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FBA Policy Brief

Ukrainian Veterans' Gender-Responsive Reintegration

Jonathan Röders, Elise Olsson, and Dr Erin K McFee

AS THE DIVERSITY OF MILITARY PERSONNEL in Ukraine continues to grow, with women now constituting approximately 8% of total personnel, the need for a gender-responsive approach to reintegration is urgent. Despite official commitments to gender equality, existing reintegration efforts are still largely male-centric, leaving women veterans with insufficient healthcare, legal support, and economic opportunities. At the same time, male veterans face their own gender-specific challenges, particularly the stigma associated with seeking support.

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Policy recommendations



1. **Expand gender-specific healthcare and mental health services:** Strengthen gender-specific healthcare services for both male and female veterans, including mental health support, and implement initiatives to prevent domestic violence in veteran families.
2. **Address systemic bureaucratic barriers for female veterans:** Streamline military discharge processes, enhance legal aid, and implement anti-discrimination policies to facilitate female veterans' reintegration, alongside providing family-friendly workplace reforms and create incentives for employers to hire female veterans
3. **Increase support for and participation of women-led veteran organisations:** Boost funding for women-led organisations and expand their role in shaping national reintegration strategies, ensuring stronger female veteran representation in policymaking.
4. **Increase sex-disaggregated data collection and research:** Prioritise state-funded research on veterans' gender-specific needs to inform the development of tailored, gender-responsive policies.

Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion has led to unprecedented participation of women in Ukraine's defence efforts, with approximately 67,000 women serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU)—roughly 8% of total personnel. More than 10,000 women serve directly on the frontlines, double the number from early 2022. The veteran population is expected to reach 5-8 million, including family members, with women projected to comprise up to 20%.¹ These demographic changes require a reintegration framework that meets the needs of both female and male veterans.

Despite women's significant contributions and the government's formal commitments to gender equality, Ukraine's reintegration frameworks remain heavily male-centric.² Policies and programs still lack sufficient gender-responsive mechanisms, leaving many female veterans without adequate healthcare, legal support, and economic reintegration pathways.³ The absence of a gender-responsive framework not only hinders female veterans' reintegration but also risks reinforcing male privilege within a large, visible and politically influential group, thereby perpetuating structural gender inequalities in the long term.

At the same time, male veterans face distinct gender-related challenges. Stereotypes of aggression or instability can lead to discrimination in the labour market, while dominant norms around masculinity often discourage help-seeking and fuel stigma surrounding mental health. When combined with social and economic pressures, untreated mental health issues and unresolved conflict-related trauma can increase the risk of substance abuse, domestic violence, and suicide. A gender-responsive approach is essential to address these intersecting barriers and to ensure that support systems are accessible, equitable, and attuned to diverse needs.

This brief examines how gender shapes the reintegration landscape in Ukraine, outlining the distinct challenges and opportunities faced by female and male veterans. Where possible, comparative data is provided to illustrate differing experiences. A gender-responsive reintegration framework—which integrates gender equality considerations, addresses disparities, and ensures inclusive policies—is essential for sup-

porting all veterans in their transition, thereby enhancing an inclusive recovery that strengthens national resilience and supports the EU accession.

Bureaucratic Barriers

Women veterans face disproportionate difficulties in obtaining official recognition of their military status. Research indicates that 83% of female veterans struggle with military discharge processes, compared to 51% of men. In comparison, 93% require legal assistance to secure combatant or disability status—significantly higher than the 66% of male veterans facing similar challenges. Inconsistencies in record-keeping compound these obstacles, as many women have historically served in non-traditional or unrecognised roles that do not fit standard administrative categories (e.g., a combat pilot listed as a morale officer or an assault soldier who received a medal for courage listed as a seamstress),⁴ making it harder for them to prove eligibility for benefits aligned with the realities of their service.⁵ Despite shifting attitudes, female soldiers' expanded roles outpace bureaucratic recognition and support.

