed messages with women across the nation, and these are followed by surveys. The surveys indicated that the women liked the messages and felt seen and supported. This creates a sense of community in which women can feel comfortable responding to their trauma and experience. As they explained to us, the idea was not to “bombard” women suffering from the war with assumptions that they were victims of sexual violence, but to create opportunities for them to process what has happened to them and their nation, and reach out for support themselves.

(4) Five organisations (and the Mozhu network) were involved in providing legal support connected to CRSV. WICC started doing so soon after the war started in 2014. In 2015, they developed what they called a “soldier’s card” to advocate for gender equality in the military and another informational card on how to prevent violence among military personnel. That year, WICC, along with the Ukrainian Helsinki Union for Human Rights, also organised an expedition to the Donetsk region to document cases of CRSV.

In 2016, the Ukrainian Women’s Fund, with some assistance from WICC and UN Women, supported a research that came to be titled the “Invisible Battalion”; it focused on women’s role in the military in the war on Donbass, and was led by Maria Berlinska. The resulting report was written by Tamara Martsenyuk, Anna Kvit and Ganna Grytsenko. The project was carried out at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. Though the original report does not specifically address sexual violence, the research turned into a prominent advocacy project for Ukrainian women serving in the military (and also a photo project in cooperation with UN Women and then a documentary film). By 2020, the project explicitly included the issue of sexual harassment within the military.

In early 2022, before Russia’s full-scale invasion, WICC (along with Mozhu), was working on assessing the implementation of Ukraine’s Women, Peace, and Security National Action Plan, releasing a report in April which helped initiate an update of the plan through a collaboration between the government and NGOs, especially WICC and the Ukrainian Women’s Fund (MANOILENKO, 2024). Discussions and meetings to update the plan were held in the summer of 2022, with the revision released by the end of the year. The resulting revised National Action Plan elaborated five sets of tasks, two of which were connected to CRSV, namely “detecting and responding to CRSV” and “comprehensive assistance to victims of CRSV.” The “updated NAP... emphasizes the need for specific legal documents to be revised, as suggested by the lawyers involved in the update process, and underscores the importance of comprehensive assistance not only to the survivors but also to their family members and witnesses of these crimes” (IBID., P. 211). After this update, various women’s organisations have been involved in the creation of regional action plans in the regions of Donetsk, Zaporizhia, Poltava, Kyiv, and Kirovograd, including

WICC, SEMA Ukraine, JurFem, and Women's Perspectives (and also the network Mozhu and the Latvian organisation Marta; see http://plsz.gov.ua/info_scr/baza_rivn_prav.html).

After the 2022 full-scale invasion, SEMA Ukraine started documenting testimonies about the crimes of Russia's forces in Ukraine and directing efforts to prosecute the persons guilty of sexual violence. In a project called "RESILIENT TOGETHER: improving the system of response to war-related sexual violence – October 2022 – April 2024," the Ukrainian Women's Fund, collaborating with JurFem and La Strada, worked to create a legal framework to respond to CRSV. JurFem posted a series of articles covering legal issues, including laws regarding compensation and legal justice for the violence caused by Russia. Additionally, JurFem.ua has a section on its website dedicated to "Wartime Violence" and legal issues related to it. They provide analytical materials and information about the legal framework of CRSV in Ukraine.

(5) By 2022, seven of the ten organisations were bringing attention to issues connected to CRSV. La Strada, the Ukrainian affiliate of a transnational anti-trafficking effort, expanded its awareness campaigns to include all sorts of CRSV. For instance, they often posted related articles such as "Gender-Based and Domestic Violence in All-out War: Key Challenges and Powerful Countermeasures" (Dec 2022) and webinars like "Sexual Violence in War Conditions: Raising the Awareness of Journalists" (Aug 2022). In April 2024, La Strada Ukraine launched a campaign on their social media titled "Darkness will not hide violence" to bring awareness to the issue of domestic violence amidst the war. As for FemSolution, its members actively posted on the organisation's Instagram page regarding sexual violence during the war. Additionally, in 2023 they engaged in street activism, spreading posters in public spaces about abuse towards women and providing information on where women could seek help.

