

**VETERAN
HUB**

The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved

2024 Results



This study is supported by the Partnership Fund for a Resilient Ukraine (PFRU), funded by aid from the governments of Canada, Estonia, Finland, Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

The Veteran Hub team continues a series of studies about the experience of warriors' beloved. These people go side by side with Ukrainian defenders while being their support and backbone.

This is the second iteration of the study "The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved," which we first presented in 2023. We continue to study the stages of the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved, how this Journey changes, and what needs arise at each stage. We also separately studied the experiences of wives and partners of military members who went missing, were captured, or were killed.

Author Team

Analysis:

Chief Analyst: Anna Kostenko

Senior Analyst: Daria Yashkina

Junior Analyst: Victoria Odusanwo

Research Manager: Iryna Udod

Interviewers: Maria Sokolova, Olena Andreieva and Yulia Kabanets

Interview Transcribers: Alina Marchenko, Nadiya Vaskivska and Myroslava Yavorska

Board Chair: Ivona Kostyna

Project Supervisor: Kateryna Skorokhod, Director of the Think Tank

Internal Review:

Ivona Kostyna, Board Chairperson

Galyna Alyomova, Director of Communications

External Consultant: Olga Fokaf

Layout: Anna Syrota

Editor: Hanna Panakhno

Translation: Iryna Kovalenko

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The authors are grateful to all interviewees who talked to us. All errors and inaccuracies, if any, in the final version are the authors' responsibility. The content is the responsibility of the Veteran Hub and does not reflect the views of the Foundation and its financial partners.

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Any use of the materials contained in this study is permitted only if the original source is mentioned and referenced. For example: The results of the Veteran Hub's study "The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved" (2024) state: "In the early days, it was extremely difficult..." (p. 42).



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Foreword

The war started by Russia against Ukraine in 2014 and expanded to all territories of our country on February 24, 2022, is one of the most difficult challenges that Ukrainian society is facing with dignity and courage. For more than 10 years, Ukrainian defenders have been fighting for the unity of our country. Every day, they defend our land and the very existence of such fundamental values as freedom, dignity and human rights.

Alongside soldiers, their loved ones walk this path. Although this study covered only women's experience in heterosexual relationships, more than a million people in Ukraine, both women and men, walk the path of the Warriors' Beloved. They take care of family and home and support their loved ones at different stages of their respective Journeys. Their role and contribution often go unnoticed and unrecognized by others.

We thank every person who loves someone who serves Ukraine. We also thank the women who agreed to tell us their stories. After the interviews, we wanted to hug each of them and tell them how proud we were to be with them, hear their stories, and have the right to share them. All we could do as a research team was to give them the opportunity to tell their stories, hear them and make them public. I hope that each and every person who reads this research will do their best to make the Warriors' Beloved Journeys full of support and recognition.

Dear Reader: Do not fear sadness and bitterness in this text. It reflects the authenticity, honesty, and strength of people who have been or are still in difficult life circumstances. Stay close, let them tell their stories and respect their right to silence.

*Anna Kostenko,
Chief Analyst*

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List of Abbreviations

LU – Law of Ukraine

AFU – Armed Forces of Ukraine

ATO – Anti-Terrorist Operation

JFO – Joint Forces Operation

TCC and SP – territorial center of recruitment and social support

ORTCC and SP – unified district territorial center for recruitment and social support

SSU – Security Service of Ukraine

DIU – the Defence Intelligence of Ukraine

NIB – National Information Bureau for Prisoners of War, Forced Deportees and Missing Persons

ICRC – International Committee of the Red Cross

IDP – Internally Displaced Person

NGO – Non-Governmental Organization

MSEC – Medical and Social Examination Commission

MMC – Military Medical Commission

UAV – Unmanned Aerial Vehicle

TOT – Temporarily Occupied Territories

POD – Permanent Deployment Position

OCA – One-Time Cash Assistance

URPTI – Unified Register of Pre-trial Investigations

Introduction

Research ¹ on the experiences of military partners in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom shows that a partner's service puts families through hardships, and partners live through the personal experience of waiting and uncertainty that comes with military service. Another study ² states that it is difficult for such women to build careers and access healthcare due to the constant need to change their place of residence. That study focused on the experiences of professional military personnel during training and peacekeeping missions.

Ukrainian soldiers and their spouses and partners have a different context. The Russian-Ukrainian war has been going on since 2014. Since the outbreak of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia on February 24, 2022, a new stage of the war began, which engulfed the entire country. As of 2024, approximately 880,000 military members are serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, including approximately 60,000 women³. Given the intensity and scope of the hostilities taking place on the territory of Ukraine, the experience of Ukrainian couples is unique and requires a separate study.

The wives and partners of military members face complex challenges. They have to wait for their closest and most intimate person to return from the war while coping with the level of threat to their lives and living the experience of a long-distance relationship in extreme conditions.

¹ Cramm, H., Norris, D., Tam-Seto, L., Eichler, M., & Smith-Evans, K. (2015). Making military families in Canada a research priority. *Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health*, 1(5), 8–12. doi.org/10.3138/jmvfh.3287.

² Borah, E., & Fina, B. (2017). Military spouses speak up: A qualitative study of military and Veteran spouses' perspectives. *Journal of Family Social Work*, 20(2), 144–161. doi.org/10.1080/10522158.2017.1284702.

³ Гайдук, Ю. (2024, 23 лютого). Яка чисельність ЗСУ у 2024 році: скільки військових перебуває на фронті (за матеріалами пресконференції президента України Володимира Зеленського 23 лютого 2024 року). ФАКТИ [Haiduk, Y. (2024, February 23). What is the number of the Armed Forces in 2024: how many soldiers are at the front (based on the materials of the press conference of the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy on February 23, 2024). FACTS]. akty.com.ua/ua/ukraine/20240223-yaka-chyselnist-zsu-u-2024-roczy-skilky-vijskovyh-perebuvaye-na-fronti/.

The Veteran Hub is a support network for soldiers, veterans, and their loved ones. It was founded in 2017 in cooperation with the Victor Pinchuk Foundation, the Olena Pinchuk Foundation, and the Pobratymy non-governmental organization. The organization provides psychosocial support and develops solutions for the well-being of Ukrainian veterans and their loved ones based on studies and reviews of their experiences. Since the outbreak of the full-scale invasion, most of the clients and a significant part of the Veteran Hub team returned to military service.

To respond to the needs of military members and their families for information and support, the organization launched a Support Line (+380 67 348-28-68). Most of the calls were from partners, wives, and husbands of Ukrainian military members. When soldiers call the hotline, most calls relate to their family's well-being. In Ukraine, there was a lack of knowledge about military families and partners' experience. Wives and husbands themselves faced stigmatization. In 2023, the Veteran Hub conducted the first exploratory research and developed the [Journey of the Warrior's Beloved](#).⁴



The Veteran Hub also researched two critical topics related to the experience of couples and families:

- Returning to Intimate and Sexual Life After Being Wounded⁵ (research [“Sexual Life of Warriors after Wounding”](#))
- Parenting in Times of War⁶ (manual [“Conscious Parenthood During War”](#)).



Our colleagues also conduct research on experiences of relatives and friends of servicemen and women and veterans. The human rights NGO

⁴ Veteran Hub (2023). *The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved*. kohana.veteranhub.com.ua/research_drive.google.com/file/d/1wSwFoA5zSMZ60L2AziXsZpy70uuue1Xi/view.

⁵ Veteran Hub (2023). Resex Project. RESEX. resex.veteranhub.com.ua.

⁶ Veteran Hub (2023). Conscious Parenting in the Wartime. parents.veteranhub.com.ua.

[Legal Hundred](#)⁷ and the [Cedos](#)⁸ think tank conducted a [study of the experiences and needs of families of the missing soldiers](#),⁹ and the Human Rights Center for military members [Pryncyp](#)¹⁰ studied the experience of family members who care for the wounded (policy brief [Behind the Scenes of Care: Veteran's Family and Care Work](#)).¹¹ These studies examined the experiences of soldiers' families and loved ones without singling out their wives or partners.

As of 2024, thanks to the work of researchers, Ukrainian NGOs, charities, and think tanks, we understand the experience of Ukraine's Warriors' Beloved better than ever, but we still don't know enough. Since the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014, military partners, wives and husbands have been staying behind the lines in the country at war. Unfortunately, the full-scale invasion has expanded this experience's geography and numbers. Warriors' beloved assume domestic and security responsibilities in the family, taking on several roles at once: Senior adults in the family, volunteers, and treatment and rehabilitation managers, among many others. They go through every stage of the soldiers' journey alongside them and simultaneously navigate their own – often invisible and unrecognized by others. We began to study this subjective experience during the first scoping study.

The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved is much broader than what we covered in the first study and the new iteration of the research you are reading. On the one hand, the path is walked by many people: More than a million people across the country with different lives, backgrounds and

⁷ The Legal Hundred is an association of lawyers who have been helping the military, veterans and their families since 2014. The organization's mission is to protect human rights in the context of military service and to create legal mechanisms for the reintegration of veterans.

⁸ Cedos is an independent think tank. It conducts research and analysis of public policy and social processes to promote data-driven decision-making and social justice.

⁹ Cedos, Legal Hundred (2024, August 20). *Research on the experiences and needs of families of missing military personnel*. Cedos. cedos.org.ua/researches/doslidzhennya-dosvidu-ta-potreb-rodyn-znyklyh-bezvisty-vijskovyh.

¹⁰ Pryncyp is a non-governmental organization that advocates for the rights of all military personnel and veterans in their interaction with the state.

¹¹ Полек, Т., Носкова, Є., Галан, Л., Яворська, О., Шматко, І., & Пашкіна, А. (2024). Аналітична записка «За лаштунками турботи: близькі ветеранів та доглядова праця». Принцип [Polek, T., Noskova, E., Galan, L., Yavorska, O., Shmatko, I., & Pashkina, A. (2024). Policy Brief "Behind the Scenes of Care: Veteran's Family and Care Work". Pryncyp.] drive.google.com/file/d/1FTEDctcHNnebRorkXJHGlu2ym58XziUI/view.

environments. On the other hand, the Journey contains little control and predictability and the future is fraught with risks and fears. At any moment of the Journey, its trajectory can change depending on the fate of the soldier: Capture, injury, death, disappearance, or completion of service radically change the lives and well-being of loved ones. Such experiences affect a person's mental and physical health and ability to live, work, perform everyday tasks and plan for the future.

Like any relationship, the relationship between a serviceman and his beloved can end for various reasons and circumstances. However, divorce or separation may not mean the immediate end of the Warrior Beloved's Journey. A woman may maintain this identity while gradually completing this stage of her life.

For the second year in a row, we have researched the experience of Warriors' Beloved during the war. Like our respondents, unfortunately, we cannot predict the future. However, what we know the most today is related to their experience during the active service of their husband or partner. With this year's survey, we have also covered the experience of husbands and partners being wounded, captured, missing, and killed. As demobilization during martial law was not regulated by law at the time of publication of the study, we covered only the completion of service for health and family reasons. We assume the experience of war will affect the lives and well-being of loved ones of Ukrainian soldiers long after the war is over, and we are committed to continuing research in the future.

Although since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion, we have been tracking the development of numerous initiatives to support the families of military members and veterans, unfortunately, the warriors' beloved have not received proper recognition and support either at the level of state institutions or in society. Their experiences remain poorly understood. That is why we continue our work to study the context of the lives of veterans and their loved ones, and record their voices and opinions. Understanding the barriers and needs will help us provide high-quality and comprehensive support to people who defend our independence at the cost of their own well-being.

Definitions

A veteran is a person who participated in homeland defense or combat operations in the territory of other states if it is part of Ukraine's international obligations (According to the [Veteran Policy Concept in relation to veterans and their families](#)).¹²

A serviceman or servicewoman (military member) is a person who serves in the Armed Forces of Ukraine or other military formations established in accordance with the law (According to the applicable legislation).¹³

Family are people who live together, are connected by a shared household, and have mutual rights and obligations. Spouses are considered family even if they do not live together for valid reasons.

Spouse of a serviceman or veteran - In this study, a person in an officially registered relationship (marriage) with a military member or veteran.

Partner of a serviceman or veteran - In this study, this is a woman who is in a relationship with a military member or veteran, but it is not officially registered (the couple is not married).

Journeys of Veteran Women and Men¹⁴ [is a map developed by the Veteran Hub to present the experiences and needs of AFO/JFO veteran women and men](#) from the moment they decide to join the service until the end of their lives.

¹² Veteran Hub, Pryncyp, Space of Opportunities, The Legal Hundred, VETERANKA (no date.). The concept of policy towards veterans and their families. Veteran Hub. veteranhub.com.ua/projects/konczepczyia-polityky-shhodo-veteraniv-ta-yihnih-simej/.

¹³ *On Military Duty and Military Service*, Law of Ukraine Number 2232-XII (2023) (Ukraine). zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2232-12#Text.

¹⁴ Veteran Hub (2023). *Journeys of Veteran Women and Men*. veteranhub.com.ua/analytics/doslidzhenya-shlyahu-veteraniv-i-veteranok, drive.google.com/file/d/1gSlkhpMoJHDFNgO6FV0o-y6oA99ieq6a/view.

The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved¹⁵ (in the text, it is referred to as the Journey) is [a map developed by the Veteran Hub to reflect the experiences and needs of wives and partners of military members and veterans](#) of the Russian-Ukrainian War from the moment they decide to join the service.

Well-being is a generalized categorization of human needs. This paper uses the Department of Veterans Affairs of Canada's definition of well-being, which "includes both subjective psychological well-being and objective economic well-being. The model considers a person's subjective and objective well-being in seven areas: Work or other meaningful activity, finances, health, life skills and knowledge, social integration, housing or physical environment, and sociocultural environment."

Acute stress¹⁶ is a reaction to a loss characterized by a feeling of emotional tension and pain, as well as physical manifestations such as exhaustion, suffocation, and physical pain.

Ambiguous loss is a condition when a person is forced to switch between two exhausting experiences: Despair that a loved one has died and hope that he or she is alive.

¹⁵ Veteran Hub (2023). *The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved*. [kohana.veteranhub.com.ua, drive.google.com/file/d/1wSwEoA5zSMZ60L2AziXsZpy70uuue1Xi/view](https://kohana.veteranhub.com.ua/drive.google.com/file/d/1wSwEoA5zSMZ60L2AziXsZpy70uuue1Xi/view).

¹⁶ Kyiv Center for CBT (no date). *Acute grief reaction*. uccbt.com.ua/poslugy/psihoterapija/gostra-reakcziya-gorya/.

Methodology

Purpose

To outline and record the Journey of the Ukrainian Warrior's Beloved. In particular, to explore the experience of living with injury, captivity, missing, death of a partner, husband or wife, divorce or breakup and to deepen understanding of the stages of beginning service, service and transition to civilian life.

Objectives

- To characterize the experience of wives and partners of military members and veterans at different stages of their service and to identify the problems, obstacles and experiences they face.
- Identify stages of the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved who are going through or have gone through the following experiences: Captivity of a partner, husband and wife and his or her release from captivity, disappearance and death.
- Identify the needs of military members' and veterans' wives and partners at all stages of the Journey.
- Identify changes in the experience of wives and partners of servicemen and veterans in a comparative perspective with the first part of the study, "The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved." Determine which everyday life practices are most affected by the third year of the full-scale invasion.
- Develop recommendations regarding relationships between the wives and partners of military members and veterans.

Sampling

When forming the sample, we planned to study different groups: men, women, and people from the LGBTQ+ community. However, due to the

time constraints of the study, the limited number of interviews we could record as part of this research, and the difficulty of recruiting men whose wives and partners are in the military and partners and spouses of people from the LGBTQ+ community who are serving, we decided not to include them in this iteration of the study. From now on, the study will focus only on women: wives and partners who are in heterosexual relationships with male servicemen.

The study's target group is the wives and partners of military members and veterans of the Russian-Ukrainian war: men who stood up to defend Ukraine in 2014 and are currently serving and who joined the Security and Defense Forces of Ukraine at the beginning of the full-scale invasion in 2022.

In this study, we applied non-probability sampling using a convenience sampling strategy.¹⁷

The main selection parameters are the inclusion criteria by which we determined whether to involve female respondents in the study. The main criterion was the respondent's experience. Subsequently, the diversity among the selected participants was ensured by specifying their required characteristics. This is how we achieved maximum variability within the defined target group of the study. The study's authors developed the inclusion criteria in accordance with the purpose of the study to ensure the representation of diverse women's experiences on the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved. In particular, the experience of waiting for a husband or partner, the experience of discharging a husband/partner from military service, the experience of being a wife/partner of a prisoner of war, missing or deceased soldier, the experience of divorce/breakup with a serviceman and veteran.

¹⁷ Lopez, V., & Whitehead, D. (2013). Sampling data and data Collection in qualitative research. *Nursing & Midwifery Research: Methods and Appraisal for Evidence-Based Practice*, 123–140.
www.researchgate.net/publication/255950308_Sampling_data_and_data_collection_in_qualitative_research.

Socio-demographic characteristics of the research audience

We used socio-demographic characteristics as an additional criterion, which allowed us to include women with diverse backgrounds in the sample.

Age. For the study, we engaged female respondents of all ages over 18, who were divided into three groups: 18–30 years old (25 interviews), 30–45 years old (25 interviews), and 45-60+ years old (10 interviews). The youngest participant in the study was 19 years old, and the oldest was 55 years old.

Region of residence. The study involved women from different regions of Ukraine who lived in urban (50 respondents) and rural (10 respondents) areas. We took into account the proximity of their place of residence to the frontline.

Marital status. We needed to include married, single, divorced, and separated women in the sample. In this study, we did not consider the journey of a husband/partner waiting for a wife/partner who is serving. However, this experience is essential and requires a separate study. Our research assumption: The journey of a husband/partner may differ in that a woman's mobilization to the Security and Defense Forces of Ukraine is voluntary. In contrast, a husband/partner may be a veteran and have his military path.

Inclusion criteria:

1. Wives and partners whose husbands or partners are:

- Serving or have served from 2022 to 2024;
- Have been enlisted recently (up to six months ago);
- Discharged from service during 2022-2024 for health reasons;
- Discharged from service during 2022-2024 due to the need to care for a loved one;
- Discharged from service during 2022-2024 because of age;

- Discharged from service during 2022-2024 due to having many children.
2. Wives and partners of fallen soldiers.
 3. Wives and partners of prisoners of war.
 4. Wives and partners of soldiers released from captivity.
 5. Wives and partners waiting for a missing husband/partner.
 6. Wives and partners who divorced/broke off a relationship with a military serviceman or veteran during 2022–2024.

