

Intimate Partnerships During War: Virtual Interviews with Women in Two Ukrainian Cities Under Russia's Full-scale Invasion

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Overview

War can upend all aspects of social and personal life for those who experience it. As the demographic implications of violent conflict has emerged as a research field (Brunborg and Tabeau 2005), most work focuses on fertility (Lindstrom and Bernahu 1999; Agadjanian and Prata 2002; Randall 2005; Cetorelli 2014; Torche and Shwed 2015; Castro Torres and Urdinola 2019; Kraehnert et al. 2019; Torrasi 2020). A smaller body of work on armed conflict and intimate partnerships has examined low-income countries with relatively high fertility, focusing on age at first marriage (Jayaraman et al. 2009; Shemyakina 2013; Neal et al. 2016; Torrasi 2022), or inter-partner violence (Annan and Brier 2010; Le and Nguyen 2022, Torrasi 2023). In the contexts of these prior studies, early marriage is often a strategy for families to provide physical security for girls or reinforce gender roles (Neal et al 2016). However, several studies indicated armed conflict may lead to postponement of marriage counterparts (Shemyakina 2013; Torrasi 2022). Broader potential effects of war on union formation and dissolution, relationship quality, and gendered power dynamics within relationships have generally not been addressed.

We study Ukraine, which has had very low fertility and high divorce rates for decades. In the immediate aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion, millions of Ukrainian women and children fled the country, often for destinations in Western Europe; today, an estimated 7 million refugees remain abroad, while millions of others have been internally displaced (IOM 2023). However, because Ukrainian working-age men are forbidden to leave the country and subject to military mobilization, the vast majority of refugees have been women. The gendered nature of refugee flows and military service is central to the war's impact on partnerships, as they lead to widespread physical separation of spouses and also of children from fathers. Nonetheless, the number of marriages in Ukraine has risen dramatically since Russia's invasion, raising questions about marriage practices under conditions of war (Institute of Justice 2023).

To gain insight into how war affects romantic relationships, we take a qualitative approach. We conducted 22 semi-structured in-depth interviews (by Zoom) with 18-39 year old women living in Ukraine's two largest cities, Kyiv and Kharkiv, in April 2023. Our informants were living in Ukraine more than one year after the start of Russia's full-fledged invasion in February 2022 (most had stayed in Ukraine throughout the full-scale war; a few had left and subsequently returned). Both Kyiv, Ukraine's centrally-located capital, and Kharkiv, near the country's north-eastern border with Russia, were threatened by approaching Russian forces in the early months of the war. Although neither city was occupied, and the immediate threats were turned back by Ukrainian counter-offensives in summer and fall 2022, both cities have experienced frequent and continuing missile and drone attacks.

Qualitative research allows for an investigation into the thought processes that translate people's lived experiences of war, especially while underway, into emotions, attitudes, and preferences that affect decisions and practices regarding whether to date, marry, cohabit, or divorce. We asked informants how the war has shaped their own and their friends' and family members' romantic relationships, their views of partnerships and childbearing, and their recent actions and future plans regarding marriage, divorce, separation, and pregnancy. Our interviews are not representative of the larger urban population of women of childbearing age who have remained in Ukraine during Russia's full-scale invasion due to small sample size. They also only represent one point in time, a year after the start of the war; nonetheless, the conflict was still well underway and the threat to life and well-being were part of lived daily experiences. Thus, our interviews provide unique evidence of diverse patterns and logics of response in the realms of partnerships to the challenges posed by war.

Preliminary results

Here we briefly discuss four distinct themes observed in multiple interviews. We will develop these themes in the full paper and link our findings to those of quantitative studies of other war contexts and theories relating war to intimate partnerships and marriage.

1. War brings couples closer together. Many informants spoke of how the war made them closer to their husbands, as it did for their friends and acquaintances. They emphasized how the intense fear and uncertainty that the Russian assault brought led them and their partners to appreciate more the "important things in life," namely family ties and mutual support:

