

GENDER SENSITIVITY IN GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS IN THE DEFENCE SECTOR



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the gender sensitivity of government communications in Ukraine's defence sector in the context of the full-scale war. Using official greetings issued on International Women's Rights Day and the Day of Defenders of Ukraine, as well as state recruitment campaigns, the research identifies the coexistence of emancipated models of femininity and traditional stereotypical representations of women as "guardians of the home" or symbols of sacrifice. The use of feminatives and lexical innovations is gradually shaping a more inclusive public discourse; however, the content often remains symbolic and fails to fully recognize women as equal subjects of defence processes. The analysis of recruitment centres' information campaigns indicates a growing emphasis on voluntariness and professionalism of service, yet gender sensitivity in these communications remains fragmented. The findings confirm the need for the consistent integration of a gender perspective into state information policy in order to effectively mobilise human potential and implement the concept of comprehensive defence.

Keywords: gender-sensitive communication, government communications, comprehensive defence, military recruitment.

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The project draws on gender mainstreaming practices within Sweden’s comprehensive defence system and represents the first attempt in the Ukrainian context to explore the possibilities of implementing a Swedish-style comprehensive defence strategy in Ukraine while simultaneously integrating a gender perspective across key sectors, including the economy, care work, the armed forces, civil defence, governance, information policy, and the volunteer movement.

Analytical reports on these sectors are available on the website of the SCO Expert Resource Gender in Detail.

<https://genderindetail.org.ua/>

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ABBREVIATIONS

AFU	Armed Forces of Ukraine
AI	Artificial Intelligence
CSO	Civil Society Organization
OMA	Oblast Military Administration
OSA	Oblast State Administration
SBU	Security Service of Ukraine
SES	State Emergency Service of Ukraine
SOF	Special Operations Forces
TRSSC	Territorial Recruitment and Social Support Center
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicles
UN	United Nations
UPA	Ukrainian Insurgent Army

BRIEF SUMMARY

Context. In March 2021, the Presidential Decree “On the Military Security Strategy of Ukraine” for the first time defined comprehensive defence as the cornerstone of national military security, identifying the information component as one of its key elements. A standalone Information Security Strategy was also approved. Although the legal discourse surrounding participation in national defence largely employs gender-neutral narratives, Ukrainian legislation — as in many countries with conscription-based systems — formally assigns the obligation of military service to men, while women retain the right, but not the duty, to serve.

The research methodology is based on: (1) an analysis of communications produced by Oblast State Administrations (OSAs) and Oblast Military Administrations (OMAs), identified through media monitoring between 2015 and July 2025, using thematic analysis with a combined deductive-inductive coding logic, as well as an analysis of communications from selected institutions within the defence sector; and (2) an analysis of the websites and Instagram pages of the Ukrainian Army Recruitment Centre and the Ground Forces Recruitment Centre of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) for the period from 2024 to July 2025, applying thematic analysis with an inductive coding approach.

CHAPTER 1. ANALYSIS OF GENDER SENSITIVITY IN GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS IN THE DEFENCE SECTOR: SELECTED CASE STUDIES

The study findings confirm that government communications in the defence sector combine elements of inclusive, gender-sensitive language with deeply entrenched gender stereotypes.

CHAPTER 2. GENDER SENSITIVITY IN GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS IN MILITARY RECRUITMENT

The content analysis of military recruitment centres revealed a discrepancy between the declared principle of open recruitment for all, reflected in part through gender-sensitive communications, and the actual limitations on opportunities for women, resulting from the persistence of gender stereotypes and the predominant focus on male audiences.

CONCLUSIONS

Since 2014, government communications have shown steady progress: inclusive language has expanded, feminatives have become more common, and the institutionalization of the Day of Defenders of Ukraine has secured women’s visibility in the public sphere.

Recruitment is becoming more service-oriented and grounded in civilian experience, while campaign materials increasingly feature real-life stories of servicewomen and data on female candidates, strengthening women's sense of belonging within the defence sphere.

At the same time, these positive changes have not yet become the norm: celebratory messages continue to rely on stereotypes, recruitment communication at times reproduces traditional role expectations, and concrete information on positions, responsibilities, and service conditions for women remains insufficient.

To enhance the effectiveness of communications, it is essential to move from the formal visibility of women toward their substantive presence, achieved through concrete descriptions of roles, socially reflective approaches to commemorative dates, and transparent reporting by state institutions. Such an approach not only supports morale but also strengthens the mobilisation and sustainability of defence capacities at all levels.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Develop standardised style guides and public communication templates with mandatory use of feminatives and gender-symmetrical formulations** — for defence ministries and agencies, central government bodies, and Oblast Military Administrations.
- **Synchronize communication standards across all state institutions and introduce regular monitoring of their implementation** — central government bodies, the Ministry of Digital Transformation, and communications departments.
- **Eliminate stereotypical and paternalistic narratives and discontinue comparative framings such as “women are no less capable than men”** — state media, institutional press services, and bodies responsible for information policy.
- **Ensure the systematic inclusion of women in information content by using feminatives, statistics, interviews, and materials highlighting achievements** — press services of the Ministry of Defence, the Armed Forces of Ukraine, as well as volunteer and media units.
- **Ensure gender balance among speakers and participants at official events and in media appearances** — event organizers and institutional press services.
- **Develop information products addressing the specific conditions of women's recruitment into the Armed Forces, service conditions, opportunities for professional development, and social protection** — state media, institutional press services, and communication centres.
- **Update the official titles of holidays, commemorative dates, awards, ranks, and positions to inclusive formulations** — relevant ministries responsible for maintaining official registries and the State Office for Documents and Calendars.

- **Combine symbolic and practical elements in communications (for example, historical and cultural references with contemporary examples of achievement)** — institutional communication departments and event organizers.
- **Use authentic images of women in specific operational roles and avoid abstract symbolic representations** — press services, institutional media centres, photographers, and videographers.
- **Establish an archive of authentic stories of successful women in the defence sector** — institutional press services and research and archiving centres.
- **Emphasize women's rights, safe service conditions, and equal access to positions and decision-making in official government communications** — central government bodies, institutional press services, and state media spokespersons.
- **Transform official communications into a tool for structural change by introducing regular reporting on progress in addressing equality and discrimination issues** — central government bodies, the Ministry of Defence, and designated communication departments.

INTRODUCTION

Research Context. The Russian–Ukrainian war has been ongoing since 2014 and entered a phase of full-scale invasion by Russia in 2022, necessitating the consolidation of Ukrainian society for both military and civilian resistance.

In March 2021, Ukraine’s Military Security Strategy for the first time defined comprehensive defence as its foundational principle, with prevention and resilient resistance to the aggressor in the information space identified as key components. The significance of the information dimension in contemporary warfare is further underscored by the separate Information Security Strategy (2021), which highlights the critical role of communication in achieving state objectives.

The legal framework governing participation in the defence of the state generally reflects gender-neutral narratives. Article 65 of the Constitution of Ukraine (2020) defines the defence of the Homeland and its independence as a civic duty, while the National Security Strategy (2020) affirms the need to ensure equal opportunities for women and men to realize and develop their abilities and potential. However, the Law of Ukraine “On Military Duty and Military Service” (2025) stipulates that men are subject to mandatory military service, whereas women may serve exclusively on a voluntary basis.

Relevance of the Topic. A prolonged war of attrition requires the mobilisation of all state resources; therefore, the rigid gendering of military obligation has become a subject of public debate. The comprehensive defence model presupposes the optimal use of human resources both in the rear and on the battlefield. Without the explicit consideration of gender-specific needs and differences in state communications, it is impossible to achieve the effective mobilisation of society’s full potential. As Kompantseva (2023) notes, information security cannot be ensured without the integration of a gender perspective, and strategic communications must reflect the diversity of experiences and roles.