Journey	Inclusion Criteria	Number of interviews
Common path: military service of the husband/partner	Wives and partners whose husbands or partners are serving or have served in the period 2022-2024	11
	Wives and partners whose husbands or partners have been mobilized recently (up to six months)	4
Deaths	Wives and partners of fallen soldiers	7
Captivity	Wives and partners of prisoners of war	11
	Wives and partners of soldiers released from captivity	2
Missing person	Wives and partners waiting for a missing husband/partner	12
Dismissal from service	Wives and partners whose husbands or partners left the service during 2022-2024 for health reasons	6
	Wives and partners whose husbands or partners left the service during 2022-2024 due to the need to care for a loved one	2
	Wives and partners whose husbands or partners resigned from the service during 2022-2024 due to having many children	2

Ending a relationship	Wives and partners who divorced/terminated their relationship with a serviceman or veteran during 2022-2024	3
Total		60 interviews

Research Assumption

We formulated general research assumptions about the well-being of military spouses/partners and veterans and assumptions about each of the Warrior's Beloved pathways we sought to test in the study.

1. General assumptions:

- Wives and partners of servicemen and veterans face difficulties in their professional and social fulfillment. This is due to the uncertainty created by the husband or partner's service, the risks associated with it, and the additional unpaid care work that women have to do.
- Wives and partners of servicemen and veterans believe they are not part of the state's legal framework in matters of their husband's or partner's service. In their opinion, the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved is invisible to the state.
- The needs of servicemen's and veterans' wives and partners depend on their role experience and the stages of their Journey.
- The wives and partners of servicemen and veterans face certain social expectations of their behavior, which change according to different stages of the Journey.

1.1. Journeys of wives and partners whose husbands or partners mobilized since the beginning of 2022:

- Women have had to adapt to the changes in their lives and plan their lives based on the realities of their husbands' or partners' military service.
- Women have acquired the "wife or partner of a serviceman" identity.

- Women's well-being is influenced by the place and position of their husbands or partners in the military structure.

1.2. Experience of wives and partners whose husbands or partners have recently mobilized (up to six months):

- The women are adapting to the changes in their lives. Their experience is similar to that of the wives and partners of servicemen who took the Journey in 2022-2023. Yet, their experience is influenced by the change in public perception of the military and attitudes toward mobilization.

2. Experience "death" (wives and partners of fallen soldiers):

- The death of a husband or partner is not the end of his beloved's Journey. After the loss, women go through the stage of completion of the Journey, which may last for an indefinite period of time.
- A woman continues the Journey by honoring the fallen soldier's memory, sometimes by caring for their children and common property.
- After the death of a loved one, a woman continues to identify herself as the wife or partner of a serviceman.
- Women feel the expectations of society regarding their behavior as wives and partners of fallen soldiers. In particular, others expect them to show grief and sadness.

3. Experience "Captivity"

3.1. Wives and partners of prisoners of war:

- Part of such women's journeys involves communication with their husband's or partner's military command, state authorities, and international organizations regarding his return from captivity.
- The wives and partners of prisoners of war unite in communities because they feel a lack of communication from the state, in particular from the military unit.

- The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved is affected by a long-term lack of contact with their husband or partner.
- Women feel the expectations of society regarding their behavior as wives/partners of prisoners of war. In particular, people around them expect them to be restrained and devoted to their husband/partner.

3.2. Wives/partners of soldiers released from captivity:

- Women go through the transition to their civilian life together with their husbands or partners. It differs from the journey of adaptation after a soldier is wounded.
- Women feel the expectations of society regarding their behavior as wives and partners of soldiers released from captivity. In particular, others expect them to be restrained and devoted to their husband or partner and to show grief.

4. Experience of the “missing” (wives/partners waiting for a missing husband or partner):

- Women live through the experience of ambiguous loss: their feelings fluctuate between the fear that they will not see their loved one again and the hope that he will be returned.
- Women feel the expectations of society regarding their behavior as wives and partners of missing soldiers. In particular, others expect them to be reserved and to show grief.
- Women have to make a choice about the status of their husbands or partners (missing or dead) and recognize their loved ones as dead (accept the loss).

5. Experience “Discharge from Service”

5.1. Wives and partners whose husbands or partners resigned from service during 2022-2024 for health reasons:

- Women continue the Journey and support their loved ones in areas where they may lack state support.

5.2. Wives and partners whose husbands or partners left the service during 2022-2024 due to the need to care for a loved one:

- The care work of wives/partners affects their overall well-being.

5.3. Wives and partners whose husbands or partners resigned from the service during 2022-2024 due to having many children:

- Women can influence the choice of their husbands or partners to stay in the military or to leave the service.

6. Experience “Ending the Relationship”

6.1. Wives/partners who divorced/broke off a relationship with a serviceman or veteran during 2022-2024:

- Women who do not have children with a serviceman or veteran complete the Journey.
- The experience that women have had while completing the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved affects their well-being for some time.
- Women feel judged by society, in particular, for their choice to divorce/break off a relationship with a serviceman or veteran.

Study Methods

Since this study focused on examining the experiences of wives and partners of servicemen and veterans, we chose **a qualitative method**. It is the qualitative method that allows us to study the subjective experience and feelings of socio-historical processes and certain stages of a person's life.¹⁸ Thanks to this method, we were able to analyze in more detail the opinions, perceptions and experiences women go through during the service of their husbands and partners and after their discharge. In particular, this approach made it possible to detail the

¹⁸ Бондар, В. (2000). Методологічні особливості якісних методів. *Наукові записки НаУКМА. Соціологічні науки* [Bondar, V. (2000). Methodological specifics of qualitative methods. Scientific notes of NaUKMA. Sociological sciences], 18, 31–34.
ekmair.ukma.edu.ua/server/api/core/bitstreams/275843e1-ce30-402b-9693-495743716638/content.

Journey of the Warrior's Beloved and emphasize the multiplicity of women's experiences.

We used **the method of semi-structured in-depth interviews** for the study. **This method allows us to follow not only the developed guide but also to change the questions according to the experience of the research participants and ask clarifying questions.**¹⁹ Also, in the course of the research, we adjusted and improved additional questions of the guide based on the information received from the respondents to obtain more meaningful and relevant information.

Recruiting Respondents

We recruited female respondents through the Veteran Hub's social media and using the snowball method. We engaged specialized civil society organizations to recruit hard-to-reach groups of female respondents. In particular, organizations and associations of wives and partners of prisoners of war and missing soldiers, and the NGO [Media Initiative for Human Rights \(MIHR\)](#).²⁰ The group of “wives and partners of servicemen discharged from service due to age” was the most difficult to reach. We assume that such women are not actively present in our recruitment channels, and no separate organizations have been established to work with them.

Data Analysis

We used the grounded theory method to analyze the data. **Grounded theory** is a research method that uses a systematic series of data analysis procedures to derive a sound theory of a particular

¹⁹ Прохорова, А. (2017). Методологічні особливості дослідження особистих свідчень учасників Майдану 2013-2014 років методом напівструктурованого інтерв'ю. *Наукові записки НаУКМА. Соціологічні науки* [Prokhorova, A. (2017). Methodological specifics of the study of personal testimonies of Maidan participants of 2013-2014 using the method of semi-structured interview. *Scientific notes of NaUKMA. Sociological Studies*], 196, 32–37. ekmair.ukma.edu.ua/server/api/core/bitstreams/645bcd21-808e-4086-9da2-a7357e13398f/content.

²⁰ The Media Initiative for Human Rights (MIHR) is a media team the aim of which is to promote change in foreign and domestic policy to integrate Ukraine into the free world. The main activities of MIHR are as follows: investigating war crimes committed in connection with the Russian aggression, including detention of prisoners of war. In addition, the MIHR advocates for policy changes to ensure human rights and freedoms.

phenomenon. It is characterized by sensitivity to the data during analysis, which was necessary for our study.²¹ Since we studied the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved, which is still ongoing and constantly changing, using this method allowed us to be flexible in the data analysis process.

We performed open data coding and thematic analysis. The research team used the MAXQDA program for coding. Three researchers coded the interviews to avoid bias in the analysis phase. We analyzed the collected data using analytical induction, which involves data classification, clustering, and analytical generalizations.

Based on the data obtained, we updated the concept of the Journey and generated an analytical report.

Study Limitations

The study is not representative and does not aim to generalize the experience of individual women to all wives and partners of servicemen and veterans.

The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved is still evolving and may change. We highlighted those elements of the Journey that were emotionally intense for the respondents. However, we were aware that we were recording a dynamic experience constantly influenced by the background of war.

We did not study in detail the experience of wives and partners whose husbands or partners were injured in combat, as it requires a separate in-depth study.

²¹ Дембіцький, С. (2010). «Обґрунтована теорія»: стратегія збирання та аналізу якісних даних за теоретичної валідації. *Соціологія: теорія, методи, маркетинг* [Dembitsky, S. (2010). "Grounded theory": a strategy for collecting and analyzing qualitative data for theoretical validation. *Sociology: Theory, Methods, Marketing.*], 2, 64–83. nbuv.gov.ua/UJRN/stmm_2010_2_6.



However, we used the data on the experience of caring for the wounded collected in the study [Behind the Scenes of Care: Veteran's Family and Care Work](#)²² conducted by the Human Rights Center for the military [Pryncyp](#).

This study presents only the experiences of women in heterosexual relationships during service and transition to civilian life. We believe that the experiences of men whose partners or wives serve in the military during the war, the experiences of families with both men and women in the military, and the experiences of LGBTQ+ families have significant differences and require separate studies. Therefore, in the text of this study, we do not use gender-sensitive language but explicitly state that this is women's experience.

This study focused on the Pre-Service, Service, and Transition stages. We could not analyze the "Civilian Life" stage, as the study's audience has not yet moved to this stage due to the ongoing active phase of the war. Also, our research assumption is that the Transition stage may take longer in active hostilities. It is also important to note that we studied the end of service experience only through the lens of discharge for health and family reasons.

We believe that the place of service, the type of military service, and the rank of the soldiers may influence their loved ones' experiences. However, this study could not consider this criterion due to time constraints and limitations on the number of interviews.

Since we were interested in the period of the respondents' lives, which could last more than two years (and sometimes more than ten years), some of the testimonies were retrospective. This could affect the accuracy and objectivity of the information we received from respondents.

²² Полек, Т., Носкова, Є., Галан, Л., Яворська, О., Шматко, І., & Пашкіна, А. (2024). Аналітична записка «За лаштунками турботи: Огляд міжнародного досвіду програм підтримки та ситуації в Україні близькі ветеранів та доглядова праця». Принцип [Polek, T., Noskova, E., Galan, L., Yavorska, O., Shmatko, I., & Pashkina, A. (2024). Policy brief "Behind the scenes of care: veteran's family and care work". Pryncyp]. drive.google.com/file/d/1FTEDctcHNnebRorkXJHGlu2ym58XzjUI/view.

The project team included wives, partners, and other family members of military personnel, as well as researchers who did not have military members in their families. This could have indirectly affected the study results, as it could lead to team bias. Yet, similar experiences allowed for a deeper understanding of the respondents' stories, which was an advantage at the stage of methodology development and data analysis. To overcome this limitation, we used the triangulation method at the data collection and analysis stages: interviews were recorded and coded by researchers with different backgrounds.

Ethical Principles

Due to the sensitivity of the research topic for both the respondents and the research team, we developed ethical guidelines to protect everyone involved.

- 1. All interviewers signed a non-disclosure agreement.**
- 2. We have anonymized all quotes** to prevent the respondent identification.
- 3. All interviewers were trained** on the methodology and ethical principles of conducting in-depth interviews, first psychological aid, storage of personal data, and the Veteran Hub Code. We also chose interviewers who had experience with sensitive interviews and interviews related to veteran issues.
- 4. A limited number of the research team had access to personal data.** Interviewers did not have access to this information.
- 5. Interviews took place only after signing an informed consent** to participate in the study and to process personal data.
- 6. We informed all respondents** about the principle of personal data protection, the purpose of the study, and the possibility of refusing to participate at any time or to answer questions.

7. **The respondents could stop the interview** and withdraw from the study by June 10. They could also skip questions that they felt uncomfortable answering.
8. **We allowed the respondents to receive psychological support if they needed it. First, they could receive psychological support from a trained interviewer** and seek free support through the contacts provided in the information sheet.
9. **The in-depth interviews were conducted in the Veteran Hub spaces,** following security protocols, or online, following instructions.

Results

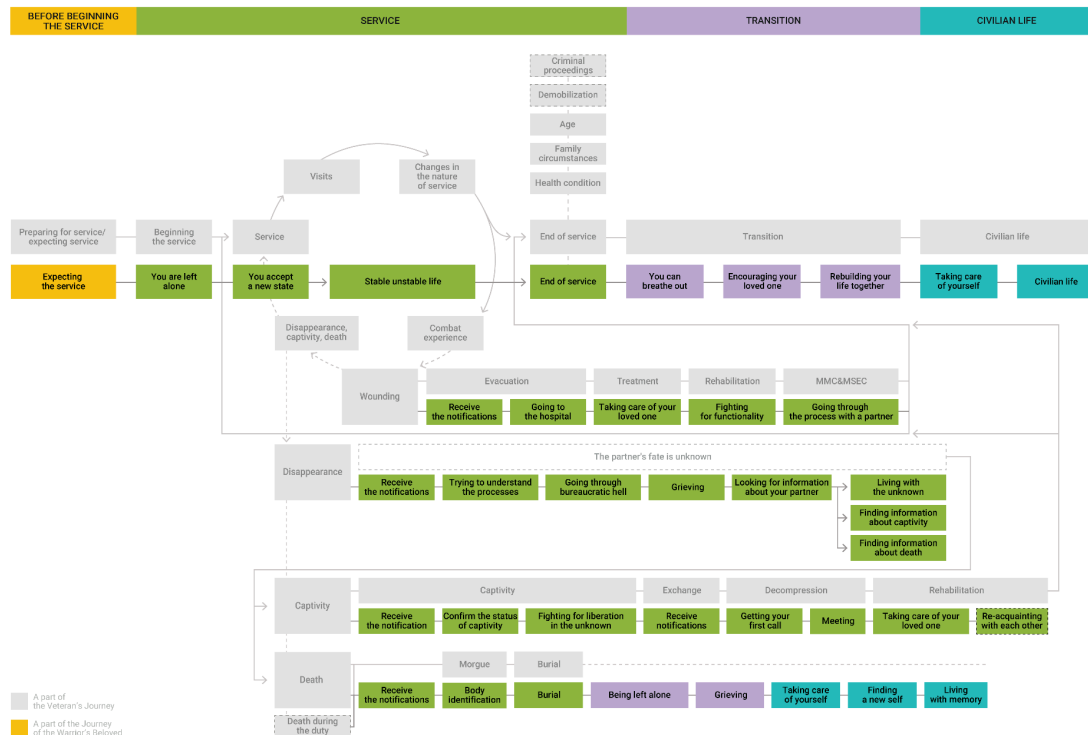


Figure 1. The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved
[\(link to the image in large size\)](#)

The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved begins with the partner's decision to join the military or with the beginning of a relationship with a soldier or veteran. The results of this analysis are our authors' attempt to summarize the experience of partners of military personnel.

The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved consists of **stages**, which we have broken down into different **parts**. The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved may have other branches, and the war is currently affecting the emergence of these branches.

We have identified **three main stages of the Journey**:



In this study, we look retrospectively at an ongoing process, so we realize that the Journey may change. Some stages of the Journey have yet to occur, and we cannot record and study them.

At the same time, we sought to deepen our understanding of the Journey and analyze how the experience of being a wife/partner of a serviceman and veteran affects a woman's overall well-being. This time, we reached previously untapped audiences:

1. Wives/partners who have lost their spouse/partner.
2. Wives/partners waiting for their husband/partner from captivity.
3. Wives/partners whose husband/partner returned from captivity.
4. Wives/partners waiting for a missing spouse/partner.
5. Wives/partners who have divorced/broken off relations with military servicemen/veterans.

Having studied the stories of the respondents who had experienced their loved one's **injury, death, disappearance, or captivity**, we decided to highlight these parts of the Journey, as they can profoundly impact the life of the warrior's beloved. In this study, we have highlighted the following experiences:

Experience “Wounding”

Experience “Death”

Experience “Disappearance”

Experience “Captivity”

Experience “Liberation from Captivity”

War is the backdrop to all events on the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved. These events, in turn, shape the experience of being a wife or partner of a soldier or veteran. Women overcome challenges related to their husband's or partner's service. Yet, they live through other difficult experiences that war brings. They have to live under the constant threat of shelling, look for a new place to live in case of occupation or the front line approaching their home, and face the loss of a loved one as a result of hostilities.

Yet, it was essential for us to explore the roles that the wife or partner of a serviceman or veteran has to fulfill. In the previous iteration of the [Journey of the Warrior's Beloved](#), we identified six roles: "beloved," "main adult," "economic stability," "family manager," "post-wounding caregiver," and "guide in civilian life."²³

In this study, we emphasized that at different stages of the Journey, women can fulfill the following role functions:

- **The role of a caregiver** at the early stage after a soldier returns from service;
- **The role of a searcher** when a loved one goes missing;
- **The role of a lawyer** who fights for the release of a loved one from captivity;
- **The role of support** for other family members (providing them with psychological and financial support and ensuring their well-being in general);
- **The role of an activist** (a woman joins efforts with other wives and partners of military personnel with similar experiences, creates public organizations, attends rallies to support prisoners of war, etc.)

We noticed that some of the roles are interconnected and have similar responsibilities. In particular, the role of "support" contains the functions of caring for a spouse or partner and other family members, which is inherent in the "main adult" role, and the functions of responsibility for the well-being of the family, which was inherent in the "economic stability" and "family manager" roles.

We conducted the first iteration of the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved study in 2023, covering the experience of living through the full-scale war in 2022 when Ukrainians did not think it would last long. During this study, in the third year of full-scale hostilities, public opinion about the

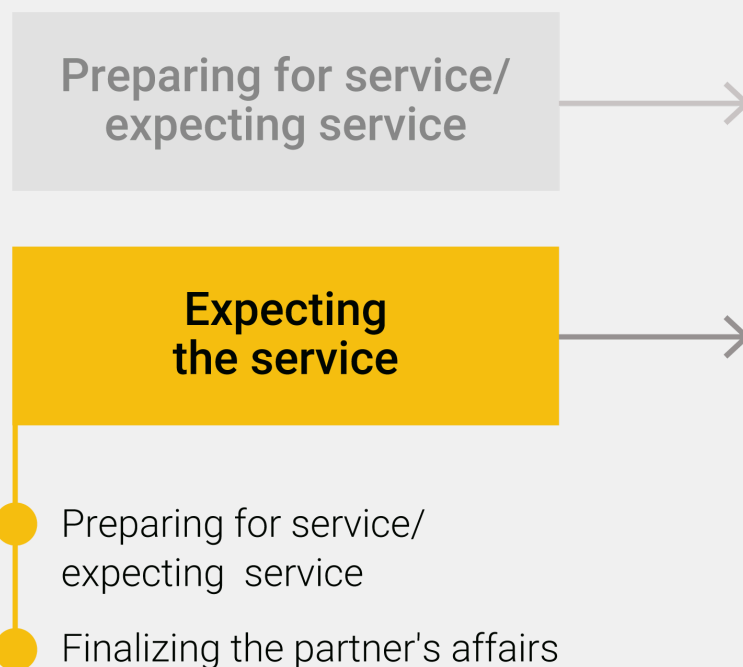
²³ Veteran Hub (2023). *The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved*. 73. drive.google.com/file/d/1wSwEoA5zSMZ60L2AziXsZpy70uuue1Xi/view.




situation and the future became polarized²⁴. For many, the issue of military service, justice, and personal contribution to Ukraine's victory became acute. The law on mobilization has exacerbated this public debate even more.

