In_visibilities in the media's gendered discourse on the war in Ukraine
Protocol of the 12th of December 2022, from 18:00 to 20:00

Content

The schedule of the event was split into three main parts – firstly, a welcome speech and introductory remarks; secondly, introductions and statements of the panellists, and lastly an open discussion with the audience.

The event was opened by Sylvia Mieszkowski, the deputy-head of GAIN and a professor of British literature at the university of Vienna. Organisers and beneficiaries of the talk were introduced briefly, and the agenda of the evening was explained and contextualised. In general, media reports (e.g. in the newspaper ZEIT) cover "common" stories, there are often only certain types of stories that are talked about when concerning wars. One of the aims of the In_visibilities talk was to bring invisible or silenced stories to light. English was chosen on purpose, in order to effectively integrate Ukrainian colleagues and speakers, and to make sure the event was intelligible on an international basis.

After the welcome speech, introductory remarks were given by two of the people who came up with the idea of holding the event: Andrea Lehner-Hartmann and Christa Hämmerle. The idea stem from the fact that the media cannot show everything about war. Stories are always shown from certain perspectives and told by certain voices. The aim of the In_visibilites talk was to make invisible mechanism in media visible, and to talk about aspects and stories that had not been shown in general media so far. The four main points on the agenda were 1) female Ukrainian soldiers and male deserters, 2) function and role of Churches, 3) Ukrainian members of the LGBTQIA2S+ community, and 4) sexual violence committed in war situations. Lehner-Hartmann posed the questions "Which victims are given a voice in media, and which are hidden?" and "How can religious education bring more justice to the world?" in her introduction. She talked about the role of religion in wars, and the connections between gender and religion. Christa Hämmerle mentioned (among other things) how gender can serve as a form of motivation in modern age wars. Wars carry masculinised understandings and notions with them. Binary and traditionalist gender schemes are brought to the surface, and everyone who does not conform to or fit into these ideas is prosecuted, degraded, and mistreated. She talked about the resurfacing of war atrocities and sexual violence in the Russian-Ukrainian war as well. SA (= sexual assault) is seen as a "standard operation procedure", as something that "cannot be avoided". It is important to note that SA in war situations is not something that "just happens", but actually a tool that is e.g.used to spread fear, demotivate and discourage the general public, or shame the enemy.

After the introduction, each of the panellist gave a 10-minute statement. Firstly, Christina Stöckl (who joined via Zoom) gave a brief presentation about the role of gender in Russia's war against Ukraine. She explained how gender plays an important role in Russia's justification of their invasion. Gendered arguments, like there supposedly being only two genders, exist mainly because of how Russia portrays itself in opposition to the West. The Ukraine is fashioned as being pro-gay and pro-European. "Gayrope" (symbolising liberalism, secularism, homosexuality,…) is contrasted with a traditional, religious, heterosexual and democratic Russia. Ukraine is lumped together with Europa and thus constructed as being both politically and morally misguided, and in need of rescue.

Then the second speaker, Friedrich Chernyshov, began his statement with the story of his escape from Ukraine. Before the war, he had been part of one of the biggest trans organisation in his country. On the 24th of February, they unexpectedly had to flee their homes. He also talked about the difficulties trans people face when trying to cross the border. If you have an "m." in your passport (regardless of whether you actually identify as male or not), you are not allowed to leave. It is very difficult to escape being drafted as well – you need to go to a special commission and argue your case. Furthermore, Chernyshov explained how war acts as a catalyst for toxic masculinity and for what he coined as the "cult of heroism". White, cisgender and heterosexual men become "heroes" in war situations. They are taught that they will be rewarded for certain kinds of toxicity, and that their status as saviour allows (and requires) them to behave in toxic and harmful ways.