"I thought we would grow apart because I kind of withdrew into myself due to all the stress. I tried not to show my tears because they can be annoying and could, you know, tire my husband more, right? So, I came to understand that he, too, deep inside, is going through stress and concerns just like me, no less than me. I think that we have started paying more attention to each other and become a bit closer. During the war, on the contrary, you need to show more restraint and more tenderness. Because tenderness is support. When you can say a kinder word, with a softer tone, rather than, you know, like this... For example, you may not like something, but you stop yourself from shouting or speaking in a high tone. You need to take care of each other because we're all in this situation, we all need support, and we're all stressed out. (...) For example, when we come together, when we have a moment to spend time together while he's not at work or volunteering, he might even help with food preparation. It's something I've noticed. Maybe he says, 'Let me help you.' Or he doesn't even ask but just helps. This didn't happen much before. I used to handle this more, and he had his masculine responsibilities. Although, each of us had our work too. I wasn't just sitting at home. Then, other moments [pauses and reflects]. Like, if something doesn't work out for me, he'd say, 'Calm down, let go of the situation, release it.' Earlier, it might have been more like, 'Oh, what are you worrying about?' But now it's 'let go of the situation.' There's more tenderness, a psychological understanding. A more gentle approach, I would say. Gentle in everything, from daily life to even the most human aspects of warmth, a sense of care. Even the fear of saying something hurtful, like a word that doesn't quite fit, you're already thinking about it. I've noticed this from my side as well as from his." (Interview 14)

“But probably, during the war, there has been more tenderness. Because we are already married... it's been more than 6 years. And we currently don't have any children. And still, those emotions that were present at the beginning of our relationship, they were slowly fading away. And perhaps the war brought more tenderness, more... (...) Well, again, when I didn't get much sleep, he was there for me... I mean, he held me, he kissed me. "Everything will be fine, don't worry, I'm here." We will get through this, everything will be fine. I mean, all those little cuddles and such. For me, it's all of that. Plus, during the war, we started to understand each other better. In my opinion. I truly believe that we started to understand each other better, and I can feel what he wants... Well, not always do you understand what emotions a person wants to express to you. Especially a person who, in general... Well, not that he's constantly silent, but he's somewhat of a quiet person. And maybe this has come with time, or maybe it's because of the war. I can really feel him. His mood. Sudden changes, a note in his voice when something is different, a note of discontent. And when I need to calm down. Somehow, it's more... I think I've grown closer to my husband.” (Interview 15)

2. *War drives couples apart.* At the same time, others spoke of the stresses on partnerships. These could be due to long separations or, conversely, new intense periods together in response to curfews and bombings, as well as tensions related to severe economic challenges, disagreements about whether to relocate, and even divergent political views:

“Those people who found themselves [separated] during the war, I think it's difficult for them when they don't know. Honestly, I believe it's hard when you can't see your loved one, for example, when relationships are at a distance. Well, those who are going through this right now, I think it's tough for them. And for girls, it's especially tough because girls are more 'sensitive,' and we tend to take things to heart more. We worry more. I think it's hard to maintain. And what they say about a lot of separations, it's probably because relationships don't pass this test. (...) Simply put, not everyone is ready to endure it. And even though many men go to war, not all girls are willing to go through this and wait. Not everyone signs up for that. Because when your husband is at home by your side, everything is fine and suits you. But when he's somewhere else, and considering the risk to his life, I think not everyone is ready to endure it.” (Interview 2, whose husband is serving at the front).

“At the beginning of the war, when everyone was enveloped in fear, fear for themselves and for their loved ones, mutual accusations constantly began. Why didn't you go there? Why didn't you take this? You should have done this earlier. And all these things were brought up against each other. Especially in moments when it was terrifying, like when we were initially together - my husband, my mother-in-law, and I. We had taken her in. When we needed to go to the pharmacy because someone in our family needed very strong medication, they went to the pharmacy. I was sitting there thinking I might die while waiting. It was only 200 meters away. But what if something happened? Why did you go there? But we needed those medications, and everyone understood that everyone needed them. So, it was something that had to be done, but it was frightening. And don't go anywhere, just stay here. That's how it was at the beginning... [One friend] faced the fact that [her husband] used to work in furniture before the war, and everything was fine. She had her own activities. But when the war started, and they both lost their jobs again, she saw that her husband was inactive. He became scared, closed off, and didn't know what to do. They were just waiting. What were they waiting for? She realized that many families

were in the same situation. It seemed like the men were more lost, maybe because they lost the income they used to earn. Eventually, things got back on track, but in those first few months, she said, 'I see opportunities. We can do this, go to Kyiv, and explore other options.' There were plenty of choices. But there was fear or some reluctance, and they closed themselves off and just waited. These kinds of situations damaged relationships.” (Interview 7)

3. War amplifies previously latent tendencies in relationships. Reflecting on the contradictory effects for different couples, informants often spoke of how it brought to the surface previously muted personal and couple tendencies.