Dmytrenko (2019) and Horchaniuk (2019) note that even under conditions of formal legal equality, the practical mechanisms for realising women’s right to military service remain weak, while the information environment fails to support this equality.

An analysis of the activities of security institutions shows that women are not represented as full-fledged security actors; instead, communication practices often depict them in traditional, typically secondary roles. According to researchers, this not only violates the principle of equality but also serves as a demotivating factor discouraging women from joining the defence forces.

Pavliuc (2025) examines how women are represented in digital political discourse during the Russian–Ukrainian war, noting that social media far more frequently reproduce images of the “mother” and the “waiting woman” than those of the warrior or the commander. In her view, this continues to reinforce gender asymmetry in societal conceptions of defence.

The “Invisible Battalion” study (Wave 5) indicates a more realistic portrayal of women in military service within public communications, as well as a twofold increase in public support for the view that women can be effective combatants. However, persistent challenges remain, particularly regarding the insufficient representation of women as defence-sector experts within information policy (Hrytsenko et al., 2023).

In the context of Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine and constrained human resources, there exists substantial untapped potential for the voluntary recruitment of women into military service. According to the Ministry of Defence, 70,000 women are currently serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine (Kinsha, 2025). Enhancing the visibility of women in public communications and developing gender-sensitive communication policy can contribute to more effectively recruiting women into military service.

However, a comprehensive analysis of the state’s entire information policy would exceed the scope of this study; therefore, the research focuses on selected manifestations of this policy: official holiday greetings, which often contain the highest concentration of gender stereotypes (specifically, International Women’s Rights Day and the Day of Defenders of Ukraine), and the state military recruitment campaign.

The aim of the study is to assess the level of gender sensitivity in government communications concerning women’s roles in the defence sector and to identify opportunities for improving state communications in order to enhance women’s participation in national defence and ensure appropriate recognition of their contributions.

Research Questions:

1. How do state institutions communicate the role of women in defence, as reflected in official messages marking International Women’s Rights Day and the Day of Defenders of Ukraine, as well as in state military recruitment campaigns?
2. Is the state military recruitment campaign gender-sensitive?
3. How can government communications in the defence sector be made more gender-sensitive in order to enhance the visibility of women and their contributions to the defence of the country?

METHODOLOGY

Data collection methods

To select congratulatory messages marking International Women's Rights Day (March 8) and the Day of Defenders of Ukraine (October 1), the media monitoring service Semantrum was used, drawing on its media archive for the period 2015–2025. The objective was to identify communication materials produced by institutions responsible for state security. However, due to the technical limitations of the monitoring tool, the resulting corpus does not encompass all communications of state security agencies. Instead, the dataset includes communications from Oblast Military Administrations (OMAs) and Oblast State Administrations (OSAs) and official statements by the President of Ukraine, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), the Special Operations Forces (SOF), the State Emergency Service of Ukraine (SES), and the National Guard.

The texts were retrieved using the following keywords: *“Happy Day of Defenders and Defendresses,” “Happy Day of Defenders,” “Celebrate,” “OMA,” “OSA,” “Oblast State Administration,”* and *“Oblast Military Administration*.”* It should be noted that OSAs and OMAs were both included because, over the 10-year period examined, they effectively constitute successive institutional forms: OSAs operated from 2014 until 2022 during the Russian–Ukrainian war, while OMAs were established on the basis of OSAs following the introduction of martial law in 2022.

Although communications produced by national security agencies were not included in the core text corpus (with individual materials reviewed separately where necessary), the analysis of communications by OMAs and OSAs is critically important in the context of comprehensive defence, as these institutions function as key communication intermediaries between the state and local populations. Consequently, their examination makes it possible to analyse, at the practical level, the prevailing public discourse on gender-sensitive communication regarding the roles of women and men in the defence of the state.

For the analysis of military recruitment into the defence forces, this study focuses specifically on the state-level recruitment campaign rather than on individual brigade initiatives, as comprehensive defence primarily concerns state policies and information practices.

In 2024, the Ministry of Defence launched the pilot project “Ukrainian Army Recruitment Centre,” designed to establish a transparent and effective model for attracting citizens to military service. The centre offers vacancies within the AFU and is gradually expanding its scope to include all Security and Defence Forces of Ukraine (Ukrainian Army Recruitment Centre, n.d.). The analysis draws on the centre’s official website and its Instagram page.

However, due to the relatively limited volume of available data, the study was expanded to include analysis of an additional institution, specifically, the 1st

Recruitment Centre of the AFU Ground Forces. This centre was selected because the Ground Forces constitute the largest branch of Ukraine's armed forces: according to President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, as of December 2023, nearly 600,000 service members were serving in the Ground Forces (Katyshev, 2023), while the total strength of the Ukrainian Armed Forces in 2025 stands at approximately 880,000 personnel (Radio Svoboda, 2025).

Accordingly, the analysis covered communications produced by the recruitment centres from 2024 through July 2025, that is, from the time of their establishment to the moment the study was conducted.

Data analysis methods

The analysis of textual materials was conducted using the thematic analysis method. Thematic analysis aims to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns of meaning ("themes") within qualitative data. The texts were coded by identifying discrete units of analysis, referred to as codes, which capture features of the data that are (potentially) relevant to the research questions. The purpose of thematic analysis is not merely to summarise data content but to identify and interpret the key characteristics of the dataset (Clarke & Braun, 2016).

Thematic analysis was carried out in six stages: familiarization with the data; identification of key words; selection of codes; development of themes; conceptualization through the interpretation of key words, codes, and themes; and the construction of a conceptual model (Naeem et al., 2023).

The analysis of recruitment campaigns was conducted using an inductive coding logic, while the analysis of holiday greetings combined both inductive and deductive coding approaches (the predefined codes are presented in Table 1).

Table 1. Codes for the analysis of holiday greeting texts

Theme	Codes
Narratives of Women's Representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Berehynia (Protective Female Figure / Guardian of the Home)• Supporting the Male Defender• Woman Soldier as an Exception• Combat Unit (on Equal Terms with Men)
Women's Roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wife• Mother• Sister• Woman Soldier• Woman Medic• Woman Commander
Stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Women's Emotionality• The Weaker Sex• Guardian of the Nation (Berehynia of the Nation)• Motherhood as a Primary Purpose• Woman as the Rear of the Army• Femininity Despite the War

During the course of the study, it was also decided to conduct situational analyses of video materials produced by the Recruitment Centre of the AFU Ground Forces, using an unstructured methodological approach

Visual materials were likewise analysed on a situational basis, using an unstructured methodology with elements of qualitative visual content analysis. The images were examined within the context of their respective publications (including structural features, year of publication, and related attributes) and compared with other examples in order to more effectively trace changes in visual standards over time. Primary attention was devoted to the representation modes of gender roles.

CHAPTER 1. ANALYSIS OF GENDER SENSITIVITY IN GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS IN THE DEFENCE SECTOR: SELECTED CASE STUDIES

1.1 Communications for International Women's Rights Day

Communications issued by Ukrainian state institutions on the occasion of March 8 — International Women's Rights Day and the International Day of Peace — present an ambivalent and internally contradictory picture of the prevailing socio-political narrative. An analysis of official governmental statements reveals the simultaneous coexistence of two mutually exclusive discourses: on the one hand, an aspiration toward the modernisation of linguistic practices and the symbolic inclusion of women within the discourse of equality; on the other, deeply entrenched traditions of paternalistic and heroic-maternal representations of women.

First, following the 2019 orthographic reform and the 2020 order of the Ministry of Economic Development, Trade, and Agriculture permitting the use of feminine professional titles, there has been a notable increase in the use of feminatives in the Ukrainian language (Panchenko, 2020). In speeches and official addresses by public officials, terms such as “woman service member,” “woman medic,” “volunteer (female),” “police officer (female),” “paramedic (female),” and “female staff member of the State Emergency Service” are increasingly employed. This trend indicates the gradual adaptation of public language to the realities of gender equality and the recognition of women's active participation in professional domains that were previously regarded as exclusively ‘male.’

