

# **The gender dimension of EU sanctions against Russia**

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## Introduction

European Union (EU) sanctions against Russia are a key part of the Union's response to the invasion of Ukraine of 2022, as they were also a key part of the EU's response to Moscow's annexation of Crimea in 2014. This sanction regime against Russia – that is, comprising the 2014 and the 2022 sanctions – is the harshest and most comprehensive in EU history, by reference to how many people and sectors of the Russian economy are impacted, and how many transactions in those sectors are affected. The sanctions encompass primarily, but not exclusively, economic measures. They aim to halt the Russian war and thus promote adherence to international law, although this is by no means their only objective (Portela, 2023) (see section 2). As these sanctions arguably represent a central tool of EU foreign policy, it becomes important to delve into their consequences, particularly through a hitherto underexplored, yet potentially significant, lens: gender. This is because a major element of contemporary human rights discourse and a framework for conduct in conflict prevention, management, and transformation is the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, since the unanimous adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security in 2000. The Council has stressed that 'gender equality and Human Rights are at the core of European values and constitute standalone priorities mainstreamed across all European Union policies' and has recalled 'the commitments of the European Union and its Member States to the full implementation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda' (Council of the EU, 2018, p. 2). Further, a group of EU Member States has called for a 'feminist foreign policy in action' (Germany, the Netherlands, and France, on which see Vorrath, 2024), which resulted in sanctions against individuals accused of gender based violence. More generally, gender mainstreaming involves systematically (i.e. as a crosscutting issue) assessing the gender implications of policies and integrating a gender perspective into their design and implementation: this is done with a view of acknowledging and reducing undue gender disparities. Since the literature suggests that gender-mainstreaming alone is not sufficient to generate gender-sensitive policy, and that it should be fully integrated into EU policy instead (Guerrina *et al.*, 2018; Chappell and Guerrina, 2020), what are the concrete implications of this in the design of EU (foreign) policy? This is the very broad question to which this paper contributes, with a focus on EU sanctions against Russia.

The understanding of gender has evolved over time, and it is often examined through interdisciplinary lenses, including sociology, psychology, anthropology, and cultural studies. Gender thus defined is an essential component of individual well-being and self-acceptance, in understanding how societal norms and expectations influence individuals' behaviour, opportunities, and experiences (Friedman, 2011), particularly within the context of transgender and non-binary identities (Cooper *et al.*, 2020; Anderson, 2022). It is relevant for patterns of employment and economic opportunities (Phillips, 1998), as well as other power dynamics more broadly, including the dynamics of sexual politics and the allocation of roles and responsibilities (Connell, 1988; Aulette and Connell, 1991). For the purposes of this article, the focus will be chiefly, but not exclusively, on *women* (see, similarly, the 'classic' Mackay *et al.*, 2010), because gender is not solely a binary concept, but rather a spectrum that encompasses diverse identities and expressions (Monro, 2005). The reason for this relatively narrow focus is pragmatic: the Council's main focus is on girls and women pursuant to the UNSCR 1325 and Women, Peace, and Security agenda. This is not to underappreciate the impact of EU policies on other vulnerable groups, that is, an element of intersectionality, or indeed on men (e.g. gender-based violence in the context of the war in Ukraine, which also affects men (Vorrath, 2024, p. 79)). Occasional reference to these groups will be made throughout the article where relevant.

The gender dimension of *international* sanctions has been a subject of growing interest, with research shedding light on the differential impact of sanctions on women and men. In a nutshell, what the literature shows is that, on the one hand, the impact of international economic sanctions is gendered, as they hit women's economic and political welfare disproportionately more than men's (this literature is discussed in Section 3). On the other hand, in the context of US sanctions, researchers have suggested that it is possible to find even a positive impact of sanctions on women's rights (Gutmann *et al.*, 2017) – positive impact on the ground, not just as signaling. For example, sanctions were adopted in order to address a violation of women's rights, either in the context of authoritarian regimes (US Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2024), or in the context of armed conflicts. Similarly, the gender dimension of EU policy and politics, including EU foreign policy, is object of a growing number of contributions (see section 3).