The Ukrainian Women's Fund, in partnership with Women's Health and Family Planning and the Ukrainian Foundation for Public Health, piloted a project in 5 regions (including occupied territories) – Zaporizhzhia, Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv, Donetsk, and Luhansk – called "Strengthening the Humanitarian Response to Violence against Women in Conflict-Affected Areas." The project aimed to distribute information regarding

gender-based violence to vulnerable population groups and to educate about and raise awareness of gender-based violence issues and resources available for survivors of violence via social media.

Some initiatives crossed the barrier into everyday life. For instance, on April 24, 2024, the Feminist Workshop posted a post on Facebook about their “Denim Day,” during which they wore jeans in support of women who have suffered from sexual violence and to highlight that one’s clothes, makeup, or behaviour are never a valid reason for sexual harassment. In their post, they explained that this internationally recognised day originated after a 1998 ruling by the Italian Supreme Court which overturned a rape conviction on the grounds that the victim’s jeans were so tight that she must have helped remove them, which suggested consent. This decision sparked global outrage and led to a protest by female members of the Italian Parliament, who wore jeans in solidarity with the victim. In 1999, Peace Over Violence established Denim Day in the United States to raise awareness of sexual violence and challenge victim-blaming. The Feminist Workshop concluded their post with some useful resources, including a hotline for victims of domestic violence. Several of these organisations, including Project Keshet, also regularly participate in the UN’s 16 Days to End Violence Against Women.

The most internationally visible was FEMEN. As indicated on their website, since 2014, reacting to the invasion of Ukraine has been part of their feminist activism. For example, on July 27, 2017, FEMEN activist Anna Aallein held a protest called “Putin kills” against the Russian aggression. After the 2022 invasion, FEMEN was more active. On August 22, 2022, in Berlin, their protestors walked topless with the slogan “Gas Embargo Now” during the Federal Government’s Open Day event. They interrupted German Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s speech to bring awareness to how buying gas from Russia is financing the war in Ukraine. In March 2022, FEMEN also organised a protest in Tbilisi, Georgia called “Stop Putin’s War” to protest against Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The protesters insisted that there should be a “clos[ing of] the sky over Ukraine” and that the sanctions against Russia should be more aggressive. Although FEMEN’s Ukraine actions did not contain explicit mentions of CRSV, its activists have been vocal in other ways about it. On their blog – in a post titled “From Hell to Hell” published on March 13, 2022 – FEMEN take

a strong stand against CRSV:

Currently, hundreds of thousands of women are fleeing Ukraine to escape the war. They are not only fleeing death and destruction, they are also fleeing sexualized violence. Rape is an integral part of war. As with all rape, it is about power, dominating the woman, breaking her, bringing shame upon her. In war, rape is targeted to weaken the morale of the enemy and destabilize society.

As FEMEN's original focus was on sexual exploitation of Ukrainian women, CRSV was on their minds.

This analysis shows that by the end of 2022, the breadth of the Ukrainian feminist organising against CRSV was remarkable. While some of the projects seem less dynamic and less mutual than the kinds we were looking for, most were responsive to what the feminist groups were seeing on the ground, and some were particularly inventive. These achievements are even more remarkable given that the activists were themselves in the middle of the brutal war.

ADAPTATION BEFORE AND AFTER 2022

While we acknowledge the limitations of this research conducted in 2024, it seems that much of the organisations' responsiveness and inventiveness did not appear until after Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. Six out of these ten organisations existed before 2014, but based on their online presence, it seemed that only three or four of those six (WICC, the Ukrainian Women's Fund, La Strada Ukraine, and maybe FEMEN) took the war seriously as an issue of gendered violence before 2022. The only organisation that directly focused on CRSV before 2022 was SEMA Ukraine. We recognise that looking at the organisations' online presence a decade out might not accurately capture the whole story. However, our examination of these organisations reveals that there was a groundswell of attention to the issue of CRSV in the spring of 2022, when horrible incidents of the first phase of the full-scale invasion came to light. All these feminist organisations paused their initial plans and switched gears to put their efforts into collectively fighting against Russian aggression and helping Ukrainian women.

By the time we started this project in January 2024, the attention to CRSV had begun to wane. This partially reflects the dynamics of the news cycle, but also as a representative from Latvia's Embassy in Ukraine put it to us, by then, everyone had been affected indirectly, if not directly, by the war. The violence and horror are almost universal even as the impact is gendered.

