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**Master's degree in
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REFUGEE WOMEN AND MASS MEDIA:
BETWEEN INVISIBILITY AND VICTIMIZATION

A CASE STUDY ON UKRAINE

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*A tutte le donne che combattono
per i loro diritti e per un futuro migliore.*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

List of acronyms

List of figures

Introduction

Chapter 1. General background on migration

1.1 Refugee, migrant, internally displaced person and asylum-seeker:
let's be clear

1.2 Migration: push factors

1.2.1 Persecution

1.2.2 Armed conflict

1.2.3 Human rights violations

1.3 Type of risks

1.3.1 Sexual violence against women

1.3.2 Human trafficking

1.3.3 Discrimination

1.3.4 Refugee camps

1.4 International and regional framework

Chapter 2. Refugee women in the media

2.1 The importance of media

2.2 The description of refugee women in European mass media:
invisibility and victimization

2.2.1 Germany

2.2.2 United Kingdom

2.2.3 France

2.2.4 Italy

2.2.5 Spain

2.3 Visual representations

Chapter 3. Evidence from Ukrainian case study

3.1 The war in Ukraine: historical background

3.1.1 Geography, culture and origins of Ukraine

3.1.2 Past history to explain 2022 invasion: USSR, independence, Crimea

3.1.3 The 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia

3.2 Women escaping the war in Ukraine

3.3 Ukrainian refugee women in mass media: invisibility, victimization or both?

3.3.1 The victimization process of Ukrainian refugee women

3.3.2 The invisibility pattern of Ukrainian refugee women

3.3.3 The hidden facet of Ukrainian refugee women: what mass media does not tell

3.4 Visual representations

Conclusion

Bibliography

Sitography

LIST OF ACRONYMS

CCME	Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
IOM	International Organization for Migration
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OAU	Organization of African Unity
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNSCR1325	United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325
VAW	Violence Against Women
WACC	World Association for Christian Communication Europe Region

LIST OF FIGURES

- Figure 1. A woman with her baby, escaping from the war in Syria. Source: The Times (AP)
- Figure 2. A Syrian woman with her face almost totally covered. Source: Ali Ihsan Ozturk, Getty Images, The Times
- Figure 3. A large group of refugees in a boat. Source: La Repubblica
- Figure 4. A large group of refugees crossing a small river. Source: La Repubblica (Ansa)
- Figure 5. A large group of refugee and migrants in a refugee camp. Source: La Repubblica, AFP
- Figure 6. A group of Afghan refugee women in India. Source: Aref Karimi, AFP, The Guardian
- Figure 7. Two Afghan women in a refugee camp. Source: Vahid Salemi, AP, The Guardian
- Figure 8. A map of Ukraine. Source: Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Ukraine>
- Figure 9. Map of Russian and Ukrainian speakers in Ukraine. Source: Translators without borders (2001 Ukraine census), <https://www.datawrapper.de/ /wp1WW/>
- Figure 10. Ukraine after World War I and II. Source: University of Rochester, <https://www.rochester.edu/newscenter/ukraine-history-fact-checking-putin-513812/>
- Figure 11. Crimea and Donbass. Source: Sky TG24, <https://tg24.sky.it/mondo/approfondimenti/donbass->

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- Figure 12. Map showing from where Russian troops entered in Ukraine. Source: Liveuamap, NYT; ISPI
- Figure 13. Map showing areas under Russian control. Source: Mapbox, OpenStreetMap, Institute for the study of war (Aljazeera)
- Figure 14. Map showing Russian-Ukrainian war territory situation as of the 1st of October 2022. Source: Institute for the Study of War, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/36a7f6a6f5a9448496de641cf64bd375>
- Figure 15. Map showing the number of Ukrainian refugees in Europe as of the 20th of September 2022. Source: UNHCR
- Figure 16. A Ukrainian refugee woman. Source: Il Corriere della sera
- Figure 17. An elderly Ukrainian woman. Source: Il Corriere della Sera, Getty Images
- Figure 18. A Ukrainian woman holding her baby. Source: Il Corriere della Sera, Afp, Daniel Leal.
- Figure 19. A Ukrainian women in a station with her baby. Source: Il Corriere della Sera, Afp
- Figure 20. A group of soldiers in the Luhansk region. Source: Il Corriere della Sera, Afp, Anatolli Stepanov
- Figure 21. A Ukrainian soldier leaving a trench. Source: Il Corriere della Sera, Afp, Fadel Senna

INTRODUCTION

Migration is an historical phenomenon in continue growth. Every day immense flows of people are forced to flee their countries due to persecution, war, and human rights violations, they escape in the need of safety, but very often they encounter other human rights violations. The recent deterioration of the war in Ukraine has worsened international scenario, as a matter of fact, consequently to the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine “*more than 9.1 million movements out of Ukraine have been recorded, with 5.816.729 individual refugees across Europe*”¹. The situation is not going to improve if the international community continues to neglect the gravity of this phenomenon: according to the latest available estimates of 2022, at the time of writing, total forced displacement around the globe oversteps 100 millions of people, which means that 1 out of 78 people is forced to escape from his/her country of origin². This is a humanitarian catastrophe.

In this thesis I decided to connect the migration phenomenon to mass media, due to their growing importance in modern world, focusing on the Ukrainian case study. In the first chapter a brief analysis of migration will be conducted. After having illustrated the main differences between refugees, migrants, internally displaced people and asylum-seekers, this thesis will analyse the main reasons women escape their countries and what type of risks they face during this difficult journey. Finally, the first chapter will conclude with the examination of the international and regional instruments designated to the protection of refugee people. A general background of migration is due, nevertheless in this thesis the main focus will be refugee women, and girls, moving from their country of origin mainly because of war and human rights violations.

The second chapter will study how European media describe refugee women escaping their countries and an answer to the research question

¹ UNHCR, *Ukraine situation flash update 21*, July 2022

² UNHCR, *Ukraine situation flash update 21*, July 2022

will be given. Media have an essential role in forging public opinion, they have the power to direct or change ideas and perceptions in relation to specific themes. In this chapter I will analyze the double face of refugee women representations in mass media: invisibility and victimization. Why nobody focuses on their ability to act and react to adversities? I will focus on the European context, leaving besides the rest of the world, because it would require too much space and, probably, the final result would not be very detailed and precise. Finally, the third chapter will deal with the Ukrainian case study. After having described the ongoing armed conflict, several articles from local and European newspapers (all related to Ukrainian female refugees) will be analysed in order to demonstrate the validity of the answer to the research question.

Refugee women escaping their countries face an enormous range of risks, such as sexual and gender-based violence, trafficking, discrimination, difficult situations in refugee camps, but too often they are described just as passive victims, unable to act, without underlining their resistance and resilience. How are mass media describing refugee women escaping war and violence? This is the research question of this thesis, through which I want to demonstrate that mass media have a dual attitude towards refugee women (and negative in both cases), on the one hand they are completely invisible and forgotten, on the other hand they are described as war victims and passive agents, vehiculating through words and images a stereotyped image which impede the real understanding of migration risks and of their active resistance. Ukrainian women escaping the current war will be fundamental in this thesis in order to demonstrate the validity of the answer to the research question, constituting a case study to analyze.

Looking at the methodology, for the first chapter of this thesis institutional data and reports were used, such as United Nations documents, including reports and resolutions, NGOs research papers and international and regional treaties. They helped me in giving some

fundamental legal definitions of refugees, migrants, asylum-seekers and internally displaced people, terms which are often considered interchangeable, but are different. Moreover, data were fundamental in this first chapter in order to concretely demonstrate how refugee women are affected by armed conflict and migration. Concrete refugee women experiences helped me to give a different perspective of refugee women lives. On the contrary, the second and third chapters of the thesis were written mainly through the analysis of European newspaper articles, with the aim of showing how refugee women are described, with the support of research paper and NGOs to describe the current situation in Ukraine. Newspaper articles were fundamental in order answer the research question, considering that they effectively give a picture of how refugee women are described by media. As far as newspaper articles are concerned, it must be mentioned that several articles were not accessible without subscription to the journal sites.

Finally, some clarifications are owed. Firstly, I consider important to underline that not all women are innocent and not all men are to blame, this thesis will concentrate on refugee women risking their lives every day, but it does not aim to discriminate no one. It is similarly important to highlight the fact that men and boys too are subjected to several risks during their migration journey, as a matter of fact they risk being recruited by armed forces, forced labour, discrimination. The stereotype “men are strong and tenacious, they can cope” must not be an excuse, men do need the same protection as women, leaving beside those stereotypes and categorization which damage our society.

CHAPTER 1

GENERAL BACKGROUND ON MIGRATION

1.1 Refugee, migrant, internally displaced person and asylum-seeker: let's be clear.

The 1951 Convention relating to the status of Refugees (hereafter 1951 Convention) defines refugee as a person who “*as a result of events occurring before 1 January 1952 and owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it*”³. According to this definition, there are five grounds for persecution: race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. Refugees must meet at least one of these grounds to obtain international protection, they must demonstrate that they have a well-founded fear of being persecuted, by state and non-state actors, family members, community members and so on, for the reasons listed in Article 1. The refugee definition has always been understood mainly through male experiences, as stated by UNHCR guidelines on international protection No. 14, and gender issues have been quite often ignored. It is widely known that, especially in the last decades, gender can influence women and girls’ lives, but can sexual and gender-based violence, discrimination and so on amount to “*a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion*”? The answer is yes, even if gender-

³ UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951

⁴ UNHCR, *Guidelines on international protection No. 1: Gender-Related Persecution Within the Context of Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*, UNHCR, 2002

related claims are not specifically included in the 1951 Convention⁵. Guidelines number 1 mention some examples of what could amount to a well-founded fear of persecution: a persecutory law, prohibited persecutory practices still performed, a disproportionately severe and gender-related punishment for non-compliance with law⁶. To this end, article 60 of the 2011 Istanbul convention urges states to take appropriate measures in order to recognize gender-based violence (GBV) as a form of persecution against women. A gender-sensitive explanation of the five grounds, especially membership of a particular social group, has been given in the last years and it will be explained in depth afterwards.

The international framework does not provide a universally accepted definition of migrant. However, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) states that migrant is a person “*who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a state away from his/her habitual place of residence regardless of (1) the person’s legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is*”⁷. There is an important difference between migrants and refugees. Migrants are people who decide to move to enhance their lives and find new opportunities, to be more precise, for reasons not comprised in Article 1(A) of the Convention. On the contrary, as stated by the 1951 Convention, refugees are forced to leave their countries due to war, violence, persecution. Moreover, refugees, unlike migrants, are protected by the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol. However, it does not mean that migrants do not have right or do not need international protection.

⁵ UNHCR, *Guidelines on international protection No. 1: Gender-Related Persecution Within the Context of Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*, UNHCR, 2002

⁶ UNHCR, *Guidelines on international protection No. 1: Gender-Related Persecution Within the Context of Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*, UNHCR, 2002

⁷ Alam Ariane, et al, *Migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls in Europe*, Strasbourg: Institute of Political studies, 2019

Another important category is composed by those displaced people who move within their country⁸. The United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement defines internally displaced people as “*persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border*”⁹. They are similar to refugees in that they are obliged to leave their homes, nevertheless they remain in their country, contrary to refugees. Internally displaced people, differently from refugees, are not protected by specific international or regional instruments, in any case they enjoy the same basic human rights as other people.

Finally, asylum-seekers are people “*who are seeking international protection (...) Not every asylum-seeker will be recognized as a refugee, but every refugee was initially an asylum-seeker*”¹⁰. Asylum-seekers requests are controlled and determined by national asylum systems, while waiting they cannot be considered as refugees, but they do have the same human rights as other people. The right to asylum is recognized as human right all around the world, according to Article 14 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of human rights “*everyone has the right to seek and enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution*”¹¹.

1.2 Migration: push factors

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), until the end of 2021 the number of people who were forced to leave their homes was 89,3 million¹², UN Women declared that at

⁸ Davaki Konstantina, *the trauma endured by refugee women and their consequences for integration and participation in the EU host country*, European Parliament, 2021

⁹ UN, *United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, 2004

¹⁰ UNHCR, *Global Report*, 2006

¹¹ 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights

¹² <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>

least half of refugees are women, and numbers are increasing relentlessly. At the beginning of 2022 the number of people who were forced to move due to conflict, persecution, violence, or human rights violations was more than 100 million: 26.6 million refugees, 50.9 million internally displaced people and 4.4 million asylum-seekers¹³. Every day, entire families or individuals decide to leave their countries, taking probably one of the hardest decisions of their lives. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable, due to their marginalized status in society and gender, daily activities such as going to school or to work can easily turn into abuse, rape, or violence. It is not always easy to be a woman, in many countries they are not able to enjoy basic human rights: girls are not allowed to go to school, women are forced to stay at home without the possibility of working, they cannot vote, they are not allowed to go out if not accompanied by a male relative or they cannot choose the man to marry. Persecution, armed conflict, and human rights violations are the main factors forcing women and girls to leave their countries every day.

1.2.1 Persecution

“I didn’t know anything about excision, I was feeling happy inside. But then I could hear the screams of the ones who went before me. I was just there, frozen. I was confused. I couldn’t run away because it would mean dishonor for my family. When my turn came, it was atrocious (...)

When I campaigned against excision, I was seen as an enemy. The police came twice to my house looking for me and my life was in danger. I had to part from my family and escape my country” – Teliwel, Guinea¹⁴.

Persecution is the main element in the 1951 Convention definition of refugees, as a matter of fact they must demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution in order to be recognized as refugees.

¹³ UNHCR Refugee statistics, <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/statistics/>

¹⁴ <https://www.unrefugees.org.au/our-stories/the-woman-fighting-female-genital-mutilation/>

What do we mean by persecution? According to Article 9 of the European Council Directive 2004/83/EEC “*acts of persecution within the meaning of article 1A of the Geneva Convention must: (a) be sufficiently serious by their nature or repetition as to constitute a severe violation of basic human rights; (b) be an accumulation of various measures, including violations of human rights which is sufficiently severe as to affect an individual in a similar manner as mentioned in (a)*¹⁵”. Moreover, article 9 lists several acts that can constitute persecution, such as physical violence, discriminatory punishment, gender-specific acts, legal measures implemented in a discriminatory manner.

As stated above, gender is not specifically mentioned in the 1951 Convention. However, a gender sensitive interpretation of the convention and the five grounds of persecution is often given. There are several ways in which women can fear persecution due to their gender: sexual violence, wartime rape, forced sterilization, forced abortion, trafficking, combined marriage, female genital mutilation. A gender-related analysis can be done if considering the five grounds listed in article 1 of the 1951 Convention (race, religion, political opinion, membership of a particular social group, nationality), with the great contribution given by UNHCR Guidelines on International Protection No. 1 on gender-related persecution. Firstly, race does not have a specific connection to gender, nonetheless women can be considered as propagator of an ethnic identity through their reproductive role, from which arise the necessity for governments of controlling their reproduction, consequently, women and girls may be subjected to forced sterilization or forced abortion. Religion, on the contrary, does have an important connection with gender. As a matter of fact, there are several societies using religion as a pretext to limitate women’s human rights (obligation to respect given dress or behavioral codes) or to implement religious practices strongly detrimental to women’s health. In Afghanistan, for example, the Taliban

¹⁵ Council Directive 2004/83/EC

imposed severe restrictions to women's human rights based on a deviated religious interpretation of Sharia. In this case, women who did not respect these norms and behavioral codes could be afraid of being persecuted for religious causes. Persecution for reasons of political opinion is typically seen as a male experience, because of their major involvement in political actions¹⁶. However, women in several countries face an enormous range of restrictions and violations of their human rights and, even if not considered by mass media, numerous women dare to oppose to this inhuman treatment. Women opposing to female genital mutilation, who escape their country or who try to save their children from this tremendous practice, may be considered having a different political opinion from the prevailing one, and experience persecution. According to the Guidance note on refugee claims relating to female genital mutilation, consequently, they can (and should) be granted refugee status on this account. Membership of a particular social group is the most important and the most related ground to gender. A particular social group is "*a group of persons who share a common characteristic other than the risk of being persecuted, or who are perceived as a group by society. The characteristic will often be one which is innate, unchangeable, or which is otherwise fundamental to identity, conscience, or the exercise of one's human rights*¹⁷". Women as a group share historical and immutable characteristics due to which they may be persecuted and treated differently if compared to men. The last ground to analyse is nationality, which may often overlap with the ground of race.