This article seeks to apply the insights of the literature on the gendered impact of *international* sanctions to *EU Common Foreign and Security Policy*: the article studies the gender dimension of EU sanctions, by asking whether EU sanctions against Russia have a disproportionate effect on women. It is worth answering this question for two reasons: first, EU sanctions target Russia but are not meant to punish the Russian population. But is this really the case? Second, while EU sanctions are primarily designed to achieve specific foreign policy objectives, there has been a growing acknowledgment of the need

for gender mainstreaming within the EU institutions, but so far this mainstreaming has been found to be defective in security and defence (Guerrina *et al.*, 2018). While this is not an article about gender mainstreaming, it has implications for that as well.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 contains information on the nature and rationale of the EU sanctions, and its purpose is to enable readers to find their way into an otherwise highly technical jungle of legal texts (the sanctions adopted by the EU against Russia since 2014 span, at the time of writing, several dozen pages of intricate text, without counting the several hundreds of pages of technical annexes). Section 3 provides an overview of the literature on the gender implications of international sanctions, and on the gender dimension of EU security and defence policy. This section not only identifies the gap this article aims to fill – namely the dearth of studies on the gender dimension of EU sanctions – but also brings to the fore the concerns that shape the structure of the empirical analysis contained in the rest of the article. The literature on international sanctions, in fact, shows that their gendered impact can be conceptualised in two macro-areas: economic/material welfare on one hand, and political rights and participation on the other hand (these are discussed, respectively, in Sections 4 and 5 as far as the Russia sanctions are concerned). This survey of the literature then considers also the following questions: how has the notion been integrated in EU policies and their design? Have there been studies on the implications of other EU policies on gender, particularly in the field of EU external relations? In the absence of comprehensive, reliable macroeconomic data, Sections 4 and 5 are based on an empirical survey conducted on sources in Russian and in English. The sources include newspapers, blogs, academic literature, and reports by civil society and other organisations (some open source, some behind paywalls).

A word of caution on the causal effect of sanctions: the purpose of this article is not to isolate, and ascribe a relative weight to, each of the factors contributing to gender inequalities in Russia. In other words, this article does not aim at unpacking the nuts and bolts of the mechanisms through which sanctions display their consequences. It accepts that, while definitive and direct causation of sanctions cannot be proven for each phenomenon, causal links may be at the very least strongly suggested – when they are not conclusively established by the sources consulted (Bessler *et al.*, 2004, p. 17 further suggests to distinguish between direct causation by sanctions, and indirect causation when the consequence occurs as a result of other actions that stem, in turn, from the sanctions). We can therefore argue with a sufficient level of satisfaction that a gendered effect of the sanctions against Russia exists, although it is unclear how much this would be due to the sanctions themselves, as opposed to pre-existing structural conditions in Russia (including, corruption, or lack of women in political leadership roles (Rebrey, 2023)). It ought to be noted that sanctions exacerbate and, so to speak, solidify a pre-existing fragile system (for the notion of solidity and stability in Russia, see (Wengle,

2022)), where religious (Kiviorg, 2022) or (late-)soviet (Racioppi, 1995; Gapova, 2022) cultural and social norms hold an enduring sway (Zdravomyslova and Temkina, 2005). Now, Putin presents a narrative in which Russia is an important global player as it is the guarantor of 'traditional values' against a West whose gender agenda is openly opposed by Moscow (Kondarov and Novitskaya, 2022).

## **Section 2: The EU sanctions against Russia: nature and rationale**

The EU has adopted several sets of sanctions against Russia in response to various geopolitical events and conflicts since 2014. These sanctions have encompassed economic, diplomatic, and trade-related measures (Meissner, 2020; Meissner and Portela, 2022; Meissner and Graziani, 2023; Poli and Finelli, 2023), reflecting the EU's efforts to address and respond to Russia's actions in different contexts (Giumelli *et al.*, 2021; Cardwell and Moret, 2022; Meissner and Graziani, 2023). The sanctions have been a significant component of the EU's foreign policy approach towards Russia and have aimed to exert pressure and influence Russia's behaviour on two occasions. In 2014 (through two "rounds" of sanctions), after the seizure of Crimea (Orenstein and Kelemen, 2016), and in 2022 (through no fewer than 16 "rounds"), even before the invasion started, namely after the Russian recognition of the separatist Republics of Donetsk and Lugansk and ever since (Beauregard, 2022; Lonardo, 2023a). The EU's sanctions against Russia have been a subject of great attention by academics and practitioners. Starting with the latter category, lawyers in Europe follow very closely the highly technical developments and have on several occasions challenged the sanctions before EU and national courts (Challet, 2023; Lonardo, 2023b). Many national officials and other practitioners who are tasked with implementing the sanctions have devoted themselves completely to understanding the complexities of the regime, often relying on the guidance issued by the European Commission (European Commission, 2024), which is, however, non-binding. In light of the practical significance of this sanction regime, researchers have analysed the impact on bilateral trade, the redistributive effects on EU member states, and the broader geopolitical and consequences.