At the same time, despite ongoing linguistic modernisation, the conceptual content of these greetings rarely corresponds to the international significance of this day as a symbol of feminist struggle for equal rights, political representation, reproductive autonomy, and protection from gender-based violence. In the majority of the analysed messages, moral and ethical constructs come to the fore, such as “tenderness,” “warmth,” “love,” “inspiration,” “motherhood,” and “female sensitivity,” thereby reducing the meaning of March 8 to metaphors of spring, beauty, and domestic comfort. As a result, the state narrative represents women primarily as objects of symbolic gratitude rather than as political subjects with their own voices and full civic rights.

Among the many official statements, the address delivered by the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, on the occasion of March 8 2023 stands out (Rivne OSA Press Service, 2023). Unlike most holiday greetings, this message articulates a clear human rights-based framework and an equality-oriented rhetoric that appeals to the original meaning of the day as a symbol of women's struggle for their rights. In particular, the address states, “This is a day that symbolizes the struggle for women's rights, dignity, freedom, and equality” (Rivne OSA Press Service, 2023). This approach fundamentally departs from the traditional ‘celebration of spring’ and marks an attempt to shape state communication in line with international standards, including

the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 1325, and the European Convention on Human Rights.

Zelenskyy shifts the emphasis away from empathy, tenderness, and motherhood toward strength, civic responsibility, and leadership: “women lead, defend Ukraine, and fight for freedom — not only for themselves, but for the entire country.” This is a form of rhetoric in which women are assigned not merely symbolic value but an active role, incorporated into the narrative as political subjects.

Another example is the joint address by the SBU and SOF, released on March 8 2022, which, by contrast, demonstrates a hyper-emotional and artistically mythologised approach (“There Is No Longer...”, 2022). In this text, the woman appears in dozens of symbolic roles — as an intelligence operative, volunteer, mother, medic, defender — who “throws herself at armoured vehicles with bare hands” and “prays while missiles explode nearby.” Particularly telling is the line, “You lure the occupiers and burn them in the toilet, like that princess,” which vividly illustrates the logic of romanticised heroization. Here, the woman is neither presented as a citizen nor as a service member with clearly defined responsibilities, but rather as a multifunctional archetype, embodying strength, sacrifice, magic, and love simultaneously.

This conceptual split between contemporary official discourse and cultural heroic-folkloric narratives produces an overall ambivalence in the state’s approach to representing women in the context of war. While the president’s address establishes a new norm of ethical and equality-based communication, examples such as the SBU message, by contrast, reinforce the image of the woman as a multifunctional, emotionally charged symbol that lacks institutional status or political voice. Consequently, despite noticeable linguistic shifts, the state narrative remains largely symbolic rather than genuinely transformative.

The Romanticisation of Women in the Defence Sector

A distinct and particularly noteworthy trend is the romanticisation of women’s roles in the sphere of national security and defence. Despite the extensive participation of women in the AFU, the National Guard, volunteer formations, medical battalions, volunteer initiatives, and evacuation services, official communications continue to rely predominantly on emotionally charged and sentimental portrayals of women as sources of moral support, guardians of the family hearth, or inspirational muses.

According to the content analysis, direct references to women’s active participation in combat or military operations appear in only six out of more than 50 analysed publications. Moreover, in just two cases — specifically in the greetings issued by the Khmelnytskyi OMA and the National Guard — women are portrayed as occupying command or strategic positions. The remaining communications instead reproduce images of women as “prayers for victory,” “guardian angels of the soldier,” “a nurse saving lives in a basement,” or even “a poet with a rifle.”

The most striking example of the superficial incorporation of women into military discourse can be found in a speech by an SES representative, in which women are compared to those who safeguard the hearth during wartime. This rhetoric fuses military symbolism with traditional gender assumptions, failing to recognise women as full-fledged actors of defence and instead positioning them as symbols of resilience, a “spiritual rear,” and moral support. Such communication reflects a phenomenon of institutional gender blindness, whereby women’s participation in armed struggle is softened through metaphor and romanticisation, ultimately devaluing their concrete professional and physical presence on the front lines.

In this context, it is important to compare different examples of congratulatory messages. For instance, the Head of the Poltava OMA, Dmytro Lunin, states: “Mothers who cook for soldiers, sisters who have become volunteers, daughters who weave camouflage nets...” — without mentioning those who serve with weapons in their hands (Ozerna, 2022). By contrast, the General Staff of the AFU and certain individual battalions, though less frequently, explicitly refer to women snipers, sappers, artillery personnel, and unit commanders.

Such a gap between reality and its linguistic representation demonstrates that the modernisation of vocabulary without a corresponding transformation of thinking merely reinforces symbolic inequality. In other words, official communications simultaneously make women visible in the diversity of their contemporary roles and, at the same time, displace them from the realm of real subjectivity, confining them within the domain of cultural archetype.

Berehynia, Mother, Sister: Woman as a Symbol of Resilience

In the communications of state institutions, particularly at the regional and security-sector levels, the image of the woman as Berehynia, mother, and sister remains one of the central stabilising narratives. This archetype is deeply embedded in the national symbolic imagination and is reproduced as an emotional–normative framework that consolidates the community under conditions of existential threat. Within this discourse, the woman appears not so much as a subject of resistance but rather as a symbol of moral equilibrium, familial unity, resilience, and a “spiritual rear.”

The figure of the woman as Berehynia is most often represented as one who “instils faith,” “supports the rear,” and “creates calm even amid chaos.” For example, in its congratulatory message, the Odesa OMA states: “Through your charm, kindness, and sensitivity, you adorn the world” (Post by the Odesa OMA, 2023).

Such rhetoric reinforces the perception of women as sources of emotional resources, aesthetic harmony, and spiritual support. Women are not substantively integrated into the spheres of decision-making or armed struggle; instead, their primary function is reduced to “being” and “inspiring.”

In a statement by Maksym Marchenko, Head of the Odesa OMA, the Berehynia archetype is further intensified through an appeal to self-sacrifice: “Your self-sacrifice

and high dignity ignite and inspire, elevate and prevent us from breaking” (Post by the Odesa OMA, 2023).

This reinforces women’s role as a moral imperative within the life of the nation. Woman is positioned as an instrument of spiritual mobilisation rather than as a subject of political action.

By contrast, communications from the National Guard emphasize “tenderness, grace, and kindness” that are said to “shine in the darkness of war.”

Even when women service members are mentioned in official statements, their portrayal remains fragmented and sentimentalised. For instance, a communication issued by the Cherkasy OMA refers to “women on the front lines,” yet within the same context, they are described as “mothers waiting for a call from their son,” “daughters praying for their father,” or “wives supporting the front through prayer” (Shchepak, 2024).

Such symbolic hyperbole entrenches the pattern of an emotional rather than professional female role. Here, woman functions as a psycho-emotional buffer, her significance articulated through sacrifice rather than through political agency or professional competence.

It is important to note that the formal use of feminatives does not necessarily constitute a marker of gender sensitivity. For example, a message from the Law Enforcement Service of the AFU states: “We warmly congratulate our women medics, women service members, and women volunteers!” Despite the correct use of feminatives, the subsequent text once again centres on women’s emotional role and their capacity to “inspire” and “help.” In this case, feminatives function more as a linguistic showcase than as an indicator of substantive change in the understanding of women’s roles.

