



Teaching Gender Studies during the Russo-Ukrainian War

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Abstract

Being a refugee scholar in 2022-2024, I wanted to make Ukrainian democratic society more known from a global perspective and Ukrainian studies more visible in broader area studies. Informed solidarity and understanding are needed in this situation. It's a very challenging task to work on gender equality implementation in your country when the major issue is surviving during the war. This paper analyses the personal experience of teaching gender sociology to both Ukrainian and international students. It reflects upon the challenges and opportunities of conducting research in Ukrainian society during the war as part of teaching. Useful resources on gender and war in Ukraine that appeared after the full-scale invasion, are overviewed. The agency of Ukrainian women who participate in the resistance is underlined.

Keywords

gender studies, teaching, Ukrainian studies, Ukrainian society, Russo-Ukrainian war, university, resistance, informed solidarity

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Introduction

As a public sociologist and gender scholar, I know that researching gender and war, presenting research results, and teaching on these issues during almost ten years of war is a challenging task (Martsenyuk et al., 2024). When Russia attacked Ukraine on February 24, 2022, academic life and other social activities changed drastically. Scholars who either stayed in their cities or were forced to evacuate gained participant observation experience of war firsthand (Kostiuchenko & Martsenyuk, 2024). Their teaching and research were interrupted, but they continued to reflect on social, political, and economic events in Ukraine.

In April 2022, the Chief Editor of *Nature Human Behaviour*, Stavroula Kousta, sent me an email titled “Invitation to contribute an opinion editorial”. After thinking for a while, I decided to use this opportunity to share my experience of evacuation from Kyiv. As a result, I wrote about the full-scale invasion and the importance of Ukrainian studies in the understanding of the Ukrainian people’s resistance to this terrible war. My first opinion piece, “As a refugee scholar, I want to make Ukrainian studies more visible” (Martsenyuk, 2022b) was published. For around two years, I stayed mainly in Germany (with travels to Ukraine and other countries) to accomplish my mission – enhancing the visibility of Ukrainian studies and Russia’s war against Ukraine. I participated in many conferences on Ukraine, gave interviews to scholars and journalists, and presented my research results about different forms of Ukrainian women’s resistance in the war in different public lectures and even taught some courses on Ukraine at German Universities (Martsenyuk 2022a, 2023a; Phillips & Martsenyuk, 2023). I had fellowship support first from the Eastern European Institute, Free University Berlin, and a bit later from Leuphana University and Volkswagen Stiftung in Germany. At the same time, I continued online teaching at the Department of Sociology for Kyiv-Mohyla Academy for our students who were both in Ukraine but also in different countries.

“Promotion of deeper knowledge about Ukraine” (Kuzemska, 2024) and “informing the international community about the genocidal war in Ukraine” (Lavrysh et al., 2022, p. 6) are also mentioned among the major tasks that Ukrainian displaced scholars and teachers strive to implement. In parallel with the military aspects, the Russo-Ukrainian war is also being waged in the spheres of science and education (Martsenyuk, 2023b). Universities and in general academia are used by Russian propaganda as so-called “soft power” for influencing Western societies. There is a lack of knowledge about Ukrainian society and its history (Khromeychuk, 2022). Khrystyna Semeryn observes that “the decolonization of Slavic and Eastern European studies has become a prominent topic of discussion amid Russia’s war against Ukraine” (Semeryn, 2024, para. 1). Moreover, Ukrainian studies can potentially transform European and Slavic area studies (Dudko, 2023). In her article on the Ukrainian subject and hierarchies of knowledge production, Bohdana Kurylo pays attention to “the need to redirect attention to the oft-overlooked realm of the everyday and the lived experiences of Ukrainians” (Kurylo, 2023).

Scholars write about “The war in Ukraine as an opportunity to teach critical thinking” (Rudolph & Tan, 2022). Using the gender viewpoint analytically can help us understand Ukraine and the strong resistance of Ukrainian society (Martsenyuk, 2023c). Ukrainian women are among those who participate in both military and non-military resistance (Phillips & Martsenyuk, 2023). They fight in the frontline, provide medical support,

volunteer for the armed forces, assist refugees, organise demonstrations, debunk misinformation and disinformation, coordinate monitoring of war crimes, and more.