The sanctions consist both of sectorial measures – targeting sectors of the Russian economy (defence industry, oil and gas, luxury, and aviation among others) – and of individual measures, targeting natural persons (such as politicians, journalists, judges) or legal persons (such as companies or bodies of the Russian state) (Meissner and Graziani, 2023; Meissner, 2023). Such distinction is chiefly a legalistic one, drawn by the Court of Justice of the European Union in its case law (Heliskoski, 2018). For the purposes of this article, however, such distinction is not crucial. As a consequence, the analysis contained in the following sections includes all these measures collectively. A distinction will nonetheless be attempted, where possible, between the sectorial measures and the individual measures. Most of the analysis will, in practice, refer to the sectorial sanctions.

However, even a superficial look at the list of people targeted by the (individual) sanctions shows a gendered impact, as more men than women are listed therein. This is because the individual sanctions target people in positions of power in Russia and in the separatist regions of Ukraine. Due to the pre-existing inequalities mentioned in the introduction (Kondarov and Novitskaya, 2022), these are mostly men.

### **Section 3: Gender and Sanctions: a literature review**

#### 3.1. The gendered impact of international sanctions

Gender influences various aspects of policy, diplomacy, and global governance. The study of gender in international relations has evolved to encompass a wide range of topics, including the impact of sanctions, gender mainstreaming in foreign policy, and the gendered effects of international economic measures (Byron and Thorburn, 1998; Standfield, 2020). For decades, scholars have emphasized the importance of understanding how social relations of masculinity and femininity, gender identities, and sexualities are implicated in fact not only in domestic (Jaggar, 1983; MacKinnon, 1983; Elshtain, 1995), but also in international politics (Brown, 1988). This recognition of the gendered dimension of international relations has led to an increased focus on the differential impact of policies and measures on men and women (for the gendered impact of public measures during COVID, see Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya, 2021; Collins *et al.*, 2021; Depalo and Pereda-Fernández, 2023; Chatot *et al.*, 2023).

Economic sanctions have gendered implications that affect various aspects of women's lives. This article suggests that previous literature can be conceptualised around two macro-areas that emerge as the most promising avenues for the research on the gendered impact of sanctions: economic and material welfare on the one hand, and political participation and rights on the other hand (a different categorisation is suggested by (Murdoch-Fyke, 2022 direct and indirect, short term or long term. Drury and Peksen, 2014 instead look at women's economic, political, and social status to analyze the gender-specific consequences of sanctions.).

When it comes to economic and material welfare, firstly, economic hardships emerge as a central focus due to the profound impact of sanctions on socio-economic structures, where gendered disparities in employment, income, and access to resources become pronounced (Lindsey, 2001, p. 79; Murdoch-Fyke, 2022, p. 201). Already in 1998, Buck and others (Buck *et al.*, 1998) showed how sanctions against Iraq had a gender dimension, with negative consequences for women ranging from differential deprivations to declines in dowry wealth. (Perry, 2021) highlighted the gendered consequences of sanctions, emphasizing that women, as primary caretakers of the home, bear the brunt of the consequences, such as the deterioration of infrastructure and shortages in essential

services (for Russia after 2022, see Chernova, 2024; for Iraq in the 90s, see Al-Ali, 2005). Numerous country-specific studies have underscored how women, particularly those in vulnerable economic positions, face heightened financial insecurity and limited livelihood opportunities. Focusing on Iran, (Seyfi *et al.*, 2020) suggest that economic sanctions may have implications for women's participation in the tourism industry and their overall empowerment. This is because the sanctions have a 'direct impact on the employment and livelihoods of Iranian female workforce' (Seyfi *et al.*, 2020, p. 1744), and as a consequence negatively affected their economic, psychological, and political empowerment. Always with the case study of Iran, (Demir and Tabrizy, 2022) provided evidence of the gendered effects of sanctions on manufacturing employment, indicating that sanctions may impact women's economic rights: 'international sanctions imposed on Iran between 1995 and 2014 led to a significant reduction in the growth rate of female manufacturing employment. In contrast, we do not observe such reduction in male manufacturing employment' (Demir and Tabrizy, 2022, p. 2062)

