

EUROPE

As Ukraine's troop needs grow, women step into the fight



A Ukrainian soldier who identifies herself by her call sign Force operates a drone on July 15, 2026, inside a former school destroyed by Russian fire in the northeastern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv. (Phillip Walter Wellman/Stars and Stripes)

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STARS AND STRIPES

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KHARKIV, Ukraine — It took a long time for Jess, a 22-year-old former nursing student, to gather the courage to join the Ukrainian army.

She turned 18 just weeks before Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 and knew the war marked the definitive end of her childhood. But for a couple of years, she stubbornly clung to the comforts of her old life — until she no longer could.

“That comfort weighed on me,” Jess said, going by her call sign. “I realized that everything I had was due to the fact that, somewhere out there, there were people who were risking their lives for it ... and I felt like I wasn't doing enough.”

She is now part of a growing number of women serving in the Ukrainian military as the country confronts an urgent need for troops in the fifth year of its all-out war with Russia. The shift in Ukraine comes as the role of women service members is also being reconsidered in the U.S.

Jess, a self-described pacifist, said she had never even held a gun before joining the army. She has since swapped it for her weapon of choice: a soldering iron that she wields in a grungy workshop less than 20 miles from the northeastern front.



A military ground-drone mechanic, who wished to be identified only as Jess, is photographed at her workstation at an undisclosed location near Kharkiv, Ukraine, on July 15, 2026. (Phillip Walter Wellman/Stars and Stripes)

She is formally a mechanic for the Khartiia, or Charter, Brigade of Ukraine's National Guard, but she also works as a drone operator and a technician and does a bit of programming and engineering as well.

The unit formed in the early days of the invasion as a grassroots effort to defend Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city, and has evolved into one of the country's most sophisticated, tech-savvy combat formations.

It has also gained attention for the nearly 300 women serving in its ranks.

The figure is well above average for a Ukrainian military unit, according to Volodymyr Dehtyarov, the brigade's press officer. Katerina Prymak, head of the military women's rights

group Veteranka, also said Khartiia leads in the number of women.



A large advertisement for the Ukrainian armed forces covers the side of a building in Kyiv on July 13, 2026. The advertisement, which features a female soldier, reads, "Together, we are unbreakable." (Phillip Walter Wellman/Stars and Stripes)

Last summer, the unit released a recruitment video aimed directly at them. Jess, with her bright red hair, is shown operating a ground drone used to supply troops in front-line positions.

"We're hiring people, and we give everyone a chance to prove themselves," a male signals officer with the call sign Smith says in the ad. "Whether it's a woman or a man, it makes no difference today. After all, we're all human beings, and we can all learn."

More than 75,000 women are part of the Ukrainian armed forces as of early 2026, with about 5,500 in combat roles, according to the defense ministry. They account for less than 10% of active-duty personnel, but their numbers have increased by about 40% since before the war.

Unlike men, who are subject to conscription, they enlist by choice.

Jess is the lone person in her family who is serving — her father and older brother have chosen not to.

"I'm not judging them, but it is kind of funny that the only one in the whole family who's fighting is, like, the youngest daughter," she said.

Women have taken up arms in Ukraine for generations, dating to the early 20th century and World War I.

Some 800,000 Soviet women, including Ukrainians, served in the Red Army in World War II, not just in traditional female roles, but as snipers, fighter pilots, machine gunners, anti-aircraft gunners, infantry officers, tank crew members, reconnaissance agents and rifle division commanders.



Kateryna Prymak, head of the military women's rights group Veteranka, is photographed at her Kyiv office on July 17, 2026. (Phillip Walter Wellman/Stars and Stripes)

Their acceptance into positions typically reserved for men was short-lived, however. By 2014, when Russia first invaded Ukraine, women had long been barred from combat. Those who fought had to register as cooks or seamstresses and were denied the same benefits as male troops, Prymak said.

Women veterans spent years advocating for change before Ukraine opened all combat roles, specialized military jobs and military education programs to women in 2018. They now serve as drone pilots, engineers, artillery commanders and, in at least one case, a combat helicopter pilot.

Ukraine's experience reflects a broader pattern of advances and setbacks in integrating women into militaries, said Ellen Haring, a senior research fellow at the Women in International Security organization and a retired U.S. Army colonel.