1.2.2 *Armed conflict*

¹⁶Crawley Heaven, Lewis Chloé, *Gender issues in the asylum claim*, Amera International,

¹⁷ UNHCR, *Guidelines on international protection No. 1: Gender-Related Persecution Within the Context of Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*, UNHCR, 2002

“The attackers tied me up and raped me because I was fighting. About five of them did the same thing to me until one of their commanders who knew my father came and stopped them, but also took me to his house to make me his wife. I just accepted him because of fear and don’t want to say no because he might do the same thing to me too” – Girls, 14 years-old, Liberia¹⁸.

Armed conflicts are our reality. In recent years the number of armed conflicts has grown intensely, Ukraine, Ethiopia, Yemen, Israel, and Myanmar are few of the countries actually experiencing an armed conflict, where the main victims are civilians, precisely on average 75%, compared to the 5% of civilian casualties during World War I¹⁹. It is widely known that armed conflicts are traumatic experiences for the entire population, nevertheless women’s human rights can be disproportionately affected by it due to the fact that they may be easily marginalized and do not have the same resources as men, even more if their society is highly discriminatory: *“in Rwanda half a million women and girls were raped during the genocide, 60.000 during the war in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, finally, in Northern Iraq Daesh organized the systematic rape of women and girls from Yezidi minority²⁰”*. These numbers are terrifying but do demonstrate the tremendous impact war has on women and girls.

Sexual and gender-based violence (GBV) is one of the main characteristics of modern armed conflicts: wartime rape, forced impregnation, forced abortion, trafficking, sexual slavery, intentional spread of infections, abduction, forced recruitment²¹. The main objectives of state and non-states actors are the humiliation, the destruction and the intimidation of entire communities, women’s bodies

¹⁸ Ekehaug Vidar, *Will you listen? Young voices from conflict zones*, UNICEF UNFPA, 2007

¹⁹ Buscher Dale, *Displaced women and girls at risks: risk factors, protection solutions and resource tools*, 2006

²⁰ Alam Ariane, et al, *Migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls in Europe*, Strasbourg: Institute of Political studies, 2019

²¹ UNHCR, *Handbook for the protection of Women and Girls*, 2008

are used as “*envelopes to send messages to the perceived enemy*”²². Words are not enough to describe what women have to endure during armed conflict, the UN Independent Experts visited refugee camps, prisons, towns and villages, where survivors shared their stories, “*wombs punctured with guns, women raped and tortured in front of their husbands and children, rifles forced into vaginas, pregnant women beaten to induce miscarriages, fetuses ripped from wombs, women kidnapped, blindfolded and beaten on their way to work or school, we saw the scars, the pain and the humiliation, we heard accounts of gang rapes, rape camps and mutilation, of murder and sexual slavery, we saw the scars of brutality so extreme that survival seemed for some a worse fate than death*”²³.

Violence against women during armed conflicts has become ordinary, the norm, since in the majority of the cases it goes unpunished. Therefore, we can assume that international treaties, conventions, and resolutions criminalizing GBV are not sufficient to punish the perpetrators and to protect women and girls.

The impact of armed conflicts to women is so important that several resolutions were adopted by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

Resolution 1325 (UNSCR1325) was the first groundbreaking resolution. Adopted in 2000 by the United Nations Security Council, UNSCR1325 finally recognized the different impact that armed conflicts have on women and girls and the specific needs they have, even in refugee camps. The most important points of UNSCR1325 are points 9 to 12, where the UN security council, after having recognized the different impact of war on women and girls, asked armed conflict parties to fully respect international commitments related to women’s and girls’ human

²² Johnson Sirleaf Ellen, Rehn Elisabeth, *Women, war, and peace: the independent experts’ assessment on the impact of armed conflict on women and women’s role in peacebuilding*, 2002, United Nation Development Fund for Women

²³ Johnson Sirleaf Ellen, Rehn Elisabeth, *Women, war, and peace: the independent experts’ assessment on the impact of armed conflict on women and women’s role in peacebuilding*, 2002, United Nation Development Fund for Women

rights. Moreover, well aware of rape and sexual abuse iteration during armed conflicts, UNSC invited states to implement protection measures in this field, being a state responsibility. What is really important in this resolution, is that on the one hand it recognizes the different impact of war on women, on the other hand it also recognizes women's agency, skills and resilience. Within the context of the actual war in Ukraine, women organized country desks, coordinated transport logistics and direction of those in need towards those in help²⁴. They are escaping war and endangering their lives in a difficult journey, but they are also helping those in need in a very difficult context, carrying out a determinant role.

In 2008 the UNSC adopted Resolution 1820, through which it reminded states that rape and sexual violence during armed conflict are a war crime and a crime against humanity, which may even constitute genocide²⁵. Resolution 1820 was the first resolution entirely devoted to sexual violence during armed conflict, point 3 stresses the importance of training and awareness, as a matter of fact protection measures are asked, which may include *“enforcing appropriate military disciplinary measures and upholding the principle of command responsibility, training troops on the categorical prohibition of all forms of sexual violence against civilians, debunking myths that fuel sexual violence, vetting armed and security forces to take into account past actions of rape and other forms of sexual violence, and evacuation of women and children under imminent threat of sexual violence to safety”*²⁶. In 2009 Resolutions 1888 and 1889 were adopted by the UNSC both with the aim of urging states to implement measures able to prevent sexual violence during armed conflict. Resolution 1888 recalled states that rape, sexual violence, and abuses may exacerbate and even lengthen wars, impeding peacebuilding operations and processes,

²⁴ Ellner Andrea, *Gender stereotypes in the media: are Ukrainian women really only helpless victims?* King's College London, 2022

²⁵ UNSC, *Resolution 1820*, 2008

²⁶ UNSC, *Resolution 1820*, 2008

therefore demanding armed conflict parties to stop immediately every sexual violence action against women and girls. UNSCR1888 put an emphasis on perpetrators of sexual violence and rape against women and girls, demanding states to punish and bring them to justice, assuring survivors an adequate treatment. Resolution 1889 focus more on the participation of women in peacebuilding operations and process, without forgetting to condemn all international law violations against women and girls (not only sexual violence and abuse, it is more comprehensive) and remembering states that it is their responsibility to prevent and stop those actions.

It is important to note the fact that these resolutions, even if adopted in different times, stress the same elements: the urgency to stop violence and rape against women, the fact that those human rights violations exacerbate armed conflict and finally that it is a state responsibility to prevent violence and punish perpetrators. States are, probably, not able to implement these resolutions and, probably, violence against women and girls during armed conflict is not on the top of their agendas, not even halfway. Time passes, armed conflicts continue to devastate civilians' lives, and we are still trying to figure out what can we do to prevent women and girls' human rights violations.

1.2.3 Human rights violations

“Many girls are forced to marry at early ages by their parents because of poverty. Their husbands are much older than them... Men marry many wives and have dozens of children and they cannot afford to care for them” – Abibatu, a teenager in Sierra Leone²⁷

Human rights violations in many countries of the world are recurring even when there is no armed conflict, for women and girls the situation is even harder. Sometimes they are so severe that they are forced to leave their country to search for a safer place to live.

²⁷ Women's refugee commission, *Refugee girls: invisible faces of war*, 2009

According to the preamble of the Istanbul Convention, domestic violence (article 3), forced marriage (article 32), rape (article 36), genital mutilations (article 38), harassment (article 40), honour crimes (article 42), constitute serious violations of women's human rights and state parties to the convention have the obligation to take all the necessary measures to criminalise those conducts. However, in many countries women's human rights violations are the norm, they are considered to be habitual practices. Domestic violence is defined as *“all acts of physical, sexual, psychological, or economic violence that occur within the family or domestic unit or between former or current spouses or partners, whether or not the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim²⁸”*. Globally, one third of women have declared that they have been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by their partner²⁹. The term domestic violence encompasses several types of violence, such as economic violence, psychological violence, emotional violence, physical violence, and sexual violence. Forced marriage is a non-consensual marriage, in the majority of cases it is child forced marriage, since one, or even both, of the parties is a minor, below 18 years old. Child forced marriage hit particularly girls, sold and forced to marry old men in exchange of money for their families. Again, international instruments punish and criminalise forced marriage, but in many countries it is still the norm: 15 million girls are married before 18 years old every year, which means 28 girls at minute³⁰.

Non-consensual penetration of another person is defined as rape, another current human rights violation against women. Rape brings with it permanent trauma and psychological damage, beyond physical pain and, in several cases, death.

²⁸ *Istanbul Convention*, 2011

²⁹ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>

³⁰ Zafar Maria, *16 shocking facts about violence against women and girls*, Islamic relief, 2020

Female genital mutilations comprehend several practices with the aim of cutting off or altering female genitalia for non-medical reasons. It is widely practiced in Africa and the Middle East, nevertheless European and American continents are not immune. Girls are cut for beauty, cleansing, religion, cultural values, and sexual reasons. Every day women experience physical and non-physical acts such as grabbing, pinching, slapping, rubbing, catcalling, demand for sexual favors, stalking or sexual comments³¹. These acts constitute sexual harassment and are a violation of women's human rights, even if they may.

Finally, honour crimes are the murder of those family members who dishonors the family name. They are not very renowned globally, which also means that data may not be very accurate, but this does not mean that they do not happen with frequency, every year, indeed, 5000 honour crimes are reported³². The lack of accurate data is also caused by the fact that honour killings happen within the family environment, preventing in this way the murder denunciation: what happens in the family, stays in the family.

Women's human rights violations do not end there. There are countries which prohibit women to leave their home without the company of a male relative, countries in which girls are not allowed to go to school and to study, countries in which women cannot work. Women and girls all around the world are constantly deprived of their basic human rights, those rights that we continue to take for granted. Women and girls cannot enjoy the right to self-determination, the right to decide for their lives and for their bodies. The achievement of gender equality is one of the UN sustainable goals, but we are still very far from reaching equality between women and men. Constitutionally and legally the majority of countries recognize gender

³¹ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/faqs/types-of-violence>

³² Zafar Maria, *16 shocking facts about violence against women and girls*, Islamic relief, 2020

equality as a fundamental right, just as they recognize that women's rights are human rights. However, reality is very different. The future of women and girls' human rights is constantly under threat and their rights are recognized only in theory.

1.3 Risks

Women and girls leave their country to search for a better life, a better future. They escape war, persecution, human rights violations, they have seen and experienced the worst scenarios in their countries, but are we really sure that leaving is the safest option? Women and girls, while escaping their country, face an enormous range of risks, the majority of those can constitute serious human rights violations. They leave in the awareness that the migration route may be painful and agonizing, aware that it may even take their life away. Rape is so ordinary that women are given contraceptives before starting their migration route, as stated by a refugee women testimony from sub-Saharan Africa to Amnesty International³³. However, this is their only option.

Risks in the migration route are common to every refugee, it is true, but women have to suffer from specific types of violence which mainly deal with their bodies, with the fact that they are women: sexual violence, human trafficking, and exploitation, and finally discrimination.

1.3.1 Sexual violence against women

“One day she was with her two daughters when they were all, at the same time, raped by three of the fighters... Listening to the screams of her younger daughter, she was powerless to do anything as slowly the voice of her 10-year-old girl became silent. The young girls died from the assault” - Gertrude Garway, gender-based violence program officer,

³³Refugees are in urgent need of protection from sexual and gender-based violence, Amnesty International, 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2016/11/refugees-are-in-urgent-need-of-protection-from-sexual-and-gender-based-violence/>

International Rescue Committee, Liberia³⁴.

Violence against women (VAW) is a systematic issue of modern world, “*it is the manifestation of the historically unequal power relations between men and women which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of full women’s advancement*”³⁵, it characterizes armed conflicts, migration journeys, ordinary life. Sexual violence against refugee women and girls may take many forms, such as rape, corrective rape, exploitation, harassment, abuse, and may come from different actors, smugglers, police, coastguards, groups of other refugees. The risk of experiencing one or more forms of VAW obviously increases for refugee women, since they often travel along dangerous and unsafe pathways, to be more precise regarding their increased vulnerability, the 90% of women refugees who travelled along the Mediterranean route from Northern Africa to Italy were raped³⁶. In these contexts, women may not have the necessary amount of money to pay their journey, consequently they may be blackmailed by smugglers to exchange sexual relations in return for the passage, this is called “*transactional sex*”³⁷. There are millions of testimonies from women who told international organizations or NGOs (such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch) that they were afraid of sleeping in refugee camps because of the risk of sexual violence, they would not eat or drink in order not to go to the bathroom where men could harass or violate them. Violence against refugee women may result in sexually transmitted diseases or unwanted pregnancies. The case of unwanted pregnancies is particularly delicate, refugee women do not have resources, giving birth first, and then growing a child during migration or in a refugee camp

³⁴ Women’s refugee commission, *Refugee girls: invisible faces of war*, 2009

³⁵ Bahija Jamal, Freedman Jane, *Violence against migrant and refugee women in the Euromed region*, Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, 2008

³⁶ UN Women, *From evidence to action: tackling gender-based violence against migrant women and girls*, 2021

³⁷ Freedman Jane, *sexual and gender-based violence against refugee women: a hidden aspect of the refugee “crisis”*, *Reproductive Health Matters*, 24(47), 2016

is an enormous challenge. Refugee women, or even girls (we have to remember that even young girls can experience sexual violence), may not want to keep the child of their rapist and seek abortion. This is another important issue. Seeking abortion is a very difficult challenge for women due to the high number of conscientious objectors, to several laws prohibiting abortion in given countries and finally to the lack of medical services.

1.3.2 Human trafficking and exploitation

“My sister is only 15 years old but every night she goes out to have sex with humanitarian workers and peacekeepers for money. I tried to stop her before but have given up since I do not have anything to give her. We all rely on the money she gets to support the family” – 17-year-old young man, Liberia³⁸.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime defines human trafficking as *“the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of people through force, fraud, or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit³⁹”*. The Council of Europe gives a more detailed definition in the Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, as a matter of fact *“trafficking in human beings shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation (...)⁴⁰”*. Human trafficking is a lucrative activity, the third in order of importance of organized crime groups after arms and drugs, but most importantly trafficking for the purposes of

³⁸ Women’s refugee commission, *Refugee girls: invisible faces of war*, 2009

³⁹ UNODC, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/human-trafficking.html>

⁴⁰ Council of Europe, *Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings*, 2005

sexual exploitation is the least punished⁴¹, again crimes against women's and girls' bodies go unpunished. Women and girls are the favorite victims of traffickers. As a matter of fact, *"in 2018, for every 10 victims detected globally, about five were adult women and two were girls"*⁴². Refugee women may be desperately searching for a job while travelling, they may have their children in charge and traffickers, therefore, take advantage of those situation to offer a job, which will mainly turn into forced labour (38%⁴³) or sexual exploitation (50%⁴⁴). Trafficking does not end uniquely in forced labour or sexual exploitation, some smugglers use trafficked people for organ trafficking, baby selling, criminal activity. Obviously, women and girls mainly are exploited for sexual purposes, 77% of women and 72% of girls⁴⁵, which can take the form of sexual slavery, forced marriage, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy⁴⁶.