Secondly, the intersection of gender and health has garnered significant attention in scholarly discourse (Lindsey, 2001, p. 79). This is particularly the case in the context of studies of the sanctions that the international community has imposed against Iran in the second decade of this century. Research has elucidated how sanctions exacerbate health inequalities, affecting women's access to healthcare, maternal health services, and reproductive rights. (Kokabisaghi, 2018) conducted a systematic review assessing the effects of economic sanctions on Iranians' right to health, shedding light on the gendered implications of sanctions on access to healthcare for women. The sanctions imposed on Iran led to a significant decline in the country's revenues, devaluation of its national currency, and a surge in inflation and unemployment. These economic challenges collectively deteriorated the overall welfare of the population, reducing their ability to afford basic necessities such as nutritious food, healthcare, and medicine. Furthermore, sanctions targeting the banking and financial systems, as well as shipping restrictions, caused a shortage of essential, high-quality lifesaving medications. The negative effects of these sanctions were especially severe for the poor, patients, women, and children. (Gutmann *et al.*, 2019)(Gutmann *et al.*, 2017) analysed the impact of economic sanctions, including those imposed by the UN and US, on life expectancy and its gender gap in target countries. This study sheds light on how economic sanctions can affect the health outcomes of populations, including women, within sanctioned nations.

Additionally, and coming back to the example of Iran, the impact of sanctions on the nutritional status and food security of pregnant women and their families has been highlighted, indicating a significant reduction in weight gain in pregnant women and newborns' birth weight, underscoring the debilitating effects of sanctions on the health of women and infants (Gohari *et al.*, 2022). (Setayesh and Mackey, 2016) discussed how sanctions have disrupted the pharmaceutical industry in Iran, leading to shortages of

essential medicines and raw materials. This disruption has forced the country to import medicines and raw materials of lower or questionable quality, impacting the availability of safe and effective treatments. Other authors emphasized the reduction in public resources allocated to the health sector and the restrictions on the importation of vital medicines and equipment, which ultimately strain the ability of the health system to provide essential care to patients (Cheraghali, 2013; Massoumi and Koduri, 2015). Similarly, (Kheirandish *et al.*, 2018) highlighted the importance of decreasing pharmaceutical expenditure without compromising the availability and access to essential medicines, emphasizing the need for promoting generics and rational prescribing and use of medicines. The impact of sanctions on access to medicines and medical equipment was also discussed by (Karimi and Turkamani, 2021), who emphasized the essential role of pharmaceuticals and supplies in all functioning health systems.

Thirdly, the theme of migration emerges as a critical area of inquiry, reflecting the intersection of migration status with gender dynamics. Existing literature underscores how women experience unique vulnerabilities during migration, facing risks of exploitation, trafficking, and gender-based violence. Sanctions and the economic difficulties they cause in certain targeted countries cause people to migrate and, in the case of women, to endure worse treatments during the migration. (Pattadath, 2020) shed light on the impact of legal sanctions on migrant women, particularly in the context of the UN Trafficking Protocol prioritizing 'sex trafficking' and potentially making 'invisible' the experiences of migrant women as sex workers. This regulatory framework may lead to increased surveillance of female migrant workers and restrict their mobility, thereby affecting their rights and safety.

Turning now to political participation and rights, the destabilizing consequences of sanctions may have gender-specific implications for political participation, affecting women's involvement in political processes. The sanctions adopted by the US against Iran are a case in point (Moaveni and Vaez, 2020), as it was noted that 'economic sanctions against the Iranian regime have, in the past, made it more difficult for women to make gains toward full and substantive participation in Iran's social and political issues' (Mitchell and Thompson, 2023, p. 12). Moreover, Drury and Peksen's study on economic sanctions and political repression indicates that the application of coercive diplomacy through sanctions can result in heightened political repression, potentially constraining women's freedom to participate actively in political processes (Peksen and Drury, 2009). This suggests that the enforcement of sanctions can foster a repressive environment that curtails women's political liberties and restricts their involvement in decision-making processes. Arguably, however, repression also applies to men in equal proportions and at worst, sanctions simply maintain the pre-existing unbalance in men and women's political participation in rights.