INTERSECTIONALITY

We did not find any conflicts over language use or about the various regions in the feminist response to CRSV, which reflected the shifts in feminist activism and society more broadly. All these entities used Ukrainian or English, not Russian, to communicate online. Instead, we found inclusiveness, especially in Project Keshet. As a feminist Jewish organisation, they have been supporting Jewish women and their communities in Ukraine in much of their work. But with the full-scale war – as indicated by their humanitarian assistance and psychological support projects – their focus was broadened to all Ukrainians even as they continued in some of their Jewish women-focused initiatives. In this way, Project Keshet was intersectional, helping to create a new inclusive Ukrainian political identity in seemingly different ways than the other organisations. We note that Project Keshet's actions also helped undermine Putin's claim, made when he launched the war, that he was fighting Nazis. While this is outside of our study, we also note that other groups have been providing support for LGBTQ people who experienced sexual violence because of the war (^{LGBT} HUMAN RIGHTS NASH SVIT CENTER, 2022; PROJECTOR, 2023). In these ways, these women's and feminist groups in Ukraine are helping to conceptualise "peace as plural" (POTAPOVA & O'SULLIVAN, 2024).

DISCUSSION: THE IMPACT OF UKRAINIAN FEMINIST RESPONSES

From the perspective of February 2026, the strong feminist organising after 2022 has significantly improved the state response to CRSV. In the first few months of the full-scale war, the scale and severity of the Russian forces' sexual violence in areas like Bucha and Irpin led the Ukrainian government – most notably Lyudmyla Denisova, the Ombudsperson for Human Rights – to express their outrage publicly. However, various

journalists and activists, including the “whole team from JurFem,” criticised her comments as sensationalist, disrespectful to the survivors, and not always supported by clear evidence, and she was dismissed by Ukraine’s parliament in May (DETECTOR MEDIA, 2022). Over the next several months, Ukraine’s Office of the Prosecutor General developed a special division dedicated to CRSV, and since then, the Ukrainian government has been proactive in documenting and prosecuting sexual violence committed by Russia’s armed forces (PRONCZUK & PETRICZKO, 2024). In 2022, Ukraine also revised a second National Action Plan for the UN Security Council’s Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security as the first country in the world to do so during an active armed conflict (MANOILENKO, 2024), and it has been implementing it since then. Through the collective engagement of femocrats such as the Government Commissioner for Gender Equality Policy Kateryna Levchenko and women’s organisations, the new National Action Plan took defining and responding to CRSV much more seriously this time, and Ukraine ratified the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combatting Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (the “Istanbul Convention”). Ukrainian feminist scholars have labelled these policies as part of “the persistence of gender-transformative (feminist) policies during the war” (STRELNYK AT AL., 2025, P. 1, SEE ALSO LEVCHENKO, 2024). This is a remarkable contrast to the Ukrainian government’s failure to support survivors or prosecute CRSV experienced by Ukrainians between 2014 and 2022 (AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, 2020, PP. 61–64).

In November 2024, the Ukrainian state took on new and unprecedented responsibilities to address CRSV as a result of and in coordination with Ukraine’s feminist activism, with the passage of the Law on Legal and Social Protection of the Rights of Victims of Sexual Violence Related to the Aggression of the Russian Federation Against Ukraine, and Urgent Interim Reparations (the Bardina Law) (VERKHOVNA RADA OF UKRAINE, 2024B, SEE ALSO ANOSOVA, 2025). The law – the first in the world to offer reparations during an ongoing conflict – officially recognises survivors of CRSV, providing them with legal status and access to state-funded services, such as medical treatment, legal aid, psychological care, and even financial assistance (VERKHOVNA RADA OF UKRAINE, 2024A). It reinforces Ukraine’s commitments under the Istanbul Convention and the Women, Peace, and Security agenda, but also indicates Ukraine’s efforts to align with international standards on victim-centred justice advocated by the feminist activists. JurFem was

not only a legal contributor to the Bardina Law, but also an implementation partner. In its February 2025 update on its website, JurFem (2025A) notes that its members were actively involved in developing the law's provisions. Moreover, they emphasise that "[l]aw itself is, of course, not enough." Effective implementation depends on bylaws and procedures that set up the Commission and structured referral pathways for CRSV survivors. JurFem also participated in a strategic session in February 2025, which was co-organised by the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine and the Global Fund for Survivors with the support of multiple organisations (IBID., 2025A). During the session, the organisations drafted the subordinate regulations and practical steps needed to effectively implement the Bardina Law.