At the same time, scholars have labelled the Russo-Ukrainian war "a war on gender order" particularly, the war of Russia against gender equality in Ukrainian society (Kratochvíl & O'Sullivan, 2023). For example, scholar of international politics Jenny Mathers points out: "While Russia's emphasis on the masculine character of its armed forces and the marked absence of women soldiers are important demonstrations of Moscow's commitment to a traditional social order, the presence of growing numbers of women in Ukraine's military demonstrates Kyiv's commitment to a very different type of state and society" (Mathers, 2023). She also pays attention to the masculine nature of Russian institutions: "Putin's idea of a strong state requires an alpha male leader because the state itself is highly gendered. The most important, most powerful, and most generously funded institutions of the state are those that are most closely associated with masculinity and the same sort of tough and ruthless behaviour that Putin celebrates — most notably the armed forces and the other security services" (Mathers, 2023).

Results of the public opinion surveys of Ukrainian society demonstrate that after Russia's full-scale invasion, it is moving to more egalitarian values (i.e. gender equality, respect for diversity, support of the registered partnerships for same-sex couples) (Martsenyuk, 2022a). That is why it is very important to teach gender studies in Ukrainian society when you teach about Ukraine. I will share my experience of doing this since the full-scale invasion.

Teaching gender studies via conducting research

For 15 years, I have been teaching the course "Introduction to Gender Studies" which is obligatory for third-year sociology majors and elective for all other students. Even though this is rather a basic course in gender studies, during the last few years I have been involving students in conducting gender research in cooperation with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or public authorities. For example, in 2020 students and I conducted gender monitoring of the Kyiv City State Administration; in 2021 in cooperation with the organisation "Ecoaction", we undertook the study "Gender aspects of environmental activism in Ukraine".

After the full-scale invasion, during online teaching at the beginning of 2023, I decided not to change the research approach to the course "Introduction to Gender Studies". My former student Olena Dudko worked as a gender advisor for Plan International (an organisation that works with children and girls in 80 countries) and proposed to join the international study about Ukrainian adolescent girls in times of war. Along with more than 60 students enrolled in this class, we conducted a sociological study on the situation of girls during the war in Ukraine. This research is part of Plan International's study "Adolescent Girls in Crisis", which aims to raise awareness of the situation faced by girls who suffered from the war in Ukraine, and those who are currently seeking asylum in Poland and other countries. After four months of work (January – April 2023) we published the results as "The situation of girls and young women in a humanitarian crisis: on the example of the war in Ukraine" (Martsenyuk & Dudko, 2023) which is available online in the Ukrainian language.

Since "the full-scale war in Ukraine affects the whole society, including all social processes, institutions, and practices" (Strelnyk, 2023, p. 93), it was important to pay

attention to the vulnerability of young women in Ukraine. Youth (among them girls) constitute a significant part of the population and have great potential for development and change. However, young people are a particularly vulnerable population and therefore also face many challenges and problems, such as unemployment, social exclusion, and depression. The number of those who need help of some kind has increased. NGOs play an important role in providing support to young people and helping them solve social and psychological problems (Martsenyuk & Dudko, 2023, p. 68). This empirical information is a part of local knowledge production. In the scholarship about ethical knowledge production, we read: “Prioritising local voices in research about the war can therefore aid in ensuring high-quality data, in addition to challenging the reproduction and exacerbation of Western-centric knowledge and entrenched perspectives on (Russia’s war against) Ukraine” (Howlett & Lazarenko, 2023).

But I was recently disappointed when I finally saw the research report “Adolescent Girls in Crisis: Voices from Ukraine, Poland and Romania” (Plan International, 2024). Our text was not used enough, especially the empirical material. Among the authors of the final report are mainly foreign names, so, local voices are not prioritised. And of course, I was upset by the language that international organisations use: “crisis” instead of Russo-Ukrainian war or Russia’s full-scale invasion. I understand that international NGOs try to be “neutral” but is it possible in the current situation?

To sum up, despite all challenges, conducting research on gender issues in Ukrainian society during learning could help students in developing their professional and networking skills, teamwork, critical thinking and become more sensitive towards diversity and discrimination.