1.3.3 Discrimination

Refugee women, during their journeys, may face obstacles caused by discrimination, and it may be even worst due to the fact that they are refugees and women (double discrimination). First of all, it must be underlined (again) the fact that the 1951 Convention does not mention gender as a ground for persecution, forms of persecution strictly related to gender are not cited in this international convention, that should apply fairly to all human beings. Discrimination against refugee women starts from the international legal instrument that should protect them. Guidelines specifying gender-related analysis have been published, it is true, but it is also true that *"in the determination process, male applicants seeking asylum are significantly more*

⁴¹ Shearer Demiir Jenna, *Trafficking of women for sexual exploitation: a gender-based well-founded fear?*, 2003

⁴² UNODC, *Global report on trafficking in persons 2020*, 2020

⁴³ UNODC, *Global report on trafficking in persons 2020*, 2020

⁴⁴ UNODC, *Global report on trafficking in persons 2020*, 2020

⁴⁵ UNODC, *Global report on trafficking in persons 2020*, 2020

⁴⁶ UNGA, Report of the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children (UNGA A/71/303)

*successful in obtaining refugee status*⁴⁷. The problem is that for how the 1951 Convention and refugee definition are written, states interpretations may reinforce gender biases in the migration process. For example, A Polish woman who refused to join the communist party was raped by a colonel in the Polish secret police. She asked for asylum claiming a well-founded fear of persecution, but the court decided to reject her claim because the Colonel raped her for personal desire, and not to persecute her⁴⁸. The problem, in this specific case, lies in the fact that often courts distinguish between private and public acts (political activity), when it comes to actions that may occur in the private sphere, such as sexual violence, they are not considered as persecution. Hundreds of women refugee claims like this have been rejected due to the absence of a cohesive interpretation of the refugee definition and due to the lack of concrete mention of gender-related claims in the convention. A last but essential example to demonstrate the discriminatory attitude towards women: *“a man was tied to a chair and forced at gunpoint to watch his common-law wife being raped by soldiers. In determining the case for refugee status, he was deemed to have been tortured. His partner was not*⁴⁹”

Discrimination against refugee women starts from the very beginning.

Treated as second-class humans, refugee women while travelling to escape their country have to face continue and growing discrimination. Finding a job is very hard, it is even harder for refugee women, forced to accepted highly discriminatory and inhumane treatment such as incredibly low wages, absence of security during work activities, no access to legal protection when employed illegally. Racial and gender barriers refugee women face are copious, making worse a

⁴⁷ Prithivi Abhinaya, *Gender discrimination against refugees*, International Immersion Program Papers, 59, 2017

⁴⁸ Prithivi Abhinaya, *Gender discrimination against refugees*, International Immersion Program Papers, 59, 2017

⁴⁹ Bartolomei Linda, Pittaway Eileen, *Refugees, race, and gender: the multiple discrimination against refugee women*, *Refuge: Canada's Journal on refugees*, 19(6), 2001

situation already merciless.

1.3.4 Refugee camps

“Nemat, a 21-year-old... left the camp with three friends to get firewood to cook with. In the early afternoon a group of men in uniforms caught and gang-raped her. They said, ‘you are black people. We want to wipe you out’ “– Nicholas Kristof, the New York Times⁵⁰.

Refugee camps are defined, by UNHCR, as *“temporary facilities built to provide immediate protection and assistance to people forced to flee. Once a person becomes a refugee, they are likely to remain displaced for many years. It is a life in limbo⁵¹”*. Some refugees may spend a short period of time, other are forced to spend the rest of their lives, and other are forced to move from one refugee camp to another. Refugee camps may be controlled and established by different actors: refuge state, refugees themselves or UNHCR. Refugee camps are not the safest option for refugee women and girls who, again, are at high risk of violence.

Every activity carried by a woman or a girl in a refugee camp may transform into violence. Taking a shower, going to the bathroom, changing the clothes, eating, sleeping, ordinary activities that can put in danger the lives of millions of girls and women living in overcrowded and dirty camps, activities that can traumatize women and girls for the rest of their lives. The internal geographical disposition of services is a factor that influences women security in refugee camps. For example, wash facilities are very often located in a distanced place with respect to where women are camped, as a result they may have to walk long distances, increasing their vulnerability and therefore risking violence or harassment by men. Moreover, women are often forced to share shelters with strangers, due to the overcrowding of refugee camps,

⁵⁰ Women’s refugee commission, *Refugee girls: invisible faces of war*, 2009

⁵¹ UNHCR, <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/camps/>

which can result in harassment, abuse or even violence. The worst part is that violence is underreported due to the fear of survivors of social stigma or, even worse, reprisal by perpetrator. They live in a situation where protection is not granted, there are insufficient instruments and measures able to prevent violence, firstly, and then if it happens to protect, physically and psychologically, survivors. The inhumane situation refugee women are forced to live in refugee camps is allowed by the complete lack of any monitoring control. Sanitary materials are absent and, considering the special needs of women and girls in this sector, infections and diseases continue to increase.

1.4 International and regional framework

Refugees are protected by an enormous amount of international and regional treaties, which are constantly violated in the total indifference of the international community. The 1951 Convention related to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol are the most important international treaties concerning the protection of refugee people. The 1951 Convention defines in depth the concept of refugee, all the rights concerned and the obligations of states towards refugees. The protocol was adopted several years later as an integration of the 1951 Convention, all the articles, definitions and rights listed in the convention are reaffirmed in the protocol, with the removal of any geographic and temporal limit. More general international legal instruments may have some articles or parts dedicated to refugees, which may complement the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol. This is the case of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantee the right to seek and enjoy asylum from persecution to every person in the world (Article 14). Moreover, the Convention against Torture and other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading treatment or punishment prohibits torture, other degrading treatment and refoulement against refugees.

Regional instruments are designed mainly to integrate international convention, they refer to continental specificities and peculiarities. As a matter of fact, the American continent cannot be considered identical to the European or African continent. They have their specificities and their cultures, as a result people may escape for different reasons or purposes. The Cartagena Declaration and the OAU Convention governing the specific aspects of refugee problems in Africa are examples of regional treaties related to refugee. They may be useful and additional instruments for the international community as they may give more relevant definitions and information. The OAU Convention was adopted in 1969 and it is the main African regional convention which deal with refugees. The refugee definition in this case adds some important elements, considering refugee “(...) *any person compelled to leave his or her country owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination of events seriously disturbing public order either in part of the whole of his or her country of origin or nationality*”⁵². The OAU Convention gives different reasons for escaping the country if compared to the 1951 Convention and, most importantly, it includes external aggressions or dominations as migration causes. Consequently, people fleeing Africa do not have to demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution in order to be granted the refugee status.

The 1984 Cartagena Declaration is the Latin American instrument dedicated to refugees, even if it is not legally binding. As for the OAU Convention, it adds some more elements to the refugee definition, considering refugees “*persons who flee their countries because their lives, safety or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violations of human rights*

⁵² UNHCR, *A guide to international refugee protection and building state asylum systems*, 2017

*or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order*⁵³. The refugee definition in this case is broader and clearer if compared to the 1951 Convention, as a matter of fact it does specifically include violence, wars, human rights violations, or public order disturbances as grounds to be recognized a refugee. In both cases, it must be noted that gender-related claims and issues are not considered. However, the Cartagena Declaration can be considered as a more inclusive instrument, integrating generalized violence, internal conflicts, and massive human rights violations as reasons for people to escape their countries. In this case, women, and girls, disproportionately affected by wars and violations of their human rights, may be more protected and included in the refugee definition.

⁵³ UNHCR, *A guide to international refugee protection and building state asylum systems*, 2017

CHAPTER 2

REFUGEE WOMEN IN THE MEDIA

2.1 The importance of media

The birth of mass media can be traced back to the 15th century, in 1456 when Johannes Gutenberg invented the first type of printer. Starting from this groundbreaking moment, news began to spread among the population. The 18th and 19th centuries saw the birth of modern communication instruments such as telephone, cinema, radio, television and, finally, the internet. The European Court of Human Rights “*has underlined the vital role of the media as a public watchdog: they impart information and ideas on matters of public interest, and the public also has the right to receive them*⁵⁴”. Likewise, “*the media has become one of the only main sources of new information on key issues, resulting in the tendency of people to be more inclined to follow what is reported in the media*⁵⁵”. Mass media crucial and influential role in society has been widely acknowledged, they help in shaping opinions, public awareness, personal views.

In the refugee context, several reports and articles have been written in order to underline their importance, both in negative and in positive. For example, tracing back to September 11th terrorist attacks, Western mass media associated immigration of non-Western individuals (mainly Muslims) with terrorism, “*because the 9/11 perpetrators were Arabs from the Middle East, as well as being young males with beards, Muslim brown others became the symbol of Islam to the agenda setters media, thus becoming representative of Islam*⁵⁶”, this picture of immigration obviously resulted in a growing fear towards refugees and migrants, increasingly viewed as a threat for European stability and

⁵⁴ Council of Europe, *Media, and Refugee*,

⁵⁵ Braxton Blair, *Analyzing the Media's representation of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK: a frame analysis of the Guardian and the Times*, 2021

⁵⁶ Braxton Blair, *Analyzing the Media's representation of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK: a frame analysis of the Guardian and the Times*, 2021

peace. Another important example, as stated by the Council of Europe, mass media had a fundamental role in describing the arrivals of migrants and refugees in 2015 and 2016 in Europe as a “crisis”, a problem, rather than a multi-faceted global phenomenon, resulting in a negative attitude from the population towards these people in need⁵⁷. It is not surprising, as mass media are the principal public opinion forger: the public trust them and ground their personal views on what they write. Why should an ordinary reader not believe in mass media shouting a regional crisis? Why should he or she not believe in the so-called “refugee problem”? Even more if refugees’ success and positive stories are not reported at all.

Moreover, mass media decide which news to publish, having in this sense a significant power in “visibilizing” some refugees and “invisibilizing” others. Fake news may also be used to distort public opinion, *“right-wing groups and commentators are using both photos and memes to demonize the desperate people risking their lives to reach the continent. But many of the photos are being faked, twisted, edited, or taken out of context in an effort to support negative myths⁵⁸”*. Journalism double face in the migration context has been recognized worldwide, it *“may be a distorting glass as much as a magnifying lens: on the one hand it can expose inhumanity and corruption in the way that migrants are treated, and on the other hand it is able to follow an agenda that inspires discrimination and hate that intensifies the suffering of the victims of migration⁵⁹”*.

Generally speaking, the description of refugees encompasses mainly four aspects: victimization, normalization, burden, and threat⁶⁰.

⁵⁷ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/media-and-refugees#:~:text=Media%20as%20facilitators%20of%20public,events%20as%20a%20%E2%80%9Ccrisis%E2%80%9D>.

⁵⁸ Dearden Lizzie, *The fake refugee images that are being used to distort public opinion on asylum seekers*, The Independent, 2015

⁵⁹ EUROMED, *How does the media on both sides of the Mediterranean report on migration? A study on 17 countries by journalists for journalists and policymaking*, 2017

⁶⁰ Amores Javier, Arcila-Calderon Carlos, Gonzales-de-Garay Beatriz, *the gendered representation of refugees using visual frames in the main Western European Media*,

Refugee women are mainly described using the normalization and victimization lens, whereas men are constantly depicted as a threat and a burden for receiving countries. The majority of refugee representation studies concerns the dichotomy victim-threat, both widely criticized for failing to capture the humanity, the essence of refugees⁶¹. The critic of refugee victimization captures two main elements: massification, that is the description of refugees as numbers, and passivization, according to which refugees are passive human beings unable to act (which will be further analyzed afterwards). In both cases, refugees lose their humanity, their human being essence. When dealing with the victimization framework it is useful to draw a further difference between worthy and unworthy refugees. Some refugee victims are forgotten, the opposite happens for those refugees who are considered deserving empathy. Refugees abused in enemy states are very worthy of general empathy from the public, as a result their vulnerability and innocence will have a predominant role in newspaper articles. The distinction between worthy and unworthy refugees is quite actual within the context of the war in Ukraine, which is creating refugees who fit the definition of refugees, escaping war, and entering countries which are building walls to prevent the crossing of their border by Syrians, Afghans, Africans and so on⁶². It is obvious that victimization in this case has a specific (political) objective, that is negatively influence public opinion related to that specific enemy state.

2.2 The description of refugee women in European mass media: invisibility and victimization

In this section of the thesis several articles will be analysed in

Gender issues, 37, 2020

⁶¹ Chouliaraki Lillie, Georgiou Myria, Zaborowski Rafal, *The European "migration crisis" and the media: a cross-European press content analysis*, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2017

⁶² Howden Daniel, *Europe has rediscovered compassion for refugees – but only if they're white*, The Guardian, 2022

order to answer the research question. It was not possible to analyse articles published in newspapers from every single European country, as a result a choice had to be made. According to the UNHCR statistics, in Europe (conceived in this case purely as a continent) the five countries hosting the most substantial number of refugees are: Germany (84 millions), United Kingdom (69 millions), France (65 millions), Italy (60 millions) and finally Spain (47 millions)⁶³. After having assessed which countries to analyse, a selection had to be made within the context of media outlets to examine. Two newspapers for each country were chosen: Der Spiegel and Süddeutsche Zeitung for Germany, The Guardian and The Times for United Kingdom, Le Monde and Le Figaro for France, Il Corriere della Sera and La Repubblica for Italy, and finally El País and El Mundo for Spain. The selected newspapers were analysed thanks to their online website and Google News through the research of keywords.

Media representations of refugees play a crucial role in shaping public opinion and perception. But concretely, how are refugee women treated by mass media? The analysis of European newspaper articles leads to the conclusion that, on the one hand, refugee women are disproportionately covered by mass media if compared to refugee men or general migration articles and, on the other hand, the few times their stories are reported, they are described as victims and therefore deprived of their agency. As it was stated beforehand, women refugees are, in the majority of cases, described under the victimization lens, lying in the way refugees are described with words and images. Victimization can be described as the “*removal of political agency from the figure of the refugee by establishing a condition of political voicelessness*”⁶⁴, the political agency of individual is a fundamental element in their lives, it can be considered

⁶³ <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/insights/explainers/refugee-host-countries-income-level.html> (figure number 4)

⁶⁴ Johnson Heather, *Click to donate: visual images, constructing victims and imagining the female refugee*, Third World Quarterly, 32(6), 2011

as the power to act, to speak, to be heard, to have a role in the world, to have an impact. Women are essentially passive and helpless actors, unable to act and to express their agency. It is obviously true that refugee women have to endure traumatic experiences during their migration journeys, but very few articles mention the ability to react of these women. In this way, an unrealistic image of refugee women is transmitted to the public, as they are depicted as “*desperate sufferers who are completely dependent on external support*”⁶⁵. The victimization of refugee women is widespread, it has to be noted that even international organizations may emphasize the submissive role of refugee women, in general the victimization of refugees by UNHCR can be traced back to a 1993 report, where refugees were described as “*desperately simple, and empty. No home, no work, no decisions to take today. And none to take tomorrow. Or the next day, refugees are the victims of persecution and violence. Most hope that, one day, they may be able to rebuild their lives in a sympathetic environment. To exist again in more than name*”⁶⁶. It is very clear that the victimization process starts from UNHCR and other UN organizations. When writing reports, organizations such as UNHCR describe refugee women as “*a broad and undifferentiated category of victims, lacking agency and unable to determine their own future*”⁶⁷. It is true that the depoliticization and victimization of refugee women can be an important instrument in order to increase humanitarian support, but at the same time it contributes to reinforcing the dominant stereotype behind refugee women, namely powerless, submissive, and lacking agency. Reducing women only to vulnerability and victims may be even more dangerous: at first glance it can be seen as an advantage, but the examination of the question in depth shows that it only causes a sense of inferiority status

⁶⁵ Boomgaarden Hajo, Greussing Esther, *Shifting the refugee narrative? An automated frame analysis of Europe’s 2015 refugee crisis*, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 43 (11), 2017

⁶⁶ Johnson Heather, *Click to donate: visual images, constructing victims and imagining the female refugee*, Third World Quarterly, 32(6), 2011

⁶⁷ Crawley Heaven, *Saving brown women from brown men? Refugee women, gender, and the racialized politics of protection*, Refugee Survey Quarterly, 41, 2022

in women and a reinforcement of existing stereotypes. Jane Freedman calls this “*symbolic violence*”, a very common experience for all refugee women coming to Europe. Two examples are brought in her article in order to explain concretely what symbolic violence is. A first example deals with a “*woman with a well-respected career as an architect before the war in Syria exploded, she travelled alone to Europe (demonstrating her agency and autonomy) and when she arrived in France, she felt she was treated as an oppressed victim, men weren’t treated like her, they were given more respect. Another Syrian woman experienced the same treatment by the Croix Rouge Charity in Paris where she asked for some food. She was given 1kg of chocolate biscuits, and she told the staff she didn’t like chocolate and they answered that if she was really hungry, she would have eaten them, humiliating this young woman*”⁶⁸.