A year later, the Global Survivors Fund (2025), a transnational organisation that has been promoting reparations for CRSV, published an impact report on the implementation of the Bardina Law, which entered into force in June 2025. They found that the first six months showed that reparations can work during war, not only afterwards: 654 survivors received interim compensation, with more applications still pending, and "the biggest verified registry" of CRSV cases in Ukraine was created (IBID., p. 14). At the same time, the Global Survivors Fund agreed with JurFem's opinion and stated that the effective implementation of the law requires proper protocols to run the Commission, staff training, and suitable funding (IBID., p. 17). Finally, in its impact report, the Global Survivors Fund stressed that follow-through is essential because survivors could otherwise lose trust in a programme that was carefully built and earned (IBID., p. 16). All these reforms – occurring during and after the increase in feminist activism – indicate that the Ukrainian feminist mobilisation led to more government responsiveness, not less.

Importantly, the NGO responses did not take away from the self organising of survivors of CRSV but foster it. In December of 2024, according to their Instagram page, some women survivors-activists founded an organisation specifically for women survivors of conflict-related trauma, including sexual violence, called Let's Act, Sisters! (Numo Sestry), which grew out of their making of a film of the same name that was shown at an international forum that SEMA Ukraine had organised in July of the same year. This grassroots initiative hit the ground running, regularly organising educational forums and resources, film screenings, and advocacy

campaigns that focus on survivors' voices, their healing, and raising public awareness of CRSV. In addition to this awareness raising, they provide roadmaps and other useful resources as well, including educational materials, and up-to-date news on laws and help for victims of CRSV. It is also worth mentioning the organisation Alumni, which was founded to support male survivors of captivity and torture, though its focus falls outside the scope of women's organisations.

As Ukrainian scholar-activist Iulia Anosova (personal communication, May 15, 2025) pointed out to us, it is important to recognise that these women's and feminist organisations did not work without international support. Most crucial were the Survivor Relief Centres that were set up in cooperation with the UN Population Fund in 2022 to address a variety of war-related issues, including CRSV, and which were located in 12 cities and three mobile units by 2024 (UNITED NATIONS POPULATION FUND, N.D.). In 2023, this project was augmented with an online platform called Aurora, a free and anonymous service for survivors of CRSV that aims to provide professional psychological support (UNFPA UKRAINE, 2023). There was also financial and legal support from the European Union and the Council of Europe as well as many individual European countries. International human rights advocates such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have worked since 2022 on examining the situation in Ukraine, including Russia's CRSV. CRSV in Ukraine has also been a focus for the United Kingdom-based thinktank Chatham House.

However, we also note that prominent transnational women's organisations were not able to successfully respond to Ukraine's post-invasion needs. These included the European networks WAVE and the European Women's Lobby.⁸ While activists and groups from places that had been under Soviet control have been more likely to be sympathetic to Ukraine, transnational peace organisations, such as CodePink and a coalition of peace activists who wrote a 2022 manifesto, continue to be blind to Russia's colonialism, supporting peace at all costs (FEMINIST ANTI-WAR RESISTANCE, 2022; JOHNSON, 2023). We did not find evidence of a Ukrainian affiliate of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the main driver of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda.⁹ That Ukrainian feminists were able to achieve what they did without these transnational feminist groups' support makes their achievements even more remarkable.

Finally, while gender-based violence remains a prominent focus of international attention, the original focus on CRSV did not limit the international attention only to this issue, which was a concern for some critics. The UN Women's (2025) three-year review of the gender-related issues in Ukraine highlights women's agency and points to "rising unemployment; decreased decision-making power; greater domestic burdens; and a severe mental health crisis." Similarly, the OECD's (CESCA ET AL., 2025) analysis calls for women to be central to Ukraine's reconstruction, noting women's strengths in entrepreneurship, local governance, and serving in the military, while highlighting the problems of gender-based violence, the gender pay gap, unemployment, and "unpaid care responsibilities." This expansiveness, we argue, is a result of the insistence of Ukrainian feminists.