Thirdly, Kateryna Busol – a Ukrainian lawyer who is currently documenting war crimes in the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war – gave her statement. She talked about patterns of conflict-related SA, the Ukrainian transitional justice system, and representations of victims and crimes in media. Conflict-related sexual violence is not only constituted of rape, but many other forms of violence such as forced abortion, forced nudity, or sexualised torture. There are many different kinds of victims and perpetrators; so far there have been victims aged up to 80 years, belonging to all genders, both civilian and military. Since the invasion of Ukraine, the whole country has become a site of crime and conflict-related sexual violence has been spreading rapidly. Additionally, Busol brought up the increase of hate speech. She stated that the portrayal and incitement of hate speech in public Russian media reflects the genocidal intentions of the war.

Lastly, Birgit Sauer gave her statement. She structured her talk into four questions and topics. 1) "Which gendered representations are we confronted with in Western media?". We see "masculine" imagery in how Russian leaders portray themselves in the media we have access to. There are also gendered arguments in the justifications Russia has given for their invasion (cf. Lehner-Hartmann).

2) "Where are Russian and Ukrainian women in this war?". Much of the media focuses on women as victims of war, and as suffering. We are shown images of farewells, of women with their children, or of women crying. These images of female victimhood make female agency in war invisible. In fact, women *do* participate in war in various ways. For example, about 22 per cent of the Ukrainian army is made up of women, and about 5.000 of them are stationed at the front. There are even female generals and or women in other high-ranking positions. However, men generally outnumber them and there is still gender segregation present in the Ukrainian army.

3) "What is the generally gendered nature of wars?". Wars create and reinforce gendered spaces. War making is connotated with masculinity and heroism. The systemic logic inherent of wars celebrates heroic masculinity and the "cult of heroism". It also dehumanises the "other", the enemy, and opposition. Women and "femininity" are excluded in this popular image of war.

The fourth question Mrs. Sauer asked concerned the fate of war deserters. Since it is basically impossible to object against being drafted, deserting is often the only option left to take. If you desert the army, you are criminalised as soon as you step foot out of the country.

After the four statements, Elisabeth Holzleithner opened the floor for a general discussion. The audience was asked to participate and engage with the panellists. Kateryna Busol was asked to talk more about the transitional justice in Ukraine, mental health support for war victims, the situation for female soldiers, and about sexual violence concerning men. Friedrich Chernyshov elaborated on

the concept of the "cult of heroism", talked about gender roles in the Ukraine and causes of sexual crime. Birgit Sauer answered questions about the effect of warfare on soldier's mental health and its possible consequences, and talked more about the standing of women in the Ukrainian army. At about 8 o'clock, the talk was finished off with a recitation of the poem "Metaphors".

Personal opinion

I personally found the talk very interesting, and I am glad I came to this protocol-writing opportunity in particular. The event was well organised and structured, we got to hear from each panellist and were able to add to the discussion ourselves as well. All of the topics were very engaging and captivating to listen to in my opinion. Even though the event lasted two and a half hours, at the end it didn't feel as if it had taken this long to me. My only "criticism" is that I would have liked to listen in a bit longer. However, I think the scope of topics was very ambitious to begin with – each aspect on its own could have probably been talked about for quite some time, and it's obvious that you need to pick and choose. With that problem in mind, I think the event schedule was well split up since we got to hear many different things from many different participants in a limited amount of time.

For me, hearing more about the situation of LGBTQIA2S+ people was really interesting and awful as well. I follow a non-binary activist (@raindovemodel) on Instagram, and they have been involved in helping LGBT+ people escape the war. I've been keeping up with them for some time online, so I knew a bit about the hardships and problems trans people can face when trying to leave Ukraine. I liked that I was able to hear more about how queer people fare in person in this event. I think minorities and marginalised groups are important to mention and include when talking about war in general media, because I myself hadn't actually thought much about their connections to war and violence before I'd seen the posts by Rain on my feed (just by chance). If you don't know about something you don't really think about it, and not everyone educates themselves or even has the opportunity to do so. Popular media is a way of bringing information to a lot of people and should include perspectives we haven't encountered until now. In general, I think the idea of bringing invisibilities in media to the light is really great, and I feel like I learned a lot from the event.