Woman Warrior: Heroization as a Substitute for Equality

Alongside the traditional image of the woman as Berehynia in wartime public discourse, an alternative narrative is also present — that of the woman as a combat participant: a soldier, scout, and warrior. This frame is actively employed by the Special Operations Forces, the National Guard, and certain units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine; however, even here, a concrete, subject-centred description is frequently replaced by generalized heroization. Within such rhetoric, the figure of the woman warrior functions more as a signifying mythological symbol than as a political or institutional actor endowed with defined functions, rights, and responsibilities

For example, a statement issued by the National Guard of Ukraine on March 8 declares: “Women are warriors. Instead of bouquets of flowers, they took weapons in their hands. They were not frightened by gunfire, explosions, blood, and cold...” (“There is no more...”, 2022).

At first glance, such rhetoric appears to function as an act of recognition: the woman is depicted as a combat unit capable of withstanding the physical and moral burdens of the front. Her image is marked by attributes of masculinized subjectivity — decisiveness, resilience, courage. However, what draws attention is the absence of specificity: the communication does not indicate the unit in which she serves, the functions she performs, or whether she is an officer, commander, sapper, driver, or drone operator. The image remains generalized and emotionally charged, yet structurally invisible within the actual organization of the armed forces.

A similar rhetorical strategy is employed by the Special Operations Forces in their March 8, 2022 address: “You are a scout, a fighter, a rescuer, a volunteer. You are here. Thank you” (“There is no more...”, 2022).

On the one hand, the woman is presented in multiple active roles. On the other, this naming is not accompanied by any concrete narrative of command, decision-making, or operational responsibility. The phrase “You are here” emotionally reinforces the image of support, yet it does not distinguish the woman as a subject of action. This is a rhetoric of visibility without functional description — the woman is present, but we do not know what exactly she does.

Instead of demonstrating concrete examples — women sappers, artillery personnel, pilots, analysts, tactical medicine instructors — the narrative remains confined to the poeticization of strength. Such heroization replaces systematic recognition: rather than reinforcing equality in access to command positions, in the definition of rights and authorities, women are offered participation in the military myth as a polyvalent symbol.

This produces the effect of a “heroic ghetto”: women are included in the rhetorical space of the military, yet remain absent from positions of power, strategy, or institutionally defined roles. Their function is to inspire, impress, to “be here,” but not to make decisions. Such an interpretation of the woman warrior remains symbolic rather than subject-based.

Thus, despite its seemingly emancipatory function, the discourse of the woman warrior’s heroization often fails to secure the real representation of women as equal participants within the military structure. The image of the woman who “has taken up arms” is romanticized but not analysed. Her actions are epic rather than structured; her functions are moral rather than command-oriented and organizational.

At the same time, it is precisely the absence of specificity — that is, of individual stories, positions, experiences, and the voices of real women — that renders this discourse superficial. When a woman appears only as a symbol or metaphor of heroism, rather than as a concrete professional with a defined role, responsibility, and competence, her participation once again falls outside the institutional dimension. Such “impersonal” heroization does not challenge the structural hierarchy in which the military sphere remains a “male norm,” while women are positioned as exceptions.

Thus, the problem lies not in the mere fact of mentioning women, but in the manner in which they are mentioned. The romanticized and generalized celebration of the “woman at the front” produces an emotional rather than a political effect: it does not transform the system itself, does not stimulate a rethinking of the principles of equality, and does not alter the personnel or organizational logic of the security sector.

It is therefore crucial to move from a rhetoric of heroization to a rhetoric of representation — one in which the visibility of women in the wartime narrative is grounded in concrete stories, positions, experiential analysis, and political decisions that recognize women’s participation not as an “exception” but as a structural norm. It is precisely such concretization that enables discourse to become not only symbolically supportive, but institutionally transformative.

Gratitude Instead of Rights: The Transformation of the Meaning of March 8

One of the most striking features of communications surrounding International Women’s Rights Day is the near-total absence of references to rights as such. None of the analysed statements issued by state institutions — whether central, oblast, or security-sector bodies — address issues of protection from sexual violence, the security of gender equality within the Armed Forces or the structures of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the prevention of discrimination, or the support of women’s reproductive and labour rights.

Instead, communications are dominated by a rhetoric of gratitude, complimentary praise, and moral exaltation. For example, in its statement the Security Service of Ukraine declares: “There is no longer an ‘International Women’s Day’... There is a Day of gratitude, respect, and honour to you, dear women!”

This statement directly strips March 8 of its historical essence as a day of political protest, solidarity, and the struggle for rights. In place of a rights-based discourse, an emotional–ethical frame is imposed, within which woman appears as an object of gratitude rather than as a subject of social change.

Such a transformation is functionally dangerous: it not only neutralizes the original meaning of the day but also legitimizes the practice of replacing structural change with symbolic approval. Gratitude, compliments, and “attention” become the currencies of public discourse that allow difficult issues to be avoided — including inequality, harassment within the military, women’s disproportionate access to command positions, and the absence of protections for motherhood in combat zones.

The consequence of this is that the state publicly “honours” women while failing to guarantee their rights. This is particularly problematic in wartime conditions, where women’s participation in the defence sector requires a genuine reconfiguration of security systems, mobilization frameworks, rotation policies, medical provision, and life planning.

The Invisibility of Women in Comprehensive Defence

The information policy of total resistance presupposes the involvement of all social groups in defence: military, economic, volunteer-based, and digital. However, within these strategies, women frequently remain at the periphery of communication, even when their participation is critical.

Women who serve as firearms training instructors, sappers, evacuation drivers, and commanders of combat units remain invisible in official communications. Their place is taken by symbolic figures: the mother, the sister, the Berehynia. In this way, women are excluded from the concept of strategic subjectivity.

This is not merely a symbolic issue. The absence of explicit articulation of women's autonomous contribution to defence directly affects:

- Personnel policy — the shortage of trained women in command positions;
- Mobilisation planning — the underestimation of women's resources;
- Resource allocation, including protective equipment, living conditions, and medical provision;
- The regulatory framework — the slow development of gender-sensitive norms regarding service, motherhood, and benefits;
- Societal information resilience — when equal representation of women is absent from official narratives, trust in state communication is weakened, and a segment of women citizens willing to participate in resistance is lost due to feelings of invisibility or undervaluation;
- Civic mobilization — the underestimation of women's contributions to volunteering, humanitarian aid, cyber forces, information campaigns, and education reduces the effectiveness of horizontal support networks, which constitute a critical element of comprehensive defence;
- Economic resilience — when women's roles in sustaining the rear, industry, logistics, and public administration are not articulated, this hinders the formation of a coherent model for integrating human potential into the national security system.

1.2 Communications for the Day of Defenders of Ukraine

The Day of Defenders of Ukraine emerged as an alternative to the Soviet holiday of February 23. In 2014, the holiday was designated for October 14, the Feast of the Protection of the Most Holy Theotokos, the Day of Ukrainian Cossacks, and the anniversary of the founding of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). Since 2015, the day has been a public holiday; in 2021, its official name was expanded to the “Day of Defenders and Defendresses of Ukraine,” and in 2023, following calendar reform, it was moved to October 1.

An analysis of official statements and greetings issued by state authorities, military administrations, and security institutions on the Day of Defenders and Defendresses of Ukraine, similarly to communications surrounding March 8, reveals the simultaneous coexistence of two somewhat contradictory discourses. On the one hand, there is an aspiration toward the emancipation of linguistic practices and the symbolic inclusion of women within the sphere of civic equality; on the other hand, deeply entrenched traditions of paternalistic, heroic–maternal representations of the woman as Berehynia persist.

Formally inclusive language without inclusive substance, combined with the continued use of traditional symbolic imagery, stands in particular contradiction to the concept of comprehensive defence, which presupposes the visibility and recognition of the contributions of all citizens — both military and civilian, women and men alike. It is precisely through this framework that one can discern where state communication reproduces old stereotypes and where it opens space for broader interpretations of social roles.