### 3.2. Gender and EU Common Foreign and Security Policy

Zooming in on EU foreign and security policy, scholarship has highlighted the (limited) evolution of gender equality as a dimension of EU foreign policy. Debusscher's work reflected on the operationalization, empowerment, and epistemology of gender equality policies in the EU's foreign policy, for example in the context of development policy (Debusscher and True, 2009; Debusscher, 2011; Debusscher and Van Der Vleuten, 2012) also in relation to the neighbourhood policy (Debusscher, 2012), or external action more broadly (Debusscher and Manners, 2020). This critical reflection offers valuable insights into the operational and epistemological aspects of gender equality policies in the EU's external engagements. Of particular relevance for our inquiry, the author argues that the EU should differentiate between how the gender impact is assessed for domestic and external policies, and in the context of foreign policy stressed the need to 'explicitly involve[e] the views of gender activists from the national context in the analysis and using their perspectives' (Debusscher, 2016, p. 4).

In their 2018 article, (Guerrina *et al.*, 2018) examined the integration of gender into the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). They analyzed the historical evolution of CSDP and the institutional structures that have shaped it, highlighting how deeply embedded military norms have limited the inclusion of gender perspectives. The authors argue that despite some efforts, such as the appointment of gender advisors, the CSDP remains largely gender-blind. They emphasize the importance of addressing both military and civilian dimensions to create a more inclusive policy framework and note that the presence of female leaders alone does not ensure the mainstreaming of gender in security and defense policies.

Although not specifically related to Common Foreign and Security Policy, but to EU external action more broadly, in the context of the withdrawal of the UK from the EU following Brexit, (Haastrup *et al.*, 2019) shed light on the divergences, opportunities, and constraints that have crystallized as a result of the Brexit process, with relation to the role of gender in EU foreign policy. The framework for analysis is a (feminist) critical one, bearing resemblance, in this, to the works authored or co-authored by Debusscher discussed in the previous paragraph. The idea of gender in (Haastrup *et al.*, 2019) reflects the conception that 'the feminized is subordinated to the masculinized' (p. 64), an idea that clearly appears from the literature on feminist critical analyses of politics (MacKinnon, 1994). What is meant by this is that the voice of marginalised groups is either silenced or anyways underappreciated.

Later, (Chappell and Guerrina, 2020) explored again the EU's role as a gender actor in foreign and security policy, emphasizing the institutional placement of gender and the promotion of gender norms within the European External Action Service. This study sheds

light on the institutional dynamics and the promotion of gender norms within the EU's security and defense policy. Their research, however, still underscored the limitations of the EU's gender policy, revealing that gender considerations have not been deeply integrated into EU foreign policy. Despite being a foundational norm, gender equality and mainstreaming remain peripheral in many aspects of the EU's external actions. The study highlighted that the EU's approach often focuses on the superficial inclusion of women rather than a substantial integration of gender perspectives, indicating a need for more profound and consistent application of gender norms across all areas of EU policy.

There is closer attention to the gender dimension of national foreign policy instead. (Thomson, 2022) discussed feminist scholarship in Europe, particularly in relation to gender and the idea of 'normative power' Europe, the process of EU enlargement and expansion, the securitization/militarization of foreign policy, and the emerging literature on 'feminist' foreign policy, through a comparison between nation-states (including some EU Member States such as Sweden, which pioneered a feminist foreign policy). (Vorrath, 2024 discusses the case of Germany and how its 'feminist foreign policy in action' influences EU sanctions.) (Limane, 2023 and ; Impagliazzo, 2023 show instead the limits of the French feminist foreign policy.)

Zooming in even further, as far as EU *sanctions* specifically are concerned, there seems instead to be a lack of studies exploring the gender implications (for an exception, see the mention of the EU sanctions against gender based violence in Ukraine in (Anosova, 2024)). However, the redistributive impact of EU sanctions on Member States has been noted, suggesting that there are winners and losers from imposing sanctions on target countries within the EU (Giumelli, 2017). The existence of winners and losers suggests that there may be differences not only *between* Member States, but between sub-sections of the society *within* those Member States: hence, the need to consider the differential effects of sanctions on various segments of the population, including women. Strikingly, sanctions are not mentioned in the EU's action plan on Women, Peace and Security. To conclude on a comparative note, it ought to be noted that others have drawn attention to the lack of gender sensibility in the adoption of US sanctions (Mitchell and Thompson, 2023).