It must be underlined that when refugee women are not described as victims, they do not appear in newspaper articles: they become invisible, their stories do not matter anymore and disappear from public coverage. The invisibility of refugee women constitutes a concrete issue of journalism. A study held by the World Association for Christian Communication Europe Region (WACC Europe) and by the Churches’ Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) underlines that only the 21% of newspaper articles concerned with migration and asylum refers specifically to refugee and/or migrant, and of the 21% only in about one-quarter the refugee and migrant mentioned was a woman⁶⁹. The invisibility of refugee women is not a simple conjecture, is the reality, and it is not about describing numbers of refugee women escaping war, it is about concretely telling their stories, hearing their voices. Refugee women must not be simply a number to be written in some articles, they must not be simply a nameless face to be put in articles just to obtain

⁶⁸ Freedman Jane, *The uses, and abuses of vulnerability in EU asylum and refugee protection: protecting women or reducing autonomy?*, Papeles del CEIC, 2019

⁶⁹ Pierigh Francesca, *Changing the narrative: media representation of refugees and migrants in Europe*, WACC and CCME, 2017

compassion and pity or donations.

2.2.1 Germany

According to the Council of Europe, German press and newspapers hardly dealt with refugee women, as a matter of fact, if compared to other European countries analyzed, Germany had the lowest rate of articles related with refugee women⁷⁰. Many articles in the newspaper Der Spiegel dealt with the removal of the protection for refugee women and children in Germany and the lack of their integration. Generally speaking, a very negative attitude was found in the majority of Der Spiegel articles as far as refugees are concerned. Words like invasion, crisis, attack, assault, chaos, were dominant in the refugee discourse. In a newspaper where refugees are treated like dangerous individuals, posing a threat to national security, it is not surprising that refugee women are invisible. A less extreme vision of refugee can be found in the Süddeutsche Zeitung, where refugee women continue to be invisible, but in general they are not treated just as security threats. How could it be explained this invisibility pattern of refugee women in German newspapers? Refugee women are constantly annihilated, as a result their voices, their stories, their actions are not considered in German mass media, they are systematically excluded⁷¹, this is unexpected especially if considering that Germany is the country that hosts the most elevated number of refugee across European countries. According to Amores, Calderon and Gonzales-de-Garay “*mass media focuses almost exclusively on the highest strata of occupation and social hierarchies, in which the representation of women remains poor (...) so the imbalance in the coverage of the two genders may simply reflect*

⁷⁰ Georgiou Myria, Zaborowski Rafal, *Media coverage of the “refugee crisis”: a cross-European perspective*, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2017

⁷¹ Lind Fabienne, Meltzer Christine, *Now you see me, now you don't: applying automated content analysis to track migrant women's salience in German news*, *Feminist media studies*, 21(6), 2021

*inequalities at the social and structural levels*⁷². It is clear that media coverage of refugee stories can be considered as a faithful picture of contemporary society, where women are constantly put in a subordinate and submissive position with respect to men.

2.2.2 United Kingdom

Within the framework of the two British newspapers analysed, in The Times articles related to refugee women do appear and can be found, even if with some difficulties. A first research was based on the words “refugee women” in The Times, and several articles appeared. In those articles, women appear as passive victims, unable to act, and waiting for someone to save them. “*Operation Jihadi Bride: the man who saves women from Islamic State*⁷³” offers the most evident example of women victimization and passivization. The story is inspiring, it is true, but at the end the point is always the same: young women waiting for a man to save them, princesses to rescue and to save, like in every fairytale. Newspaper should spread the vision that women are able to save themselves, they may ask for help if needed, but they are not passive princesses. A curious article dealt with matchmakers: “*refugee matchmakers’ prey on single women*”. The focus here lies in the fact that some refugee agents search for unmarried, widows, and divorcees refugee women in refugee camps and make them monetary offers⁷⁴. Again, men have the power, newspaper articles like this one, contribute to offer the public a hierarchical conception of relations among individuals. To be more precise, due to the prominent position of men and the consequently subordination of women, they have the power to buy women, passive victims without the ability to oppose, according to newspapers.

⁷² Amores Javier, Arcila-Calderon Carlos, Gonzales-de-Garay Beatriz, *the gendered representation of refugees using visual frames in the main Western European Media*, Gender issues, 37, 2020

⁷³ Ben Machell, *Operation Jihadi Bride: the man who saves women from Islamic State*, The Times, 2019

⁷⁴ Smith Hannah Lucinda, *Refugee matchmakers’ prey on single women*, The Times, 2016

The Guardian, similarly to The Times, offers some articles concerned with refugee women issues. However, the result is the same: refugee women appear as weak and vulnerable victims, as passive and objectified entities unable to act and to determine their fate. A first article analyzed from The Guardian is entitled “*Syrian women in Jordan at risk of sexual exploitation at refugee camps*”⁷⁵. Only the risks faced by women are evidenced in this article, no sign of agency from women. It is undeniable the fact that refugee women throughout their lives face some of the worst experiences in earth, the first chapter of this thesis have underlined objectively these risks and data confirms them, notwithstanding their active behaviour to oppose these events is not mentioned.

The number of articles describing refugee women as victims and vulnerable is considerable. It was nearly impossible to find articles related to some successful stories of refugee women escaping the horrors of war, British newspapers concentrate on women victims of rape, violence. Why not stories of women that, even if victims of violence, were able to succeed?

2.2.3 France

The two newspapers analysed within the French framework where Le Monde and Le Figaro, which had quite opposite view of refugees in general. Le Monde underlined the victimization of refugees, whereas Le Figaro concentrated more on negative connotations of refugees, seeing them as dangerous and invaders⁷⁶. This difference reflects on the description of refugee women, resulting in a considerable number of articles dealing with refugee women in Le Monde and, a difficulty in finding articles concerned with refugee women in Le Figaro. Le Monde was the first newspaper to be analyzed. In “On the road,

⁷⁵ Harper Lee in Amman, *Syrian women in Jordan at risk of sexual exploitation at refugee camps*, The Guardian, 2014

⁷⁶ Georgiou Myria, Zaborowski Rafal, *Media coverage of the “refugee crisis”: a cross-European perspective*, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2017

refugee women more vulnerable to violence⁷⁷”, the author admits that for unaccompanied refugee women the road to Europe is even more dangerous, this is the reason why (according to the author) they put themselves under male protection. After having assessed the considerable risks for refugee women, in general, the journalist has two possible roads to undertake: victimize and passivize women or underline their strength and resilience. It is not surprising that, even in this case, women are victimized, considered unable to protect themselves and forced to ask for the protection of a man. A second article similarly dealt with refugee women, “*The dead princesses*⁷⁸”, this was not a very recent article, but anyway important for this thesis. The title is meaningful and significant, it compares refugee women with princesses. It is widely known that fairytales dealing with princesses have always the same story behind: a princess in difficulty waits to be save by her prince. This article clearly starts with a stereotype, too frequent in mass media, women dying every day simply for having broken some fixed rules. However, rather than underlying their courage in breaking these rules, in deciding for their own future, in chasing their dreams, they are called princesses. The title states that these princesses are dead, as if the journalist wanted to underline the fact that these women were not able to save by themselves, and as a result they died. However, the world must know all the stories of these brave and courageous women, able to save their lives and, in the majority of the cases, the lives of their families. They are not princesses waiting to be saved by their prince. The second newspaper analyzed was Le Figaro, where it was quite difficult to find some articles dealing with refugee women. The author of “*Tchad: the tragedy of Darfur women*⁷⁹” clearly admits that the three refugee women interviewed in Darfur region survive thank to

⁷⁷ Soullier Lucie, *Sur la route, les femmes migrantes plus vulnérables face aux violences*, Le Monde, 2015

⁷⁸ *Les “princesses mortes”*, Le Monde, 1981

⁷⁹ Abéché Léonard Schrik, *Tchad: la tragédie des femmes du Darfour*, Le Figaro, 2007

international aid: if the international community did not help them, they probably would have already died, due to their inability to survive. From the beginning women are treated like passive victims, once again posing the main focus and emphasis on their inability to react to adversities. There are two options: on the one hand, they survive thanks to international aid (as in this article) or, on the other hand, they survive thanks to male protection. No article mentions refugee women agency, not even remotely. What is more, in this specific article, is that at the beginning a description of a young girl from Darfur is given and it is not surprising that the journalist focuses on the veil, as if he wanted to underline the oppression of Islamic women, forced to wear the veil. Was it really necessary to say that this young girl was covered with the Tarha (a type of Islamic veil)? Without specifically mentioning that it is not possible to know whether the veil was a free choice of the girl, the reader can freely suppose that this young girl was obliged to wear the Tarha, emphasizing again the stereotyped conception of Islamic veil.

2.2.4 Italy

According to Giorgia Alberta, generally speaking the Italian press rarely debate on refugee women per se and when they emerge they are described in five main ways: the maid, the prostitute, the Muslim woman, the westernized woman and finally the mother⁸⁰. Therefore, it is obvious that refugee and migrant women cannot be separated from their passiveness, their subordinate role and, the rare times it happens, women are considered to be westernized, so according to newspapers they have abandoned their culture (which is the main cause of their previous situation). In the first newspaper analysed, *Il Corriere della Sera*, few articles were found on the website entirely devoted to refugee women. A first article to analyze, right from the title shows a passivization of refugee women:

⁸⁰ Giorgia Alberta, *the cultural construction of migrant women in the Italian press*, 2012

“Yazidis women abandoned by Europe⁸¹”. The author of this article clearly underlines the fact that refugee women have to be saved by someone, as if they were not able to save themselves. They appear to be waiting for foreign policies, declarations, and aid, yet again denied their agency and their ability to react. Why no article states “Yazidis men abandoned by Europe”? Why women cannot be able to save themselves?

La Repubblica, on the contrary, in several articles mentions women in the title, but then in its corpus no reference to women is present. This way of working is the main peculiarity of two articles analyzed: “*Sudan, Darfur: violence obliges once again millions of people to escape, they are mostly women and children, who seek refuge in Chad*⁸²” and “*Ethiopia, the number of refugee in Sudan overtakes 40.000 people: millions of women and children escape from the Tigray*⁸³”. Beside these articles, “*Syria, the war of refugee women: alone and offended they have to find again dignity and courage*⁸⁴” is an article that needs an analysis. Refugee women are again treated like passive victims that needs and external protection from men and several phrases deserve attention. Firstly, the author of the article emphasizes the fact that “*men, fathers, husbands and sons are the one dying in majority, which even represent the only source of subsistence*⁸⁵”, this phrase clearly aims at evidencing the fact that in Syria only men can work and bring home some money to live. However, the reality is different. There are many women actually working in Syria, they are women who can, similarly to men, help their families and in the same way, there are many women who are actually heads of families. It is true that in many cases women are forced to stay at home, denied from their

⁸¹ Serafini Marta, *Le donne yazide abbandonate dall'Europa*, Il Corriere della Sera, 2021

⁸² *Sudan, Darfur: le violenze costringono ancora una volta migliaia di persone alla fuga, sono per lo più donne e bambini rifugiati nel vicino Ciad*, La Repubblica, 2021

⁸³ *Etiopia, il numero di rifugiati in Sudan supera le 40.000 persone: migliaia di donne e bambini fuggono dalla regione del Tigray*, La Repubblica, 2020

⁸⁴ Nardinocchi Chiara, *Siria, la guerra delle donne rifugiate: sole e offese devono ritrovare dignità e coraggio*, La Repubblica, 2022

⁸⁵ Nardinocchi Chiara, *Siria, la guerra delle donne rifugiate: sole e offese devono ritrovare dignità e coraggio*, La Repubblica, 2022

basic human rights, they are the protagonists of forced marriage, but journalists should not generalize too much. Another important sentence is "without *men protecting them, women are treated like outcast*⁸⁶", in this case the author of the article is specifically putting an accent to the fact that women need a man to survive, to be treated like humans. Society has never been polite to women, in many countries women without a husband are concretely treated like outcasts. But, the problem here is that the article only focuses on one aspect of refugee women lives: the fact that they can survive without a men. They are denied their agency, their ability to react to adversities only because passive and victimized refugee women are a more attractive topic. This article would have been more objective if, after having assessed all the concrete difficulties refugee women have to face, some successful stories of refugee women were told.

2.2.5 Spain

The Spanish newspaper El Mundo often publish articles dealing with refugee women, as a result invisibility is not a predominant feature of this newspaper. The first article to be analyzed is entitled "Refugee women are victims of sexual harassment during their journey to Europe⁸⁷". The keywords of this article are victim, suffering, violence. An emphasis should be put on a phrase taken from this article: "*protecting those groups of people risking more than others abuse, like women travelling alone and single-parent families whose head is a woman*⁸⁸". It can be noted that men are not mentioned, single-parent families guided by men neither. The point is that, again, women are denied their agency, they are not considered able to protect themselves and their families from the risks encountered

⁸⁶ Nardinocchi Chiara, *Siria, la guerra delle donne rifugiate: sole e offese devono ritrovare dignità e coraggio*, La Repubblica, 2022

⁸⁷ *Las refugiadas son víctimas de acoso sexual durante su viaje a Europa*, El Mundo, 2016

⁸⁸ *Las refugiadas son víctimas de acoso sexual durante su viaje a Europa*, El Mundo, 2016

during their migration journey. Every person in the world deserve protection, but women deserve it even more because they are vulnerable, submissive, passive. From this phrase the reader can understand that women are not capable of protecting their own children, they have to be helped. A large number of articles from El Mundo concerning refugee women deal with prostitution, having sex in exchange of money or clothes, in this way the “average reader” may misunderstand the problem. A first article, “*Buying a Syrian refugee women in internet*”⁸⁹, gives an objectified conception of refugee women, passive actors that can be bought without problems by strangers, denying for the umpteenth time, their ability to act and react, denying their resistance. By giving a vision of refugee women similar to “sex objects”, mass media reduce considerably the immense number of faceting of refugee women: courage, reacting to adversities, resilience. Another disturbing article from El Mundo, “*Sex in exchange of bread for Syrian refugee women with the knowledge of UN*”⁹⁰. The focus lies in the fact that refugee women, according to this article, are basically selling themselves for some food, a conception that could lead to a very large number of misunderstanding by the public and that could forge a general public opinion very dangerous in relation to refugee women. The accent is put on the exchange food-sex, as if refugee women were not able to do anything else (or do not want to do anything else) in order to get some food for their families. The second newspaper analyzed was El Pais, in which, less articles concerning refugee women were found. In the very first lines of “*The voice of refugee women*”⁹¹, the journalist states that refugee women between having lost their homes, their relatives, and their most-cared ones, they also lost their identity (but not their voices). Within the context

⁸⁹ Lupo Nicolas, *Comprar a una refugiada Siria a través de internet*, El Mundo, 2014

⁹⁰ Hurtado Lluís Miquel, *Sexo por pan para las refugiadas sirias con el conocimiento de la ONU*, El Mundo, 2018

⁹¹ De La Fuente Inmaculada, *La voz de las refugiadas*, El Pais, 2022

of an article aiming at emphasizing the right to speak of refugee women, saying that they have lost their identities is clearly a way to remove agency from brave and powerful refugee women. After all the difficulties they are able to overcome before, during and after their migration journeys, journalists do not have the right to say that they lost their identity. According to the Cambridge dictionary, the identity of a person can be considered as “*a person’s name and other facts about who they are; the fact of being or feeling that you are a particular type of person; the qualities that make a person different from the others*”⁹². Another article is entitled “*The vulnerability of refugee women and migrants*”⁹³. The title of this article itself emphasize the vulnerability of refugee women, who are once again denied their agency. The journalist correctly states that women and men experience different type of risks, on the basis of their gender. However, men are not defined as victims, women, on the contrary, are defined only as victims in this article, not once, but more times.