Renaming the “Day of Defenders” as the “Day of Defenders and Defendresses”

The official renaming of the holiday in 2021 — through the addition of “Defendresses” — undeniably ascribed lexical inclusion at the institutional level and, accordingly, significantly expanded the use of feminatives and the inclusion of women in official state communication surrounding the Day of Defenders and Defendresses. None of the 17 analysed statements published prior to 2021 (with the exception of addresses by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy published on the website of the Office of the President) employed feminatives or contained direct references to women. By contrast, communications issued from 2021 onward consistently use the formula “defenders and defendresses” and include explicit references to women’s equal participation in defence, such as “brave men and women who stood up to defend the state” and “many courageous and strong women and girls who, no less than men, bravely fulfil their difficult duty.”

Formal Gender Inclusion Without Gender Sensitivity

Nevertheless, although the communication is formally inclusive, it often lacks substantive gender sensitivity: it reproduces men as the “norm” and reduces women’s contributions to a comparison with that norm, as exemplified by the comparative construction “no less than men.”

The use of the word “bravery” (*muzhnist*) as the primary virtue of defenders and defendresses reinforces masculinity as the normative model: “honouring the bravery of Ukrainian men,” “the bravery and resilience of today’s defenders of Ukraine,” “the bravery and heroism of defenders.” Such phraseology narrows the circle of addressees and marginalises other equally important virtues for defenders, defendresses, and civilian participants in defence. To broaden inclusion without diluting meaning, it is advisable to replace “bravery” with more neutral synonyms such as “courage” and “valour,” and, where possible, to alternate it with other values such as “resilience,” “determination,” “dedication,” or “professionalism.” It is also important to use symmetric formulations (“defenders and defendresses”) and to link virtues to concrete roles without resorting to comparative hierarchies.

Lack of Specificity

This is compounded by a broader structural flaw in communication: despite inclusive formulations, the majority of official messages rely heavily on formulaic language that lacks specificity for both genders. Real positions, specialties, or command responsibilities are not meaningfully articulated for neither men nor women; instead, generalised references to “warriors,” “units,” and “high professionalism” prevail. Against the backdrop of deep-rooted stereotypes, this produces an asymmetry: men are perceived as “warriors by default,” so the absence of detailed descriptions of their actual contributions hardly diminishes their visibility; by contrast, women’s participation without operational description is reduced to symbolic roles.

Visual Standards

In the visual materials associated with this holiday, two motifs are frequently combined: the Pokrova as a feminine sacred figure and the Cossack as a masculine warrior figure. The Pokrova is typically depicted as a protective mother, positioned above or behind, with a gesture of guardianship or an outstretched veil; the Cossack, by contrast, appears in a combat posture, holding a weapon, a banner, or mounted attributes. The composition is sometimes supplemented by a contemporary soldier in camouflage. Within this visual construction, a clear juxtaposition emerges: the feminine is marked as spiritual protection and moral rear, while the masculine is framed as armed defence and operational subjectivity; contemporary women’s participation in the military is either absent or mediated through the symbolic figure of the Pokrova.

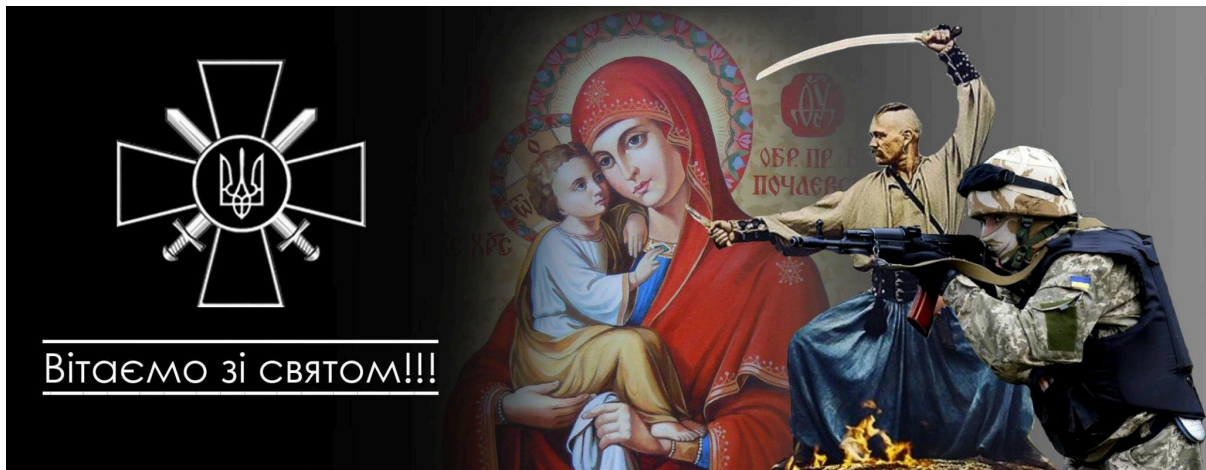


Figure 1. Image published on the official Facebook page of the AFU Ground Forces, October 14, 2017

Over time, a shift from iconographic imagery to field photographs featuring real people becomes evident; at the same time, part of the visual content continues to preserve symbolic meaning, in which female presence is associated with guardianship (through the figure of the Pokrova), while male presence is linked to combat. This meaning is conveyed primarily through standard images of male soldiers as a form of visual “counterbalance,” since the female figure is already embodied in the image of the Pokrova.



Figure 2. Image published on the official website of the Donetsk OMA October 14, 2022

In recent years, however, AI-generated images have also become widespread, introducing additional risks. Such artificially generated visuals largely rely on formulaic visual conventions, thereby reinforcing stereotypical motifs.



Figure 3. Image published on the official website of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, October 14 2022

The Historical and Religious Context of October 1

The conceptual content of official messages often gravitates toward traditional and sacral frameworks. This is partly due to the fact that the Day of Defenders and Defendresses of Ukraine is celebrated on the same date as the Feast of the Intercession of the Most Holy Mother of God and the Day of Ukrainian Cossacks, October 1 (October 14 until 2023). As a result, historical and religious symbols become discursive anchors of the holiday's communication: "descendants of the glorious Cossacks," "the feast under the Protection of the Most Holy Mother of God," and "may

the Most Holy Mother of God... be the patroness of the Ukrainian army." Within this constellation, the image of the Mother of God functions as a maternal-protective model of femininity, while Cossackhood serves as the warrior ideal of masculinity; together they establish a gendered division of symbolic labour: woman as protectress/guardian, man as warrior. Such framing does not deny women's participation in service, yet it channels their visibility into moral-ethical constructs (sacrifice, protection, motherhood) and heroic-mythological narratives. Consequently, this framework pushes concrete authority, rights, and achievements of military personnel — particularly women service members — into the background.

The Berehynia Archetype

The figure of the Berehynia, inspired by the image of the Intercession of the Mother of God, contributes to emotional cohesion during wartime, but at the cost of narrowing women's institutional subjectivity. The emphasis falls on spiritual rather than operational contribution: "those who helped and continue to help our army... through the long days of waiting for fighters at home." As of today, care work is most often performed by women. Such communication makes women's care work visible, but predominantly within an emotional rather than a functional-operational framework, foregrounding sacrifice above all else.

Comprehensive Defence

The paradox lies in the fact that these messages send a compelling, albeit likely unintended, signal of formal recognition of the role of comprehensive defence: alongside the military, the texts mention volunteers, medics, chaplains, and communities, that is, the entire "ecosystem" of resistance. At the same time, this recognition is framed through a gender dichotomy (guardian/warrior) and almost entirely devoid of operational specificity: it fails to specify who does what, what positions, specialties, authorities, and responsibilities exist, for either men or women.