Teaching gender issues in the Ukrainian society for the international audience: Overview of major challenges

During the full-scale invasion, teaching is also becoming a form of educational activism. You have to explain to the audience—particularly an international audience—controversial issues about Ukraine and Russia’s full invasion. Of course, you as a scholar are doing it via articles and interviews but also teaching. As a result, you are supposed to explain the broader geopolitical context; for example, “10 facts you should know about Russian military aggression against Ukraine” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2019).

While teaching gender issues after the full-scale invasion, I try to underline women’s agency. The stereotype of Ukrainian women as (only) victims of war is challenged: “In reality, women also play a key role in resistance movements, both at the frontline and on the home front” (Feminist Initiative Group, 2022). Writing about Ukrainian women and war, scholars pay attention to the issues of “freedom of expression” (Zychowicz, 2023) and women’s agency (Phillips & Martsenyuk, 2023) in struggles for human rights. At the same time, Ukrainian scholars are not hiding gender-based problems and remain critical of gender relations in Ukrainian society (Martsenyuk & Dudko, 2023; Phillips & Martsenyuk, 2023; Shevtsova, 2024; Strelnyk, 2023).

In autumn-winter 2022, I was teaching a guest course for master’s students, “Constructing Gender in the Ukrainian Society,” at Magdeburg University. The teaching mobility between my home University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy and Otto-von-Guericke Universität Magdeburg was agreed upon before the full-scale invasion. Since I had evacuated to Germany, together with Dr. Tetyana Samostyan we decided to arrange on-campus lectures

for students. The students were mainly from Germany, but also from Ukraine and other countries, with backgrounds in social sciences and humanities. The level of knowledge of Ukrainian society and Ukrainian studies varied that also added to the challenge of selecting proper topics and literature for readings and discussions. However, there was a lot of interest in Ukrainian society and gender relations in it.

As for the discussion on gender relations in Ukrainian society, I chose such topics to cover gender aspects in different spheres:

- “Beauty will save the world”?: women and men in the politics in Ukraine;
- “My body is my manifesto!”: performative feminist activism and FEMEN as a case study;
- Gender-based violence and online campaign #IAmNotAfraidToSayIt in Ukraine;
- “Glory to heroines”: women’s participation in the Euromaidan protests of 2013-2014;
- “A nation exists as long as there are men ready to fight for it”: men, and masculinities on Euromaidan protests and war in Ukraine;
- “Girls, let’s close the sky”: women’s resistance in Russia’s war in Ukraine.

Previously, I taught several courses in gender studies for international students. Particularly, in 2014, when I was a German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) professor at the European University Viadrina, I developed syllabi for three courses: “Gender Politics in Ukraine: Challenges of Europeanisation,” “Feminism in Eastern Europe: between Global and Local,” and “Masculinities and Men's Studies in Eastern Europe”. But in that case, I was asked to teach mainly about Eastern Europe – Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia as former Soviet Union countries that are perceived in area studies as countries with similar experience. In my paper “(De-)Gendering Ukraine: Understanding social change in a post-Soviet society” (Martsenyuk, 2023c), I conclude:

It is important to change the perception of studying Ukrainian and Russian societies under the common post-Soviet umbrella. As the data from the last few years demonstrate, these societies are taking different ways. Moreover, the empirical data collected in Ukraine in recent years, particularly on gender equality and diversity, provides an opportunity to rethink the Western concepts of gender and nation-building as well as gender and war. For Ukrainian women and men, their national identity is important, as they have been fighting for their independence for centuries. At the same time, people with strong national identity are supporting ideas of gender equality and rights for LGBT people.

So, in 2022 for teaching about gender relations in Ukrainian society, I tried to provide mainly literature on Ukraine (not about the whole region, where usually studies on Russia dominate). Moreover, I also wanted to highlight the work of Ukrainian scholars from different disciplines. That was not an easy task, even though there are some resources like “A Collection of Anglophone Literature on Gender Issues in Ukraine” from “Gender in Details” (Kristiansen, 2019) and *Gender, Resources: Rethinking Eastern Europe* (Lviv Center for Urban History, 2024). Among the most known and used books devoted to the gender issues in Ukrainian society and culture are *Gender, Politics, and Society in Ukraine* (Hankivsky & Salnykova, 2012) and *New Imaginaries: Youthful Reinvention of Ukraine's Cultural Paradigm* (Rubchak, 2015). Both of them are written and edited mainly by

Ukrainian scholars who are experts in their fields of study. Moreover, some sources on women writers, women in the military, and women in Crimea could be found in the primary database of Ukrainian studies from the Ukrainian Institute, Harvard University (Ukraïnica, 2024). There is also a smaller amount of research that is connected with masculinity issues during the war; for example, “Understanding of Masculinity and Gender Equality in the Security Sector of Ukraine” (UN Women, 2022).