2.3 Visual representation of refugee women

Images can be even more important than words, they are more immediate and can capture the essence of people, in these case migrants, they are more immediate rather than words. However, they have also the ability to contribute to shape public opinion concerning migration, they can shape our emotions towards this phenomena: fear, sadness, empathy, anger. In this specific case, they may become political forces. Newspapers articles analysed beforehand in paragraph 3.2 had images chosen by journalists to legitimize even more their words.

Curiously, as far as photographs in newspapers articles are concerned, women become visible: “*the percentage of female refugees (48%) who are portrayed alone is much higher than males (17,4%),*

⁹² <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/it/dizionario/inglese/identity>

⁹³ Becerra Beatriz, *La vulnerabilidad de las mujeres refugiadas y migrantes*, El Pais, 2016

although males appear much more frequently in groups of many individuals (40,5%), compared to females (2%)⁹⁴. All of a sudden refugee women become visible, why? Obviously, in the majority of photographs, refugee women are portrayed with religious symbols, referring to the Muslim culture and religion in particular. Women are photographed with burkas, long robes, completely covered by veils, in this way contributing to a discrimination of the Muslim culture. Journalists know the power of photos and pictures, know exactly that they may support, even unconsciously, dominant values, such as women considered as victims of their religion, forced to wear long robes covering their bodies entirely, without realizing that the real and concrete problem does not lie in the way these women dress (see figures 1 and 2). A Western way of dressing does not automatically make women free and full of rights. Journalists often forget that Muslim women may also choose to wear Burqas or Hijabs. Moreover, the “identifiable victim effect” is a phenomenon described in social psychology, according to which people feel closer to images portraying a single individual rather than large groups⁹⁵. This means that people show different attitudes towards images: they may offer more aid to a single victim rather than a group of victims. As a result, journalists, pushed by the “identifiable victim effect” are more prone to insert single victims’ images in their article, notably women (as underlined by previous data). Refugee women become a journalistic instrument, a way to obtain pity and compassion, to increase charity donations. However, their stories probably won’t be mentioned in those articles. When writing their articles and choosing the right image, journalists find themselves in front of a double way to influence public opinion: on the one hand, the public will show compassion and pity towards single

⁹⁴ Amores Javier, Arcila-Calderon Carlos, Gonzales-de-Garay Beatriz, *the gendered representation of refugees using visual frames in the main Western European Media*, Gender issues, 37, 2020

⁹⁵ Tsakiris Manos, *Refugees in the media: how the most commonly used images make viewers dehumanize them*, The Conversation, 2021

individuals' images; on the other hand, with group of individuals images, the public will feel threatened and, as a result, may be more apt to support anti-refugee petitions. It is not the first time women are used as an instrument to legitimize actions and ideas, just remember the use of Afghan women by United States of America administration as a justification to invade Afghanistan in 2001.



Figure 1 – A woman with her baby, escaping from the war in Syria.

Source: The Times (AP)



Figure 2 – a Syrian woman with her face almost totally covered.

Source: Ali Ihsan Ozturk, Getty Images, The Times

Figure 1 and figure 2 can be found in the two articles analysed previously from the Times. The articles dealt with refugee women and their victimization process, as a result a connection image-article can be found. Figure 1 represents a women entirely covered with a Burqa and holding in their hands her children, while escaping the Syrian war. Even if the photo is quite dark, the focus is clearly on the woman. Figure 2, on the contrary, emphasizes the face of the Syrian women, this photo was probably chosen in order to underline two main elements: the veil and the sad eyes of the woman, contributing to the victimization of refugee women. Moreover, both figures represent a limited group of people, there is a protagonist, which is the focus of the image and a background. They are very different if compared to figure 3 and 4.



Figure 3 – A large group of refugees in a boat.

Source: La Repubblica



Figure 4 – A large group of refugees crossing a small river.

Source: La Repubblica (Ansa)

In figure 3 and 4 a large group of people is represented, and it is not difficult to see that the majority of refugees portrayed in those figures are men. As stated beforehand, images showing large group of refugees have the power to frighten the reader, to make him/her feel in threat as if his/her country could be invaded from one moment to the next.

Figure 5 is even more powerful. An immense group of refugees is shown

in the article from La Repubblica, “Migrants, Italians are scared: away Schengen, yes to borders⁹⁶”. The threat perceived with this image from the reader is noteworthy. Yes to borders, Italians are scared and then this photo is found in the article. Everything goes in one single direction: the danger male refugees pose to national security.



Figure 5 – A large group of refugee and migrants in a refugee camp.

Source: La Repubblica, AFP

Going back to female refugees, sometimes their photos can be found in articles which do not have a concrete relation with them. Figure 6 shows a group of veiled women, their faces are not visible due to Burqa. However, the title of the articles is “Afghan refugees are cooking up a better future in India⁹⁷”, it deals with an interesting project run in India with the aim of giving these refugees the chance to cook and to work in a catering business. Leaving beside the too often frequent stereotype describing women just as housewives “cooking up a better future”. Why could the image of this article not portray some Afghan refugees actually working withing this project? Was it really necessary to evidence,

⁹⁶ Diamanti Ilvio, *Migranti, gli italiani hanno paura: via Schengen, si alle frontiere*, La Repubblica, 2016

⁹⁷ Venkatraman Shai, *Afghan refugees are cooking up a better future in India*, The Guardian, 2016

emphasize and underline the fact that Afghan refugees are covered from head to toes?



Figure 6 – A group of Afghan refugee women in India.

Source: Aref Karimi, AFP, The Guardian

Similarly, and perhaps even more dangerous, another article from The Guardian deals with harassment against refugees in Iran⁹⁸. There was actually no reference to women’s human rights violations, women’s agency, the article can be described as very general and “gender-neutral”. The only photo present in this article (figure 7), however, portrays two women in a refugee camp. What is the focus and the main particular in this photo? Their burqas. Again.

⁹⁸ Graham-Harrison Emma, *Afghan refugees in Iran face harassment, report finds*, The Guardian, 2013



Figure 7 – Two Afghan women in a refugee camp,
Source: Vahid Salemi, AP, The Guardian

CHAPTER 3

EVIDENCE FROM UKRAINIAN CASE STUDY

3.1 The war in Ukraine: historical background

3.1.1 Geography, culture, and origins of Ukraine

Before dealing with the 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces, it is necessary to make a premise concerning Ukrainian early history, culture, population, to make clear that Ukraine has become an independent country, a sovereign state, with an own history, an own culture, and an own population. The questioning of the identity and history of Ukraine has been used by Russian authorities to start another chapter of the Russian-Ukrainian war. However, it must be cleared out that Ukraine is an independent state. The Ukrainian state is located in Europe and its capital is Kyiv. It borders with Belarus to the north, Russia to the east, Poland to the north-west, Slovakia and Hungary to the west and finally Moldova to the south-west (figure 8).



Figure 8 – Map of Ukrainian borders

Source: Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Ukraine>

The massive Russian influence has led to the consequence that in many regions of Ukraine, there are many people actually identifying themselves as Russians. As far as language is concerned, many may believe that Russian and Ukrainian are the same. However, there are several differences, Russian and Ukrainian are similar (but they are similar in the same way Spanish is alike to Portuguese) but are two different languages. It is clearly the result of centuries of Russian domination and influence, it is not surprising to see Ukrainian people speaking Russian as their native language. The majority of Russian native speakers is concentrated in the South and East of Ukraine, whereas in the North-West there is a majority of Ukrainian speakers, as it can be seen in figure 9.



March 2022

Figure 9 – Map of Russian and Ukrainian speakers in Ukraine

Source: Translators without borders (2001 Ukraine census),

https://www.datawrapper.de/_wp1WWW/

As far as ethnic origins are concerned, the majority of Ukrainians identify themselves as Ukrainian (77.8%), whereas the rest of the population identify as Russian, Belarusian, Moldovan, or Crimean. This is the result of the various states under which Ukraine fell, it has been called for this reason “*the gates of Europe*”⁹⁹. For centuries Ukrainians, Poles, Jews, Tatars, Belarusians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Armenians, Germans, and Romania¹⁰⁰ have shaped and influenced in their own ways Ukrainian culture. It must not be confused the richness of Ukrainian culture thank to external domination with the absence of an own culture and identity. The religious framework in Ukraine is very variegated, again thanks to external influence. The majority of Ukrainians are Orthodox and there is a massive part of the population which does not practice any religion

⁹⁹ <https://ukraine.ua/explore/origins-history-of-ukraine/>

¹⁰⁰ <https://ukraine.ua/explore/origins-history-of-ukraine/>

(42,5%¹⁰¹). Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, and Jewish follows as the most practiced religions in Ukraine.

3.1.2 Past history to explain 2022 invasion: USSR, independence, Crimea

In order to better understand the reasons behind the 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia, it is important to take a step back, underling the antecedents of Russia-Ukraine relations. Ukrainian history of the 20th century is strictly tied to the Soviet Union, as Ukraine was one of its founder states, between 1917 and 1922, after the collapse of the Czarist Russian Empire. The Western part of Ukraine was given to Poland and, after World War II it will be annexed to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Figure 10 clearly shows the main territorial changes of Ukraine in the 20th century. Therefore, Ukraine was divided mainly in two parts after World War I: the blue part of figure 10 became the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic and the yellow part was annexed to Poland. During and after World War II, the Soviet Union directly (and the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic indirectly) gained the yellow part from Poland (Western Ukraine), the orange part from Romania and the salmon pink part from Czechoslovakia.

¹⁰¹ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Ukraine/Languages>

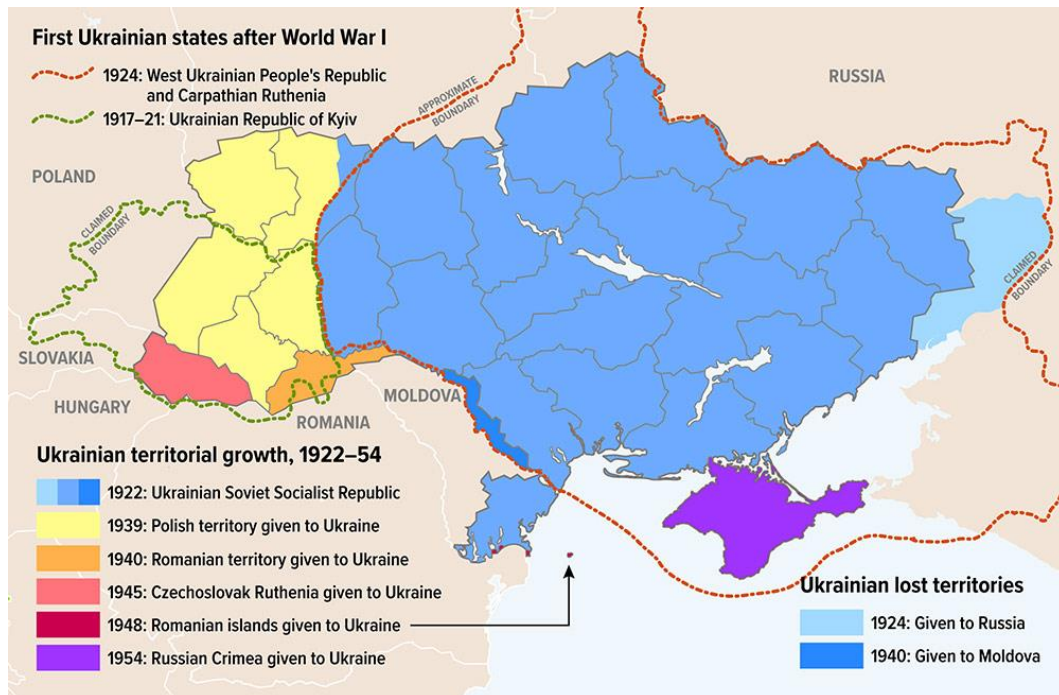


Figure 10 – Ukraine after World War I and II

Source: University of Rochester, <https://www.rochester.edu/newscenter/ukraine-history-fact-checking-putin-513812/>

In 1991, after years of violence, famine (1932-1933), poverty and Russification, Ukraine voted in a referendum and declared its independence, simultaneously to the collapse of the Soviet Union. The first instability element of the newly independent Ukraine came from the presidential elections of 2004, when Viktor Yushchenko, highly feared and hated by Russian elite for his democratic beliefs, lost against Viktor Yanukovich. Yanukovich was a pro-Russian presidential candidate, whereas Yushchenko was the leader of the opposition. The presidential election results were challenged immediately, as a matter of fact the exit polls of the elections gave Yushchenko a possible majority, with a 52% of votes, and 43% for Yanukovich¹⁰². At the end Yanukovich, the pro-Russian candidate, won with a 2,5% of votes margin.

What happened? A miraculous last-minute upsurge was reported: the region of Donetsk went from a voter turnout of 78% to 96,2%, in

¹⁰² Karatnycky Adrian, *Ukraine's orange revolution*, Foreign affairs, 84(2), 2005

Luhansk the turnout went from 80% to 89,5%¹⁰³. 1.2 million of new votes were recorded in this election and over 90% of these votes were for the Russian favorite candidate Yanukovych, who at the end won the elections¹⁰⁴. It is quite clear that someone wanted to steal the elections from Yushchenko, and this sabotage started even six months before the elections: during his campaign Yushchenko was forbidden to defend himself from press distortions, he mysteriously became ill (dioxin poisoning), activists and students from his coalition were arrested and finally, on the election day, *“at polling sites in several areas where support for Yushchenko was high, monitors discovered that pens had been filled with disappearing ink, so that ballots would appear blank”*¹⁰⁵. It was one of the biggest sabotage in Ukraine history. A massive series of protests took place from the date of the elections (November 2004) to January 2005, in order to obtain new fair elections. The supreme Court of Ukraine, finally, ordered new elections which took place in December 2004, when Yushchenko won with 52% of the votes.

In 2010 new presidential elections were held in Ukraine and Yanukovych was elected president. Yanukovych, who was a pro-Russian candidate, decided to abandon every idea of joining the NATO with Ukraine. Protests soon exploded after the decision of Yanukovych to abandon the decision to sign a deal with the European Union, obviously under Russian pressure: it's time for Euromaidan, also known as the Maidan Revolution. Euromaidan consisted in a series of protests held by young students and people in the Maidan Square as a result of the refusal to sign the EU-Ukraine deal, positioning Ukraine under Russia influence, again. From the name of this event, it is clear that people protesting were aiming at strengthening ties with Europe and distancing from Russian ideology and hegemony. Protests were held from November 2013 and on the 30th

¹⁰³ Karatnycky Adrian, *Ukraine's orange revolution*, Foreign affairs, 84(2), 2005

¹⁰⁴ Karatnycky Adrian, *Ukraine's orange revolution*, Foreign affairs, 84(2), 2005

¹⁰⁵ Karatnycky Adrian, *Ukraine's orange revolution*, Foreign affairs, 84(2), 2005

of November 2013 special forces used violence against protestants for the first time¹⁰⁶. After months of protests, deaths, violence and repression, the Euromaidan finally held to the deposition of President Yanukovich, in February 2014. Yanukovich was substituted by a new government elected ad interim and, most importantly, under Western influence, driven by Poroshenko. Vladimir Putin did not agree, obviously.