## Section 4: Gendered Impacts on economic and social welfare

This section considers the gendered implications of economic sanctions imposed by the EU against Russia, focusing on how restrictive measures affect the economic and material welfare of women. The structure of this section reflects the conceptualisation of the literature that this Article has made in Section 3.1.

### 4.1 Economic Hardships and Gender Disparities

It shall be recalled that economic sanctions primarily targeted Russia's economy, affecting trade, financial transactions, and investment. As such, although the exact figures are unknown (Demarais, 2023), they have already had profound economic repercussions (Belozyorov and Sokolovska, 2020; Astrov *et al.*, 2024). However, these repercussions are not evenly distributed among women and men: women often bear the burden of the economic hardships caused by sanctions. According to the annual Women, Peace and Security index based on inclusion, justice, and security of women, Russia lost three places (from 53<sup>rd</sup> to 56<sup>th</sup>) since the beginning of the war (Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2023). There is no conclusive evidence that is due to sanctions specifically, as opposed to the war and repression more generally: the disproportionate impact on women is due to pre-existing gender disparities in access to the labour market (Kosyakova *et al.*, 2015), resources and opportunities in Russia (Mareeva, 2020; Pisklakova-Parker, 2022). In particular, the economic hardship felt by women is evident in sectors most affected by sanctions, such as informal employment, education, or care work. These sectors have a higher percentage of women workers, leading to repercussions on their employment opportunities. Here, long-existing social norms account for a significantly asymmetric access to the market: certain jobs (in mines, dangerous industries, or requiring heavy-lifting duties) have been banned for women (Government of the Russian Federation Resolution No. 162, Feb. 25, 2000) (this is in and of itself, of course, a fundamental rights violation (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 2016)).

Sanctions hit this already unbalanced market. What we are now witnessing in Russia is the proliferation of informal and vulnerable employment (Shmagun, 2024), which disproportionately affects women (Cordell, 2019; Biryukova *et al.*, 2022). The gendered implications of informal work, including in Russia specifically, have been extensively studied (Karabchuk, 2012; Lehmann and Zaiceva, 2013; Gontmakher, 2021; Biryukova *et al.*, 2022). The literature provides valuable insights into the factors contributing to this disparity and its consequences for women in the Russian labour market.

As economic sanctions hit the Russian economy since 2014, unemployment rates have remained stable (Bargain *et al.*, 2021, p. 2). But women, who are already more likely to

be engaged in informal and vulnerable employment, face even greater challenges in finding stable work (Kim *et al.*, 2019; whereas Biryukova *et al.*, 2022 explain that even though the prevalence of informal employment is higher among men, women are the ones who receive part or all of their wages at their main job unofficially). As a result, they are forced to rely on precarious jobs in the informal sector, which often lack social protections and job security. Econometric research confirms such reliance: for the lowest-paid jobs in the informal economy, 'there is a gradual increase for men, which tends to accelerate in the recent years when women's informal employment also takes off. Between 2010 and 2017, the increase in informal salary work in the bottom wage quintile is twofold for men (a shift from 10% to 20%) and almost threefold for women (from 5% to 14% of total employment).' (Bargain *et al.*, 2021, p. 10). But these jobs lack social security ((Bargain *et al.*, 2021, p. 7; Slonimczyk, 2012); see, for the case of Ukraine, (Akay and Khamis, 2012)). (Vanore and Siegel, 2015) discussed the impact of reductions in social protection benefits in former Soviet states, which disproportionately affected women and limited their re-entry into the labour market following childbirth. This reduction in social protection benefits may have contributed to the prevalence of informal employment among women in Russia. This further perpetuates gender inequalities and exacerbates the economic vulnerability of women in Russia.

The same can be said for the education sector. The research by (Brushkova *et al.*, 2021) highlighted the increasing "feminization" of higher education in Russia. After the imposition of sanctions, funding for education has been significantly reduced, leading to cuts in scholarships and resources. These cuts disproportionately impact women who make up the majority of employees in higher education institutions.