Warriors' beloved who continued to support their husbands or partners all this time said that they did not feel the necessary support from society and the state, and their efforts remained invisible and unrecognized. With this work, we aim to help every warrior's beloved to be seen and heard.

²⁴ Злобіна, О. (2023). Психоемоційний стан населення на тлі війни: від мобілізації ресурсів до поляризації оцінок. *Українське суспільство в умовах війни. Рік 2023* [Zlobina, O. (2023). The psycho-emotional state of the population in the wartime: from resource mobilization to polarization of opinions. *Ukrainian society in the conditions of war. Year 2023*], 177–208. isnasu.org.ua/assets/files/books/2023/Maket_Ukr_suspilstvo_2023.pdf.

Before the Service



-  A part of
the Veteran's Journey
-  A part of the Journey
of the Warrior's Beloved
-  Important processes
and points

Expecting the Service

The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved begins with the decision of her husband or partner to join the military or initiation of a relationship with a serviceman or veteran. In the first iteration of the study, we analyzed different stories at the beginning of the Journey. Currently, there are the following groups of men in the country:

- Soldiers who are serving for the first time and mobilized recently since the outbreak of the full-scale invasion;
- Men who are awaiting mobilization;
- Soldiers for whom this is not their first military service experience - such as men who gained combat experience during the ATO/JFO or career military.

The field phase of the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved study began in May 2024, shortly after the new mobilization law was adopted.²⁵ During this period, many Ukrainian women who had a husband/partner of conscription age experienced contradictions and anxiety. The public discussion about conscription created a sense of inevitability, so most families could not avoid discussing this event. Yet, the mobilization moment could be a relief for women, as it was a certainty. It is a point of no return, but it is clear: my husband/partner will serve.

Considering the needs and feelings of wives and partners at the beginning of this Journey, the difference in women's experiences is worth noting. Loved ones who lived through their husband/partner's mobilization and service from 2014-2022 were aware of what was coming next. They said that the second experience was "easier" for them.

"I was going through this process before the full-scale invasion. And I think it's easier for me now. My husband was demobilized a week

²⁵Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (2024). The Law of Ukraine "On Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of Ukraine on Certain Issues of Military Service, Mobilization and Military Registration" Number 3633-IX. zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/3633-IX#Text.

ago, and we are on our way back. This is his third demobilization in general.” – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 40 years old.

Women who did not live with soldiers before the outbreak of full-scale war but met them later and fell in love with veterans might not be ready for their mobilization. They hoped their husband/partner would not serve a second time, not understanding the [Journeys of the Veteran Women and Men](#) and their loved one’s readiness to return to the army.

*“I married a veteran, a man with a disability. I used to joke with him that his personal war had already ended by then. But now I realize, as of 2024, that there are no former military men. **At the time of 2022, I was not ready for this.**” – Partner of a soldier who retired from service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 40 years old.*

Anxiety caused by the risk of declassification of the serviceman's personal data adds to the level of stress that spouses or couples are experiencing. This represents the risk for the entire family.

“I had to evacuate because my husband is in all Russian databases. His family is the only leverage that could be used to blackmail him. That's why he insisted that I leave Ukraine at least temporarily. And that's what I did.” – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 40 years old.

“Yet, I was relieved. And it was such a relief because the worst had finally happened. We can calm down because he has already been enlisted.” – Partner of a recently mobilized soldier, 31 years old.

The Veteran Hub observed that the exclusion of the demobilization clause from the law on mobilization caused a lot of anxiety and

misunderstanding among the families of military members. Meanwhile, our organization has not witnessed any targeted communication by government agencies aimed at wives, partners and other family members of military personnel.

Waiting for a husband or partner to start serving in a full-scale war is an anxious process for women. However, discussing major issues related to mobilization in the family can reduce anxiety and help women better adapt to their loved one's service. In this study, we focused on the experiences of women who are waiting for their husband or partner to be mobilized to understand whether this affects their future Journey.

We cannot state for sure, but in the current Ukrainian situation, almost every woman who has a loved one of conscription age during active combat operations, as long as mobilization is ongoing, has the prospect of becoming a soldier's beloved. This path begins with realizing and accepting such a decision by her husband or partner. It can be a voluntary decision, combined with the phrase "I'm going to serve", or receiving and accepting a draft notice to join the Security and Defense Forces.

When it comes to mobilization, women often experience internal conflict. On the one hand, they understand that Ukraine needs protection and that it is the constitutional duty of their husband/partner to defend their country. On the other hand, they feel fear for the life of their loved one and anxiety about their future without him by their side.

"I would like my husband to be at home. After all, I need male support. [...] But on the other hand, I understood that he had to go. Someone has to go. Someone has to go." – Partner of a recently mobilized soldier, 49 years old.

"I tried to talk him out of it because it was very hard for me. But in fact, I think it was the right thing to do, he did the right thing." – Partner of a recently mobilized soldier, 31 years old.

Because of such fears, women may avoid thinking about their husbands/partners' potential service or discourage them from joining the military.

*"I realized what I was doing. **And how many times did I say: "Don't transfer to this brigade. I have many friends in the military, and I wanted [him to go] to a better place.** [And he said: "I'm not going anywhere without my guys. If I'm going, I'm going with them". He also said: "If people like me don't fight, who will?" I respect him a lot for this principle." – Partner of a missing soldier, 26 years old.*

Anxiety about a spouse or partner's potential service may depend on many factors. In particular, the degree of autonomy of partners in a couple. In the first iteration of this study, we [wrote](#) that it is usually the husband who makes a decision to serve.²⁶ In this case, the wife or partner has to accept and come to terms with it. It is easier for a woman to accept this opinion when the couple's relationship is generally based on respect for each other's choices (partnership model of relationships). For example, one of the respondents said that she did not try to stop her loved one from joining the Ukrainian Security and Defense Forces because she respected his decision:

*"I could not stop him and did not try to. **He wanted it. It was his decision.**" – Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 36 years old.*

A woman's inner struggle can manifest itself in different forms. This complex psychological phenomenon arises at the moment of her beloved's decision to join the army and develops during and after the husband/partner's service. It includes emotional conflicts, a sense of duty, and role strain – all of which we [considered](#) in the first iteration of the study "Journey of the Warrior's Beloved."²⁷ However, in this report, we

²⁶ Veteran Hub (2023). The Study "The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved." 35. drive.google.com/file/d/1wSwEoA5zSMZ60L2AziXsZpy70uuue1Xi/view.

²⁷ Veteran Hub (2023). The Study "The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved." 35. drive.google.com/file/d/1wSwEoA5zSMZ60L2AziXsZpy70uuue1Xi/view.

refer to this concept again because the internal struggle largely depends on external factors, in particular:

1. **Social support of the spouse/partner** (general support for the military, respect for them);
2. **Social support for the family** (whether the community understands how to avoid traumatizing military families, support them, and respond to their needs).

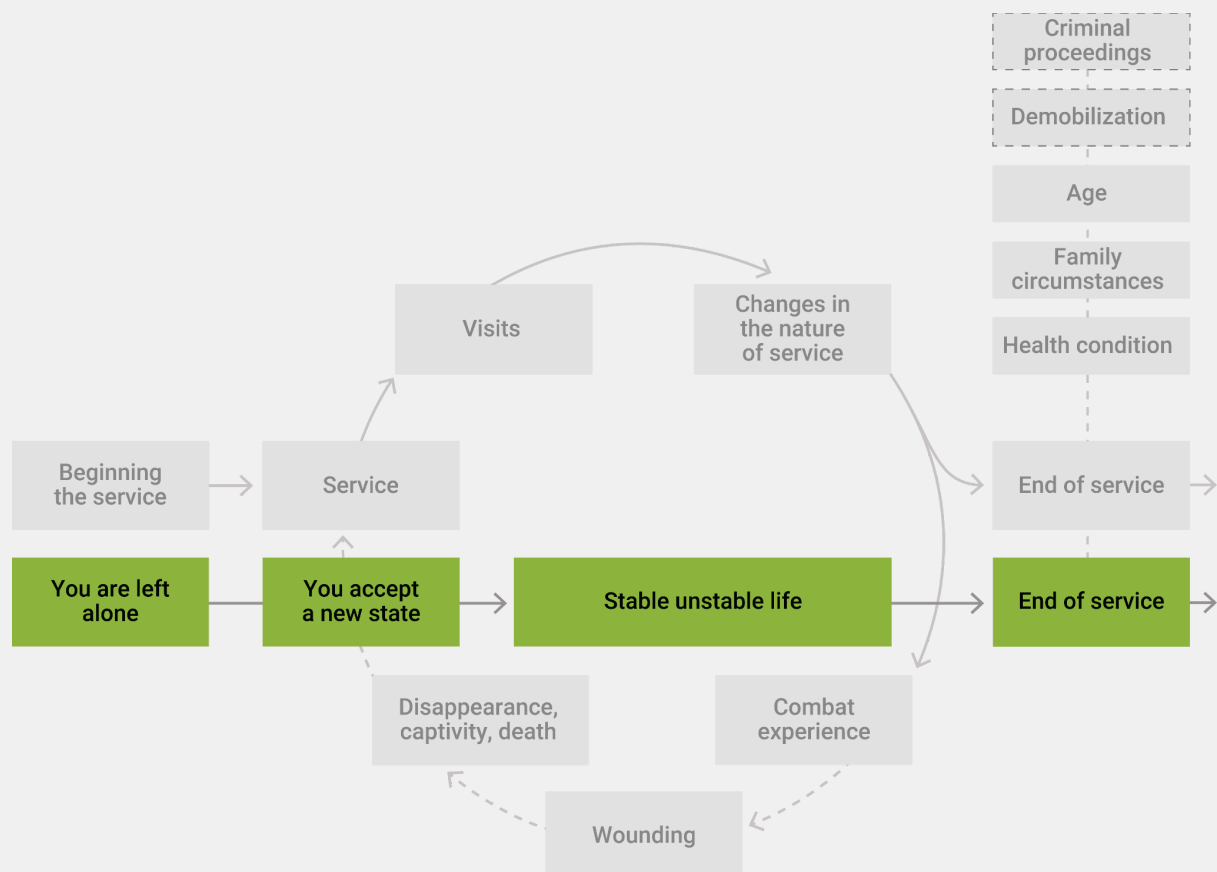
Conclusions: Before the Service

The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved begins with her husband's or partner's decision to voluntarily join or accept a draft notice and be enlisted in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. At this stage, the wife/partner goes through her path of adaptation and acceptance of new reality.

After the spouse or partner voluntarily joins the army or receives a draft notice, the partners prepare for the beginning of service. The time given for this preparation is not clearly defined. Partners mobilized in early 2022 had little time to prepare for service, while partners mobilized recently had sufficient time to finalize their affairs before starting service. However, the amount of time is unclear and depends on different circumstances, so each partner has different options.

Service

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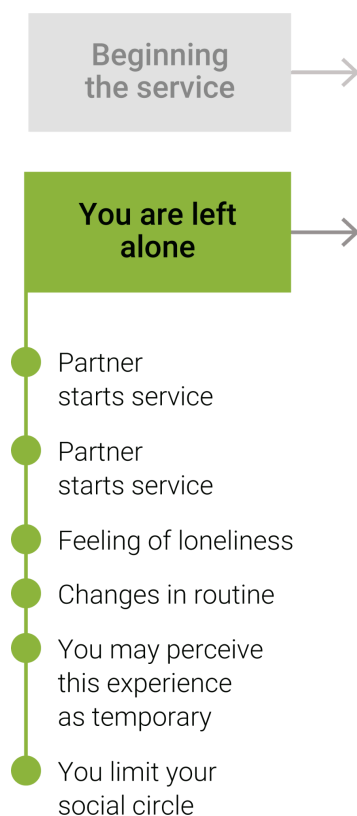


- A part of the Veteran's Journey
- A part of the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved
- Important processes and points

The “Service” stage begins with a spouse or partner's deployment, consists of several parts, and may include separate experiences. During this stage, wives and partners experience the first service-related separation, learn to support their loved ones, and adapt to new living conditions.

You Are Left Alone

After the beginning of service, the lives of the warriors’ beloved change dramatically. With the start of military training, they are left alone and begin their Journey. Little do they know and understand what awaits them at this stage. This period is emotionally charged and can last several weeks or months after the husband or partner starts serving. During the first service-related separation, a woman realizes that her life has changed, experiences stress, may withdraw from her usual social circle, and is sensitive to questions from others about her loved one's mobilization.



***"In the early days, it was tough.** Because there are traditions that have been there from day to day, the schedule of who gets up when, and traditionally I would get up earlier, make two cups of coffee, bring it to him, and wake him up. And these are the first days when you realize that you are brewing two cups of coffee on the machine, and then you consciously brew two cups for yourself and your husband, because you don't want to accept it. And then acceptance came: don't waste resources because coffee is expensive, so what's the point? That's enough. Pull yourself together." - Partner of a recently mobilized soldier, 42 years old.*

It is also a transformational period for many warriors' wives/partners. Now, they have to learn to cope with all the responsibilities previously divided between the two. For example, the study participants mentioned cooking, grocery shopping, raising children, cleaning, repairing, and maintaining the car.

One characteristic of this stage is the denial of the husband/partner's absence in the long term. Women may perceive this state of affairs as a temporary phenomenon. This can manifest in the refusal to get help from others with household chores, even if needed.

***"The realization that you are alone** and have no one to rely on, that you have to do it, that it is yours, that you have no rear to back you up. Although, well, it's not totally like that. You have your friends. There are no questions, but you realize that you don't want to interfere with this process, to involve anyone in this process. **No. I had one answer: "When you come home, you will do it. You have to do it, not someone else in our apartment. You have to do it."** - Partner of a recently mobilized soldier, 38 years old.*

Also, temporality can manifest itself in everyday aspects and through identity. The respondents said they continued perceiving their

husband/partner as a civilian. Accordingly, they also did not perceive themselves as a wife/partner of a soldier.

*"First of all, I consider my husband to be my husband, and the fact that he is **a military man** (temporarily) is just that. It's just a temporary thing. **I even told him that real life is here, and he is just there temporarily.**" - Partner of a recently mobilized soldier, 49 years old.*

"Being Left Alone" Well-Being

Physical and Mental Health

Wives and partners can continue to do the routine things they used to do with their loved ones alone, such as watching a favorite movie or walking along "their" routes. Recreating joint rituals, albeit alone, helps them calm down.

The first stage of integration into the role of a woman waiting for her beloved to return from service is accompanied by insomnia or dreams about her husband/partner. Frequent dreams and morning anxiety are signs of constant stress. The respondents also said that they experienced panic attacks, mood swings, and apathy during this period.

***"There was a period of crazy panic attacks. Just panic attacks with the realization that you have to run somewhere, do something, and you don't know what, where, what to do, and how. It was difficult."** - Partner of a recently mobilized soldier, 38 years old.*

These states are characteristic of the beginning of the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved. They precede a woman's adaptation to new conditions. The duration of these states is individual, as is the duration of each stage of the Journey.

Relationship and Recognition

For women, adaptation to the new role of the warrior's beloved may result in a significant change in their social circle. They may change their attitude towards society in general and towards certain people in particular. We will list a few strategies of our respondents during this adaptation:

- **Alienation**

Women withdraw, consciously or unconsciously, from those who do not understand them, do not provide them with the necessary support, or ask uncomfortable questions (even from relatives, friends, and other close people). This may be a defense mechanism to cope with additional stress, but it can also lead to a sense of isolation.

***"I did not receive support from my mother and sister. I didn't get the support I needed."** - Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 27 years old.*

*"I always have someone else in the army [for support] because **civilian reassurance does not work**. When a civilian says: "Calm down, everything will be fine," I usually want to spit in their eyes. Because [you want to say]: "What do you know about it? How can you tell me now that everything will be fine?" - Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 36 years old.*

- **Limiting the Circle of Communication**

Servicemen's wives and partners often share their feelings only with those who understand their values and have similar experiences. They mostly communicate with other women whose husbands or partners are serving. This creates a narrow but strong circle of support where everyone can talk about their experiences and find understanding. They also prefer talking to their husbands or partners or psychotherapists.

Some women are reluctant to open their feelings to friends, believing that not everyone can understand them.

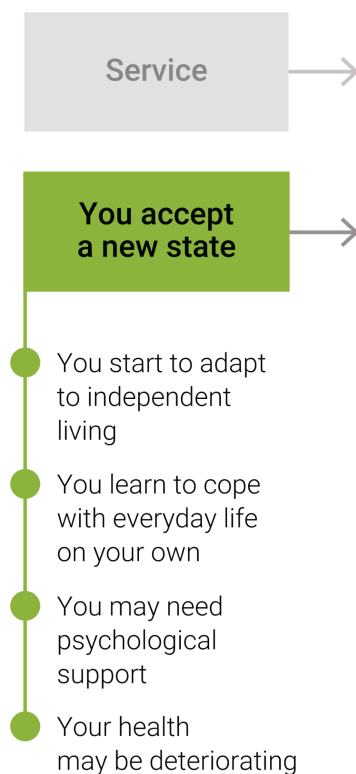
*"When my friend discovered that my husband was a soldier, she even closed up slightly. I said: "It's okay". She and I did not have the same perception of certain social processes, for example. **I realized this could divide us in our friendship.**" - Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 30 years old.*

Women have a tough time dealing with the experience of the first separation with an uncertain future, which is brought about by the service of their husband or partner. They continue to cope with all household chores independently and perceive this period as temporary.

Accepting a New State

At some point, the realization comes that this experience can be a part of life for a long time. A woman begins to change her life routine and looks for ways to maintain her health.

Another characteristic feature of this period is that wives and partners could reduce the number of household duties as they realized that they had to cope with everything independently.



*"I've **changed my attitude to household chores** a bit. Before, it was important to me that the apartment was clean, but **now it's important that I am more or less okay**. And if I don't vacuum it today, nothing bad will happen in a week. No one has ever died from an unvacuumed carpet." - Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 36 years old.*

Women's experience of doing household chores unassisted also depends on their place of residence. Wives and partners in private

homes had more domestic difficulties than those in apartment buildings. They had to take additional care of the adjacent territory, household, or garden.

*"At the beginning, it was like this: everything was on me: "You see what you are like, you hid from me in the Armed Forces, you ran away, **you serve, and I'm here alone with everything.** What am I supposed to do? Now I have a sowing season. It's spring 2022. Will you at least come back for the harvest?" He said: "I don't know. You have to plan for yourself." I was killing myself in that garden, in the village. **Then in 2023, I decided not to plant any garden.**" - Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 58 years old.*

"Accepting a New State" Well-Being

Mental Health

An American study conducted back in 2011²⁸ found that every eighth woman who was a partner of a military member had experienced at least one major depressive episode, and every sixth woman had experienced anxiety. At the time, their rates were higher than those of other categories of the American population but almost the same as those of the military. Despite this, the families of military personnel received much less attention in terms of preserving and maintaining mental and physical health than the soldiers themselves. Given the Ukrainian realities, we should note the double impact on the mental state of a military spouse/partner: the general impact of war on civilian life (anxiety, rocket attacks, or "Shaheeds" attacks) and the impact of the service of a loved one. Our interviews showed that the stress experienced by women has a significant effect on their physical health, particularly in the presence of chronic diseases.