CONCLUSION: INSIGHTS FOR THE STUDY OF GENDER AND VIOLENCE

Our study shows the prompt, inventive, and wide-ranging responses of Ukrainian feminist organisations to CRSV, especially after the full-scale invasion in 2022. Despite many obstacles, especially Russia's continued attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, the organisations' leaders transformed their organisations, exemplifying resilience, solidarity, and adaptability. Ukrainian feminists, prioritising inclusiveness and cooperation, have played a vital role in documenting war crimes and advocating for women's rights, while also addressing the immediate needs of women affected by war. We argue that this responsiveness contributed to new legal frameworks and notable government reforms without undermining the self organising of survivors. Given the other feminist and queer organising in Ukrainian society, including that related to women in the military, their activism did not forestall attention to other gender-related issues or the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people, or cast women as only victims, and in the last few years, survivors have organised themselves. In sum, in the middle of a full-scale invasion, Ukrainians created a multifaceted network of support for survivors of CRSV, successfully navigating a complex normative and funding environment given the need for international support for the war efforts, with no evidence that they undermined other causes.

This research contributes to the scholarly discussion of the transformation in Ukraine's civil society after the Revolution of Dignity.

The common wisdom until 2014 was that Ukraine, like other states recovering from Soviet-imposed state socialism, had a weak civil society, including the women's and feminist portion. The success of Ukrainian women's and feminist organisations in addressing the mass sexual violence of Russia's war, enlisting international support, and compelling government reforms, demonstrates a strong civil society, especially given the context of the largest land-war in Europe since World War II. While shared experiences of Soviet control still shape international feminist solidarities, this research contributes to the growing wisdom that postcommunism is no longer an important framework for Ukraine. This research also provides further evidence that the Russian language is no longer an important cleavage in Ukraine's society and that, even during martial law, Ukrainian organisations can continue to democratise the state.

Most broadly, this study contributes to studies of gender-based violence from the perspective of Ukraine. This article stakes a claim for the importance of including the violence that results from war as an issue that domestic activists work against. In scholarship, CRSV has mostly been seen as the province of transnational activists, perhaps partly because of the divide within political science between the fields of comparative politics and international relations. Using a more comparative politics approach as we do here makes visible the enormous efforts of Ukrainian feminists to use the available international norms connected to CRSV in a way that best suits them. While these norms remain more limited than what is called for by a Ukrainian decolonial feminist perspective, there is also agency in how the activists use and reframe them strategically. Norms are continually contested in transnational arenas, but also by activists as they attempt to localise them for their own contexts. These efforts by Ukrainian feminists demonstrate that there is more flexibility in the Women, Peace, and Security agenda, at least for a country on the margins of Europe, than was suggested by the most critical of the critics. At the same time, given the uphill battle that the feminists had to fight to expand the norms, including against many transnational feminists, this study also points out how much these international normative regimes and transnational women's peace networks still need to be decolonised when it comes to Central-Eastern Europe.