It may appear that generalised communication is more universal, as it allows all participants to be addressed through a single gesture of gratitude. However, such rhetoric fails to convey the meaning of "comprehensiveness": it does not demonstrate how different components of defence actually interact or who bears responsibility for specific decisions, especially where "non-typical" roles of women and men are concerned. Specificity, by contrast, reveals that defence is not an abstract "unity," but a network of interrelated roles and competencies.

This is precisely where the opportunity lies: to integrate the doctrine of comprehensive defence into state communication not merely symbolically but substantively, by consistently naming concrete roles at the front and in the rear (from engineering, UAV operations, and demining to logistics, medicine, operational planning, and command), by symmetrically recognising the contributions of women and men, and by shifting gratitude from the level of rhetoric to the level of articulated functions, procedures, and rights. Such a transition would dismantle the perception of men as the "norm" or default standard against which all others are measured. It would mark a move from symbolic visibility to genuine institutional presence, in

which women's and men's contributions are acknowledged at the level of operational functions, without stereotypical gendered expectations or assumptions.

A positive example of movement toward the framework of comprehensive defence is the 2024 greeting issued by the Zhytomyr OSA:

“The contemporary Russian-Ukrainian war has a hybrid character; therefore, we speak of the defenders and defendresses of Ukraine in a broad sense — those who, through their conscientious professional and civic activity, ensure the economic, humanitarian, educational, and informational protection of the state.”

Here, defence is associated not only with women and men in military service, but with all citizens — women and men — who in one way or another contribute to comprehensive defence. The text then moves on to specify the volunteer segment:

“Volunteers ... provide the [army] with technical equipment, warm clothing, gear, and medicines; they assist wounded soldiers ... and the families of forcibly displaced persons.” These individuals are described as “peaceful warriors” and “reliable defenders of the Motherland.”

This represents a broader interpretation of the Day of Defenders and Defendresses as a day of the entire “ecosystem” of resistance: it reflects an institutional understanding of comprehensive defence and makes visible the contributions of civilian participants, while at the same time preserving the leading role of the military and emphasizing the complementarity of roles within the framework of comprehensive defence. Such an interpretation of the holiday enables a larger share of the population — both women and men — to recognize themselves within it, to experience a sense of belonging, and to feel their contributions acknowledged. For government institutions, it also creates an opportunity to encourage broader segments of society to engage in comprehensive defence.

1.3 Summary of Chapter 1: Analysis of Gender Sensitivity in Government Communications in the Defence Sector

The analysis of state communication surrounding March 8 and the Day of Defenders and Defendresses reveals gradual positive change. Public messages issued by state institutions increasingly employ feminine professional titles — “woman service member,” “woman medic,” “woman volunteer,” “policewoman” — which not only reflect the actual presence of women in diverse professional spheres but also transform the very lens through which women’s participation in defence is perceived.

In some cases, particularly in the messages of the President and certain oblast administrations, there is a discernible shift from complimentary rhetoric toward a rhetoric of partnership, in which women are not only said to “inspire” but to “lead” and “defend.” These tendencies indicate the beginning of a deeper reconfiguration of the state’s communication culture, which, despite the persistence of stereotypes, is gradually moving toward genuine equality in public discourse.

At the same time, women are still predominantly represented either as objects of gratitude or as mythologized heroines, rather than as equal participants in security processes. This concerns not only the absence of a feminist perspective, but also the frequent exclusion of women from spheres where key decisions are made. As a result, a gap emerges between women’s actual participation in the sectors of defence, medicine, volunteering, and logistics and the way this participation is represented. Communicative reality fails to keep pace with social transformation. Heroization without specificity and gratitude without rights function as mechanisms for maintaining the gender status quo.

The analysis of state communication surrounding the Day of Defenders and Defendresses demonstrates significant positive trends following the renaming of the holiday as the “Day of Defenders and Defendresses,” which initiated an important lexical shift: the near-universal adoption of inclusive forms and feminine professional titles in communication related to this occasion. However, the substance of these messages remains largely symbolic rather than operationally specific. Official statements rarely detail concrete positions, specialties, and authorities — for either men or women — and against the backdrop of the historical and religious context of October 1 (October 14 until 2023), marked by the Intercession and Cossack traditions, the familiar division of gender roles is reproduced: man as the “warrior by default,” woman as guardian/protectress.

It is also important to consider how state institutions themselves position their role in such messages: they appear as actors who congratulate, honour, and express gratitude, although these functions do not formally belong to their institutional mandates. Therefore, it is advisable not only to represent women as full participants in defence processes, but also to rethink the self-positioning of state institutions and the very conceptual approach to communication on national commemorative occasions. Instead of limiting themselves to expressions of gratitude and tribute (or, at minimum, supplementing them), official statements can become an opportunity for

a more substantive approach: for public discussion of the challenges faced by women service members, participants in defence processes, and women more broadly, as well as for reporting on the concrete steps taken within the respective institution's mandate to address these issues. Such a format of communication strengthens institutional trust and generates a productive public discourse, transforming symbolic rhetoric into a tool for real change.

CHAPTER 2. GENDER SENSITIVITY IN GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS IN MILITARY RECRUITMENT

Recruitment can be understood as a transformational approach to engaging citizens in military service, one that is grounded in individual choice and takes into account candidates' prior civilian experience. Recruitment Centres provide consultation and guidance to civilians on their pathway into military service. These centres are positioned as an alternative to Territorial Recruitment and Social Support Centres (TRSSCs) in the process of joining the armed forces.

Already at this stage, the effectiveness of voluntary recruitment in replenishing the armed forces with new qualified specialists is being observed. Therefore, analysing this domain from the perspective of gender sensitivity is particularly relevant in the context of unequal opportunities for force generation between Ukraine and Russia, as women can significantly strengthen the military and mitigate personnel shortages.

The communication of the Ukrainian Army Recruitment Centre and the 1st Recruitment Centre of the AFU Ground Forces was analysed.

The Use of Feminine Professional Titles in State Military Recruitment Communication

The use of feminine professional titles in the communication of state recruitment centres serves as one of the indicators of gender sensitivity.

A characteristic feature of both recruitment centres is the use of masculine forms in generalised terms (e.g., citizens, recruiters, candidates, service members). This is particularly evident in job postings, where feminine forms are entirely absent (with only a few vacancies listing "nurse," which can be explained by the conventional usage of this occupational title due to the high number of women in such positions). The Ukrainian Army Recruitment Centre occasionally employed feminine forms (e.g., recruiter/female recruiter, representative/female representative, candidate/female candidate, service member/female service member); however, their use remained inconsistent. Certain terminology may be classified as a gender-neutral strategy (e.g., person, we call on everyone, etc.), yet this approach is not dominant.

It should be noted that in messages addressed specifically to women, the Ukrainian Army Recruitment Centre did employ feminine professional titles, particularly when introducing women (e.g., "female officer"). Thus, when communication focused exclusively on women, the use of feminine forms was permitted; however, when both men and women were addressed, masculine forms were typically used. The 1st Recruitment Centre of the AFU Ground Forces, by contrast, usually employed masculine forms even when presenting women, although over time feminine forms have begun to appear occasionally. An additional issue is that women themselves sometimes use masculine forms to refer to their own positions (in some videos, women service members introduced themselves as "officers").

Why do we analyse the use of feminine professional titles? The use of feminine forms can be a simple yet effective tool for drawing attention to women and encouraging their participation in the military. For example, in one video produced by the 1st Recruitment Centre of the AFU Ground Forces, Officer Alla, who appears frequently in the centre's videos, corrected a passerby by noting that October 1 is the Day of Defenders and Defendresses, not only Defenders. This immediately drew attention to the presence of women in the military and to their contributions. While this incident can be attributed primarily to the official name of the holiday rather than to a deliberate institutional strategy regarding feminine forms, the case itself serves as an additional illustration of how state policy can shape everyday practices and influence the visibility of women.