Accessing legal and social support systems is also more difficult for women veterans. While free legal aid services have expanded, female veterans are more likely than men to cite distrust in these institutions and point out negative past experiences as reasons for avoiding legal assistance. In contrast, male veterans more frequently attribute legal challenges to a simple lack of awareness about available resources. This trust gap reflects broader systemic issues, including the historical exclusion of women from veteran-centred policies and a lack of gender-responsive training for legal and administrative personnel.⁶ Beyond legal status, these bureaucratic barriers create ripple effects across other domains, limiting women's access to medical care, employment support, and financial assistance.

Social and Economic Reintegration Hurdles

Returning to civilian life, women veterans frequently encounter prejudice due to their military background, hindering reintegration. A survey found that 64% of female veterans reported experiencing harassment or discrimination after leaving military service, compared to 49% of male veterans. Addition-

ally, 56% of women, compared to 43% of men, report having fewer civilian friends after service, increasing their reliance on peer networks. This disparity stems from civilian society's expectation that women revert to traditional domestic roles post-service, creating a disconnect between their military identity and civilian expectations. At the same time, female service members often prioritise relationships with fellow service members who share their experiences of combat and post-service stigmatisation, thus narrowing the field of potential relationships.⁷

Persistent stereotypes suggest that women join the military for romance rather than duty or that they are "bad mothers" for prioritising their careers or service. These biases, rooted in cultural norms that define women as caregivers rather than soldiers, undermine their leadership potential. As a result, doubts about their professionalism and capabilities limit their participation, recognition, and successful reintegration.⁸ Despite evolving public perceptions since the full-scale invasion, stereotypes continue to create social barriers that hinder female veterans from translating their service experience into civilian leadership roles and political participation.⁹

Economic reintegration remains a significant hurdle, with women veterans reporting lower income stability and greater dissatisfaction with their economic situation.¹⁰ Gender biases affect post-service employment, making securing appropriate positions difficult in the face of doubts about their motives, service records, and valour.¹¹ Caregiving responsibilities that disproportionately fall on women further restrict workforce participation, particularly for single parents and primary household earners.¹²

These biases lead to higher unemployment rates among women veterans compared to their male counterparts and create financial instability during transition.¹³ The stigma can cause harassment and hostile environments in both military and civilian settings, exacerbating the psycho-emotional strain and negative consequences of both visible and invisible wounds of war. Additionally, these stereotypes limit representation in government and public life, restricting opportunities for civic engagement.¹⁴

Male veterans face their own unique set of challenges in this domain. Potential employers have expressed concerns about emotional instability: over 50% of employers in a 2023 study expressed reluctance to hire veterans due to perceived aggression or PTSD-related risks. Combined with assumptions about their combat-honed skills, discipline, and resilience, these perceptions result in frequently channelling these men into narrow hiring pipelines for roles seen as "safe", such as security, private military, or physically intensive labour.¹⁵ These dynamics both fuel social stigma and limit broader employment opportunities.

These dynamics extends to civilian populations as well. Male returning refugees encounter legal restrictions, societal stigma, and psychological pressures stemming from traditional masculine roles. At the same time, female civilians face heightened risks of gender-based violence and vulnerability to exploitation during displacement. Increasingly, evidence is emerging about sexual assault in the context of the war.¹⁶ Thus, both groups require targeted interventions addressing their specific needs.

Gendered Experiences of Injury and Care

Healthcare systems designed for male veterans often fail to meet the unique needs of female service members. Combat-related injuries like traumatic brain injury manifest differently in women, linking to reproductive dysfunction (e.g., female veterans with post-concussive syndrome showed 1.3-1.64 times higher likelihood of prolonged and heavy menstruation, infertility lasting roughly 1.5 years longer, and 1.64 times greater prevalence of endometrial structural pathology than in unaffected women). At the same time, service-related exposures increase risks of conditions like breast cancer, yet insufficient sex-specific research impedes proper diagnosis and treatment.¹⁷ Despite some program expansions for reproductive health services, persistent barriers, including benefit access difficulties and specialist shortages, continue to undermine female veterans' well-being and reintegration without targeted reforms.¹⁸

Beyond physical injuries, female veterans face heightened psychological challenges stemming from both combat exposure and gender-based violence (including sexual harassment and assault), resulting

in significantly elevated rates of mental health conditions compared to their male counterparts (e.g., depression at approximately 33% higher prevalence, anxiety affecting 37% of women versus 29% of men, and suicidal ideation reported by 15% of female veterans compared to 9% of males).¹⁹ They additionally encounter systemic barriers, including provider shortages trained in gender-specific trauma and cultural stigma.²⁰ Additionally, combat injuries can impact self-image due to societal pressures and expectations.