²⁸ Verdelli, H., Baily, C., Vousoura, E., Belser, A., Singla, D., & Manos, G. (2011). The case for treating depression in military spouse. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 25(4), 488–496. doi.org/10.1037/a0024525.

*"In winter, there was total apathy. It was just horrible. I was sick then. I had a sore throat, cough, and fever. **I attribute this to my moral and psychological state.**" – Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 30 years old.*

Deterioration of health does not become a motivating factor for seeking mental health care, as we [said](#) in the previous study.²⁹ On the one hand, military wives/partners are more focused on the well-being and health of their loved ones. When there is a danger to the life and health of their husband/partner, they often change their priorities, neglecting their own needs. This leads to increased anxiety and stress. On the other hand, women do not have enough time to take care of themselves. They understand that they need medical advice, but because of their workload (caring for family members, including their husband/partner, and work), they put it off as a non-urgent matter.

As we have already said, servicemen's wives/partners are in a state of constant anxiety and fear for the lives of their loved ones. These feelings are exacerbated when a soldier is in combat positions, especially when there is no communication with him. One strategy to overcome these feelings is to convince yourself that nothing will happen to your loved one.

***"I was sure that people like [name] don't die. He was a sergeant who held two officer positions. He was a commander, a leader."** – Partner of a fallen soldier, 37 years old.*

The death, injury, capture, or disappearance of a loved one cannot be predicted or controlled. Statistically, the majority of soldiers in modern wars and armed conflicts survive. However, every woman

²⁹ Veteran Hub (2023). The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved. 53.
drive.google.com/file/d/1wSwEoA5zSMZ60L2AziXsZpy70uuue1Xi/view.

lives with a risk that affects her life and well-being during the service of her husband or partner.

Not all soldiers are ready to talk openly about their possible death. Not everyone makes a will and shares their wishes regarding burial with their loved ones, and legal issues in this case. Yet, spouses/couples can cautiously touch on this topic, talking about dangerous circumstances and death as a potential outcome.

"There were such phrases: "You realize that the chances of not returning from here are very high. You have to be strong". There was no specific conversation about what I would do if he died. But it was in the air." – Partner of a fallen soldier, 37 years old.

The fluctuations in the psycho-emotional state of military wives/partners are similar to a circle of worry and anxiety. Emotional swings significantly impact physical well-being, causing fatigue, lack of activity, and other adverse physical symptoms. Another reason for emotional swings is women's attachment to the well-being of their loved ones and the fact that their mood often depends on the mood and condition of their husband/partner.

At the beginning of the service, women try to control every aspect of their lives and the lives of their husbands/partners to reduce anxiety. This leads to constant stress, tension, and even more exhaustion. As a result, the woman feels apathetic and unable to perform daily tasks.

Physical Health

Nervous overload affects the appearance (from gray hair to eczema), changing a woman's self-perception.

*"Well, I have this **eczema**. I don't know. It's a thing that can appear for any reason." – Partner of a soldier serving between 2022 and 2024,*

27 years old.

The respondents said that they did not have enough support to find time to see the doctor and get checked. This applies mainly to those who are raising children and cannot leave them with anyone, as well as to IDP women who have to adapt and build a life in a new place.

*"I don't feel like I'm putting it off, but **unfortunately, I don't have the time and opportunity to do it right now.**" – Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 36 years old.*

Yet, the responsibilities and duties assigned to a wife/partner during her husband's service can motivate her to stay healthy. Realizing that the well-being of family members depends on her physical and emotional capacity (to support others), women feel motivated to keep in a resourceful state. In particular, this applies to those who are raising children in the absence of a father.

*"I am very motivated because **I am the only one with my children. If something happens to me, who will take care of them?**" – Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 36 years old.*

Another motivating factor for maintaining health and visiting healthcare establishments, including preventive examinations, is the fear of developing severe illnesses due to nervousness.

"I am terrified of cancer. Because, for example, a girl in our self-help group found out that she had breast cancer during the war." – Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 36 years old.

Material Needs and Security

The financial situation of soldiers' beloved and their families depends on many factors. In particular, it depends on the family's income before the husband or partner's service, the wife or partner's income, and the woman's ability to continue working after her loved one's mobilization. Some respondents shared that they felt anxious about their financial situation. Financial instability can be a particular concern for women who:

- Are on maternity leave and are unable to support their families fully;
- Have irregular earnings;
- Are looking for a job.

*"Before he started his service, we had a better financial situation because he worked and I worked. We had enough. When he quitted his job and started serving... they didn't pay him combat pay yet. **He is still in training there, so they paid him 20 thousand, but they saved that money and bought all sorts of things for their FPV [drones]. And I've already gone on maternity leave, stopped working, and I am worried about my financial situation.**" – Partner of a recently mobilized soldier, 26.*

In addition, the women we talked to during our study said that their husbands or partners had to spend their salaries on renting housing in the combat zone, car repairs, and other things related to the service.

Women may also face difficulties in budgeting. In particular, the respondents said they were not used to planning expenses and initially felt they were going beyond the budget. Dangerous conditions of service of a husband or partner and the general context of war can increase the anxiety of a soldier's beloved for the financial well-being of the family.

More often than not, warriors' beloved continue to work: some to maintain a minimum quality of life, others to achieve the desired level of well-being.

Some companies provide benefits and allowances for mobilized employees. However, these benefits are not always available to military families if they do not work for them.

*"My company generally supports employees if they are mobilized. The company keeps 100% of their salaries. We have a special fund that helps cover the needs of the employees who are now in the army. **But for wives and relatives, if my husband is not an employee of my company, there is no support.**" – Partner of a recently mobilized soldier, 31 years old.*

Relationships and Recognition

For all the study participants, this stage is characterized by narrowing the social circle. Difficulties in communication can arise with relatives (parents, sisters, and other relatives) and with friends. The respondents mentioned that they might have stopped communicating with friends because they asked inappropriate questions.

Sometimes, wives and partners of servicemen have to take care of other family members who become vulnerable due to their loved one's deployment. In this case, women generally support their moral and psychological state and well-being. For this reason, staying under the same roof with relatives often does not make the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved easier but only expands the area of responsibility.

Some respondents shared that the best option for them is not to emphasize the status of a military spouse/partner.

***"It's better not to mention it.** Not to escalate the situation. They won't support me because they don't understand it all. I do not need financial support from them. I just want them to remain human." – Partner of a recently mobilized soldier, 49 years old.*

According to the respondents, such attention may be traumatizing when there is no proper support.

Housing and Public Environment

The experience of soldiers' wives/partners who are IDPs and live in rented housing differs from the experience of women who live in their own homes. The lack of a place, familiar people and the need to adapt to life in a new community can destabilize women's psycho-emotional state. The respondents noted that their valuable belongings that simplified everyday life or hobby supplies could have been left at home.

Being far away from home and a familiar environment is an additional factor of uncertainty, compounded by the absence of a loved one.

*"I feel like I'm in limbo. I constantly realize that I am not living in my own home. **I am waiting for my husband to move out.** I don't see myself or us here in this rented apartment. You don't see the future at all, but to avoid depression, you plan something for yourself." – Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 36 years old.*

*"We came here. Only the military lived in this house. For two winters, it was without heating. We were supposed to move back in March. I'm grateful to the commanders [for] letting my husband go on vacation during this period. **I don't know what I would have done if he hadn't come. A pipe burst, a boiler leaked, and a door wouldn't close. He fixed everything as quickly as he could.** What if he hadn't had a vacation? There are many questions. But some women live alone. I don't know how they cope with it. I don't know who helps them, how they cope with their children." – Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 42 years old.*

Women also shared that they had to master the areas where their husbands/partners were previously involved.

*"I have a small garden, yard, and house. **I had to learn a lot, work with a chainsaw and a screwdriver.**" – Partner of a recently mobilized soldier, 49 years old.*

Women respondents living in rural areas said they had to solve the transportation issue. Previously, they could be picked up by their husbands or partners, but now they had to use carriers' services or learn to drive.

The respondents said they need help from the community and the state with everyday issues. They need a place to turn for help with household issues.

Vocation

The life of a military spouse/partner changes dramatically, particularly in work and employment. Emotional exhaustion, fatigue, constant worries about a loved one, and lack of time due to new responsibilities previously performed by the husband/partner (especially in families with children), significantly affect a woman's ability to work and the quality of work tasks. This can lead to the need to change jobs or working conditions.

*"Of course, it's harder. Especially on those days when your husband goes to the positions, there is no communication, and you don't know what's wrong with him. Then **you can't concentrate on your work 100%.**" – Partner of a recently mobilized soldier, 49 years old.*

Yet, for many women, work is a way to distract from stressful factors. Performing work tasks helps them maintain emotional balance and feel fulfilled.

*"I am lucky that my job requires maximum involvement. **When I'm explaining something, I can't afford to think about anything else, [...]***

about why he's not answering the phone. And at least I have this time at work to breathe out, to stop languishing in heavy thoughts." – Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 36 years old.

*"I work outside the city as an administrator of a recreational facility [name] with a swimming pool. I live there. I have calmed down so much during this time because of nature, the sky, no air raids. **It's a completely different dimension, I have a rest there.**" – Partner of a soldier who retired from service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 45 years old.*

For women who see their professional activities not only as a source of income but also as an escape from stress, losing their jobs (due to relocation or other circumstances related to the service of their husband/partner) can be an even greater shock amid constant uncertainty.

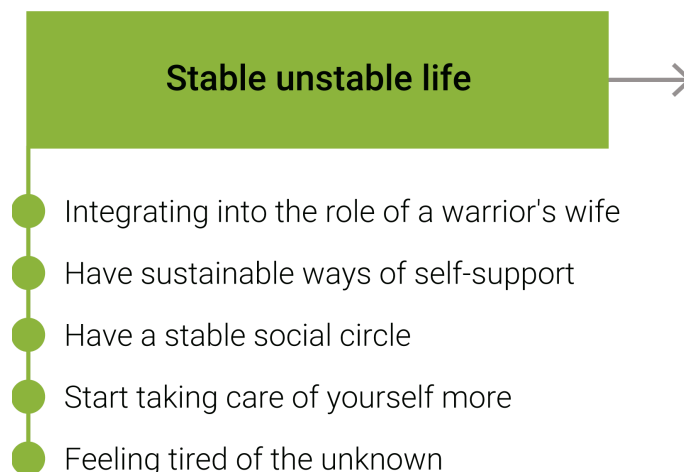
The study participants said that their colleagues' attitudes towards them in the workplace have not changed. However, their attitudes to what is happening at work have changed.

*"Sometimes I don't feel okay at work. Some people feel they can make jokes about the military enlistment offices freely. In most [cases], I **keep quiet because I don't want to escalate the conflict.**" – Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 27 years old.*

The part "Being Left Alone" covers the first separation experience, the restructuring of everyday life, and the usual routine. Women begin to acquire the identity of a warrior's wife or partner. However, they may still perceive the current state of affairs as a temporary experience and consider their husband or partner a civilian, not a military man. Wives and partners feel worse and may experience insomnia due to constant anxiety about their loved one's life. During this period, the warriors' beloved need systematic health support, physical and psychological.

Stable Unstable Life

A stable unstable life is a period of the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved that begins after they accept the new reality and realize that they must continue living in new circumstances. The wife/partner has already coped with all the domestic challenges, gotten used to new responsibilities and constant stress, and found ways to psychologically support herself and adapt to the conditions of war and her husband/partner's service. Life goes on, even during the service of a loved one and the war. This life is significantly different from the usual one, but it also has its routine and normalcy. Women learn to adapt to the instability in their families' lives, make plans for vacations and visits from their husbands or partners. They learn to cope with their anxiety. Also, during this period, women get to realize their contribution, which has yet to be recognized by others.



In the first study, "Journey of the Warrior's Beloved," we [described](#)³⁰ various ways of self-support used by military members' wives and partners.

During this study, we recorded the following needs of women:

- Seeking help from mental health professionals;
- Joining support groups that bring together people with similar experiences; and

³⁰ Veteran Hub (2023). *The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved*. 53.
drive.google.com/file/d/1wSwEoA5zSMZ60L2AziXsZpy70uuue1Xi/view.

- Medication treatment.

The respondents are generally ready to seek professional help or make efforts to improve their quality of life. They realize that they could no longer cope with the deterioration of their mental state on their own.

*"Last year, it was harder. I had no depression. But I had mood swings, sometimes I felt terrible, **I was prescribed mild antidepressants.**" – Partner of a soldier serving from 2022 to 2024, 27 years old.*

It should be emphasized that self-administered medication is harmful and may lead to a deterioration in health. Any medication-related issues should be resolved under the supervision and guidance of a medical professional.

Constant worry about a loved one's life reduces one's ability to concentrate, which interferes with living and work. However, work is an integral part of life. The respondents said that they sought psychological help and took medication to stabilize their psycho-emotional state, maintain their ability to work, and take care of the well-being of their loved ones.

*"After he was mobilized, **I had my dose of antidepressants doubled.** Because anxiety prevents me from working, I can't concentrate. But, on the other hand, **I get tired very quickly.**" – Partner of a recently mobilized soldier, 31 years old.*

Planning vacations and joint activities with your spouse/partner also helps to reduce anxiety and stress. **Over time, warriors' spouses/partners learn to better cope with stress and adapt their reactions,** which allows them remain calm in difficult situations.

*"Everything is still there, but the **reaction is completely different.** It's*

not like I don't care, no, it's more like a healthy person's reaction. I used to panic at once. Now I don't: at the beginning, I evaluate everything, I need to think about what options I have, maybe I need to wait.” – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 45 years old.

The build-up of fatigue is one of the signs of the adjustment period. A study by the Cedos think tank [shows](#) that Ukrainians experience accumulated fatigue from constant stress.³¹ Such fatigue affects not only civilians but also military personnel. The study participants said that the military feels physically and emotionally tired due to the lack of rotation and demobilization.

*“I realized that the **guys were tired** and needed to be replaced.” – Partner of a recently mobilized soldier, 49 years old.*

*“...**Fatigue has already set in, psychological fatigue.** And this is very much evident. It's scary to understand what will happen next. Because there are no time limits for all this. I'm not talking about the war. I'm talking about the terms of service.” – Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 30 years old.*

Since the warriors' beloved co-live the service with them (in the emotional sense),³² they have double fatigue: the constant strain of civilian life in war is compounded by the stress of experiencing the service of their spouse/partner and the role pressure. **Role strain** is the difficulties that arise when playing a specific role, in our case, the role of a warrior's beloved. Role conflict and insufficient role training may be the

³¹ Cedos (2023, 11 July). "It seems to last forever:" How Ukrainians feel about the year of the big war. cedos.org.ua/zdayetsya-tryvatyme-zavzhdy-shho-vidchuvayut-ukrayinczi-za-rik-velykoyi-vijny/.

³² Veteran Hub (2023). The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved. drive.google.com/file/d/1wSwEoA5zSMZ60L2AziXsZpy70uuue1Xi/view.

root causes of such tension.³³ In this study, it is more appropriate to talk about inadequate role training, as our respondents said that one cannot be fully prepared for this role, even when one has time.

*"I was preparing for it mentally. But **you still can't prepare for it**. It can be compared to the birth of a child. No matter how much you prepare, when the child is born, you realize you know nothing about it. Even though I knew what would happen, it was still a shock. I was completely disoriented." – Partner of a recently mobilized soldier, 31 years old.*

"Stable Unstable Life" Well-Being

Mental Health

A woman's physical and emotional fatigue affects all areas of her life and the life of her spouse/couple in general. Thus, fatigue can lead to misunderstandings between a man and a woman. We emphasize that it is essential to recognize the uncertainty in the context of stress fatigue. Uncertainty due to a lack of understanding of how long the spouse's service will last affects the woman's emotional state. No one knows when this stage will end and how long they will have to live in this state. The feeling of emotional uplift on the wave of patriotism gives way to exhaustion, and the woman does not understand where to look for resources to regain strength, as she is under constant stress.

"Fatigue only builds up. It is not offset by any resources, activities or anything else. This is a truly permanent state of fatigue and anxiety." – Partner of a soldier serving from 2022 to 2024, 27 years old.

³³ Володько, В. (2008). Рольова теорія в сучасній соціологічній перспективі. *Український соціум* [Volodko V. (2008) Role Theory in the Contemporary Sociological Perspective. *Ukrainian society*], 2(25), 19–33. doi.org/10.15407/socium2008.02.019.

Increased household duties and responsibility for all family members, combined with unpreparedness for such circumstances and unexpected problems, increase stress and fatigue. Yet, women may feel subjectively devalued and misunderstood by their husbands/partners.

*"At some point, I realized that I was overwhelmed by everything. This also caused misunderstandings. Because I didn't understand that my husband couldn't switch. **He didn't know everything that was going on. That a lot of things just fell on women's shoulders. And fatigue, as well as different aspects like that. And that it was very difficult mentally...**" – Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 25 years old.*

Some women prefer to experience their emotions on their own. Like withdrawal, this can be a way of self-protection, but it can also lead to the accumulation of stress.

*"Now it's **I, me and myself**. Sometimes I can share with my cousin." – Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 36 years old.*

As we have said, wives/partners are increasingly inclined to use the services of mental health professionals to stabilize their psycho-emotional state. Professional support also becomes important when they seek to deal with their perceptions of other men being civilians and destructive anger.

*"Last year, I worked through this at support groups, and they annoyed me. I used to look at couples walking around. I could even cry. **Now I am calmer about it all because everyone has their destiny.** And we do not know what will happen to this guy who is not serving now. Over two years, my attitude has changed." – Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 36 years old.*

Physical Health

As we have already emphasized, fatigue can affect women's emotional state and appearance: They lack the time and energy to take the necessary care of themselves, which becomes an additional factor of discomfort.

*"Of course, I **look entirely different, more tired**, unlike when my husband was home." – Partner of a recently mobilized soldier, 42 years old.*

In addition, due to fatigue, wives/partners often neglect quality nutrition, which can lead to poor physical health and worsening of diseases over time.

Relationships and Recognition

By this time, military spouses and partners have mostly integrated into their new roles and found themselves in a new environment. Wives and partners of military members are involved in communities of peers and support groups where they can find understanding, support, and new acquaintances. This helps them feel less alone and be heard.

"...It has become easier to communicate with acquaintances, with friends who also have this experience, whose husband or son [is serving]. It is understanding each other in such a situation." – Partner of a recently mobilized soldier, 49 years old.

*"We have a chat group where **we talk like a family all day**. We've been chatting for over a year now. We all are from different cities. We try to meet each other. I don't know how any of us would have survived if there hadn't been such support." – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 45 years old.*

Differences in experiences among military spouses/partners need to be considered when creating such groups (if they are made in an inorganic way).