“There have been blips in history when sheer needs for human power have driven changes in norms but then there’s these regressions that happen,” she said. “Things open up and as soon as the manpower needs go away, women get pushed out.”

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq provided such an opening for American women in uniform. Their front-line service under fire helped convince the U.S. military to lift its ban on women in combat positions in 2013 and fully integrate them by 2016, she said.



A laptop at the office of the military women's rights group Veteranka is covered with stickers depicting women in combat on July 17, 2026. (Phillip Walter Wellman/Stars and Stripes)

A decade later, that progress is showing signs of reversal: the Pentagon is reevaluating women's effectiveness in [ground combat roles](#); fewer women are being promoted into high-ranking posts; and, according to Haring, mid-career women officers fear for their jobs.

“We’re regressing to periods of extreme discrimination against women,” said Haring, who sued the Pentagon in 2012 to overturn its combat exclusion policy. “It’s a return to these very masculine norms that don’t allow any space for women in them.”

In Ukraine, the military has made “quantum leaps” in becoming more receptive to women, Prymak said, but they still grapple with traditional sexist attitudes and barriers that have plagued women service members elsewhere.

Aira, a reconnaissance drone pilot for Khartiia, wants to follow in the footsteps of her late husband and serve in the infantry but is not allowed to.

No women are in those positions, said Dmytro Kuzubov, a member of the brigade's communications team. "It's very physically hard work," he said, and "it's impossible to imagine" women doing it.



Aira, a reconnaissance drone pilot for the 13th Khartiia Brigade of the National Guard of Ukraine, in the Kharkiv region this winter. (13th Khartiia Brigade)

Aira, 34, said she knows she physically lags behind men but believes she could train up for the job.

"Humans are, by their very nature, versatile. We can do absolutely anything. And women? Women even more so," she said.

For now, she works about 600 meters, or less than half a mile, behind the infantry, trekking miles to and from her position carrying about 60 pounds of gear. There were times in the winter when it was so grueling that she wanted to throw up.

"But I realized where I was, that my brother in arms is right beside me and if something happens to me ... he has a wife and a small child waiting for him at home," Aira said. "So I have to keep going."

She is the only woman in her crew. It was difficult at first, she said. The men didn't quite know how to act around her — it was "as if they had never seen a woman before," she said.

More than a year later, they are used to her and she to them.

Still, she is treated differently. When a complicated task comes up, Aira said she is asked whether she can handle it or if a male soldier should take it on instead. It can be upsetting, she admitted, “because I want to prove that I’m just like them.”

“If I’m given a task, I’ll do it,” she said.

The rise of drone warfare is making gender less of a factor on the battlefield, Prymak said. The technology favors technical skills over raw physical power, reducing the significance of differences that have traditionally separated men and women.

“Physical strength doesn’t really play a significant role anymore,” Prymak said. “And, also, motivation is far more important.”



A female soldier who goes by the call sign Force wears the patch of the Ukrainian National Guard's 13th Khartiia Brigade on July 15, 2026. (Phillip Walter Wellman/Stars and Stripes)

A junior sergeant in Khartiia who goes by the call sign Force said she pushes through labor-intensive tasks, refusing to let doubt take hold. She primarily works as a medic but also pilots drones and said the mental toll of service is harder than the physical.

“Even though I’ve essentially been at war since I was a girl, there are still moments when it’s incredibly unpleasant,” she said. “Someone you had coffee with just yesterday goes out on a mission and then you never have coffee with them again — it still stings.”

Force, 24, grew up in the eastern front-line cities of Donetsk and Avdiivka, both now under Russian occupation. When full-scale war broke out, she helped set up roadblocks and joined the local volunteer militia to assist with the evacuation of civilians.

Her volunteer work often brought her into contact with the military, but she did not sign an army contract until last year, when she felt she had gained enough first-aid and medical knowledge to be useful.

After fleeing her childhood homes, Force said she finally feels she is where she belongs.

“Even if the war ends, I’ll stay here,” she said. “It’s like one big dysfunctional family that you don’t want to leave.”



The Motherland Monument towers over Kyiv, Ukraine, on July 18, 2026. Erected in 1981 as part of a Soviet World War II memorial, the armed female figure has been reinterpreted during Russia’s war against Ukraine as a symbol of Ukrainian resistance and resilience. (Phillip Walter Wellman/Stars and Stripes)



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