While women veterans face stereotypes tied to caregiving roles, men encounter expectations of stoicism that discourage help-seeking. These masculine norms deter the acknowledgement of vulnerability, leading to delayed treatment and increased risks of isolation, substance abuse, and suicide.²¹ Male veterans also report higher levels of aggression than both non-veterans and female veterans.²² Meanwhile, the ongoing war appears to reinforce a militarized ideal of masculinity, which may further complicate emotional recovery.²³ Socioeconomic reintegration requires approaches that address these gendered dynamics, creating environments where former service members can leverage their military experience while receiving targeted support to overcome gender-specific barriers to civilian reintegration.

Moreover, the war in Ukraine triggered an alarming 51% spike in domestic violence cases between early 2022 and early 2023, as economic hardship, trauma, and stress exacerbate patterns of gender-based violence, heightening the risk of abuse both at home and in public spaces.²⁴ Though more ongoing data collection is needed, researchers have found that multiple factors compound problems of gender-based violence, with women and girls bearing the brunt, though not the entirety of the crisis: traumatised returning soldiers, economic vulnerability, mobility restrictions during alerts and curfews, displacement-related privacy concerns, and dangerous blackouts. These conditions create a cycle where victims face heightened abuse risks both at home (through forced proximity to abusers and financial dependence) and in public spaces (particularly during power outages affecting streets, transportation, and shelters).²⁵

Women-led civil society organisations in Ukraine are critical in addressing the gaps in reintegration support and fostering a more inclusive environment for female servicemembers and veterans. Groups like the Ukrainian Women Veteran Movement (“VETERANKA”) provide essential services, including educational training, psychological support, and peer-to-peer mentoring. They also distribute gender-specific military gear and hygiene products, ensuring women in the Armed Forces receive the necessary resources. Beyond direct service provision, these organisations advocate for systemic reforms in the rehabilitation and healthcare system to improve care for injured female service members and their families.²⁶

Other organisations, such as Zemliachky and The Invisible Battalion Project, focus on research, advocacy, and public awareness. The Invisible Battalion Project led to the landmark 2018 law that formally allowed women to serve in combat roles—previously prohibited despite women’s actual frontline participation. This important legislation is, nevertheless, just the beginning of dismantling Soviet-era stereotypes that portrayed women primarily as mothers who needed protection from dangerous professions.²⁷ These organisations have also spearheaded campaigns against sexual harassment within the armed forces, achieving policy changes such as the Ministry of Defence featuring female soldiers in official communications and Ukraine’s Defender’s Day being renamed to include feminine forms—symbolic recognition of women’s role in national defence. Additionally, a Memorandum of Cooperation was signed with the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Women Lawyers Association “JurFem”, with project representatives now participating in a working group addressing discrimination and sexual harassment prevention among military personnel.²⁸

Despite their impact, these civil society organisations face significant resource constraints, juggling frontline support for active-duty female servicemembers and reintegration assistance for returning veterans. While international donors often prioritise funding for large organisations based in major cities, community-based NGOs can be better positioned to provide localised, culturally relevant support. However, without sufficient financial backing, these grassroots ini-

tiatives struggle to sustain operations, leaving many female veterans without accessible reintegration services.²⁹

Conclusion

To ensure that Ukraine's reintegration framework is more inclusive, sustainable, and responsive to the realities of its growing and diverse veteran population, it is essential to institutionalize a gender-responsive approach across all levels of policy and programming. While progress has been made, existing systems remain shaped by long-standing gendered assumptions that undermine veterans' successful transition to civilian life. Female veterans often face barriers in accessing recognition, healthcare, legal support and economic opportunities, while male veterans frequently grapple with societal expectations around emotional resilience, employability, and mental health. Without deliberate and sustained attention to these dynamics, such inequalities may become further entrenched, undermining both individual transitions and broader recovery efforts.