*"It became difficult to communicate. I have friends whose [husbands/partners] are also in the military, but they are officers. **For some reason, there is no understanding.** There are two realities. Officers and infantrymen at war. This is something a little different." – Partner of a recently mobilized soldier, 49 years old.*

Spouses/partners who lived in rural areas or small towns said there were no support groups, and it was challenging to find a community of military spouses/partners due to the small population. It would be advantageous for them to join online meetings of such communities to receive support and share their experiences with those who understand them.

We conducted this research in the third year of the full-scale invasion, during the mobilization campaign, which was extensively covered by the media. At that time, journalists coined the term "draft dodger". Photos and videos of men being dragged to the military enlistment offices were all over the media. It was a period of active public debate that significantly impacted women waiting for their loved ones to return from military service. Their views became radicalized, their positions hardened, and their sense of injustice deepened. Warriors' wives/partners experienced everything we outlined in the first study in a much more poignant way.

In the first study of the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved, we identified that some respondents had difficulty communicating with people around them, and in particular, they experienced the following:

- Painful perception of couples in love or fathers who spend time with their families;
- Feelings of abandonment and anger because of this;

- Feelings of injustice, envy, and anger towards civilians who are not fighting;
- Feeling that no one understands you; and
- Difficulty being among other people, in crowds, among strangers.³⁴

The attitudes of military wives/partners towards civilian men show a dilemma: someone has to replace their loved one, but there are those they would not want to send to service. The respondents must speak frankly about this.

*"Frankly speaking, I am not pleased to see men walking around. I understand that this is not right. **You can't react, but I can't do anything else now. Because I immediately have a picture of my husband there. And you are walking here and you are fine.**" – Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 30 years old.*

*"It's very, very difficult to communicate with civilians, especially with **men**, especially those of conscription age, who are not physically incapacitated in fact. [...] And there are a lot of them here." – Partner of a soldier discharged from service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 45 years old.*

The attitudes of military wives and partners towards civilian husbands show a dilemma: someone has to replace their loved ones, but there are those whom they would not want to go to the military either. It is essential that the respondents speak frankly about this.

*"On the one hand, I don't want anyone to be there... I understand why people don't want to, it's scary and so on, how difficult it is. For example, **I would not want my nephew to go there.** But he is still*

³⁴ Veteran Hub (2023). *The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved*. 44–45.
drive.google.com/file/d/1wSwEoA5zSMZ60L2AziXsZpy70uuue1Xi/view.

studying. But he's probably the kind of person who, once he's finished, may need to leave if he's called. But on the other hand, if they run away and hide, I despise them.” – Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 27 years old.

*“On the one hand, you think that **everyone should be there, but on the other hand, you realize that you are not being honest with yourself because you don't want everyone to be there, because you have guys who you don't want to go there.**” – Partner of a recently mobilized soldier, 42 years old.*

This is how tension grows. On the one hand, there is internal strain, when it is difficult to decide what is right and what is wrong, to weigh the position between “what you want” and “what you need.” On the other hand, there is external social tension. Where there should be support, misunderstandings are building. Where there should be space for socialization in a new role, there is a split.

The well-being of the warriors’ beloved depends on how the community understands their situation. The community needs to build communication that does not traumatize or devalue the role of a soldier’s wife/partner. Our respondents said that people around them, even though they wanted to support them, did not know how to do it and could only worsen things. Because of this, the warriors' beloved may wish to withdraw from social life.

Vocation

Servicemen's wives and partners participate in volunteer activities, such as planting forests, weaving camouflage nets, distributing food packages, and other initiatives. This allows them to feel important and contribute to the common cause.

“Together with friends, we go to neighboring villages to distribute food packages to help internally displaced persons in need.” - Partner

of a soldier who retired from service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 45 years old.

Yet volunteering can be emotionally draining, as women have to interact with others actively. For example, when raising funds, they have to be sensitive to others' feelings, and this process can be resource-intensive.

"It's getting harder and harder for me to keep my emotions under control. When I write, I also have to be attentive to the feelings of civilians who do not want to be attentive to my feelings. But I have to write my posts so that I don't offend them, that they want to give me money after my stories, and that I don't let out this inner Kraken. In general, it's getting harder and harder to write to express myself. But then I tell myself: "No, it's harder for them. They have "Shaheeds" flying over their heads. That's why you have to get yourself together and write – it's the least you can do." – Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 36 years old.

If we address coping strategies and maintaining relationships in couples where one of the partners serves in the military, researchers Maguire and Purcell³⁵ identified a paradox. When you follow a particular strategy, this can often bring the opposite effect. For example, distracting oneself from worries about the life of a spouse/partner in the service by working can lead to exhaustion with work; the fear of overloading a loved one with your problems can lead to isolation and distance between the partners.³⁶ The point is that knowing how to support yourself and your relationship is not enough. It is essential to maintain a balance: to release and share emotions with your spouse/partner but to control them so that they do you good, not vice versa. Keep yourself busy with work to make surviving separation easier, but not drown in it. Protect

³⁵ Maguire, K. C., & Parcell, E. S. (2015). Communication and the coping paradox: the case of army spouses and wartime deployment. *Southern Communication Journal*, 80(5), 365–376. doi.org/10.1080/1041794X.2015.1081973

³⁶ Knobloch, L. K., Monk, J. K., & MacDermid Wadsworth, S. M. (2023). Relationship maintenance among military couples. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 40(3), 734–772. doi.org/10.1177/02654075221105025.

your loved one from unnecessary information, but do not hide everything.

Life Skills and Adaptability

In general, among the ways that help women manage stress and normalize their lives in new conditions and new roles, the respondents identified the following:

- **Proactive Participation**

Wives/partners of military members actively engage in various activities, such as walking, reading, watching movies, embroidery, and other hobbies. This helps them to distract from negative thoughts and maintain a stable psycho-emotional state. You can also add household chores, gardening, and other physical activities that allow you to ground yourself and focus on the present moment.

- **Working with mental health professionals and using self-monitoring techniques**

Psychotherapy, antidepressants, and psychological counseling help to stabilize the emotional state and find inner strength to overcome difficulties. It is also helpful to work through your condition on your own. For example, some of the study participants said they kept a diary.

Many servicemen's wives/partners need professional support to overcome depression, anxiety, stress, and other psychological problems. However, they may postpone this step due to fear, distrust of new people, lack of experience in seeing a psychologist or psychiatrist, and financial constraints.

It should be emphasized that self-administered medication is harmful and may lead to a deterioration in health. Any medication-related issues should be resolved under the supervision and guidance of a medical professional.

- **Social Support**

Socializing, participating in support groups, meeting new people, and sharing experiences are essential for maintaining morale. Interaction with people in similar circumstances helps to feel less lonely.

Respondents mentioned feeling lonely because people from their usual social circle did not understand their problems since they had not gone through similar experiences.

- **Working with oneself and one's perception of the situation**

Awareness of the importance of the present moment, meditation, positive attitude, and belief in the best help to cope with anxiety and stress. Also, servicemen's wives or partners may feel more stable when they are assuming responsibility for their psycho-emotional state.

However, despite using all the ways of self-support, women still experience stress – it will not cease while their loved one is in the military. The respondents said they felt relieved when they knew that their husband/partner was not performing any tasks at a particular moment or was transferred to a unit that was not in the hottest spots when they were in contact with him. However, even in such circumstances, they still had background anxiety and fear for the fate of their loved one.

Conclusions: “Service” Stage: Waiting

Based on the results of the study, we divided the experience of waiting at the Service stage of the Journey of the Warrior’s Beloved into three components:

**1. You are
Left Alone**

**2. You Accept
a New State**

**3. Stable
Unstable Life**

Being alone: a woman's anxiety level rises. However, she expects that this state of affairs (the absence of her beloved) will not last long. Yet, she gets used to the new responsibility.

Accepting a new state: a woman adapts to the situation, learns to live apart from her husband or partner, takes on new responsibilities, and develops new skills.

Stable unstable life: a woman has emotional fatigue and background anxiety and may have health problems. However, she has already established a routine and life and can cope with certain issues independently.

These parts of the Stage may have different durations, but they usually occur in sequence.

Mental and physical health deterioration is typical for all parts of the Service stage. However, according to our observations, a wife and partner's condition can often depend on their psychological characteristics (in particular, the level of resilience) rather than on external circumstances.

In the course of this study, we also noticed that the well-being of military wives and partners is affected by their place of residence and whether they have experienced internal displacement (or are registered as IDPs). Women who live close to the front line are in a zone of increased danger, but they feel that this allows them to be closer to their loved ones. Wives and partners who have to move to another community may have difficulties arranging their everyday lives and maintaining their general well-being and experience the loss of their homes. Therefore, they may feel the absence of their spouse or partner more acutely.

Recommendations and Resources for Warriors' Beloved

Remember that you can get psychological and legal counseling at the Veteran Hub or visit our support group.



You can also reach out to our partners to get support:

[NGO "Psychological Support and Rehabilitation
"Free Choice"](#)

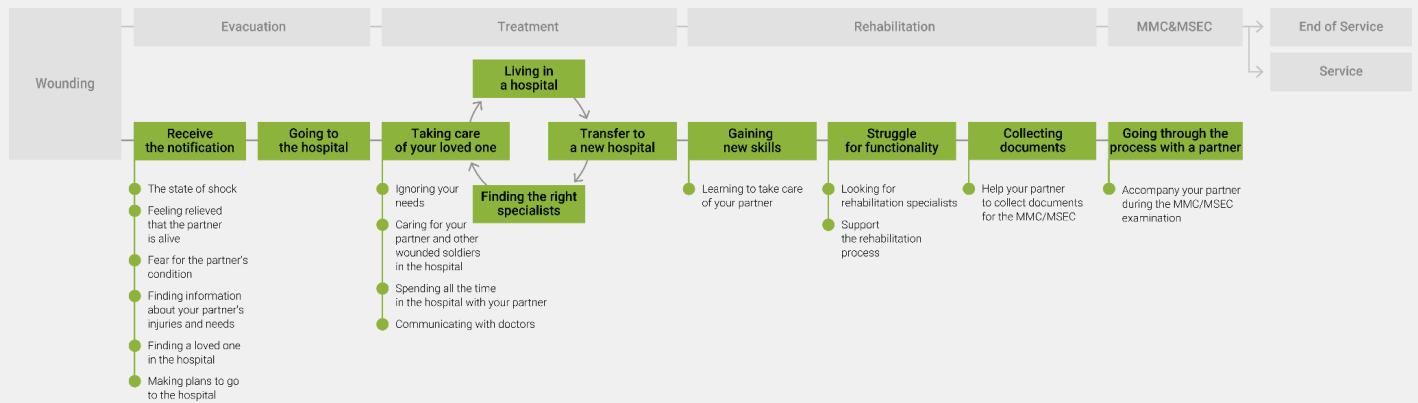
[NGO "Masha Foundation"](#)

[Projector Foundation](#)

[Educational Project "Close"](#)

[Veteran Women's Fund "Veteranka"](#)

Experience “Wounding”



- A part of the Veteran's Journey
- A part of the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved
- Important processes and points

The injury of a husband or partner cannot be foreseen or planned for. As strange as this statement may sound, at this point, a woman's seemingly entirely civilian life may change suddenly as she must respond to new circumstances. The Journey of a woman whose husband or partner was wounded in combat has several variations. In this paper, we have only partially considered this experience, as it requires a separate in-depth study, considering the specifics of the injury and recovery from it. There are many different situations, and only some women will act in the way we have documented in the study. Additionally, we relied on the study "[Behind the Scenes of Care: Veteran's Family and Care Work](#)"³⁷ by the Human Rights Center for the Military "[Pryncyp](#)."

Usually, this path begins when a woman receives news of her husband/partner's injury and realizes this fact. After that, the couple goes through a long period of treatment and rehabilitation of the soldier.

"From that moment on, a very interesting, intense other life began, called the "Journey of the Wounded." Well, that's what I called it. Later, when I started to study it in more detail, it turned out that I was not the only one who called it that." – Partner of a soldier who was discharged from service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 38 years old.

In this "other" life, a woman almost entirely cares for her husband/partner. First, she takes care of his treatment, rehabilitation, and general well-being. Yet, she does not abandon other responsibilities assigned to her during her beloved's service, such as running a household and caring for children or other relatives. The study "[Behind the Scenes of Care: Veteran's Family and Care Work](#)" describes the challenges faced by people who provide long-term care for severely wounded veterans and how they live through this stage. In this study, we examined the main stages of the journey of women whose

³⁷ Polek, T., Noskova, E., Galan, L., Yavorska, O., Shmatko, I., & Pashkina, A. (2024). Policy Brief "[Behind the Scenes of Care: Veteran's Family and Care Work](#)." Pryncyp. drive.google.com/file/d/1FTEDotcHNnebRorkXJHGlu2ym58XziUI/view.

husbands/partners were injured. We traced its intersections with the [Journeys of Veteran Women and Men](#) based on the findings of the research conducted by the Human Rights Center for the Military [Pryncyp](#) and the analysis of the interviews conducted.

Getting a Notification

Often, the report of an injury may be preceded by interruptions in communication with a loved one or their complete absence. This news may come not from the spouse/partner but from commanders, fellow soldiers, volunteers, or medical personnel. In such cases, the nature of communication with the person who reports the injury significantly affects the morale of the soldiers' wives/partners.

*“...Then the commander calls me. And I realize that something has gone wrong. He tells me: “Calm down, you shouldn’t be nervous, calm down. [Name] was wounded. He hit a mine. I’ll put you in touch with him in a little while.” I am really grateful to the commander [name]. **He chose some very appropriate words that really calmed me down.**” – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 to care for a loved one, 55 years old.*

In the aforementioned study, [“Behind the Scenes of Care: Veteran’s Family and Care Work,”](#)³⁸ it is mentioned that wives and partners lack information about the military system's response to injuries and a serviceman's condition after an injury. Our respondents mentioned that they did not know what to do next and felt confused by the uncertainty.

*“But I didn’t know what to do. This was such a state of mind. **You don’t know whether to sit here or run somewhere, who to call, shout at, or what to do.** He said there was nothing to do.” – Partner of a soldier who retired from service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 38*

³⁸ Polek, T., Noskova, E., Galan, L., Yavorska, O., Shmatko, I., & Pashkina, A. (2024). Policy Brief “Behind the Scenes of Care: Veteran’s Family and Care Work.” Pryncyp. drive.google.com/file/d/1FTEDctcHNnebRorkXJHGlu2ym58XziUI/view.

years old.

Such issues may arise because soldiers' wives and partners do not have instructions for coping with such situations. An additional stressor is the inability to get advice on the military healthcare system, procedures for receiving care, and transferring the wounded between hospitals. The only thing women clearly realize is the need to be close to their husbands and partners.

Frequent transfers between healthcare establishments often become obstacles for the warriors' beloved on their way to their husbands or partners. Women do not know whether a serviceman will be left for treatment in one facility and can go there or whether he will be transferred to another hospital in another part of Ukraine. These issues are becoming especially important:

- For families who do not own a house and need to rent and/or to relocate;
- For women who are traveling from abroad;
- For mothers who have to leave their children with someone or take them with them;
- For women who care about other relatives.

Getting to the Hospital

Immediately after receiving the news of the injury, women go to the hospital to visit their husbands/partners. Soldiers' wives/partners who are working have to take leave or time off for an indefinite period and later may need to resign from their jobs due to the need to care for their loved ones. The journey of a warrior's beloved to the hospital often goes by rail. We explored this experience in a separate study to be published in the fall of 2024.

"...I think [a city in eastern Ukraine] is where they were at first. And then they went to [a city in southern Ukraine] and were sent away.

*And after [city in Southern Ukraine], after these injuries, it was so far away that the first stop was [city]. **And you don't know whether you should go or run there, what you should do.** He said, "You don't need to go anywhere. I feel fine. They will drip me here." And when they were sent to [the city], we packed up with the child and left. It was a week in September, the child was supposed to go to school, but we spent those days in [the city]." – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 38 years old.*

Caring for Your Loved One

When a woman finds herself next to her husband/partner, their joint treatment journey begins. The couple's relationship is immediately rebuilt into a "turbo-giver – turbo-receiver" format, at least immediately after reuniting. The stage of getting reacquainted with your loved one is postponed. Instead, a woman immerses herself in caring for her beloved and lives one life with him. And this life is the life of a husband/partner.

*"After a few months, **I started to feel like I was forgetting about myself. I only see a wounded man whom I want to heal, help, and calm down.** And I started noticing this not only in terms of his health but in general, that I was more focused on how he was feeling." – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 19 years old.*

The well-being of the soldier's spouse/partner fades into the background, even though their mental and physical health may be deteriorating significantly. For example, the respondents said that due to the lack of time to organize their daily routine and meals, they lost a lot of weight:

*"Plus, **I was still so tired. I lost 15 kilograms then.** All my clothes just hung on me like that. I didn't care about that at the time. I was so*

focused on him getting better.” – Partner of a soldier who retired from service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 36 years old.

Living in the Hospital

During the treatment period of a loved one, a woman should revise her routine to free up as much time as possible to take care of him. In addition to care and emotional support, servicemen's wives/partners may be responsible for specific medical procedures due to the overload of medical personnel.

*“Everyday routines were such that you had to go in and out all the time. **I had to go and do some errands all the time.** While he was recovering from surgery, I had to go to his clinic to support him, first of all, morally.” – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 38 years old.*

*“For three months, I followed a strict schedule. **I would get up at 6 a.m., come to the hospital, and then go to work. In the afternoon – to the hospital, in the evening – to the hospital.** Well, because he was not independent at that time. The medical staff... they were lacking.” – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 36 years old.*

Respondents pointed to shortcomings in the organization of medical services and staff overload. This, in turn, increases the number of tasks that fall on the shoulders of the warriors' beloved.

*“**There is a great need for medical support for those who have already been released, for the military.** I hope we will get to the point where they will receive medical care immediately and in full because it is tough.” – Partner of a soldier who resigned from service in*

2022-2024 due to having many children, 34 years old.

While their husbands/partners receive treatment, some women may additionally care for other wounded soldiers in the hospital.

*"I met another boy there. He lost his leg after being wounded, but from the knee down. But he is so positive. And when... we became friends with him, with [name], **I brought two thermoses. One for [husband], the other for [name].**" – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 to care for a loved one, 55 years old.*

This was also mentioned in the study "[Behind the Scenes of Care: Veteran's Family and Care Work](#)"³⁹ by the Human Rights Center for the Military [Pryncyp](#). On the one hand, such assistance is an essential indicator of cohesion among fellow veterans and their loved ones. Over time, such relationships allow for the creation of veteran communities, circles of communication, and mutual support. On the other hand, this care becomes an additional burden on women: they prepare not just one dinner but several – for their loved ones and those without relatives bringing food to the ward.

Over time, staying in a healthcare establishment becomes clearer: procedures and doctors become familiar, and the soldier's condition stabilizes. Then, the spouses/couples may establish a personal connection. The time they spend physically together and the feeling of mutual support become essential to the spouses. Getting used to being with each other again begins at this stage.

The respondents said that despite the difficulty of long-term treatment, when their loved one's condition improves or stabilizes, establishing communication and rebuilding relationships can be romanticized to some extent. There is a feeling of being a "savior" and the possibility of partially restoring sexual life.