#### 4.2 Healthcare and Gendered Implications

Economic sanctions can have a significant impact on healthcare systems, with gendered implications. When sanctions reduce a country's ability to import essential medical supplies and pharmaceuticals, women's health can be jeopardized.

Although studies on Russia specifically are limited, the existing data document the adverse effects of the war on reproductive health, in a country in which the war triggered a demographic crisis ('Russia's Battle around Reproductive Health and Women's Rights', 2024).

When it comes to employment in healthcare, women in Russia also face gender-specific challenges. Women constitute the majority of healthcare workers in Russia, particularly in fields such as nursing and caregiving. The strain on healthcare resources and funding resulting from economic sanctions directly impacted women's employment opportunities and the quality of healthcare services available to them.

### 4.3 Migration and Gendered Vulnerability

The vulnerability of women migrants compared to men has been a subject of scholarly inquiry, with various studies shedding light on the gendered dimensions of migration and the challenges faced by women. The literature provides valuable insights into the factors contributing to women's vulnerability in the context of migration, including socioeconomic status, gender discrimination, and cultural norms. (Salama *et al.*, 2022) discussed the vulnerability of Russian, Somali, and Kurdish migrants in Finland, shedding light on the challenges faced by these migrant populations, including substance use, affective symptoms, and suicidal ideation. Due to Central Asia's heavy reliance on the Russian economy, migrants and their families have already experienced the repercussions of sanctions, primarily through rising unemployment and a decline in remittances (United Nations, 2022). However, this should not lead to hasty conclusions, since comparative has also highlighted that there is no systematic gender difference in the effect of sanctions on migration (Gutmann *et al.*, 2023) – but, in light of the fact that this finding is in contradiction with what the literature suggests, this is discussed again in Section 5.3.

## Section 5: Gendered political impact

### 5. Gendered political impact

This section considers the second macro-area that this Article has identified as a case study for the gendered impact of sanctions, namely political participation and rights. As this section shows, the sanctions have broader gender implications beyond just economic consequences. Sanctions, in fact, have also a gendered *political* effect, specifically in the areas of women's political participation, civil society and women's rights, and gender-based violence.

#### 5.1 Political Participation

It was noted that, in peace and security in general, 'women continue to be underrepresented' despite the fact that the WPS agenda strives to promote 'women's full and meaningful participation "at all decision-making level [...] for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflicts"' (Mitchell and Thompson, 2023, p. 10).

One of the key gendered impacts of EU sanctions against Russia is their influence on political participation of women, which diminished both terms of civic engagement, although not in terms of formal politics (at least in the period 2014-2021 (Milaeva *et al.*, 2021)). Already before 2022, it was reported that 'women remain under-represented in

executive positions in businesses and in politics. For instance, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, Russia ranks 128th out of 187 countries in terms of women's representation in national parliaments, with women occupying only around 15% of elected seats' (*BTI 2024 Russia Country Report*, n.d.). After 2022, this ought to be compared and contrasted with what is happening in Ukraine, where 'women are playing a leading role in the country's freedom movement by documenting war crimes perpetrated by the Russian army and coordinating the distribution of aid' (Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2023, p. 41).

Sanctions can disrupt political systems and create an atmosphere of instability. In such circumstances, it was documented that women faced challenges in accessing and maintaining political positions (Erich and Beauvais, 2022), although with the caveat that female deputies at the sub-federal level was and remains worryingly low, for European standards (Milaeva *et al.*, 2021). Polls show that the majority of Russians think that the country is not ready to have women as president or in other high ranking roles (Interfax, 2017). Would the situation be different without the sanctions? The argument must be tentative in the absence of a counterfactual scenario, but there are convincing signs that (some) women are in fact gaining more political exposure as a result of the situation created by the war and by the sanctions (Luchenko and Komin, 2024).

## 5.2 Civil Society and Women's Rights

Sanctions had a detrimental impact on an already vulnerable civil society, making it even more challenging for them to promote gender equality and protect women's rights. Additionally, the country's economy suffered from economic hardships resulting in reduced funding for these organizations and significant limitations on advocacy efforts for women's rights. This ultimately weakened the overall capacity of civil society to advocate for gender equality and address issues related to women's rights.