Euromaidan was a crucial point in Russian-Ukrainian relations, as a matter of fact “*Putin realized that there was unlikely to be another elected pro-Russian Ukrainian president*”¹⁰⁷. As a result, in 2014 Russia decided to annex Crimea and incited separatists’ ideas in the Donbass.



Figure 11 – Crimea and Donbass

¹⁰⁶ Diuk Nadia, *EUROMAIDAN: Ukraine’s self-organizing revolution*, World Affairs, 176(6), 2014

¹⁰⁷ Crawford Mark, *The legacy of the Euromaidan revolution lives on in the Ukrainian-Russian war*, The Conversation, 2022

Source: Sky TG24, <https://tg24.sky.it/mondo/approfondimenti/donbass-ucraina>

The invasion and annexation of Crimea was accurately prepared by Russian forces for at least two decades. For a moment, when Yanukovich was elected President of Ukraine, Russia believed that there was no need any more to annex Crimea, due to the very high possibility of Russian penetration in Ukrainian government during Yanukovich mandate. History changed when Yanukovich was overthrown by anti-Russian and oppositional forces on the 22nd of February 2014.

It was at this moment that Russia decided to put in place Crimea annexation plans. On February the 26th Russia invaded Crimea: the most important and strategic places in Crimea were seized, connections between Ukraine and Crimea were cut off, Ukrainian army and Navy installations were blocked¹⁰⁸. It was clearly a well prepared invasion, in a few days Russian army was able to establish control in the most strategic points of Crimea, using the Kosovo example as a justification for this military action. According to Bebler Anton, the conquest of Crimea was favored by several points: *“the takeover was warmly greeted by a good part of the Crimean population; the Russian marines were already legally stationed at Sevastopol; the Ukrainian security agencies had totally failed to detect these preparations; the short distances to the most strategic locations in Crimea allowed for the quick insertion of air; Ukrainian military personnel stationed in Crimea were not given orders to resist and, moreover, many of them switched their loyalty¹⁰⁹”*. A massive number of factors contributed to this Russian success.

After having assessed and imposed its control on Crimea, for Russia it was time to call for a referendum. With a very short period of notice, which made impossible every type of debate, the referendum was

¹⁰⁸ Bebler Anton, *Crimea and the Ukrainian-Russian conflict*, Frozen Conflicts in Europe, Verlag Barbara Budrich Publications, 2015

¹⁰⁹ Bebler Anton, *Crimea and the Ukrainian-Russian conflict*, Frozen Conflicts in Europe, Verlag Barbara Budrich Publications, 2015

“peacefully” (Russian military occupation of the region) held on the 16th of March 2014. Two questions were given to each voter: “*do you support rejoining Crimea with Russia as a subject of the Russian Federation? Do you support restoration of the 1992 Constitution of the Republic of Crimea and Crimea’s status as a part of Ukraine?*”¹¹⁰. The voter had to answer positively only to one of the two questions. However, not all choices possible were present in the ballot, remaining under Ukraine under the current circumstances and constitutional structure (without going back to 1992 structure) and Crimea’s independence¹¹¹. People voted in any case, and the 96,77% of them was favorable to the separation of Crimea from Ukraine and its annexation to Russia.

The annexation of Crimea encouraged separatists’ forces in the Donbass region to occupy official buildings, tearing down Ukrainian symbols and raising Russian flags in April 2014. They were hoping for an independence referendum, similar to the one granted for Crimea, which was denied by Ukrainian authorities, but took place anyway on the 11th of May 2014. Finally, in the two oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk, separatists proclaimed the independence on the same day (Donetsk People’s Republic and Luhansk People’s Republic). Since 2014 this war has never stopped, contrasting Russian forces with Ukrainian military. In 2015 negotiations were proposed by some European countries (Minsk Accords), with a possible ceasefire and Ukrainian control of conflict zones. However, these negotiations never saw the light, as they were largely unsuccessful. The first effort to diplomatically solve and end this crisis failed. From 2016 NATO and United States of America involvement grew, they firstly deployed some military forces in the Baltic Republics borders, in order to prevent possible invasions and, moreover, sanctions to Russia started to be imposed. This war has been brought to international attention only in 2022, after

¹¹⁰ Bebler Anton, *Crimea and the Ukrainian-Russian conflict*, Frozen Conflicts in Europe, Verlag Barbara Budrich Publications, 2015

¹¹¹ Bebler Anton, *Crimea and the Ukrainian-Russian conflict*, Frozen Conflicts in Europe, Verlag Barbara Budrich Publications, 2015

years of invisibility, with the invasion of Ukraine by Russian armed forces.

3.1.3 *The 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia*

This chapter will focus on refugee women escaping the 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia, but it is important to underline the fact that this invasion is one part of the very long war between Russia and Ukraine which started officially in 2014, with the annexation of Crimea. The 2022 invasion is not a single and isolated event, and this is the reason why a massive and specific analysis of previous years was fundamental in order to fully understand why we are fighting today.

On the 21st of February 2022 Putin recognized the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk and gave an important speech preceding the invasion of Ukraine. He declared that *“modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia, more precisely, Bolshevik, communist Russia. This process began immediately after the revolution of 1917 (...) As a result of Bolshevik policy, Soviet Ukraine arose, which even today can with good reason be called Vladimir Ilyich Lenin’s Ukraine. He is its author and architect. This is confirmed by archive documents (...)”*¹¹². It is clear that Putin sees Ukraine as a Russian affair, the distinct Ukrainian identity, according to Putin, is just the *“product of foreign manipulation”*¹¹³, an artificial creation of the West in order to achieve an *“anti-Russia project”*¹¹⁴ to destroy Russia. The fact that Putin does not perceive Ukraine as an independent nation is not new, in 2008 he clearly stated that *“Ukraine is not even a country”*¹¹⁵, and the continuous Westernization, Ukrainization and Europeanization processes were a considerable threat to Russia and to Putin. He felt the duty to stop this

¹¹² Reuters, *Extracts from Putin’s speech on Ukraine, 2022*, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/extracts-putins-speech-ukraine-2022-02-21/>

¹¹³ Mankoff Jeffrey, *Russia’s war in Ukraine*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2022

¹¹⁴ Mankoff Jeffrey, *Russia’s war in Ukraine*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2022

¹¹⁵ Mankoff Jeffrey, *Russia’s war in Ukraine*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2022

processes and decided to launch a “peacekeeping mission¹¹⁶” in Ukraine, as he defined the 2022 invasion. A peacekeeping mission to save Ukrainians that killed 5996 people only in Ukraine¹¹⁷. The Russian attack began on the 24th of February 2022, it was a full-scale invasion: air, land, and sea attack of Ukraine. Figure 12 shows that Russian troops came from different parts, several troops came from the north directly pointing at Kiev, the capital, other troops came from Crimea and other troops attacked from the East, directly from Russia to Kharkov and the Donbass region.



Figure 12 – Map showing from where Russian troops entered in Ukraine

Source: Liveuamap, NYT; ISPI

Russian troops clearly outnumbered Ukrainian troops and for this reason Putin believed that the war could end in a few weeks, with the complete capitulation of Ukraine and its consequent annexation to Russia. At time

¹¹⁶ Boyle John, Kiselyova Maria, Osborn Andrew, *Putin orders Russian forces to “perform peacekeeping functions” in eastern Ukraine’s breakaway regions*, Reuters, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-orders-russian-peacekeepers-eastern-ukraines-two-breakaway-regions-2022-02-21/>

¹¹⁷ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2022/09/ukraine-civilian-casualty-update-26-september-2022>

of writing war is still in process, Russian and Ukrainian troops are still fighting, and the end of this war does not seem very close. As the result of this invasion, Russia was immediately isolated from Europe and the United States, and sanctions (economic, trade and financial sanctions mainly) against Russia and its main advocates were imposed.

The Russian-Ukrainian war is mainly characterized by the Russian attempt to conquer every day more and more Ukrainian territories. Figure 13 shows the territories under Russian control as of the 28th of September 2022. The East part of Ukraine, the one bordering with Russia, is currently under Russian control.



Figure 13 – Map showing areas under Russian control

Source: Mapbox, OpenStreetMap, Institute for the study of war (Aljazeera)

What is more is that from the 23rd to the 27th of September 2022 in the Russian occupied territories of Ukraine, several referendums were expected to take place. The European Union clearly did not recognize

these referendum and considered them illegals. The secretary general of the Council of Europe, Marija Pejcinovic Buric, stated that “*those referendums are a further escalation of the conflict and the ongoing violation of Ukraine’s territorial integrity*”¹¹⁸, it must be underlined that these referendum do not hold legal value (just as the Crimean referendum), they are not recognized by the international community. These referendums took place anyway and the results are not surprising, especially for the political climate in which they took place: organized by occupational forces under military occupation and under gunpoint threat: a man from Zaporizhzhia, interviewed by Human Rights Watch told “*I will have to tick a box for Russia, or they might tear down my house*”¹¹⁹. The regions concerned with this territories were Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson¹²⁰. According to Euronews, in Kherson the yes prevailed with 87% of votes, in Luhansk 98,4% of yes, Zaporizhzhia 93,1% and finally in Donetsk 99,2%. According to these results, a massive majority of Ukrainians residing in these regions were in favour to the annexation to Russia and as a result Putin proceeded to their annexation: “*Welcome home, to Russia!*”¹²¹ said Dmitry Medvedev. Currently, Russia is militarily advancing from the occupied territories of the East, whereas Ukrainian forces are countering the Russian offensive mainly from the North (Figure 14).

¹¹⁸ [https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/full-news/-/asset_publisher/y5xQt7QdunzT/content/council-of-europe-secretary-general-rejects-so-called-referenda-in-occupied-ukrainian-territories? 101_INSTANCE_y5xQt7QdunzT_languageId=en_GB](https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/full-news/-/asset_publisher/y5xQt7QdunzT/content/council-of-europe-secretary-general-rejects-so-called-referenda-in-occupied-ukrainian-territories?_101_INSTANCE_y5xQt7QdunzT_languageId=en_GB)

¹¹⁹ Gorbunova Yulia, *Fictitious annexation follows “voting” at gunpoint*, Human Rights Watch, 2022

¹²⁰ Gorbunova Yulia, *Fictitious annexation follows “voting” at gunpoint*, Human Rights Watch, 2022

¹²¹ <https://www.euronews.com/2022/09/27/occupied-areas-of-ukraine-vote-to-join-russia-in-referendums-branded-a-sham-by-the-west>

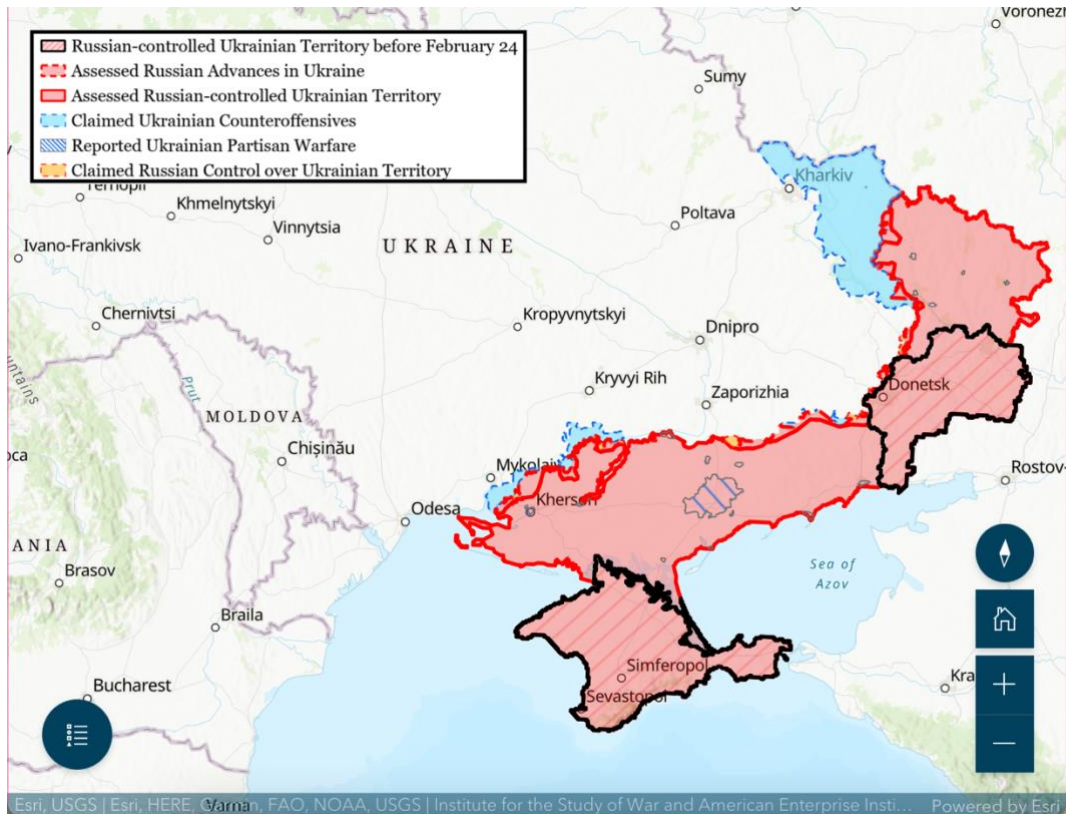


Figure 14 – Map showing Russian-Ukrainian war territory situation as of the 1st of October 2022.

Source: Institute for the Study of War,

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/36a7f6a6f5a9448496de641cf64bd375>

3.2 Women escaping the war in Ukraine

Ukrainian war is actually a very important crisis for women. Following the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces, a massive flow of women and girls fleeing the country has been reported. Actually, martial law is imposed in Ukraine since the 24th of February 2022, which makes impossible for men aged 18 to 60 to escape the country.

According to UNHCR Flash Update on the Ukrainian situation, as of the end of September 2022 an amount of 15 million people in total have been forced to displace: 7.400.013 people have fled the country to search for a safer place to live and 6.975.000 people are currently internally displaced people, who are trying to avoid leaving their

country¹²². Poland, Germany, and Russia are the countries which have received the largest number of Ukrainian refugees since the 2022 invasion, Czech Republic, United Kingdom, Italy, France and Spain follows¹²³ (see Figure 15).

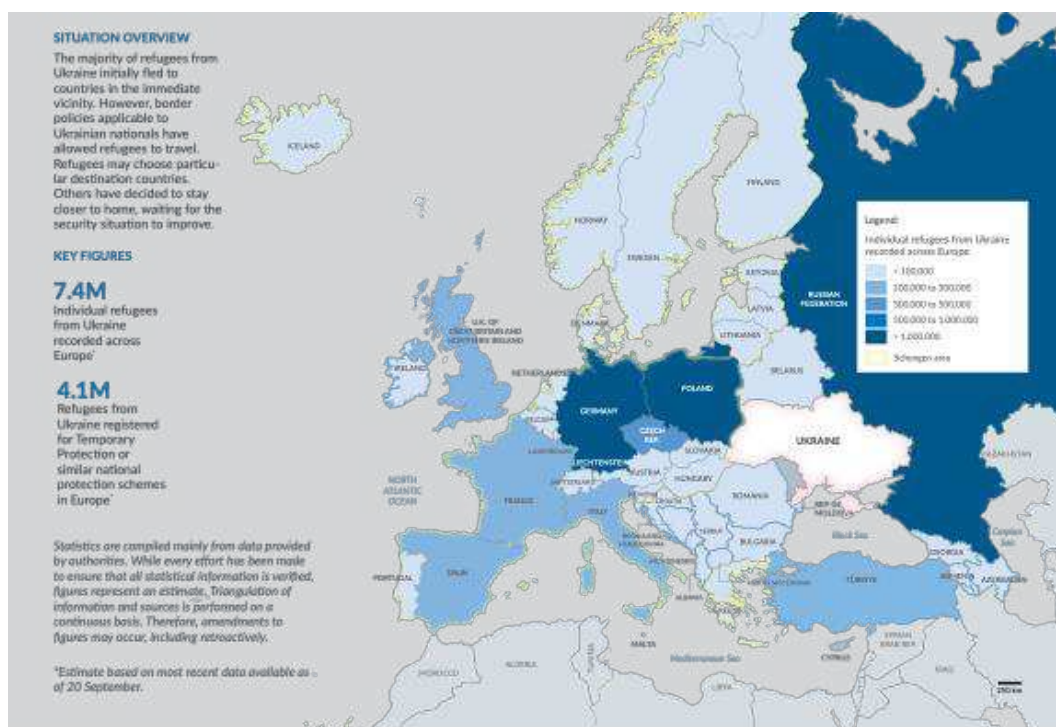


Figure 15 – Map showing the number of Ukrainian refugees in Europe as of the 20th of September 2022.