After the full-scale invasion, some new scholarship and texts on gender and war in Ukraine appeared that could be used in teaching gender studies. In 2022-2023, editors of the feminist research journal *Women's Studies International Forum* arranged a special issue on “Women and the 2022 War in Ukraine” featuring eight articles by Ukrainian and international scholars: on the construction of women’s combatant status, gendering transnational justice, feminised forced migration, women’s agency and resistance, women and disability and others.

Ukrainian scholar Maryna Shevtsova edited and co-authored a book *Feminist Perspective on Russia’s War in Ukraine. Hear Our Voices* (2024). It includes chapters, mainly from Ukrainian scholars, about media images of women (by Olena Strelnyk), men and masculinities on the Euromaidan protests and in the war (by Tamara Martsenyuk and Maryna Shevtsova), LGBTQ+ Soldiers (by Ivan Shmatko and Dafna Rachok), the TerOnlyFans movement (by Dafna Rachok), National action plan on UNHCR 1325 “Women, Peace, and Security” in Ukraine (by Hanna Manoilenko), decolonising feminist visions of peace in Ukraine (by Oksana Potapova and Míla O’Sullivan) and others.

There are several articles about gender issues in the *European Societies* journal's special issue “Understanding Ukrainian Society Before and after the Russian Invasion” (2022–2024), which I was invited to guest edit. These articles include ones about female refugees and “the unique challenges experienced by the members of the Ukrainian LGBTIQ community after leaving the country in the wake of the war” (Martsenyuk et al., 2024, p. 3).

Some useful teaching materials could be also taken from online courses and lectures. Paula-Irene Villa Braslavsky (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich) and Andrea Peto, (CEU Vienna, CEU DI, Budapest) organised the online lecture series “Rethinking War, the Military, and Gender Through the Russian War on Ukraine”. Topics discussed include sexual violence during wartime, media images of women at war, women in the army and shifts in everyday life, national/transnational feminism and the role of gender studies in fostering solidarity, the role of the museum and herstory of war in promoting and upholding women’s rights, homonationalism, and LGBTQ activism during the war (University of New Europe, 2022). It is important that Ukrainian scholars were invited as lecturers to participate. Additionally, Dr. Svitlana Babenko organised an international online course “Rethinking Gender, War, and Peace in the XXIst Century: Ukraine in a Comparative Perspective” that “aims to critically rethink gender studies within the frame of comparative approaches to war and peace with a regional focus on Russia's wars in Ukraine and in the post-USSR region” (Karazin University, 2024).

So, despite the challenges of knowledge production during the full-scale invasion (which continues after more than two years), there is some scholarship and online material about gender and war in Ukraine that should be used to make Ukrainian studies more visible.

Conclusions

During my public speeches of different kinds in front of international audiences I am frequently asked: what do you need in this terrible war situation? My colleagues from Ukraine and I experienced considerable solidarity from the international community, and we are very grateful for it. But we, Ukrainian scholars and activists, ask for more informed solidarity.

I also prepared some suggestions to my international colleagues that are connected with teaching:

- a) incorporate readings referenced in this article into course syllabi;
- b) pursue opportunities to link your students with Ukrainian students in joint research or other activities (to build so called “classroom bridges”);
- c) seek out teaching collaborations with Ukrainian colleagues who have similar interests;
- d) help build databases of primary and secondary resources about gender and Ukraine;
- e) give more attention to gender perspective when you teach about Ukrainian society, history, and culture and the Russo-Ukrainian war;
- f) and, in case you teach about gender and war, pay attention to local Ukrainian voices and the results of Ukrainian scholars' research. “Critical thinking involves a reflective dimension and self-criticism is a necessary element of it” (Rudolph & Tan, 2022, p. 171).

Ukrainian scholars and teachers try to be self-critical but in the situation of survival, they also need understanding and support.

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