ENDNOTES

- 1 This book was part of an EU funded project titled "Let's stand together: Improving the system of support for victims of war-related sexual violence," a collaboration between several of the women's organisations we discuss below (the Ukrainian Women's Fund, La Strada-Ukraine, and JurFem).
- 2 The Rome Statute explicitly included sexual violence among crimes against humanity and war crimes: "Rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity." Ukraine signed the Rome Statute in 2000, but only ratified it in 2024 (Russia signed but never ratified the Rome Statute, and then withdrew its signature in 2016).
- 3 As a member of the UN, Ukraine is subject to all the UN Security Council resolutions. Russia as a permanent member of the UN Security Council has voted for all of the Women, Peace, and Security resolutions.
- 4 The UN unit on CRSV conceptualises CRSV as the following: "rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, forced marriage and any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity perpetrated against women, men, girls or boys that is directly or indirectly linked to a conflict" (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2024).
- 5 A big part of Ukrainian women's response to the war starting in 2014 was their joining the military "as volunteers, journalists, medical staff, and military staff, including in combat positions" (Philipps & Martsenyuk, 2023, p. 4). From December 2021 to December 2022, the number of women in the military almost doubled (Ibid.).
- 6 We note that Anosova (personal communication, May 15, 2025) told us that, based on her experience working with them, La Strada-Ukraine was also providing psychological support via a hotline as well as some humanitarian aid after 2022. We did not find any discussion of this in their online activities, however. She also added that in 2019–2020, La Strada-Ukraine developed a course with the National School of Judges on prosecution of sexual violence, with one of the four modules of the course being on CRSV.
- 7 Despite its having a similar name and focus as the International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) for Women's Rights, Peace, and Security (<https://icanpeacework.org/>), we were told that Ukraine's Mozhu (ICAN) network is not affiliated with it.
- 8 Hrycak made this point at the 2024 convention for the Association for the Study of Nationality. Also, WAVE's (2025a, p. 25) efforts "responding to gender-based violence during war and in post-conflict settings" have included a toolkit (developed in 2022) and a manual (in 2023), with participants from Ukraine's Women's Perspectives and other groups from Armenia, Georgia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. But in its description of its priorities moving forward, there is no mention of Ukraine and this massive war in Europe (WAVE, 2025b).
- 9 We did find a page on Ukraine on the WILPF website: <https://www.wilpf.org/focus-countries/ukraine/>.

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Websites of organisations in our sample that address CRSV in Ukraine

FEMEN, <https://femen.org/>
Facebook: FEMEN; Instagram: [femen_movement](#)

Feminist Workshop [Feministychna Maysternya], <https://femwork.org/en/>
Facebook: Феміністична майстерня / Feminist Workshop; Instagram: [femwork-shop](#); YouTube: Феміністична Майстерня; Telegram: Феміністичні події у Львові. Феміністична майстерня; Patreon: Feminist Workshop

FemSolution
Instagram: [@femsolution_org](#)

Let's Go, Sisters! [Numo, Sestry!]
Facebook: Нумо, сестри! and Нумо сестри (an account that was closed on April 28, 2025 due to technical issues); Instagram: [@numo.sisters](#)

La Strada Ukraine [Ukrayina La Strada], <https://la-strada.org.ua/en/>
Facebook: Ла Страда-Україна/La Strada-Ukraine; Instagram: [@lastradaukraine](#);
YouTube: La Strada Ukraine

Network of Ukrainian Men Who Survived Captivity And Torture (Alumni) [Merezha choloivikiv Ukraїny, yakі perezhly polon i tortury (Alumni)]
Facebook: Мережа чоловіків України, які пережили полон і тортури.

Project Keshar [Proekt Keshar], <https://www.projectkeshar.org/> and <https://www.projectkeshar.org/the-womens-opportunity-fund>
Facebook: Project Keshar; Instagram: [projectkesharusa](#); YouTube: Project Keshar

SEMA Ukraine, <http://semaukraine.org.ua/>
Facebook: Sema Ukraine; Twitter; Instagram: [sema_ukraine](#); YouTube: [sema_ukraine](#); Twitter: [@SEMAUkraine](#)

Ukrainian Women's Fund [Ukrayins'kyy Zhinochyy Fond (UZHD)], <https://uwf.org.ua/en/>
Facebook: Український Жіночий Фонд / Ukrainian Women's Fund; Instagram: [ukrainianwomensfund](#)

Ukrainian Women Lawyers Association's Jurfem, <https://jurfem.com.ua/en/home-page-2/>
Facebook: Асоціація жінок-юристок України "ЮрФем"; Instagram: [@jurfem.ua](#);
Linkedin: Ukrainian Women-Lawyers Association "JurFem"; Telegram: ЮрФем;
TikTok: [@jurfem.ua](#)

Women's Perspectives' Woman for Woman [Zhinochi perspektvy (Zhinka dlya Zhinky)], <https://www.woman4woman.org.ua/about>
Facebook: Жінка для Жінки; Instagram: [woman4woman.ua](#)

Women's Information Consultative Center (WICC) [Informatsiyno-Konsul'tatyvnyy Zhinochyy Tsent (IKZHTS)], <https://wicc.net.ua/en>
Facebook: Інформаційно-консультативний жіночий центр / WICC

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