Source: UNHCR

As already stated, the largest part of refugees is composed by women and children due to martial law. It is very clear that women (and children) beside war and insecurity are escaping war crimes, among which rape is the most frequent. The United Nations Security Council has reported several allegations of sexual violence used as a weapon of war by Russian troops. The Update by the Chair of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine at the 51st session of the Human Rights Council stated that, as far as sexual and gender-based violence is concerned, victims are aged from 4 to 82 years old, and

¹²² UNHCR, *Flash Update #31*, UNHCR, 23rd of September 2022

¹²³ UNHCR, *Flash Update #31*, UNHCR, 23rd of September 2022

sometimes relatives are forced to witness the violence¹²⁴. Honestly speaking, rape is the cheapest weapon of war, as already underlined in the first chapter, women's bodies become the real battlefield of war. It is the most immediate way of damaging the essence of society, its core. Since the February invasion women and girls have reported several cases of violence: *"25 girls and women aged 14 to 24 has been held in a basement by Russian soldiers. The soldiers threatened to rape them to the point where they wouldn't want sexual contact with any man, and to prevent them from having Ukrainian children. 9 of them are now pregnant¹²⁵".* In this case, why don't directly kill women in order to prevent them to have Ukrainian children? The answer is simple, and it evidence the essence of rape as a weapon of war: *"soldiers chose to inflict sexual harm as a sign of their power¹²⁶".* It is a powerful and double-faced message Russian soldiers want to send to Ukrainians: on the one hand, even if contemporary society wants to portray women as mothers and housewives, it is widely known (or should be) that reality is different. Women are the core of societies, they are not simply mothers, they are brave individuals able to face every type of adversity. By hitting women, you hit society directly. On the other hand, the main element of Putin's advocacy resides in the fact that Ukraine does not exists, Ukrainians in reality are Russians and, according to this specific case of rape and sexual violence, *"even if Ukrainians won't submit to being Russian, their unborn children will have no choice¹²⁷",* they will be the result of a rape Russian troops perpetrated on Ukrainian women.

Ukrainian refugee women's obstacles and difficulties does not end in their home country. As already analyzed, the refugee journey can

¹²⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2022/09/update-chair-independent-international-commission-inquiry-ukraine-51st-session>

¹²⁵ Sri Anna, *Rape and conflict-related sexual violence in Ukraine: the cheapest weapon of war*, Inspire the Mind, 2022

¹²⁶ Block Sharon, *The rape of Ukraine*, Think, 2022

¹²⁷ Hinsliff Gaby, *Russia's mass rapes in Ukraine are a war crime. Its military leaders must face persecution*, The Guardian, 2022

be very problematic and dangerous. According the UNHCR, risks of gender-based violence, trafficking, abuse, trauma, and family separation in this context are increased due to the profile of refugees: they are women and children¹²⁸. They escape violence, to encounter during their journeys even more violence, nevertheless these women continue their fight without giving up. Olexandra (81 years old), her daughter Elena (53 years old) and granddaughter Vika (22 years old) told the story of their difficult journey to CARE, *“we tried to travel in a car with a man who transports people with disabilities, but he didn’t have enough documents, so in the end we had to come by bus and by walking, which took three hours. But we struggled with my grandmother, as she was really weak and couldn’t walk because she was so scared. So, we were holding her up under her arms and carrying her along”*¹²⁹. It is frequent to encounter histories of Ukrainian refugees forced to walk for part of their journey, which clearly intensify the risks of exploitation, violence, and trafficking. Another crucial aspect is rape. It is still very confused and approximate the number of women raped in Ukraine and Ukrainian refugee women raped during their journey. However, in these cases Ukrainian women may face several difficulties in getting an abortion due to a near-total abortion ban in neighboring countries. The majority of Ukrainian refugees are fleeing Ukraine to travel to Poland, one of the European countries with the most restrictive measures concerning abortion. *“I can’t keep this baby, it reminds me all the time of what I’ve been through”*¹³⁰, this is what a Ukrainian women raped by Russian soldiers told to a doctor in Poland. In this country, women can have an abortion if the pregnancy is the result of a rape, however it must be certified that the pregnancy was the result of a crime, which clearly makes it nearly

¹²⁸ <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2022/4/6255a6964/statement-risks-trafficking-exploitation-facing-refugees-ukraine-attributed.html>

¹²⁹ CARE Staff, *Ukrainian exodus: refugees share their harrowing stories*, CARE, 2022

¹³⁰ Kozłowska Hanna, *Pregnant Ukrainian refugees struggle to get abortion care*, The Fuller Project, 2022

impossible¹³¹.

3.3 Ukrainian refugee women in mass media: invisibility, victimization, or both?

This war is not very different from the others: men fight, women and children are essentially the victims, and this differentiation reflects in newspaper articles. The fact that, actually, in Ukraine is in force the martial law, strengthen this stereotypic vision of men and women during wars. Men are really fighting this war, it cannot be denied due to the existence of the martial law. But women? Are they really only helpless victims without agency in this framework? Absolutely not, as a matter of fact, *“in L’viv women have been running the nerve centre of Ukraine’s refugee crisis; organized around country desks, they have been coordinating everything from transport logistics to directing those in need towards those offering help¹³²”*, but mass media prefer to portray women only as war victims, as *“passive recipients¹³³”*. How many stories of Ukrainian women fighting next to Ukrainian men or actively acting during the crisis have been illustrated by mass media? None. How many stories of Ukrainian women suffering the impact of war, unable to react to adversities have been illustrated by mass media? Many.

An interesting element evidenced by this analysis of European mass media is the different attitude towards refugee women (but also refugee, more generally). In the second chapter, it was analyzed the difference between worthy and unworthy refugee, that seems to be quite inherent. The invisibility pattern seems to be more specific to Syrian, Afghan, African refugees, which are considered to be unworthy refugee. In the analysis conducted it was not difficult to find articles dealing with

¹³¹ Kozłowska Hanna, *Pregnant Ukrainian refugees struggle to get abortion care*, The Fuller Project, 2022

¹³² Ellner Andrea, *Gender stereotypes in the media: are Ukrainian women really only helpless victims?*, King’s College London, 2022

¹³³ Ellner Andrea, *Gender stereotypes in the media: are Ukrainian women really only helpless victims?*, King’s College London, 2022

Ukrainian refugee women, whereas in some countries (Germany) or in some newspapers (Le Figaro), it was very difficult to find articles concerning with refugee women from non-European countries. It is the same differential attitude European governments adopt when it comes to welcoming refugees, there is a two faces response based on skin colour, and this double-faced response affects the way refugee are portrayed in mass media. One of the very large number of examples is Poland which is at the moment closing non-Ukrainian migrant children in detention centers, recently at least 20 refugees, from Middle East and Afghanistan, died in the woods due to cold¹³⁴. Again, Massimiliano Fedriga (Italian politician) admitted: *“We need to stop other refugees (...). The problem are not Ukrainians, but the other refugees coming from Africa and mostly from the Balcanic Route¹³⁵”* Why Middle East and African refugees are so hard to welcome? What makes them different from Ukrainian refugees? It was correctly noted that *“Ukrainian refugees have been described as white, intelligent, educated, civilized, middle-class, well-dressed and most importantly unlike refugees from Iraq or Afghanistan¹³⁶”*, there is a very important bias afflicting non-Ukrainian refugees and it is a bias based on superficial aspects of refugees: the way they are dressing, their skin colour, the money they possess. To conclude, in a BBC interview the former deputy prosecutors general of Ukraine said *“it is very emotional for me because I see European people with blue eyes and blond hair being killed every day¹³⁷”*. In this case, no further comments are needed. This element of the analysis does not aim at all at discriminating Ukrainian refugees in favour of “non-white” refugees, on the contrary aims at underling the fact that all refugees are escaping war, atrocities, violence, persecution, and they all deserve protection and hospitality,

¹³⁴ Polonia, *“basta con il doppio standard sui rifugiati: un incaricato delle Nazioni Unite esorta il paese europeo*, La Repubblica, 2022

¹³⁵ Lauria Emanuele, *Lega, Fedriga avverte “fermare gli altri migranti”*, La Repubblica, 2022

¹³⁶ Su Yvonne, *Ukraine: the good, bad and ideal refugees*, The Conversation, 2022

¹³⁷ Boberg Emma Lygnerud, *“Everything we know about war we know with a man’s voice”, and Ukraine is no exception*, IMS, 2022

with no difference. Coming back to the description of Ukrainian refugee women in mass media, the same newspaper analyzed for chapter 2 were analyzed in this context, and several considerations are due.

3.3.1 *The victimization process of Ukrainian refugee women*

Victimization is the main pattern of Ukrainian refugee women, “*the image of a bloody pregnant woman from Ukraine and her unborn child is one of the many examples of viral stories dictating an overall narrative of women’s victimization. Whilst these stories are critical and deserve to be heard as they ultimately are documentation of human rights abuses, it is important to consider how they are being told*¹³⁸”. Mass media’s role is again crucial. As far as Italy and Spain are concerned, several articles dealing with Ukrainian refugee women were found. A first article needs to be attentively analyzed: “*rape, violence and kidnapping: in Ukraine women are treated like war trophies*¹³⁹”. The article itself does not evidence a deviant conception of refugee women, but the title, which is the most important part of the article, compare women to war trophies, the most objectified and passive element. The Cambridge dictionary defines a trophy in several ways. The most common definition sees trophy as “*a prize that is given to the winner of a competition or race*¹⁴⁰”. However, another definition is given, which considers a trophy as an object “*used to describe something such as a partner of a possession that is a symbol of someone’s success or social position*¹⁴¹”, which is clearly the definition that fit the most in this specific case. Comparing women as trophies is another way to deprive them from their agency, from their ability to act and react, they become an objectified symbol of the

¹³⁸ Boberg Emma Lygnerud, “*Everything we know about war we know with a man’s voice*”, and *Ukraine is no exception*, IMS, 2022

¹³⁹ Serafini Marta, *Stupri, violenza e rapimenti: in Ucraina le donne trattate come trofei di guerra*, Il Corriere della Sera, 2022

¹⁴⁰ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/it/dizionario/inglese/trophy>

¹⁴¹ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/it/dizionario/inglese/trophy>

supremacy of Russian troops when compared to Ukrainians troops. It is a way to establish a hierarchy where women occupy the last position available. Similarly, to Il Corriere della Sera, El Pais published an article in which refugee women and girls from Ukraine were compared to spoils of war: "*Women and girls as spoils of war: Ukraine report violence from Russian soldiers in occupied zones*¹⁴²". Again, comparing women to spoils of war emphasize their passivity, their objectification. They appear and are described only as passive and silenced individuals. Another article since the beginning emphasize that there is a difference between women and men: "*Ukraine, from the Donbass blow the fear, women and children in Russia, men are called to arms*¹⁴³". Men aged 18 to 60 due to martial law are not able to escape the country, they are forced to fight. However, it has been already evidenced that many women in Ukraine are actually helping in the coordination process of refugees, they may even decide to fight next to men. Women, contrary to men, do have a choice: they may decide to escape with their children, becoming the heads of families and having the important duty to protect their children and to reach a safer place, or they may decide to remain in Ukraine. In both ways women show their agency, they show the world that they are not simply passive objects to be saved. However, it is very clear that the world is blind. The world and, in this specific case, journalism is unable to see the real power of women. They are not victims simply escaping Ukraine. Another article that deserves attention and analysis is "*Women defeated in every war*¹⁴⁴", in this article particular attention is given to the impact of war on women, which is not wrong. It has been already underlined in this thesis. However, it must be said that the title of this article may be misleading, as a matter of fact saying that women are defeated in every war evidence the fact that they lose every war in which they are included. Rather than underlying that

¹⁴² Pita Antonio, *Mujeres y niñas como botín de Guerra: Ucrania denuncia violaciones por soldados rusos en zonas ocupadas*, El País, 2022

¹⁴³ Nicastro Andrea, *Ucraina, dal Donbass soffia la paura: donne e bimbi in Russia, uomini alle armi*, Il Corriere della Sera, 2022

¹⁴⁴ Ferrera Maurizio, *Le donne sconfitte in ogni guerra*, Il Corriere della Sera, 2022

they try to win these wars, the author emphasizes the fact that they lose. Moreover, the choice of verbs is important. The verb defeated want to underline the passivity, they were not able to win the war (conceived as a war for the respect of their human rights and their bodies), the verb to lose, on the contrary, would probably have emphasized a more active attitude, a person who failed to win. El País, again, felt the need to underline the fundamental presence of the male figure in a family. Cristian Segura, in one of its articles, stated that "*Makohou family crosses the border, but without the father*¹⁴⁵". Clearly, this sentence may not be seen by the majority of people as an example of women victimization. However, the fact that he needs to emphasize the fact that the father is not with its family, it is an indirect way of confirming the subordinate role of the mother. Newspaper, televisions, social media, all existing platforms of news-spreading have underlined during this months the fact that men aged from 18 to 60 are forced to fight for Ukraine, it is taken for granted. So, is it really necessary to say that a family crossed the border without the father? Are women really too weak to be able to guide a family?

3.3.2 *The invisibility pattern of Ukrainian refugee women*

Ukrainian refugee women are quite invisible when it comes to British newspaper (The Times and The Guardian). Both newspapers concentrated on the problems Ukrainian refugees find when they arrive in the United Kingdom, notably visa and accommodation issues. No articles dedicated to Ukrainian refugee women were found. As a result, the victimization process of Ukrainian refugee women cannot be conducted, due to their nearly total invisibility. However, in many articles appeared photos and images of refugee women, clearly desperate from the journey. Useful strategy to obtain compassion and pity from the reader. The same issue has been noticed in French newspapers (Le

¹⁴⁵ Segura Cristian, *Una refugiada ucrania en Polonia "todavía no he tenido tiempo de llorar"*, El País, 2022

Monde and Le Figaro), where Ukrainian refugee women does not appear to be relevant. Ukrainian refugee women do not appear as well in German press. The invisibility pattern, in this case, is a continuity element with refugee women. An article related to Ukrainian refugee women was found in Der Spiegel newspaper. However, in some way it was an article almost legitimizing the double attitude European countries (and Germany as well) have when it comes to refugee. Two sentences reported in the article were quite disturbing: *“in my view, giving Ukrainians preferential help is not racism¹⁴⁶”* and *“the Ukrainians are simply Europeans and are thus perceived by the white German majority society as our people¹⁴⁷”*. The author, after having reported these sentences, stated that Ukrainians too can be subjected to racism and discrimination, and it is true, this is the reality of modern world. However, the problem lies in the double attitude European countries have in accepting white refugees and rejecting non-white refugees. It has been already explained above and no comments are needed, again.