³⁹ Polek, T., Noskova, E., Galan, L., Yavorska, O., Shmatko, I., & Pashkina, A. (2024). Policy Brief "[Behind the Scenes of Care: Veteran's Family and Care Work](#)." Pryncyp. drive.google.com/file/d/1FTEDctcHNnebRorkXJHGlu2ym58XzjUI/view.

*“There were different relationships. [...] At first, it was romantic. In the hospital, I was nursing him back to health. He was there for three months. And it was a hell, of course. **But there is a certain romance when you save lives**, that's all. You have sex in the ward when no one sees.” – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 36 years old.*

Learning New Skills

After specific injuries and wounds, soldiers need long-term rehabilitation and repeated courses of treatment, in addition to the long therapy process. Therefore, even after discharge from the hospital, the warrior's beloved performs the function of a “turbo-charger” and takes on responsibilities related to monitoring the health of their husband/partner and formulating a plan for his recovery.

*“In general, as the doctors told us after he was injured: **“You'll need a year or two for your body to rehabilitate after all that**, then you can do it.” When we applied for surgery to remove the shrapnel from his body, we were told that we needed to improve his general condition first.” – Partner of a soldier who was discharged from service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 19 years old.*

Women must also learn to perform medical procedures, such as dressing wounds.

***“At home, I performed all the manipulations related to the bandages. It was difficult because it all had to be pulled off and disinfected.”** – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 38 years old.*

In addition, wives and partners may be responsible for arranging a home that meets the needs of a veteran after specific injuries. According to the

study [Behind the Scenes of Care: Veteran's Family and Care Work](#)⁴⁰ by the Human Rights Center for the Military [Pryncyp](#), women whose husbands or partners have severe injuries related to the loss of bodily functions create special conditions in the home and organize the space so that their loved one feels comfortable.

"I live more often at my parents' place because it's a private house, and my husband is wounded, and it seems more comfortable here." – Partner of a soldier discharged from service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 38 years old.

Struggle for Functionality of Your Loved One

The couple then undergoes a rehabilitation period (if necessary). The women we spoke to said they took the initiative in this process.

"For two years, he was going through rehabilitation because **his arm did not work at all. It had already started to become atrophic. But I found a rehabilitation center in [a European country] and sent him there. He went there twice.**" – Partner of a soldier who was discharged from service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 36 years old.

Wives/partners would find rehabilitation centers, negotiate with medical staff, and look for opportunities to help their loved ones recover as much as possible outside of emergency procedures in healthcare establishments.

⁴⁰ Полек, Т., Носкова, Є., Галан, Л., Яворська, О., Шматко, І., & Пашкіна, А. (2024). Аналітична записка «За лаштунками турботи: близькі ветеранів та доглядова праця». Принцип [Polek, T., Noskova, E., Galan, L., Yavorska, O., Shmatko, I., & Pashkina, A. (2024). Policy brief "Behind the scenes of Care: Veteran's Family and Care Work." Pryncyp]. drive.google.com/file/d/1FTEDctcHNnebRorkXJHGlu2ym58XziUI/view.

"Wounding" Experience Well-Being

Physical Health

Caring for the wounded is hard physical work that affects the health of wives and partners. Women are constantly in the hospital next to the wounded and have no time for quality food and sleep. The study participants said they lost much weight while their husband or partner was hospitalized. Due to the focus on the health of their loved ones, women do not monitor changes in their bodies.

Also, chronic diseases and diseases related to the musculoskeletal system can worsen in women due to constant stress.

*"As for chronic diseases, **my pancreatitis may be exacerbated through nerves**. It happened several times during this period. I have a pretty severe vertebral hernia." – Partner of a soldier who was discharged from service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 36 years old.*

Respondents said that they had to postpone treatment of their illnesses because of caring for their spouse/partner.

Public Attitude and Recognition

Women respondents were annoyed by the public attitude towards their husbands/partners with visible signs of disability. Even though Ukrainian society is moving towards inclusivity (according to a [study](#) by the Rating sociological group, the majority of people treat people with disabilities as full members of society),⁴¹ women identified certain "different" attitudes towards their husbands/partners, including strange looks from others.

"People do not react in any way. They just stare... I don't understand

⁴¹ National sociological study on the perception of people with disabilities in Ukraine. Rating. ratinggroup.ua/files/ratinggroup/reg_files/rq_ua_los_112023_press.pdf.

why they look like that... Maybe it's the second time they see it. But you just notice it. It's obvious somehow.” – Partner of a soldier who was discharged from service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 38 years old.

The respondents said that people around them felt indifferent towards them and their families, so they did not receive the necessary support. As one of the study participants put it, **“No one cares that your husband was “there.”**

***“No one was interested in me, no one asked me how I was, how my child was, or if I needed anything, or if we could go somewhere together, or something else, or what we were doing.”** – Partner of a soldier who was discharged from service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 38 years old.*

Conclusions: “Wounding” Experience

In this section, we have taken a first approach to mapping the Journey of the Wounded Warrior’s Beloved. We also confirmed our assumption that there are several variations depending on the complexity of the injury. At this stage of the Journey, wives and partners perform the function of a “caregiver,” learn new skills, and build their entire routine around caring for their husband or partner. This is a challenging experience in a woman's life, often invisible to society.

Recommendations and Resources for the Warrior’s Beloved

The Veteran Hub offers a separate study and guide on returning to intimacy and sexual life after injury. Please refer to them with your loved one if you need them.

[Project "RESEX"](#)



You can also learn more about the issues faced by soldiers and their loved ones after being wounded in the research of the Human Rights Center for the Military ["Pryncyp"](#):

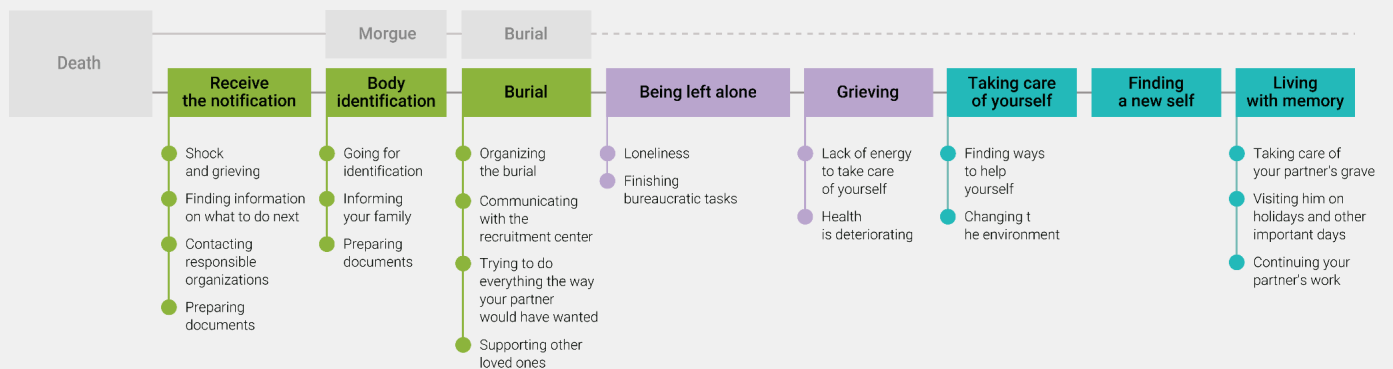
["Behind the Scenes of Care: Veteran's Family and Care Work"](#)



["From Injury to Return. An Ethnographic Study of the Journey of Veterans and Their Loved Ones"](#)



Experience “Death”



- A part of the Veteran's Journey
- A part of the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved
- Important processes and points

In this part of the study, we turned to the experience of living with the loss of a husband/partner who was a military man. The path of the warrior's beloved does not end at the moment of his death. A woman does not cease to be the serviceman's beloved. However, she becomes the person who is often the first to receive the sad news, takes care of the return of the body, the organization of the burial, and the subsequent honoring of the fallen soldier. She was his support and backbone, and now she will have to live through perhaps the most difficult personal grief. The woman remains the wife/partner of the serviceman, but she remains on this Journey alone.

It is important to us that the wives/partners of fallen soldiers are not left alone with their grief and that society and the state have effective mechanisms to support such women. We have researched the journey of the loved ones of fallen soldiers to make their experience of grief visible to the general public.

Each wife and partner of a fallen soldier goes through this journey differently, but these individual experiences have common features. Foreign researchers have been studying the issue of identity transition from "before the loss" (wife or partner) to "after the loss" (wife or partner of the deceased).⁴² We know very little about this path in contemporary Ukrainian realities, so we began to study it based on the findings of foreign research on this topic. In particular, living through this experience is accompanied by certain stigmas and expectations, risks of social isolation, and critical deterioration of mental and, as a result, physical health.^{43 44} Accordingly, we paid attention to these aspects in our research. Analyzing the stories of our respondents, we identified the main stages that a military wife or partner goes through after receiving the news of the death of a loved one.

⁴² Wehrman, E. C. (2021). "I was their worst nightmare": The identity challenges of military widows. *Death Studies*, 45(8), 583–593. doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2019.1671540.

⁴³ Wilson-Menzfeld, G., McGill, G., Moreland, M., Collins, T., Erfani, G., & Johnson, A. (2024). Military widows' experiences of social isolation, loneliness and unmet social needs. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 1–21. doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2024.2326563.

⁴⁴ Cozza, S. J., Hefner, K. R., Fisher, J. E., Zhou, J., Fullerton, C. S., Ursano, R. J., & Shear, M. K. (2020). Mental health conditions in bereaved military service widows: A prospective, case-controlled, and longitudinal study. *Depression and anxiety*, 37(1), 45–53. doi.org/10.1002/da.22971.

Receiving a Death Notification

Recalling the days before receiving the news of the death of their husband/partner, the respondents said that they noticed signs, a certain sense of something wrong. In other words, there was a partial mystification in their memories: the women were convinced that they knew or felt this would happen. Such testimonies are probably a consequence of the fact that our conversation took place at a retrospective.

The death, injury, capture, or disappearance of a loved one cannot be predicted or controlled. Statistically, the majority of soldiers in modern wars and armed conflicts survive. However, every woman lives with a risk that affects her life and well-being during the service of her husband or partner.

*"Even before that, we had a dog of a certain breed, which doesn't howl. He just can't. And I'm sleeping, well, like sleeping. It was like this. At some point, Malyi jumps up and starts howling. He jumps on me like that. He hits me with his paws like that. I could not understand what was happening to my kid (dog – Ed. Note). Oh, my God. I understand. **And on that day, when I found him late in the evening, it was 11 p.m., I think it was the 23rd or 24th, something like that.**" – Partner of a fallen soldier, 33 years old.*

According to the official procedure, upon receiving the information from the army unit commander, the military commissar shall inform the family of a soldier's death on the same day.⁴⁵ Most often, the warrior's beloved learns about the death of her husband/partner from the military units and military enlistment offices.

"And when I laid down, I got a call from [name of the commander]."

⁴⁵ Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (2019). Instruction on organizing the burial of military members who were killed in action (died) during military service. zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/z0524-01#Text.

*Well, this is so bad, I immediately realized it. It's such a bad call that he's calling me by himself. And when I picked up the phone, it just killed me when he started to introduce himself officially. Because he is my buddy [name]. **I still had some hope that maybe he was seriously wounded, very seriously wounded, critical. He told me that 'while performing his duty to protect the homeland, [name] died around 2:30 p.m.'*** – Partner of a fallen soldier, 37 years old.

Other relatives, not the partner, may be the first to receive the news of a soldier's death. It depends on two factors:

- 1. Relationship status of the couple** (whether the couple was in an officially registered relationship – marriage).
- 2. Availability of documents** regarding authorized representatives of military personnel.

If the woman does not fall into any of the above two categories, she may be notified of her partner's death directly, but this would be rather an exception.

*"Two hours after he died, **I was informed by the commander. This is an exception to the rule.**"* – Partner of a fallen soldier, 37 years old.

When the death of a husband/partner is confirmed, it may often be preceded by a prolonged loss of communication. Women may contact their loved ones' colleagues and/or command. In such cases, the wives/partners of soldiers can receive information about their deaths before the official notification from the military enlistment office.

*"When I got home, I called this instructor and said: "Please tell the truth. Only with a cold mind, let's not get emotional." He said: "I'm sorry, but [name] is dead," and hung up the phone. I understand that it was hard for him to say this. **He died in November. And in early December, his parents received [...].**"* – Partner of a fallen soldier, 35

years old.

The study participants said that the organizational processes related to contacting the family of the deceased, identifying the body, paperwork, and funerals are poorly coordinated and generally poorly developed. Bureaucracy often takes an excessive amount of time. Yet, certain obligations of the military enlistment office, such as the organization of the funeral, were not fulfilled, according to the respondents. This creates a situation in which the loved ones of fallen soldiers, in addition to grief, have to take responsibility for monitoring the fulfillment of the state's functions and responsibilities.

“The official notification came after I buried him a week and a half later. When I went to the military enlistment office and said that my husband had died. Here's a medical statement of death, a death notification, and a burial certificate. Only then did they hand me the death notice. The work of the military enlistment office, I can't say without using obscene language, is completely dysfunctional. Well, I have never seen such a mess anywhere as the enlistment office.” – Partner of a fallen soldier, 37 years old.

On the one hand, the authorities' slow actions regarding the identification procedure and the necessary documents negatively affect the psycho-emotional state of the wife or partner of a fallen soldier. The warrior's beloved has no option but to stay out of these processes. In addition to the double burden, this causes additional stress, resentment towards the government, anger, powerlessness, a sense of injustice, and abandonment. Such pressure makes it impossible to enter the grieving process fully.

On the other hand, taking responsibility and organizing processes on your own can distract the fallen soldiers' spouses and keep them in good shape for a while. However, it should be borne in mind that holding back feelings can destabilize a woman's mental state when the necessary

procedures are completed and all the accumulated experiences overwhelm her at once.

Body Identification

Identification of the fallen soldier's body is a part of the stage during which the soldiers' beloved and their families are directly confronted with the fact of death.

*"...In the morgue. And while he was being delivered... I don't know if the temperature was maintained or not. But he said that you would smell the body, **it would be wrapped in plastic film. And the clothes [that] he was supposed to be dressed in would just be put next to him.** At that moment, it was utterly devastating for me. [...]" – Partner of a fallen soldier, 37 years old.*

For women, an additional stressor may be the presence of a husband or partner in the morgue. One respondent said that she was annoyed when morgue and police workers called her husband, who had been killed in action, "the body" because it depersonalized him.

Funeral

Funerals are traumatic events for the loved ones of fallen soldiers and their families. During this period, they face many emotionally complex tasks, including organizing and conducting the funeral. Yet, it is a time of farewell. This process is not always conscious—wives and partners live with their loss for a long time, but the funeral itself is an important moment for them. Details of the burial and elements of commemoration are of great importance to the loved ones of fallen soldiers.

According to the official procedure, the military unit is responsible for some aspects of the burial of fallen soldiers, such as purchasing a coffin

and providing a set of uniforms.⁴⁶ Some of the study participants said that the army unit fulfilled those responsibilities.

*"I went to the [hospital]. I went to the morgue. There were all these documents. This stupid situation of preparing for the burial began. You contact the military commissariat there. **It was decided to bury him in [the location]. The military commissariat said it was not a problem.**" – Partner of a fallen soldier, 30 years old.*

However, organizing a funeral by a military unit can be time-consuming, which means long waits, extended farewells, and a sense of uncertainty.

*"...I called our [the military enlistment office employee]. He said: "I will call you in a week. **And we will plan with you in a week when we can pick him up**". That is, we won't even pick him up in a week. We will plan it." – Partner of a fallen soldier, 37 years old.*

Therefore, wives/partners often had to organize and pay for the funeral themselves.

*"Everything that was needed **was organized by my personal social connections**, starting with the transportation of the body, the uniform, the burial." – Partner of a fallen soldier, 37 years old.*

Despite all the possible challenges and complexity of this period, it was important for the wives/partners of the fallen soldiers to bury their loved ones with dignity: to choose the best possible coffin and to organize the farewell as their husband/partner would have wanted.

*"It was important to me that **everything was the way he wanted it to be.**" – Partner of a fallen soldier, 25 years old.*

⁴⁶ Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (2019). Instruction on organizing the burial of military members who were killed in action (died) during military service. zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/z0524-01#Text.

In such circumstances, women have no time to deal with loss and grief. They have to take on additional responsibilities for organizing a decent burial for their loved one and deal with significant financial costs that the state should cover. The respondents also shared negative experiences of communication with the military enlistment office regarding the faith of the deceased soldier and the observance of religious rites during the funeral.

*“My husband was an atheist, and I don't believe in God either. This is my right. Ukraine is a secular state. When I came to the military enlistment office, **she started asking me how we would like to bury my husband**, whether we'd order a forty-day service in the church, whether we pray and all that.” – Partner of a fallen soldier, 37 years old.*

Yet soldiers' wives/partners reported negative and positive examples of communication with military units. The study participants shared stories of how the military enlistment office members welcomed them and provided all possible support.

*“Then we said goodbye to [name]. When we were given the urn with the ashes, we were not supposed to receive any services. Well, as services. The military enlistment office organized the solemn salute when they shot six times in memory of the deceased. It was not required of them. **But the enlistment office people met with us. They helped us. They came again to help us.**” – Partner of a fallen soldier, 25 years old.*

The spouses/partners of deceased servicemen may face bureaucratic obstacles in organizing the burial of their spouses/partners. Despite the fact that the law on burial has been partially improved, a number of issues remain unresolved. In particular, the algorithm of actions for alternative burial methods, such as cremation, as well as the issue of the

National Military Cemetery are unclear.⁴⁷ Because of this, the fallen soldiers' loved ones and their families have to delve into the legal aspects to fulfill the wishes of the soldiers regarding their burial.

*"The moment of farewell is [date] in the crematorium, and the moment of burial is [date]. That is a month plus five days, so to speak. Because there is a certain bureaucratic procedure that makes me hate the [name] city council, according to which cremated **people cannot be buried in the ground**. It was impossible at that time—only [name] cemetery." – Partner of a fallen soldier, 25 years old.*

The burial process can be complicated for women who were not in a registered marriage with a soldier but were in a romantic relationship. This can lead to conflicts between the partner and family members of the serviceman, for example, between parents and a partner or a partner and an ex-wife with whom the soldier was still officially married.

*"**Since we didn't have time to register our marriage, I had no right to take a leave.** My parents went to [the city] to bring the body, but they did not look at the body. They couldn't look, they looked at the photos." – Partner of a fallen soldier, 35 years old.*

This greatly complicates the identification procedure and, in some cases, may affect the partner's ability to participate in organizing the burial and attending the funeral.

*"He has a daughter. The daughter is 33 years old. She knew about our relationship. She and, in fact, his wife knew. Because he did not live at home. [...] And it so happened that **[they] did not want to let me or the children go to the funeral**, they asked mutual friends to keep me away. But thanks to our friends and the military commissariat, who*

⁴⁷ Agency for Legislative Initiatives (2024, March 14). War and burial: has the Verkhovna Rada settled everything? parlament.org.ua/analytics/vijna-i-pohovannya-chy-vse-vregulyuvala-verhovna-rada/.

said: "They have no right to prevent you from attending the funeral"... They just walked us through a human corridor so we could say goodbye." – Partner of a fallen soldier, 44 years old.