A gender-responsive approach systematically identifies, acknowledges and addresses the distinct experiences, needs, and challenges faced by female and male veterans—guided by sex-disaggregated data and inclusive stakeholder consultation. It involves strengthening gender-sensitive healthcare for all veterans, streamlining bureaucratic processes, and supporting women-led civil society. By investing in these reforms, Ukraine can move beyond a male-centric model toward a gender-responsive reintegration system that equitably supports all veterans. In doing so, Ukraine will uphold its commitments under national and international frameworks, including the Women, Peace and Security agenda, while laying the groundwork for a more equitable, democratic, and inclusive recovery.

Recommendations

To ensure a gender-responsive reintegration framework, the Ukrainian government, civil society, and international partners should prioritise the following four key interventions:

1. Expand gender-responsive healthcare and mental health services

The Ukrainian government should strengthen the Veterans' Medical Guarantees Program by expanding gender-specific healthcare services that address female veterans' distinct needs. This should include access to specialised care for combat-related injuries, chronic conditions, reproductive health, and military sexual trauma (MST). This includes integrating gender-sensitive providers into the National Health Service of Ukraine (NHSU), expanding telemedicine access for rural veterans, and improving mental health services by training professionals to address gendered trauma and social stigma that often discourage women from seeking care. Reforms must also address men's gender-specific barriers to care—particularly the stigma surrounding mental health—through targeted outreach, public awareness campaigns, and increased visibility of available support services.

Success metrics should track healthcare utilisation rates, patient satisfaction, and access to specialised care, particularly in rural areas where services are scarce. Funding and technical support from international partners will be needed to scale and implement these reforms effectively.

At the same time, national initiatives could be developed to prevent violence within veteran families, especially intimate partner violence, e.g., by prioritizing improved psychological rehabilitation services and the expansion of support programs, including for veterans' family members, and strengthening prevention and detection mechanisms.³⁰³⁰

2. Address systemic barriers and transform institutional structures for veterans' reintegration

Women veterans face disproportionate bureaucratic barriers in obtaining recognition of service and benefits, restricting their access to medical, financial, and employment opportunities. The government should streamline military discharge processes and enhance

gender-sensitive legal aid with dedicated outreach to address trust deficits in the legal system.

Economic reintegration remains challenging due to persistent structural inequalities. The Ukrainian government should implement comprehensive anti-discrimination policies with enforcement mechanisms, conduct gender sensitivity training for employers, and establish incentives for hiring female veterans. Government institutions and private companies should be required to examine and reform their organisational cultures, hiring practices, and advancement policies to identify and eliminate gender biases that disadvantage women veterans.

Family-friendly workplace policies—including affordable childcare, flexible work arrangements, and parental leave—must address women’s disproportionate caregiving responsibilities. These structural reforms will create an enabling environment that addresses the root causes of economic marginalisation and sustainable pathways for women veterans’ meaningful participation in the workforce.

In addition to structural reforms, gender-responsive training should be integrated into broader capacity-building efforts for social workers and other veteran service providers. While ongoing initiatives—often led by NGOs and international partners—are already enhancing the ability of service providers to offer high-quality, trauma-sensitive support, their impact can be strengthened by incorporating gender equality and sensitivity training. This will equip service providers with the skills to recognize and address the unique needs of both male and female veterans, while also raising awareness to prevent the reinforcement of gender stereotypes or discriminatory practices that can undermine veterans’ trust in available support services.

3. Scale the impact of women-led veteran organisations and community-based support.

Women-led civil society organisations have played a critical role in supporting female veterans by providing psychosocial assistance, advocacy, and reintegration programs. However, funding gaps and resource limitations hinder their ability to scale services—particularly in rural areas, where most female veter-

ans reside. It is recommended that the government and international donors establish dedicated funding mechanisms to support small and local women-led veteran organisations, ensuring equitable distribution of resources across urban and rural regions. These organisations should be formally integrated into national veteran reintegration strategies, including policy development and oversight mechanisms. The Ukrainian government should also strengthen female veteran representation by expanding women’s roles in Public Councils, veteran advisory boards, and reintegration policymaking bodies, aligning efforts with the strategic objectives of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda.