Women's Integration into the Military

The next dimension concerns communication related to women's integration into the military. The AFU Recruitment Centre maintains a regular section presenting statistics on the number of candidates who have applied to the centre. A mandatory component of this section is the number of women applicants. The Centre itself notes that over time the proportion of women has been steadily increasing. The section also provides information on the oblasts with the highest numbers of women among applicants during the reporting period, for example:

“Ternopil Oblast leads in the number of women among candidates applying to join the Defence Forces of Ukraine through recruitment centres — 48% of all applicants in the oblast.” (Website of the AFU Recruitment Centre)

This form of continuous communication draws attention to women recruits and gently maintains focus on the topic of women in the military. At the same time, it demonstrates the broad-based nature of engagement in military affairs — involving both men and women and residents of different oblasts.

The 1st Recruitment Centre of the AFU Ground Forces does not place similar emphasis on statistical reporting. However, based on its video content, it is evident that it does have women candidates: in one of the texts, it is noted that 20% of applicants are women. In several interview excerpts, combat commanders drew attention to the growing participation of women in the military. For example, in an interview, Major of the AFU and commander of the 429th Separate Unmanned Systems Regiment “ACHILLES,” Yurii Fedorenko, stated:

“We are currently observing a high volume of applications from civilians, both from those who are subject to military service and those who are not. In particular, a significant number of applications are now being submitted by women for a wide range of positions — from combat crews to legal and combat support.”

It should be noted that not all brigades are currently ready to accept women. In particular, the 1st Recruitment Centre of the AFU Ground Forces mentions this on its Instagram page:

“...women often apply to the centre, and although not all brigades are ready to accept them into combat positions, work is being done in this area” (Instagram post of the 1st Recruitment Centre of the AFU Ground Forces).

A discrepancy is observed between the declared principle of open recruitment for all interested applicants and the actual limitations of opportunities for women. Such restrictions may be considered discriminatory and contradict the Labor Code of Ukraine, which prohibits direct or indirect restriction of employees' rights on the basis of sex and other characteristics (Labor Code of Ukraine, 2025)

Traditional gender roles

The recruitment centres' communications demonstrate a predominant orientation toward a male audience. In most publications, particularly in video and photo formats, men appear as the main subjects, and male service members prevail among invited speakers. This tendency is likely based on the numerical predominance of men in the military and men's statutory military obligation; however, it also shapes the perception of military service as a predominantly “male” domain. Despite the presence of women in some materials, certain communication practices diminish their role by focusing exclusively on men. For example, in one of the video greetings for the Day of Defenders and Defendresses of Ukraine, a civilian woman acknowledged the contribution of the younger generation to the defence of the country while referring only to men:

“What those boys are doing is very touching.” (Instagram post of the 1st Recruitment Centre of the AFU Ground Forces)

Particular attention should be paid to the communications surrounding the “18–24” contract, launched as a Ministry of Defence project in February 2025 to encourage youth enlistment. Overall, the communication of the 1st Recruitment Centre of the AFU Ground Forces regarding this project is gender-neutral: it addresses young people of all genders, and the videos feature a balanced representation of men and women. However, some videos produced in collaboration with military brigades contain overtly sexist statements, such as: “You can take your girl to the seaside,” “Make you dream of money, fame, and girls' attention,” where women are positioned as a reward for men and as motivation to join the military. Such expressions in communication not only objectify women but also reinforce gender stereotypes and discrimination within the broader culture, which ultimately contributes to the reproduction of existing gender inequalities, including within the armed forces. Moreover, this diminishes the contribution of women currently serving in the military and discourages the recruitment of new women, as it promotes the notion that a woman's role in war is to serve as inspiration and motivation for the male warrior.

Other common stereotypes about women are also present, including the perception that women in the military are limited to support roles, as well as assumptions about the difficulty of “fragile” women operating within a predominantly male military environment, among others. For example, in an interview with a female service member, the radio hosts asked:

“A pretty, beautiful, delicate lady — do you face difficulties with rough men? Do they not offend you?” (Instagram post of the 1st Recruitment Centre of the AFU Ground Forces)

The quotation demonstrates that, in the presenters' perception, the woman is not regarded as a full-fledged part of the military environment. Instead, emphasis is placed on her presumed vulnerability, even though the issue of sexual harassment in the military constitutes a serious problem.

The communications both reproduce stereotypes about women and demonstrate certain attempts to encourage their participation in military service. For example, in an interview, a male service member refers to the need to recruit women into the armed forces, yet simultaneously reiterates the stereotype of “female” professions within the military:

“We need girls: medics, in the rear.” (Instagram post of the 1st Recruitment Centre of the AFU Ground Forces)

Holiday greetings that appear regularly in the communications of the 1st Recruitment Centre of the AFU Ground Forces also merit attention. Although explicit stereotypes are generally absent (with only a single reference to women as “guardians of the home”), a pronounced masculinisation of these messages is evident, particularly in relation to “military” holidays (such as the days of various branches of the armed forces). Such greetings almost invariably emphasize notions of bravery, comrades-in-arms, and brotherhood. By contrast, more “civilian” holidays (for example, Lawyers' Day) are accompanied by neutral greetings that address both women and men equally. In this way, the masculinisation of holiday greetings reinforces the traditional perception of military service as a male domain.

It is important to remember that in communication every element carries weight and contributes to the formation of public opinion. At times, even the sequence of words can influence perception. For example, the website of the AFU's recruitment centre contains the following wording: “the opportunity to serve at the place of service of the husband (wife),” which appears to emphasize the assumption that women are more likely to follow their husbands to the place of service. Certainly, men statistically constitute the majority in the military. However, the formulation “at the place of service of the husband or wife” is more appropriate, as it treats as equal both the situation in which wives follow their husbands' place of service and that in which husbands follow their wives' place of service.

2.1 Summary of Chapter 2: Gender Sensitivity in Government Communications in Military Recruitment

Military recruitment represents a new approach to engaging citizens in military service, emphasizing the use of civilian experience and the primacy of individual choice. An analysis of the communication practices of military recruitment centres indicates a dual effect of contemporary recruitment. On the one hand, elements of gender-sensitive communication are being introduced, and a certain openness toward women is demonstrated, in particular through the publication of statistics and motivational materials addressed to both women and men. On the other hand, structural and cultural barriers persist, including the use of masculine forms of language, stereotypical notions of “female” positions, and the limited readiness of military units to accept women into service.

CONCLUSIONS

An analysis of state communications from 2014 to 2025 reveals positive trends. In recent years, linguistic inclusivity has become increasingly widespread: feminine forms are used more frequently in official addresses, and the renaming of October 1 as the Day of Defenders and Defendresses of Ukraine has ascribed the presence of women in public language at the official level. Recruitment practices are also gradually shifting toward a service-oriented model, in which individuals encounter not “coercion” but a clear entry pathway supported by guidance and built upon prior experience. A number of materials now feature the stories of real male and female service members, and state communication channels periodically publish data on the proportion of women among those willing to enlist. This fosters a sense of belonging and sends a clear signal: women are part of national defence not merely symbolically, but in practice.

The analysis also indicates that these positive changes have not yet become a stable standard. In communications related to March 8, emotional rhetoric continues to dominate, displacing the discourse of rights and equal participation. Messaging around the Day of Defenders and Defendresses also frequently relies on traditional imagery that frames women’s role as “moral support” and men’s role as the “combat norm.” Recruitment content at times reverts to presenting certain traits and stereotypes as “normative” and exhibits inconsistencies in the use of feminine forms. Most notably, there is a lack of operational specificity: clear naming of positions and specialties, detailed descriptions of functions, responsibilities, and service conditions, presented symmetrically for women and men, which would reduce the space for stereotypical interpretations.