Respondents who did not have the status of an official spouse also recalled situations when military units refused to communicate with them and provide them with the necessary documents.

*"...I had to deal with the military unit through a lawyer. Because they did not provide the documents for a very long time and kept on sending me excuses, like **"who are you..."**. I wrote that "I am the official representative of his children, minors who are unable, because of their age...". And only thanks to the lawyer's efforts this issue was resolved." – Partner of a fallen soldier, 44 years old.*

As we have already mentioned, it can take a long time to receive the body of the deceased and bury it, even if all procedures go smoothly. However, force majeure circumstances can make these processes even more delayed and, therefore, more stressful.

"When the parents took the body, they brought a different body. They had to return it. And it was all about time. I know all these stories that this also happens. And it's not that someone there is doing it on purpose or intentionally. It's just a human factor." – Partner of a fallen soldier, 37 years old.

You Are Left Alone with Yourself

After the burial is completed, the wife or partner is left to deal with their grief. Her pain of loss is combined with a sense of loneliness. After all, the death of a spouse or partner is not only the loss of a loved one but also the loss of support, a person with whom they shared everyday life, most routine activities, plans, and ideas about the future. It is a feeling of

defenselessness, the loss of one's own path, which was shared with the path of the loved one. During the burial procedure, a woman is constantly surrounded by different people and has to solve various tasks related to this process. All this can block her feelings. The study participants said that the actual realization of what had happened came to them after the burial when they were left alone with themselves.

*"I thought, 'That's it, I'm going to bury him. I had already done my best. I did my best. **The worst thing... is what happens... to... wives, families... It's how to live on. And... it's without him. And you're alone.** And... you don't have a comrade. You don't have a friend. You have no ally.'" – Partner of a fallen soldier, 37 years old.*

Grieving

Grief over loss is a complex process during which a woman faces a change in identity, separates from her husband/partner, and looks for ways to continue living without her beloved. This stage can last for years. During this time, the wife/partner of a fallen serviceman can experience many complex emotions and feelings, react painfully to events related to the experience of being a soldier's beloved, and become very vulnerable. This condition affects all spheres of a woman's life, including her ability to work effectively, organize her life, and communicate with others.

The women we spoke to said that the burial is only the beginning of grief. Then the wife/partner only begins to realize that she is left alone, without her beloved, that he will not return.

The most challenging period of grieving after the death is the first year, when a woman does not yet fully realize the loss and subconsciously waits for her loved one to return.

"The first year was like a hell. My worst condition was about six months later. Well, this is not new information either. All

*psychotherapists say this. Because you slowly come to realize... I have always written a lot about this. **I understand that he died, but I don't understand that it's forever. It's about feelings. The brain understands, but you feel differently. You keep waiting for him.**" – Partner of a fallen soldier, 37 years old.*

This stage is extremely difficult for the soldiers' beloved. Their inner strength is often limited to performing only the most basic routine.

*"I would say this: **It's not a life, it's survival.** This word is more appropriate. Now my function is just to survive. Just to survive this terrible, terrible pain." – Partner of a fallen soldier, 30 years old.*

From the outside, it may seem that a woman is feeling well. However, in reality, her mental health may be in a critical state at this time.

*"...people who looked at me from the outside, it seemed to them that I was pulling myself together, everything was fine. Although **at that very moment I just wanted to die**, that's all, nothing else." – Partner of a fallen soldier, 37 years old.*

Taking Care of Yourself

Women resort to various self-support strategies to live through the loss and not lose themselves. Here are the practices mentioned by the respondents:

- **Being distracted by studies, work, hobbies, and volunteering.** In particular, the partners said that they continued to volunteer, participate in meetings, and support their brothers-in-arms and sisters-in-arms.

- **Working through traumas on their own.** One respondent told us that she writes letters to her deceased partner and thus says goodbye to him.

"I write him a letter: what I'm thinking about and going through. It's as if I'm talking to him and have 10 minutes to talk to him, but it's all in a paper format. This is me saying goodbye." – Partner of a fallen soldier, 25 years old.

- **Caring for an "important other,"** including pets that need support and, thus, "forces" partners to continue living:

"At this very last moment, Malyi [Dog – Ed. Note] saved the entire situation." – Partner of the deceased soldier, 25 years old.

- Psychological aid from mental health professionals, including individual therapy and/or medication. Participants in our study were prescribed sedatives and antidepressants to help them through the first acute moments after the loss.

It should be emphasized that self-administered medication is harmful and may lead to a deterioration in health. Any medication-related issues should be resolved under the supervision and guidance of a medical professional.

"I realized how my feelings change after antidepressants: I feel curiosity and a desire to live. I want to live. It's cool, you walk, you hear birds singing, and you are interested in listening." – Partner of a fallen soldier, 35 years old.

- **Group therapy** to accept the death of a spouse/partner and learn to live with it.

- **Bad habits.** Some of the fallen soldiers' beloved developed bad habits.

"I started smoking after [my husband] died, again." – Partner of a fallen soldier, 44 years old.

This behavior can be attributed to maladaptive (destructive) coping mechanisms. We described a similar coping mechanism in the study "[Journeys of Veteran Women and Men](#)." Veterans who are experiencing loss and/or face heavy stresses during the transition to civilian life may use bad habits to cope with a difficult situation. The following strategies are used to refocus their minds and find relief.⁴⁸

- **Change of residence:** Women may change their place of residence in search of ways to live through the loss and start life anew. After all, locations associated with shared memories may not allow them to "let their loved one go:"

*"But I left [a city in the West]. I cannot live there. It's hard for me there because he died there. **But I can't live there because every piece of land there is his piece of land, it's [husband's name]. I come here, and it torments me.**" – Partner of a fallen soldier, 33 years old.*

Finding a New Self

The women we spoke to told us that grief and pain from loss are not something that can be fully healed within a "set" period. This experience remains a part of a person forever:

*"The pain will not go away. It still hurts. But at some point, **it is not that it has dulled; it has somehow merged and grown into***

⁴⁸ Veteran Hub. *Journeys of Veteran Women and Men*. 170–171.
drive.google.com/file/d/1gSlkhpMoJHDFNqO6FV0o-y6oA99ieq6a/view.

something." – Partner of a fallen soldier, 35 years old.

However, the fallen soldiers' beloved also shared that over time, they learned to live with this loss.

"I live, I already live, not just exist. I'm undergoing treatment because I felt that I was no longer able to cope. That's why I used all the possibilities I could: different foundations, a psychiatrist, a psychotherapist. And I see improvements. **I already have a feeling that I want to live. Life goes on. The pain doesn't go away, but life goes on."** – Partner of a fallen soldier, 35 years old.

This path is complex and lengthy, and it requires considerable effort. Although the study participants said that occasionally, the future might seem futile, they also noted that, ultimately, they were able to find a new sense of life and joy.

Living with Memory

It is essential for the wives/partners of fallen soldiers to keep the memory of their loved ones alive.

"But I want to say that... as the wife of the deceased... That it is to calm my soul. Because... even after death, you want to take care of this person. His memory. The place where he is buried. And it's more about... Again, it's about love. Because... it's... It's something you can do as long as you're alive. As long as you are alive, the memory of your loved one still exists." – Partner of a fallen soldier, 37 years old.

This preservation of memory, prolongation of care for the loved one, and keeping the connection is reproduced in various practices: preserving the clothes and "odor" of the spouse/partner; wearing his wedding ring and your own, yet, visiting and caring for the burial site.

"And I took this ring off his fingers in the freezer. Because it was his wedding ring, I took it off to wear it." – Partner of a fallen soldier, 30 years old.

"Some of [name]'s things I... I mean, I left his sleeping bag at home, and I brought a lot of things with me. I look through them regularly, but they are in my closet. I keep them there. I'm afraid that his sweaters will lose his odor, so I keep them in a bag." – Partner of a fallen soldier, 25 years old.

The need to preserve the memory of the fallen is not confined to personal practices. It is also manifested in honoring fallen soldiers in the society.

The study participants pointed out the rules of behavior during the funeral procession and burial, which allow people to show respect even if they do not know the deceased personally. In particular, they spoke about respect during the funeral procession.

"And it was clear that the mayor came, and all these people came, flags were lowered around the city. And, basically, they have a funeral service in the garrison, which is near the [name] square, and the [name] cemetery is also more or less in the center. You go through the center. All the shops stopped working when we were having a funeral procession for [my husband]. People came out of the universities." – Partner of a fallen soldier, 33 years old.



[Memorial](#)

Yet, beyond the funeral procession, the culture of commemoration in Ukrainian society is not sufficiently developed. The country has

introduced practices of honoring fallen soldiers, such as a nationwide moment of silence. However, the study participants said that only some joined them. In addition, the respondents said that further efforts are necessary to ensure that the culture of commemoration takes root in Ukrainian society.

"This is an important commemoration. A minute of silence is important. It is held at 9 o'clock. The initiative came from the state. I heard the clock ticking at the railway station. But when I come to work, no one stands up at 9 o'clock. And the cars keep going. The society needs to mature." – Partner of a fallen soldier, 35 years old.

The memorialization of fallen soldiers should take place not only through commemorative practices but also in everyday life. Insensitivity to this topic can be manifested in the disrespectful treatment of wives and partners of soldiers and negating their grief, such as by mentioning payments to the families of the fallen.

*"And wherever I go, even in stores, I hear it all the time. First: "No one sent them there." Secondly: "For the money they rake in there, they live in luxury." That's what my neighbors in the building (an apartment building) told me. And as soon as they found out that **[my husband] had died, they had already calculated how much money I should get, or what I spent it on.** And when I moved in with my mother, because we simply had nothing to eat at home, and it would be easier to pay the rent, they started telling me that I might have invested all the money into something, or I might have bought a villa."* – Partner of a fallen soldier, 44 years old.

Others' behavior can harm the morale and psychological state of soldiers' loved ones and their families.

"Death of the Loved One" Experience and Well-Being

Mental Health

Describing their feelings in the first year after the loss, the respondents mentioned apathy and depression:

"You don't care about anything at all...", "I was depressed" (Partner of a fallen soldier, 37 years old).

This was manifested in the fact that they could not organize their everyday life and had no strength and desire to take care of themselves:

***"The clothes you wear are the same.** You don't care so much whether your teeth are brushed or your hair is washed." – Partner of a fallen soldier, 37 years old.*

***"I didn't care about entertainment, clothes, nothing in particular.** There was even a time when my daughter and I, we didn't want to eat anything but Mivina instant noodles." – Partner of a fallen soldier, 35 years old.*

Such apathy and depression can lead to suicidal thoughts.

"I had suicidal thoughts." – Partner of a fallen soldier, 37 years old.

The respondents said that they could release their emotions by screaming. For example, one woman mentioned that she used to cry while driving.

Wives and partners shared that they felt better after seeing a psychotherapist. Some of them decided to start psychotherapy after the first anniversary of their loved one's death.

Working with mental health professionals did not immediately bring relief to the loved ones of the soldiers, but over time, it did get results.

Physical Health

Stress from the events is reflected in the state of physical health, and it starts deteriorating.

"I started to get sick very often. I got really sick" (Partner of a fallen soldier, 25 years old).

And the body may start gaining weight:

"I gained a lot of weight, 25 kilograms" (Partner of a fallen soldier, 25 years old).

Or, vice versa:

"I lost a lot of weight" (Partner of a fallen soldier, 35 years old).

Material Needs and Security

In the previous sections, we noted that official wives have access to the procedure of identification of the deceased and paperwork and participate in the organization and conduct of the funeral. Benefits are assigned to officially married spouses. According to the Law of Ukraine "On Social and Legal Protection of Servicemen and Members of Their Families,"⁴⁹ the family of a deceased serviceman is entitled to a one-time payment of financial assistance. The following citizens are eligible to receive a one-time financial aid:

- Parents of a serviceman or servicewoman;
- A spouse;

⁴⁹ Law of Ukraine Number 2011-XII "On Social and Legal Protection of Servicemen and Members of Their Families." zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2011-12#n95.

- Minor children;
- People who were dependent on the serviceman/servicewoman.⁵⁰

As of 2024, the civilian partners of fallen soldiers were also included in this list.⁵¹ In addition, starting from March 2024, according to the Law of Ukraine “On Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of Ukraine on Assignment and Payment of One-time Financial Assistance,”⁵² servicemen have the opportunity to determine themselves who will receive the financial assistance and add these people to the list. The amount of the aid is divided equally among family members.⁵³

At present, the partners of fallen soldiers have the procedure to prove the fact of the relationship and receive state aid.⁵⁴ This legislative innovation should have allowed partners to put their work on hold so they would have time to grieve and not worry about their financial situation and the well-being of the children and other family members they support.

However, submitting documents, proving their status in case of no official marriage, and receiving payments take a considerable amount of time, which often causes women great stress. In some cases, the partners of fallen soldiers refuse to apply for benefits because they do not have the psychological and emotional resources to go through the procedure. In this case, they must take care of their financial well-being independently.

⁵⁰ Procedure for the appointment and payment of one-time financial assistance in case of death of servicemen, persons liable for military service and reservists called up for training (or check-up) and special training or for service in the military reserve (s.a.). Social security and support for servicemen and their families. social.mil.gov.ua/odnorazova-groshova-dopomoga/ogd-u-razi-smerti.html.

⁵¹ Bovsunovska, K. (2024, June 18). Civilian wives of fallen soldiers will now be able to receive financial assistance. UNIAN. www.unian.ua/society/chi-mozhe-civilna-druzhina-zagiblogo-vojina-otrimati-odnorazovu-dopomogu-12670446.html.

⁵² Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (2024). The Law of Ukraine Number 3515-IX “On Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of Ukraine on the Appointment and Payment of One-time Financial Assistance.” zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/3515-20#Text.

⁵³ Ministry of Defense of Ukraine (n.d.). Clarification on the payment of one-time financial assistance to family members of fallen servicemen. www.mil.gov.ua/special/news.html?article=59986.

⁵⁴ Bovsunovska, K. (2024, June 18). Civilian wives of fallen soldiers will now be able to receive financial assistance. UNIAN. www.unian.ua/society/chi-mozhe-civilna-druzhina-zagiblogo-vojina-otrimati-odnorazovu-dopomogu-12670446.html.

It is also worth noting that not all women feel morally entitled to receive such payments.

*"You know, it looks like as if I sold him for money. **I can't do that.**" – Partner of a fallen soldier, 33 years old.*

*"This is a very hard money. **I don't deserve it.**" – Partner of a fallen soldier, 25 years old.*

If there is no such support from the state, a woman may experience increased stress and anxiety due to thoughts about the future and the need to find the strength to take care of everyday life and routine.

*"I was a little different because they are official wives. And the thing is that you can grieve calmly when you do not worry about your daily bread. **Then you can go through the grieving process, you don't worry about money, you are paid some money, and you can grieve calmly.**" – Partner of a fallen soldier, 35 years old.*

The moral and psychological state of the fallen servicemen's wives or partners is further complicated when women become the sole caretakers of children and/or have to take care of the family's well-being. In such circumstances, they need to go to work and deal with everyday issues, living through the acute stage of grief without the opportunity to work through the loss.

Partners who begin the process of proving the fact of a relationship and entering into marriage face lengthy bureaucratic procedures:

*"This process took a very long time. **About six months of litigation.** When we filed with the general court, I mean the civil court, we were told that "we are not considering this. You should send it to the administrative court." This is the legal conflict: the administrative*

court sends the plaintiff to the general court, and the general court refers the litigant to the administrative court [...].” – Partner of a fallen soldier, 25 years old.

You must collect many documents and have professional legal support to prove your relationship.

***“If we talk about the lawsuit, it consisted of 38 attachments. The lawsuit itself, joint photos, a bunch of joint receipts, gifts, screenshots, trip confirmations, tickets, screenshots of messages about trips that he was coming to see me, I was coming to see him. There are testimonies of witnesses from the condominium. There is a certificate from the head of the condominium. There are testimonies from his comrades. These are all the documents regarding the burial. My name was mentioned everywhere.”** – Partner of a fallen soldier, 25 years old.*

Despite the system's flaws, the recent introduction of legislation allowing partners to obtain the status of official spouses and receive the corresponding benefits and payments is a positive change.

Relationships and Recognition

Support and understanding from others is vitally important. Women need to feel that the community understands them and can support them without further traumatizing them. However, according to the respondents' experience, they did not receive this:

***“They may say: “You have a child. You need to think about the child. Get that nonsense out of your head. Do some exercise, embroider, and read. Go somewhere and see something...” People don't realize that at that moment...”** – Partner of a fallen soldier, 37 years old.*

Even close people seeking to support the woman often had no idea how to do it correctly, which could have worsened the woman's condition instead of improving it. For example, one of the respondents said that she had to turn off her phone and cut off communication with her parents for a while because their overprotection caused additional harm.

*"What I lacked was the community support and proper support of my **parents** because my parents tried very hard to, you know, wrap me in this care. Phone calls once an hour. Then I turned off the phone." – Partner of a fallen soldier, 25 years old.*

Living with loss and lack of understanding may push deceased servicemen's wives/partners to isolation, and their circle of communication and trust can be significantly reduced. On the one hand, this can work as a defense mechanism, but on the other hand, it can lead to feelings of loneliness and helplessness.

"A lot of people dropped out at that moment because it is emotionally difficult to be involved in grief. If you want to do something to help, you have to get involved." – Partner of a fallen soldier, 37 years old.

When a woman finds there is no support, no recognition of her grief by other people, and no respect for the deceased, she may become hostile to the outside world and/or to people who did not lend a shoulder at the right time.

*"One of my trigger moments, when people wanted to say something to me about this after a while when I was already on my feet, and people started asking me for help, I said: "When I stood by my husband's coffin, only my son was with me from my family. No one else. **Where were all of you when I needed help and support when I was standing by the coffin?**" Now we have what we have." – Partner*

of a fallen soldier, 37 years old.

It is essential to communicate with other women who have experienced the loss of their military partners, as those who can understand and know what this experience is. Such contact is essential not only for sharing the grieving experience. It allows you to build a circle of communication where you don't have to explain how the wife/partner of a fallen soldier feels, how to respond to her condition, and how to support her better. This circle is, therefore, safe:

*"The wives of the fallen get together with artists and then organize various exhibitions and communications. **And this community is quite vibrant and honestly very organic.**" – Partner of a fallen soldier, 35 years old.*

Such communication is not necessarily limited to discussing loss or shared experiences:

*"We don't discuss men's deaths or experiences. It's not scary to be there because **everyone somehow subconsciously feels what phrase is better not to say and what phrase will be unnecessary or might hurt. And it is so organic that you feel very safe, even without words, even when you see a person for the first time.**" – Partner of a fallen soldier, 35 years old.*

Fallen soldiers' loved ones and their families may also face misunderstanding from society and the unreadiness or unwillingness of others to show empathy. This is typical during the grieving period and other stages of the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved.

It is worth noting that the study participants shared not only negative experiences but also stories in which others showed empathy and understanding for their loss.