4. Strengthen gender-sensitive data collection and research for evidence-based veteran support.

Gender-responsive reintegration support requires the systematic collection and analysis of sex-disaggregated data that reflects the distinct needs, challenges, and opportunities of male and female veterans. In Ukraine, state-led research on veterans remains limited, with data collection driven mainly by international partners and civil society actors. While these efforts offer valuable insights, they are often small in scale and lack strategic coordination.³¹³¹ To ensure that reintegration policies are inclusive, evidence-based, and responsive to the realities of all veterans, the Ministry of Veterans Affairs should prioritise the regular commissioning of national research that is gender-sensitive and aligned with broader policy objectives. Robust sex-disaggregated data is critical to identifying gender-specific barriers and to designing tailored, effective support measures.

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Authors biography

Jonathan Röders is the Director of Projects & Programs at the Corioli Institute. His work centers on livelihood security, trust-building, reconciliation, and the societal reintegration of individuals formerly associated with armed groups. He has worked in a range of conflict-affected settings, including with FARC ex-combatants in Colombia, former cartel members and incarcerated individuals in Mexico, and military veterans and their families in Ukraine. He also contributes to original research, oversees the Corioli Institute's brand identity and social media presence, and helps develop conceptual frameworks guiding its mission. Jonathan holds a BA in Political Science from the Freie Universität Berlin and an MSc in International Social and Public Policy from the London School of Economics (LSE)

Elise Olsson is currently at the Ukraine Unit of the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA), where she focuses on the gender dimensions of Ukrainian veterans' reintegration. Her work explores institutional challenges and opportunities for both women and men as they transition from military to civilian life. Elise's previous research has examined the links between peace agreement design and women's political participation in post-conflict settings. She holds a BA in Political Science from Stockholm University and an MSc in Political Science, with a specialization in Politics, Security, and Crisis, from the Swedish Defence University.

Dr. Erin K. McFee is the Founder and President of the Corioli Institute, a global organization focused on supporting the reintegration of formerly armed actors and improving security, resilience, and social cohesion in conflict-affected communities. She is also a Senior Non-Residential Fellow at the Atlantic Council. As a political anthropologist, she has worked across Latin America, Africa, the Mena region, and Eurasia since 2010, studying the reintegration of military veterans, ex-guerrillas, insurgents, and gang members as well as advising international bodies on veteran reintegration. The Corioli Institute has conducted significant research in Ukraine, gathering life histories and leading veteran workshops. Dr. McFee holds a PhD from the University of Chicago and is an awardee of the UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship and Fulbright-Hays.

The Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) is the Swedish government agency for peace, security and development. Since 2014, the FBA has been actively engaged in supporting Ukraine's reform and development efforts. Following Russia's full-scale invasion, supporting veterans' reintegration and transition to civilian lives has become a critical component of Ukraine's recovery and long-term resilience. FBA contributes to these efforts by working with stakeholders at national and local levels to develop inclusive reintegration strategies, enhance coordination among state institutions, civil society and international partners, and promote gender-responsive approaches that advance social cohesion, equality and a sustainable recovery.

THEMATIC POLICY BRIEF SERIES: UKRAINIAN VETERANS' REINTEGRATION

This policy brief series is the outcome of an initiative by the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) to explore key dimensions of veterans' reintegration in Ukraine. The aim of the series is to contribute to policy development by providing evidence- and experience-based insights into the challenges veterans face in their transitions to civilian life and to offer recommendations that seek to enhance Ukraine's reintegration frameworks. The brief series sets out to present a succinct overview of central dimensions of reintegration processes, viewed through a Ukraine-specific lens, within four key areas: Political reintegration, economic reintegration, gender dimensions of reintegration, and community-based reintegration (CBR).

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