Sanctions imposed on Russia by the EU have led to a shrinking space for women's activism and hindered their ability to advocate for gender equality. This is particularly evident in the case of women's rights organizations, which have faced increased restrictions, surveillance, and harassment under the sanctions regime. The situation, however, was dire also before the invasion of Ukraine. In 2021, Daria Serenko, a feminist activist, faced threats of physical violence following the unauthorized disclosure of her personal information and the addresses of her family members (Merkuryeva and Coalson, 2021).

Additionally, economic hardship may compel some women to prioritize immediate survival over political activism, further eroding the momentum of the women's rights movement.

Many international organizations and NGOs, who already faced significant risks operating in Russia, emphasized gender mainstreaming in their projects and initiatives. Sanctions disrupted these efforts by making it practically impossible for these NGOs to keep operating in Russia, as well as by diverting their resources and attention away. As a result, gender mainstreaming efforts in Russia were significantly hampered, and the progress made towards achieving gender equality was undermined.

### 5.3 Gender-Based Violence

First, EU sanctions target the perpetrators of gender based violence. In 2023, EU sanctions targeted 'officers of the Moscow Police Station responsible for arbitrary arrests and detentions as well as torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment in the context of the censorship and oppression led by the Russian authorities. The listings will also target high-ranking members of the Russian armed forces, whose units systematically participated in acts of sexual and gender-based violence in Ukraine in March/April 2022'.

By comparison, the US has also imposed sanctions on two political and military targets from South Sudan who oversaw the rape and murder of civilians during the civil war, and two ISIS terrorists responsible for the brutal rape and torture of Yazidi women and girls. This was an important political development, as Biden commented 'The United States is committed to doing all we can to end this blatant abuse of human rights. That's why, today, my Administration is issuing historic sanctions targeting actors who perpetrate this abuse — marking the first time that a dedicated focus on conflict-related sexual violence has led to the imposition of U.S. sanctions.' (Biden, 2023). However, despite the acknowledgement that conflict related sexual violence was used as a weapon of war also in the context of the war in Ukraine, the US has not yet targeted Russians for that specifically.

Second, the gendered impacts of EU sanctions against Russia may extend to women's rights and gender-based violence, but the causal link is impossible to establish with any degree of accuracy. Economic instability and political turmoil exacerbate existing gender inequalities and create conditions conducive to gender-based violence, but this is probably due to Putin's decision to go to war rather than to the sanctions. Violence against women and trafficking was already a pressing issue before the war (World Organisation Against Torture, 2003). It has only increased since 2022 (Kumar Sen, 2022).

## 6. Conclusion

This article has shown that EU sanctions against Russia have significant gender implications that cannot be ignored. In this, they follow patterns already identified by the literature on international sanctions. This finding, however, must be significantly qualified: it is impossible, probably because it is too early, to have access to reliable figures on Russia's macroeconomics that could confirm or disprove some of the findings of the previous literature.

What can be stated with a degree of confidence is that economic sanctions, while designed to exert pressure on a targeted state, tend to affect women and men differently, exacerbating existing gender disparities. While in most cases Putin's decision to go to war is the direct cause of a deterioration in the condition of life of women in Russia, in many cases sanctions crystallised or exacerbated the difficulties and the disparities. This happened despite the stated goal of EU sanctions to target the Russian economy as opposed to the civilian population. The gendered impact of sanctions described in this article is perhaps a specific expression of a general paradox of sanctions: despite the intention of sanctions to address political and security concerns stemming from Russia, they have inadvertently perpetuated and solidified its existing corrupt system.

Women, particularly those in vulnerable economic positions, face disproportionate economic hardships, with documents obstacles in accessing healthcare, and all the more so in the case of migrant women. Further to the purely economic difficulties, this article highlighted the political and social consequences of sanctions, such as disruptions in political participation, civil society engagement, and women's rights advocacy. These factors all contribute in shaping, in proportions that are probably impossible to determine, the complex web of (intersectional) gendered impact of the sanctions.

There are lessons to be drawn for policymakers. Gender mainstreaming is a central element of the global WPS agenda to which the EU has committed (Council of the EU, 2018). It underpins the four pillars of the WPS agenda and requires that policymakers consider the gendered impacts of any element of public or foreign policy, and there is growing awareness of the need to consider gender in sanctions design and implementation. This is doubtlessly a step in the right direction. But much more remains to be done, including the creation of a 'gender empowerment programme' to help minimise the consequences of sanctions on women's financial independence and health (Murdoch-Fyke, 2022).

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