In addition, state holiday communications should not only portray women as an integral part of the defence process, but also reconsider their overall format. Commemorative dates can serve a different function — not merely celebratory, but also socially reflective. Shifting from greetings (or complementing them) toward treating such dates as opportunities for public discussion and for drawing attention to the systemic challenges faced by servicewomen, participants in the defence sector, and women more broadly (in the case of March 8) would make state communications more substantive and socially meaningful. This would also provide relevant government institutions with an additional opportunity to publicly report on the progress achieved over the year in addressing these challenges.

In conclusion, the strengths of current communication practices — formal linguistic inclusivity, the service-oriented character of recruitment, and the emergence of real women’s stories — form the foundation for the next step: the transition from visibility to substantive presence. The implementation of the solutions proposed in this study transforms comprehensive defence from a declared value into a lived practice, one that people encounter daily in accurate descriptions of roles, in recognizable faces, and in clear rules of engagement. In this way, communication begins not merely to sustain morale, but to mobilise and maintain capacity, from individual female professionals to entire units and communities jointly sustaining the defence effort.

RECOMMENDATIONS: DEVELOPING GENDER-SENSITIVE GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS TO INCREASE WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE DEFENCE FORCES

State communication in the context of full-scale war acquires particular significance, as its quality affects not only the level of public trust but also society's capacity to mobilise effectively for comprehensive defence. One of the most vulnerable dimensions remains the representation of women in the defence sector. Despite women's extensive and substantive participation in military service, volunteer formations, logistics, medical services, and command structures, state narratives continue to frequently reduce their role to symbolic or stereotypical images. Although recent years have seen positive developments in state communication — including more frequent use of feminine forms and the introduction of emancipated female representations — the lack of consistency in applying them creates a gap between lived practice and public discourse, which in turn constrains women's further participation and diminishes recognition of their contributions.

First and foremost, state communication requires greater consistency and coherence. It is essential that all institutions, from central government bodies to oblast military administrations, operate within a unified framework of standards that ascribes the principles of gender equality. To this end, standardised style guides and public communication templates should be developed and formally adopted, providing for the mandatory use of inclusive language, feminine forms, and gender-symmetrical formulations. It is equally important that these standards be harmonised across ministries and agencies, and that their implementation be ensured through a system of regular monitoring.

Special attention must be **devoted to dismantling gender stereotypes**. Contemporary communication practices continue to rely heavily on paternalistic clichés that portray women as guardians of the home, sources of inspiration, or symbolic protectors. Instead, the state should actively cultivate narratives that recognise women as equal participants in defence processes. It is particularly important to avoid comparisons such as “not inferior to men,” as such formulations reinforce men as the normative standard and position women as a secondary alternative. All official messaging should be grounded in the principle of equality of roles and functions.

A practical instrument for achieving this objective is the **systematic inclusion of women in informational content**. State institutions should consistently employ feminine forms, provide up-to-date statistics on the number of women in the Armed Forces and other security institutions, and produce dedicated materials and interviews with servicewomen and women volunteers. It is equally important to ensure **gender balance among participants in official events, speakers at press conferences, and contributors to state media broadcasts**. Such inclusion must become the norm rather than the exception.

It is also advisable to initiate developing **dedicated information products focused on highlighting the specific aspects of women's participation in military service.** These may include series of posts or video content explaining service conditions for women, opportunities for professional development, specialised training programmes, and social protection guarantees. Such materials would not only serve an informational function but also strengthen institutional trust and reduce the level of societal prejudice.

To further advance gender-sensitive communication, it is necessary **to conduct an institutional review of the names of holidays, commemorative dates, awards, ranks, and positions.** These designations should be updated to inclusive formulations, both through paired forms (such as “Defenders and Defendresses”) and through gender-neutral alternatives (e.g., “veterans’ community”). These changes must be formally ascribed in official calendars, directives, and media plans in order to prevent the continued use of outdated terminology. Such an approach would not only standardise linguistic practice but also institutionalise the principle of equality.

In shaping substantive content, it is essential **to combine symbolic and practical elements.** For example, communications for the Day of Defenders and Defendresses may preserve historical and cultural motifs, such as references to the Cossack tradition or the Feast of the Protection, while necessarily complementing them with concrete examples of the contemporary roles and achievements of servicewomen and servicemen. This approach makes messages more accessible and grounded in reality, allowing society to perceive the holiday not only as symbolic, but also as a reflection of modern defence practices.

Visual communication is equally significant. State institutions should **prioritise the use of authentic images of servicewomen and servicemen in concrete operational roles,** i.e., photographs and videos produced with the participants’ consent that depict their actual functions, ranging from unit leadership to work with equipment, logistics, or medical services. Conversely, abstract symbolic imagery that reinforces stereotypes, such as mythologised figures or religious allegories, should be avoided. This approach ensures representation that is proportionate to the actual composition of units and helps prevent performative inclusion.

A separate strategic focus should be placed on **highlighting the real-life stories of women.** These should move beyond abstract representations or symbolic roles and instead present concrete examples of women professionals, including specialists, commanders, analysts, and instructors. Creating an archive of positive practices, containing documented cases of successful women’s participation, would serve as an effective instrument both for state communication and for motivating future generations.

Finally, **the issue of women’s rights must be firmly embedded in state messaging, particularly in communications surrounding March 8.** Rather than relying on complimentary references to “gentleness” or “feminine sensitivity,” official discourse should emphasize women’s rights to safe service conditions, freedom from discrimination, and equal access to leadership positions and decision-making

processes. Moreover, communication should shift away from expressions of gratitude and ceremonial greetings toward substantive discussion of existing challenges and public reporting on the measures taken to address them, especially with regard to gender equality in society. This transformation would enable official communication to function as a genuinely transformative instrument, rather than as a mechanism for reproducing outdated assumptions.

Thus, improving state communication in the sphere of comprehensive defence requires a shift from symbolic inclusion to genuine representation. This entails both systemic linguistic and institutional reforms, as well as the development of substantive, visually compelling materials that reflect the real role of women in the defence sector. Only through such a transformation of communication can true equality be achieved and the full potential of society be mobilised in the defence of the state.

- **Develop standardised style guides and public communication templates with mandatory use of feminatives and gender-symmetrical formulations** — for defence ministries and agencies, central government bodies, and Oblast Military Administrations.
- **Synchronise communication standards across all state institutions and introduce regular monitoring of their implementation** — central government bodies, the Ministry of Digital Transformation, and communications departments.
- **Eliminate stereotypical and paternalistic narratives and discontinue comparative framings such as “women are no less capable than men”** — state media, institutional press services, and bodies responsible for information policy.
- **Ensure the systematic inclusion of women in information content through the use of feminatives, statistics, interviews, and materials highlighting achievements** — press services of the Ministry of Defence, the Armed Forces of Ukraine, as well as volunteer and media units.
- **Ensure gender balance among speakers and participants at official events and in media appearances** — event organizers and institutional press services.
- **Develop information products addressing the specific conditions of women’s recruitment into the armed forces, service conditions, opportunities for professional development, and social protection** — state media, institutional press services, and communication centres.
- **Update the official titles of holidays, commemorative dates, awards, ranks, and positions to inclusive formulations** — relevant ministries responsible for maintaining official registries and the State Office for Documents and Calendars.
- **Combine symbolic and practical elements in communications (e.g., historical and cultural references with contemporary examples of achievement)** — institutional communication departments and event

organizers.

- **Use authentic images of women in specific operational roles and avoid abstract symbolic representations** — press services, institutional media centres, photographers, and videographers.
- **Establish an archive of authentic stories of successful women in the defence sector** — institutional press services and research and archiving centres.
- **Emphasize women's rights, safe service conditions, and equal access to positions and decision-making in official government communications** — central government bodies, institutional press services, and state media spokespersons.
- **Transform official communications into a tool for structural change by introducing regular reporting on progress in addressing equality and discrimination issues** — central government bodies, the Ministry of Defence, and designated communication departments.

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