“The overall stress levels increase. People react differently to such situations. Some become irritable, even aggressive. Others may exhibit their less desirable qualities, focusing more on personal survival and less on their families. For example, a woman might say, ‘I can leave, that's it, I'm going, I'm leaving everything behind, and you can do as you wish.’ Each person makes their own decision. In any case, in highly charged situations, they tend to bring underlying conflicts to the surface. It's similar to what happened during the COVID-19 pandemic, where some got married or moved in together, while others, on the contrary, stayed home together 24/7 and ended up arguing and divorcing. (...) At the beginning of the war, I also had thoughts that it might be easier to live on my own, without a family. Because, in that case, you aren't attached, and you don't feel the pain of leaving behind those who couldn't go with you. You don't have to fear for your child or your partner, who may be on the front lines or unable to leave for some reason. So, emotionally, it's easier when you're only responsible for yourself. However, on the flip side, when you're on your own, you might miss the support that comes from being together. When you're together, you can support each other during difficult times, even if you're scared, just by hugging or providing that companionship. Regarding work... Well, maybe we've become more open about certain things. I'm not sure if it's directly related to the war; it's a complex issue, I suppose. We've become more open about discussing certain things.” (Interview 22)

“It's like a litmus test, you know. Everything surfaced, both the human flaws and the good sides. People fully opened up, and maybe it doesn't apply to everyone, but it's how everyone reacted differently. From what I know, based on my own experience and that of my husband, I can say that I didn't reveal myself like this, and my husband didn't reveal himself like this before this period. During this year, we saw, well, not 100% of each other's essence, but at least a significant portion. Just like other people. So, I believe this changed our relationship at its core. Because here, you can't always hide what you want to hide. What no psychologist can reveal, in my opinion, is how people open up to each other. When people saw this truth, some began to drift apart, while others began to understand each other even more. It fundamentally changes relationships, significantly.” (Interview 19)

4. War accelerates new relationships with soldiers and marriages among new couples. Asked about their own and others' experiences forming new relationships, several informants noted the popularity of soldiers and told stories of friends and acquaintances starting new relationships and quickly getting married, a trend confirmed in marriage statistics (Ministry of Justice 2023).

“Again, it's their personal matter, everyone's personal matter. But since he's a military man, according to their logic, you never know what will happen tomorrow. So, they got married, they are living day by day, and they are actively thinking about having children as soon as possible. Because, again, he's at war. He's currently near Bakhmut, he rarely comes home. And they need to have a family, there should be descendants. That's how it is, despite everything. (...) Well, again, I don't want to repeat myself, but nobody knows what will happen later. I mean, everyone is living for today. And no one is putting off anything for tomorrow or later.” (Interview 8)

“And there are people who got married. They had been planning to do it before, and they hesitated earlier, wondering if they should do it now. But in the end, they decided that you cannot keep postponing things indefinitely, and they decided to do it now. Initially, they had thought of doing it after the war, but then they said, ‘How long will this continue? It's uncertain.’” (Interview 16)

5. War both reinforces and challenges gender norms and can upend gender power dynamics. As several of the passages cited above hint, couples experience the challenges of war through gendered perspectives, and the existential and economic exigencies can both solidify and undermine gendered power dynamics within relationships. Although we only interviewed women, many spoke directly of how the war (and its associated restrictions on male emigration and demands for male military service) affected men and women differently.

“They have this vision that they are not needed by anyone, men. That they're not needed by anyone. And women have this feeling that he's not paying attention to me, he's distant. And that's why they grow apart. There is infidelity, you won't believe it... There is infidelity in some [military] units” (Interview 23, whose husband is serving at the front.)

“Well, most of my acquaintances... they used to be [close] friends, but now they are [merely] acquaintances. That's because many of them moved abroad. Well, they found other men there. Most of them left with their children. The men stayed here. Their wives don't want to return. There have been many divorces during this war. (...) Even among those who stayed, there have been issues in their relationships. (...) Misunderstandings, perhaps, between people. Because even if we look at my family, my mother and her husband (not my father), when the war started, they were too anxious, and they had constant arguments because of it. They even considered getting a divorce, and separated for a while.(...) Many of my female acquaintances left the country. Well, for the first few months, they may have tried to maintain their relationships, but later on, they ended their relationships with their husbands who stayed here because they have a new life there, new social circles, new jobs, and new interests. So, this has led to divorces.” (Interview 18)

These brief quotes only hint at the rich and complex themes regarding the impact of Russia's full-scale invasion on plans and actions related to intimate partnerships and childbearing in Ukraine. The full paper will develop these themes further, and also incorporate material from three virtual focus groups we will conduct in December 2023 in order to supplement our data using a different qualitative method.

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