3.3.3 The hidden facet of Ukrainian refugee women: what mass media does not tell

Equality between men and women is one of the cornerstone of modern society, not always implemented and supported, but still remains one of the main legal principles. At time of writing, there are about 50.000 Ukrainian women serving the army, which is a considerable number in continue growth. Women in the army can occupy several roles: field doctors, field nurses, administrative roles, soldiers. However, mass media are concentrated in evidencing the lack of agency of Ukrainian women, instead of narrating and describing these stories of courageous women beside men’s stories. There are Ukrainian women in the military, but they are constantly ignored by mass media,

¹⁴⁶ Stokowski Margarete, *Finger weg von den Frauen!*, Der Spiegel, 2022

¹⁴⁷ Stokowski Margarete, *Finger weg von den Frauen!*, Der Spiegel, 2022

due to the fact that, probably, for them is more convenient to publish stories of victimization of these women. As a matter of fact, generally speaking, *“women’s voices constitute less than a quarter (23%) of the total experts, protagonists, or sources quoted in global digital news about the war in Ukraine¹⁴⁸”*.

Another important aspect constantly ignored by mass media is Ukrainian refugee women agency. Their strength, courage and resilience are admirable but not attractive for European mass media. The refugee journey is exhausting and the dangers around the corner, women escaping Ukraine alone and with their children to search for a better life. Refugee women should be described as heroes: after all the thing they have to witness in their home country they take control of their lives and of those of their relatives and escape. It is crucial to respect and hear Ukrainian refugee voices, in order to fight the traditional vision of war in which *“men are governing, negotiating, and fighting to protect women and the nation, and women and children going to safety. This interpretation strengthens the masculine culture, which does not sufficiently respect women as agents, and which in turn leads to their exclusion and post-war deterioration of their position¹⁴⁹”*. Ukrainian women leaving the country in the first place have to make one of the hardest decision of their lives: leaving the country or not? Leaving alone in Ukraine their husbands and relatives and search a safer place to live with their children or staying in Ukraine? Those deciding to leave Ukraine are conscious that the journey will be extremely difficult, but these powerful women does not succumb. Ukrainian women, at times, are forced to walk miles in freezing climate, with their children and essential luggage in their hands. These women cannot complain or lose confidence due to the fact that they have to reach a safer place, and the most important element is the fact that the presence or absence of men

¹⁴⁸ Kassova Luba, *Ukrainian women on the front lines but not in the headlines*, Foreign Policy, 2022

¹⁴⁹ O’Sullivan Mila, *Where are the Ukrainian women? Respecting female voices now and in post-war times*, Heinrich Boll Stiftung, 2022

does not change the scenario. Ukrainian women are perfectly able to reach Poland, Germany, Italy, or another European country with or without the presence of men. Ukrainian refugee women, beside refugee women coming from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and other countries, are the symbol of resilience, of courage and every day they demonstrate their immense agency. Mass media should value more these stories, they should evidence the ability of these women to overcome difficulties, rather than victimizing them and describing them as “war prizes”. The description of refugee women in the way they concretely are, is probably (it is important to give the benefit of the doubt) an uncomfortable truth for currently hierarchies. What would happen if the world started to realize how powerful refugee women are and how their coping strategies are a sing of agency and determination? Modern hierarchies which see women in a subordinate position if compared to men would start to be questioned. Is the world ready for this? Probably not: better continue to describe women as passive individuals and men as strong and brave.

3.4 Visual representations

It is important to underline again the importance of images and their massive role in forging public opinion. Differently from chapter 2, religious symbols are not the main focus in visual representation of Ukrainian refugee women, this due to the fact that the majority of Ukrainians are Orthodox or non-religious. Newspaper articles’ images mainly portray women and children, firstly because they form the 90% of refugees actually escaping from Ukraine, and secondly because they have the power to impress the reader, to obtain pity and compassion, even if the article does not specifically deal with them or their stories. Figure 16 shows a young Ukrainian woman, sitting on her backpack. Her expression is visibly exhausted and desperate. The same emotions can be perceived by seeing figure 17, it is even more functioning for the

purpose of journalism due to the fact that the main focus is posed on an elderly woman.



Figure 16 – A Ukrainian refugee woman

Source: Il Corriere della sera



Figure 17 – An elderly Ukrainian woman
Source: Il Corriere della Sera, Getty Images

Il Corriere della Sera published an article entirely dedicated to the most symbolic images of the first 100 days since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It is interesting to note the fact that there was a difference between images portraying women and images portraying men. When women were the main focus of images, their faces were emphasized in order to underline their desperation (figures 18 and 19). On the contrary, men were represented in their military uniforms, fighting for the liberation of Ukraine (figures 20 and 21).



Figure 18 – A Ukrainian woman holding her baby

Source: Il Corriere della Sera, Afp, Daniel Leal



Figure 19 – A Ukrainian women in a station with her baby

Source: Il Corriere della Sera, Afp



Figure 20 – A group of soldiers in the Luhansk region
Source: Il Corriere della Sera, Afp, Anatolli Stepanov



Figure 21 – A Ukrainian soldier leaving a trench
Source: Il Corriere della Sera, Afp, Fadel Senna

Curiously, Ukrainian men were never represented in very large groups, differently from refugees from Afghanistan, Syria and so on. This is

mainly due to two elements. Firstly, men in the very majority of cases do not have the right to escape Ukraine, they remain in their country fighting against Russian troops, as a result European countries do not have to fear their “invasion”. Secondly, as already analyzed, Ukrainian refugees are very welcome in Europe: they are white people facing a catastrophic war (as if they were the only population actually experiencing a devastating situation in their country). European newspapers do not feel the duty to warn European countries regarding a possible invasion and crisis.

To conclude, Ukrainian refugee women are represented in photos where their faces are the main focus and objective, similarly to Afghan, Syrian refugee women. Obviously their facial expressions are tired, sad, and exhausted, they are used to impress the reader, to obtain pity and compassion. Ukrainian refugee women are the most evident example of victimization nowadays, poor victims forced to flee their countries due to violence. The only difference in the representation of refugee women from around the world and Ukrainian refugee women is the lack of reference to religious symbols, due to the fact that Ukrainian refugee women “are like us”.

CONCLUSIONS

Movements of people around the globe have always occurred, as a result they are not specifically a peculiarity of nowadays. However, it must be underlined that in the last centuries we have experienced massive flows of people, escaping their countries of origins in order to escape war, famine, discrimination. People are currently escaping from dangerous countries such as Syria, Afghanistan to search for a better future, to have the concrete possibility to live a dignified and decent life. The recent invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops have further exacerbated the international framework, causing probably one of the severest humanitarian catastrophe of the last decades. In this complicated framework, special attention needs to be devoted to women. Women experience war and the refugee journey differently if compared to men, and this difference is mainly due to their bodies. Violence, discrimination and trafficking are not new features of our century.

In this context, mass media cover a crucial role in shaping and forging public opinion. Two main issues have been encountered when analyzing newspaper articles of the five European countries receiving the most elevated number of refugees: victimization and invisibility. The first problem is related to the fact that mass media describe only one facet of refugee women history. They only deal with what they experience in their lives, meaning that they describe only violence and suffer women face. This would not be a problem if a comprehensive picture of refugee women was given to society. However, by describing only the violent aspect of refugee women lives, mass media contribute to the victimization of women. Journalists from European country have the tendency to underline that refugee women are victims, unable to react. Refugee women, in other words, are simply passive individuals lacking agency. Stories of refugee women overcoming obstacles, reacting to sexual and gender-based violence, reaching safer place for them and

being heads of entire families are in the majority of the cases (if not always) hidden. Journalists decide what to show or not to show to society and in this way, public opinion is negatively influenced. It must be said that what journalists write in their article regarding refugee women is actually the reality, the risk of rape, exploitation, trafficking and discrimination is very high, wartime rape has become an ordinary instrument used by troops. However, we must not fall into the mistake of recounting only one aspect of this difficult journey. Refugee women stories must be told completely, without setting aside the resilient part. The second issue consists in the invisibility of refugee women. When they are not described as passive recipients lacking agency, they are not present at all in newspaper articles. Which is probably even more dangerous than victimization. Refugee women suddenly become invisible, their stories does not matter anymore. Beside words, it is crucial to choose the right images for newspaper articles. Images are the most immediate communication method, we are not required to put any effort. But again, refugee women have to deal with a victimization process. In this sense, a crucial difference can be encountered if comparing refugee women and refugee men images: the former are portrayed alone, or with their children, in images specifically focusing on their desperate faces, in this way aiming at obtaining some compassion and pity from the reader. The latter are mainly portrayed in large groups, without focusing on one single person, in order to give the reader a sense of threat, of danger. Ukrainian refugee women do not excessively distance from this framework. As a matter of fact, the victimization pattern is still the main focus in newspaper articles, where Ukrainian refugee women are described as spoils and prizes of war. Their description as objects, as prizes, is clearly coherent with the victimization logic, Ukrainian refugee women suddenly lose their agency, they are not capable of reacting to adversities. Refugee women *“are categorized as vulnerable a priori, without real consideration of the structural and contextual causes of this*

*vulnerability*¹⁵⁰, it is a sort of imposed vulnerability and passivity that have the only result of denying refugee women of their agency, neglecting the massive number of coping strategies they put into practice.

It is important to deal with refugee women, but it is even more important to pay attention in how we deal with refugee women. Journalists should weight the words they use to describe refugee women, as they are not simply victims, they are not passive individuals, they are more. Refugee women walk days in every climatic condition possible to reach a safer place, they take care of entire families without giving up in front of adversities, they run humanitarian organizations to help other refugees. They cannot be described as victims because they are more than this. They surely face unimaginably suffering and violence, which has to be evidenced by mass media, journalists, politicians and so on, but this suffering does not have to label them. They are more than the violence they experience. Refugee women are resilient, courageous. Refugee women stories are louder and more powerful than bombs, and must be told. We owe it to them.

I want to conclude this thesis with a testimony from a young Ukrainian refugee women. From this testimony we clearly can say that refugee women and girls are the exact opposite of passive and victimized individuals.

“How are you?” This was the message I saw at 6:40 in the morning on 24th of February as I was packing my bag to go to school. I do not normally receive such messages so early, and I had received many across several groups simultaneously. I texted back, asking them what was happening. I already felt that it was something bad — and it was.

“Explosions all over the country” was the reply. I checked the news, and

¹⁵⁰ Crawley Heaven, *Saving brown women from brown men? Refugee women, gender, and the racialized politics of protection*, Refugee Survey Quarterly, 41, 2022

then I shouted to my mother — she was getting ready together with my younger sister — that we were not going to school.

I live in the suburbs and at that time I couldn't hear those early explosions my friends had messaged me about. I spent the whole day checking the news, every muscle of my body so tense I almost couldn't breathe. I was terrified by everything that was happening; I wanted to yell. Instead, I looked for ways to support my country. At almost 16, I am too young to join the Territorial Defense, so I decided to use the resources I had. I began reaching out to international youth organizations, writing essays, giving interviews, and recording podcasts.

On the 24th of February, our family stayed in our home, believing we would be safer in our village. How wrong we were... A few days later, they cut off our electricity. We were left without heat, internet, and lights. At that time, running away wasn't an option since all the bridges were bombed or mined and the rest of the motorways were occupied. When we asked a local soldier whether it was possible to leave, he shook his head and told the story of a volunteer bus that was shot as it evacuated people and delivered medicine.

My mother cried a lot and accused herself of not being able to save her children.

After another sleepless night — the doors were opening as the whole house shook in response to bombing and explosions about 10km away — we received a call. Our friend informed us that there would be an evacuation from the town for women and children at 9am. In just an hour, we packed a bag and our dad drove us to the station.

It was terrible. We left everything in the home my parents built just a few years ago: our dog, our memories, my sister's favorite toys. We had to leave our father behind.

When we were on our way to Kyiv Central Station, our dad called and said that more than 50 tanks had entered the village; he could see them from the window. On the following day, they bombed the railway. We

had used our last chance to escape.

But what awaited us made us doubt our decision to leave Ukraine many times: a 12-hour ride on an electric train from Kyiv to L'viv, packed with people, children, dogs, cats, and even turtles sitting on top of each other's heads. It was so hot there. Then we waited five hours in a cold underground station for our train to Poland. By then, I didn't even have access to the toilet for 24 hours. I was thirsty, hungry, tired, and cold. The next day and night we spent on a train packed with women and children who were also escaping for their lives. All kinds of emotions came up for me. I was afraid of the future. Everything that scared me before at once seemed so insignificant. I felt so powerless, but I knew that I had to be strong for my mother, who was on the verge of breaking down. I noticed how much gray hair she had added seemingly overnight, and how her once bright eyes were now red and dull.

I knew that if I could be strong and emotionless, my mother would look up to me and try to behave in the same way — calmer. As she told me of her favorite dresses and the bags she wore during the best moments of her life, I remembered mine, but I told her that we can buy new ones.

She told me about the apartments that they purchased for our grandparents and planned to finish this year. I recalled the collection of English books that I had left in my room; a secret box of chocolates that I kept hidden, adding to it each time my grandparents came over and gave me one. Of course, such material things are nothing in comparison to separated families, but everything that we left in Ukraine was a part of our soul, history wrapped up with our emotions. Still, we have not lost hope of returning.

*We arrived in Poland, but we knew we would not stay there for long. I had this feeling inside that we should keep moving. For that week that we stayed in Poland, I realized how much I had grown. **The girl, who once would have almost had a panic attack when entering an underground station, was now finding her way to volunteering centers, checking price tags in supermarkets, and building her big***

plan to survive until the war ends and we can return to our homeland.

*The decision to come to Vienna was rather spontaneous. I was a member of a youth organization that was based in Vienna, so I texted the founder, Marko to see if he maybe had any friends who could help us find a place to stay. And then I learned the power of networks. When I say the power of people and networks, I mean what happened to us when we arrived in Vienna. People we have never met picked us up from the station, and the following day we had a temporary apartment as we waited for another one to be furnished. People would just let us live there for free because they wanted to show their solidarity with Ukraine and help Ukrainian refugees. Never in my life have I thought that people might be so kind and willing to help strangers... This experience has given me a crucial lesson about the circle of kindness in the world. However, there was another feeling that was eating me from the inside. The feeling of betrayal — leaving Ukraine when some people from my town were suffering; eating, when people in Mariupol had been without food and water for weeks. The only way for me to deal with this was to **do everything in my power to spread awareness of the war, to raise my voice, and to help Ukrainians.***

Staying in touch with my relatives, friends, and classmates has helped me to overcome my anxiety since all of them know the feelings I am experiencing well. I remember one night back in Ukraine I was sitting in my wardrobe back when we still had electricity and chatting with my classmates. There were no windows in the wardrobe and I could turn on the lights and not be spotted by Russian aircraft. We exchanged our thoughts and tried to joke.

Now, a month later, some of us have met again through online classes that our school has renewed. All of us had been displaced: some moving to the west and others dispersed all over Europe. Continuing my studies is challenging now – I hardly manage to concentrate. I think about my family who stayed in Ukraine, my father, grandparents, aunt, and my dog

Bella. People with whom I shared the best moments of my life. I wonder about every person I have met in my life – teachers, classmates, neighbors. The thought of the possibility of not meeting them again terrifies me.

*I must maintain my position as a strong young woman so that my mother will be proud of me, and so that when we return to Ukraine I can say “I’m home”. **I wish to become a part of the powerful youth force that will rebuild our country.***

But even as I know that we will win and millions of Ukrainians will return home, I will never forget. Never forgive. Children, women, and civilians were raped and shot in the streets. Beautiful towns and cities have been destroyed. These memories will forever stay with me.

That was the price we paid to be safe now, and the price every Ukrainian, every civilian, soldier, mother, and daughter paid for freedom¹⁵¹.”

¹⁵¹ Ivanova Valeriia, *Ukraine: my testimony as a Ukrainian refugee*, World Pulse, 2022

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