

Gendered Perception of Volunteering: Camouflaged Female Volunteer Soldier in Conflict in Eastern Ukraine

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Introduction. The conflict in Ukraine mobilised about 40 thousand volunteers (including independent volunteer units) for fighting the war in Eastern Ukraine that followed Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014. According to estimates, roughly 30–35% of these were women; yet, they remained relatively unseen not only due to legislation in Ukraine and inherent bias, but also lack of representation in the media (as only “boys” fight for freedom). The role of volunteer women in war is also camouflaged under the controversy surrounding the battalions.

Nadia Savchenko's imprisonment in 2016 was seemingly a turning point, as “our Nadia” became a symbol of voluntarism equalling sacrifice in the name of nationalism and motherland; a symbol of resilience and defiance of Ukraine. Nevertheless, neither Savchenko, nor other female volunteers involved in the war in Eastern Ukraine have changed the dominant discourse of volunteer soldiers of Ukraine as masculine.

The research will, therefore, address the question of written discourses on female volunteers in Ukrainian and international electronic mass media space from March 2014 to December 2017.

Aim, Materials and Methods. The aim of the research was to analyse gender differentiation of women in volunteer military formations in Ukrainian (in Russian and English) and international (in Russian, English and French) electronic mass media sources by using post-structuralist discourse analysis (e. g. Baxter (2003), Baker (2013)) from March 2014 to December 2017. This theoretical approach is beneficial as it focuses on language and considers the performativity of identity and gender (Butler, 1990), and the positioning of genders by competing discourses (Foucault) key components of power relationships. The transformative agenda of the approach enables to uncover the gendered idea of volunteering in times of war, and identify how language is used to discriminate between human beings engaging in the act of volunteering, and to challenge the dominant discourse on a volunteer soldier in Ukraine.

Results. The dominant discourses on gender differentiation of females in volunteer military formations in Ukraine were identified and analysed in 30–40 Ukrainian and international electronic mass media sources. They were further analysed by using the post-structuralist approach to discourse analysis, uncovering the way communication shapes the dominant discourse of a volunteer soldier in Ukraine, the differentiated female volunteer soldier and the intertextual relationship of these two competing discourses. A particular emphasis was put on the discourse showing the fluctuation between seemingly emancipated and empowered, and subjugated positions of female volunteer soldiers.

Conclusions. The accounts of women volunteer soldiers in Ukrainian and international media testify that their embodiment is both performed (and sometimes bound to be performed) and constructed. Despite the seemingly emancipatory and empowering discourse on women volunteers, which has increased in visibility both in Ukrainian and international mass media, it remains trapped in masculine militarism, and perpetuates the dominant and essentialised discourse of women volunteers as community-builders, care-givers and mothers. These discourses on female volunteers in the battlefield are rarely separated from their role as a body that carries the capital of resilience (children) of the future of Ukraine.