*"I had one moment when we buried my partner. I was leaving work (I was wearing a headscarf). A young guy comes along and says: "Excuse me, I understand that you wear a black ribbon for a reason." I said: "Yes." He said: **"My heart aches for you."** And he left." – Partner of a fallen soldier, 35 years old.*

Conclusions

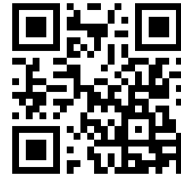
We have broken down the experience of wives/partners of fallen soldiers into the following stages:

1. Receiving a notification;
2. Identification of the body;
3. Burial;
4. You are left alone with yourself;
5. Grieving;
6. Taking care of yourself;
7. Inventing a new self; and
8. Living with memory.

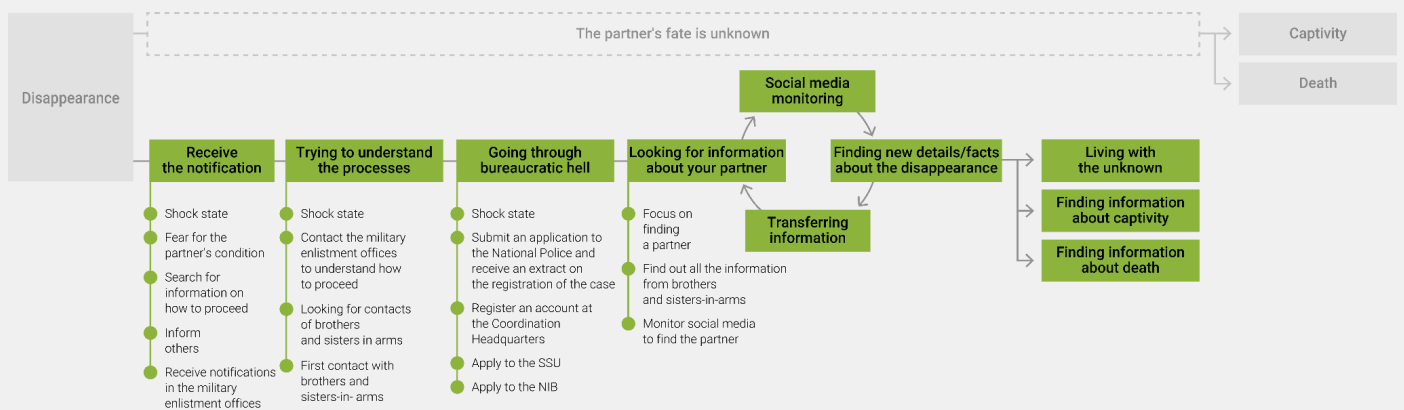
Despite experiencing difficult emotions, the fallen servicemen's beloved have to deal with numerous bureaucratic procedures. They have to organize funerals, obtain death certificates, and communicate with the military enlistment office. After the funeral, the spouse/partner is left alone and often needs support. Her ability to work decreases, her psychological and physical health deteriorates, and it can be difficult for her to organize her life. Fallen soldiers' beloved feel the need to preserve the memory of their husband or partner.

Recommendation for Warriors' Beloved

You can always turn to the Veteran Hub, where you can get support



Missing in Action



- A part of the Veteran's Journey
- A part of the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved
- Important processes and points

"Of course, at that moment, you pray: anything but death. They said he was missing." – Partner of a missing soldier, 35 years old.

This part of the research was devoted to exploring the experiences of the wives and partners of soldiers who went missing. They find themselves in a situation where they have no information about the life or death of their loved ones.

Loss of Connection

Most of the study participants said that a loss of communication preceded the report of a missing husband or partner. They would often receive information first about his departure for combat missions. Sometimes, after losing contact with a loved one, women can discover what happened to him through his brothers or sisters-in-arms.

*"...Before that, my husband had not been in touch for about eight days because the **last time I talked to him was [date] 2022**. After that, I learned all the information from his comrades. The guys who were able to get in touch. Because at that time there was no communication." – Partner of a missing soldier, 22 years old.*

Receive a Notification

When women learn that their husband/partner has gone missing, they experience acute stress⁵⁵ for some time. Firstly, because of the lack of communication, and secondly, they realize the level of danger their loved one faces. Such an extraordinary event significantly destabilizes the psycho-emotional state – the warriors' beloved feel very vulnerable.

⁵⁵ Acute stress is a reaction to loss, characterized by a feeling of emotional tension and pain, as well as physical manifestations such as exhaustion, suffocation, and bouts of physical pain.

Cited by: Kyiv Center for CBT (n.d.). Acute grief reaction.

uccbt.com.ua/poslugy/psihoterapija/gostra-reakczyia-gorya/.

*"It's such a shock that you don't ask about how they came to you and with what emotions they said, what they told you to do. You just have a message about the fact that he is missing. And that's it. You're in a trance, like a stupor. You have no idea what to do at all. You are, you know, **in a vacuum. You seem to be living, breathing, sitting, but you are not even in this space. It is simply impossible to convey.**" – Partner of a fallen soldier, 37 years old.*

Some respondents learned about the disappearance of their husband/partner through an official notification. According to other studies, families receive such information from the military unit or the military enlistment office.⁵⁶

*"I was in [a city in the West] at the time, doing errands. And since we lived at the same address, and he was registered with his father, **my father received this notification in his hands because they brought it to the place of registration.**" – Partner of a fallen soldier, 37 years old.*

Some respondents contacted military enlistment offices or a military unit before receiving official notification. This happened in cases when women could not reach their husbands/partners for a long time.

Most of the respondents had negative experiences when dealing with military enlistment offices. In particular, they pointed to the following problems:

- Indifference to their experiences;
- Lack of clear explanations, procedures, and referral mechanisms.

⁵⁶ Cedos (2024, 28 August). Study of the Experience and Needs of the Missing Soldiers' Families. cedos.org.ua/researches/doslidzhennya-dosvidu-ta-potreb-rodyn-znyklyh-bezvisty-vijskovykh/.

Going through Bureaucratic Hell

*"And I told the girls from the military enlistment office: "Ladies, as we were told, you are intermediaries between families and the military unit." They said they didn't know where to get these addresses from. I said. "You have military mail. It's not our problem. It's your job." **"You know how many of you are like that!" And now they say the same thing. Nothing has changed.**" – Partner of a missing soldier, 50 years old.*

At this stage of the Journey, the respondents were influenced by the time factor (the period necessary to apply to the military enlistment office). Yet, the procedures were even less structured at the beginning of the full-scale invasion.

Some women also shared their experiences of receiving false notifications. At first, women would receive information about the death of their husband/partner. However, they would later receive a report that he had gone missing.

*"About two weeks later, a notification came to [the settlement] through the military enlistment office. **But the notification was not about the disappearance but about the death. It was in the wrong form.** The notification was about the death, but the document said [clearly – Ed. Note] that the person was missing. " – Partner of a missing soldier, 33 years old.*

Such situations are extremely traumatizing for women, as they make them experience several types of trauma. First, **the grief of loss**, then **the grief of ambiguous loss**, when the wife/partner is forced to switch between two exhausting experiences: despair that a loved one has died and hope that he is alive.

Partners and spouses deal with legal matters and try to clarify the situation. They appeal to the soldier's brothers and sisters-in-arms,

government agencies, and international organizations, seeking to discover the circumstances of the disappearance and other facts that will help them understand their loved one's fate. The feeling of complete uncertainty is reinforced by the fact that the partner or spouse may receive different information from different sources.

*"...And I waited for those two weeks. As soon as they passed, I wrote to my first contact. It was his deputy commander. [...] He dialed me and started telling me that [my husband] was gone. **They all said to me that he was killed, in detail, how it happened.** And that they did not evacuate him because they had no means to do it. [...] **Today, I have information that he was seen in captivity.**" – Partner of a missing soldier, 28 years old.*

An additional stressor is the need to do bureaucratic paperwork, such as submitting documents and applying to various authorities. The website of the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War (hereinafter referred to as the Coordination Headquarters) has a detailed [roadmap](#) for close relatives and family members whose relatives went missing under exceptional circumstances. In particular, the study participants said that in the first days after the disappearance of a loved one, they had to go through the following procedures:

1. File a report of a missing person with the territorial body of the National Police of Ukraine.
2. Receive an extract from the URPI the next day.
3. Register in the personal account of the Coordination Headquarters's information system.
4. After passing the verification, enter all known information about the missing soldier into the account.
5. Contact the Joint Center for the Coordination of Search and Release of Illegally Deprived Persons as a Result of Aggression against Ukraine (SBU).

6. Contact the National Information Bureau.⁵⁷

*"At the moment when a person disappears, writing all this is just a real mockery. Well, it has to be done. But it's just a mockery. I couldn't do it, for example. **I just couldn't physically do it. I had to be carried around like a vegetable by a friend to get this notification or something else.** We just couldn't do it morally. **And if you are an older adult, it is tough. That's why I say it would be easier if someone came to the Coordination Headquarters and got help.** Because these bodies say that "we can't have you apply to one body and then the information goes to all the others." So, there is no such system yet." – Partner of a missing soldier, 34 years old.*

The situation can be complicated because the procedures for submitting documents often need to be more straightforward. In addition, as we said above, families of missing servicemen usually face ineffective work of certain divisions within the authorities.

***"The military enlistment offices just sent us from one office to another.** They still don't have application templates. Because when I came in the fall, [because] the military unit told me I had to write an application for financial assistance... [...] I went to the military enlistment office, and nothing changed." – Partner of a missing soldier, 50 years old.*

Yet, some study participants reported positive experiences with military enlistment offices.

*"You know, somehow, we must have been so lucky. I mean, **the communication was adequate.** We were immediately given the information we needed. Yes, it could have taken longer than it should*

⁵⁷ Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War (n.d.). Family action plan if a serviceman is captured, missing or killed. roadmap.koordshtab.gov.ua/missing-in-action/.

*have to get answers or some excerpts. But not significantly longer. For example, they promised a month and a half. The documents came in two months. **Well, somehow there were no such situations when they would not give us an answer or would refuse to provide us with any information.*** – Partner of a missing soldier, 27 years old.

Given the respondents' answers, we might assume that the nature of communication with this agency and the services rendered depend primarily on the expertise and empathy of specific representatives of the military enlistment office or the work specifics.

In general, to obtain information about the fate of a missing soldier, wives and partners may turn to the following state bodies and international organizations:

- International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC);
- Coordination Headquarters;
- National Police of Ukraine;
- The National Information Bureau for Prisoners of War, Forced Deportees and Missing Persons;
- The Security Service of Ukraine and the Defence Intelligence of Ukraine dealing with prisoners of war.

Women may call the hotlines of these organizations.⁵⁸

If wives/partners of missing soldiers discover the whereabouts of their husbands/partners, they report this information to the law enforcement authorities, including the National Police. Women address the National Police as soon as they receive a report of their husband/partner's disappearance. In the beginning, they file a missing person report with the territorial body of the National Police. Then, this case is transferred to the investigator at the location of the disappearance. Respondents repeatedly testified that they faced difficulties finding a new investigator's contacts. Sometimes, according to respondents, police officers do not show empathy and are being rude.

⁵⁸ You can read more about the procedure on the website of the Coordination Headquarters: koordshtab.gov.ua.

*"Well, for example: "Why do you need an investigator? We have transferred your case to [a city in the East]. It will take a month or a month and a half for it to get there. And then the investigator there, the one with the fewest open cases, will take over the case, and then they will call you: **"What good will it do? Your husband disappeared in the occupied territory. How are they supposed to look for him there? It's an occupied territory."** Isn't that rude?" – Partner of a fallen soldier, 37 years old.*

Search for a Husband / Partner

After the wives/partners receive the news of the soldier's disappearance, recover from shock, and go through the first bureaucratic procedures, they begin to search for their loved ones on their own. Women realize that they now have to fight for the fate of their husbands/partners.

*"...and then I think: **"Okay, stop. If I vent my emotions now, I just won't be able to understand this situation any further."** Because somehow my head was pounding, you know, this is not true, this cannot be happening." – Partner of a missing soldier, 50 years old.*

Searching for a husband or partner helped some respondents stabilize their psychological condition and move on, regaining control over the situation.

*"For me, this is a little more encouraging. Because it's not death, **everything that is not death is okay. And I immediately start thinking: "What should I do? What should I do?"**" – Partner of a missing soldier, 35 years old.*

One way to find out the circumstances under which a soldier went missing is to communicate with his brothers and sisters-in-arms. This is often the case if the wife/partner has already met them. However,

sometimes, a woman needs more information about her husband's/partner's place of service, his brigade, or battalion. In this case, she must first find their contacts, which may take a lot of time. One of the ways to find such information is to post a message on social media about a missing person. Servicemen's wives/partners may know this is a dangerous step, but they decide to take it under pressure from relatives or in absolute uncertainty.

"...And in fact, I also posted [the information] in the telegram group. At first, I was afraid to post it. I didn't know what to do. But relatives immediately lamented: "Let's put it on Viber right away, right away." I said, "Yes, even if I don't do it, this process will be independent of me anyway." I was also found by a girl who added me to the brigade group in Signal and then in Telegram. Somehow, it all started to spin. That is, there were certain connections. And then we switched to the brigade's contacts." – Partner of a missing soldier, 35 years old.

Also, wives/partners try to find those who were directly on the battlefield with their husband or partner when he disappeared. One of the respondents said that she received information about the place and circumstances of the disappearance from his fellow soldiers who were released from captivity.

Since people who were with their husbands/partners on a combat mission may also be in the status of missing persons or prisoners of war, wives/partners search for their relatives and friends. This allows them to join forces and share the information they find.

"First of all, you look for who was with him. I quickly found the relatives of everyone who was with him at the position. As we were told, no one came back, but it took us a while to find out all these bits of information and put them together. There were six people in the position. All of them went missing, and the Russians took over the entire position. And what happened there, as I was told, is unknown. Then we got in touch with the relatives of these people. Of course,

Facebook, of course, Viber: "I'm looking for so-and-so, who disappeared at such-and-such a time." And that's how I found four of them. I mean, only by searching and comparing information that on the same day in the same direction, they also went missing." – Partner of a missing soldier, 35 years old.

Speaking about attempts to obtain information about the place and circumstances of a soldier's disappearance, the respondents repeatedly testified that they had conflicts with their husband's/partner's military command (platoon commander, company commander). They may not be able to report what happened on the battlefield immediately. Study participants had difficulties obtaining documents to confirm they were eligible for payment or the report on the investigation to provide the details of the missing soldier's circumstances. In such cases, female partners are obliged to make additional efforts and resolve this situation on their own:

"We caught our unit commander in [the city]. He's already been discharged from the hospital: "Well, if you want...". He didn't expect us to come. "You have half an hour." Just imagine. We drove so quickly that we arrived at a destination in half an hour. He went pale because we were like: "Sit down!". He was a little bit in shock. We gave him these documents. He also signed copies of the applications to certify that he had received them. And after that, everything started working. Little by little, they started sending us documents." – Partner of a missing soldier, 50 years old.

However, not all wives/partners spoke about such conflicts. One respondent shared that her husband's brothers-in-arms immediately informed her about the situation with him. According to her, they did so out of respect for him. One of our research assumptions is that the well-being of the wife/partner depends on the military well-being of the husband/partner. In this case, the partner was respected among the

military, which is why the partner was personally informed. However, confirmation of this assumption requires additional research.

*"Let's just say that **I was contacted by my brothers-in-arms from the military unit**, guys, because they all respected my husband very much." – Partner of a missing soldier, 33 years old.*

Spouses try to fully reconstruct the circumstances of their husbands' disappearance. They are trying to find out the coordinates where he disappeared, the circumstances of the battle to the minute and second, to understand what happened to their loved one. To do this, they independently record the testimonies of their colleagues. One of the respondents said that she brought drones to her partner's brothers and sisters-in-arms so that they could fly over the place of disappearance and check if there was a body there.

If a soldier goes missing in the temporarily occupied territory, the wife/partner waits for the brothers and sisters to check for the body of their partner/husband. During the study, we recorded the following stories. The respondents shared that after the liberation of the territory, the soldier's brothers/sisters-in-law tried to find his body there, but to no avail. One respondent also said that a search operation was conducted at sea to find her husband and his comrades-in-arms, but they could not access the room where their partner was supposed to be. When they tried to look through the cracks in the box, they did not see her husband's body either. The absence of witnesses and evidence of the partner's death may give hope to partners that the man is alive and may be in captivity.

● **Search through Social Media**

Wives/partners use dedicated websites and social media groups to search for missing soldiers. In particular, they look at Ukrainian and Russian telegram channels and websites that publish photos and videos of prisoners of war. This is how women try to find confirmation that their husband/partner is in captivity.

"I just sat all day long watching these Telegram channels, reading. And I was calling all these services." – Partner of a missing soldier, 29 years old.

Browsing Telegram channels could take our respondents almost all day: they would watch all the photos and videos and read all the comments. The content of such channels is often sensitive. Wives/partners have to look closely at images of dead soldiers or mutilated bodies to see if it is their husband/partner.

*"There is the largest [channel] – [name]. There is a database of prisoners of war in Ukraine. There's a list of missing and captured people. I think it's called something like that. And, accordingly, there are their sub-channels, some chats of these channels where you can communicate. **There is a story about monitoring. They monitor different chatbots by name to see if any information about that name appears.** They write down that they communicate with certain people and may communicate with those released from captivity. **They send different lists of prisoners through these channels.** Just like through the SBU, but this is unofficial information." – Partner of a missing soldier, 35 years old.*

However, not all wives and partners of missing soldiers use social media as a tool to find their loved ones. In particular, they are stopped by considerations of their safety and the possibility of fraud. One of the respondents said that since she is not subscribed to such pages, she does not receive calls. However, her partner's mother, who follows these pages, has experience with fraudsters.

*"But for some reason, I think that when I subscribe to all these different telegram channels, Russian and so on, **then some calls start, some fraud, some messages come to my family. I don't have that.**" – Partner of a missing soldier, 33 years old.*

The respondents also said they had received calls or messages from their husband/partner's social media accounts. Unidentified people told them that their husband/partner was alive or the name of the colony where he was held. Such calls may have been accompanied by demands for money from their partners.

*"...And on [date], I think, I got a message from [partner]'s Instagram page saying **'30 thousand hryvnias and we give you your husband'**. I thought they were scammers. But then I started to correspond. My hands were shaking. I was very worried. At first, I thought it was him. I asked if it was his phone, if he was definitely a prisoner of war, what kind of injuries he had. Like everything I knew and could ask. Well, **they gave me all the truthful information.** [...] But I still realized that they could have broken the page. [...] **Before that, some caller had been trying to reach me in Telegram.** That is, they wrote me messages and deleted them. [...] I immediately ran the number through Getcontact. I discovered that it was the number of Ukraine's temporarily occupied territories. Later, after they wrote to me on Instagram... I was in [a city in the South], and my guys from the unit who stayed at the checkpoint knew me well, and [the partner], respectively... So **the same person wrote to another guy. They screened [the partner's] photo from Instagram, sent it to him, and wrote in the Telegram messenger: "Tell my family that this guy is alive. I just want things to be ok.**"⁵⁹ It was something like that. **That's when I found out that he was a prisoner of war.** Of course, it was not some kind of a reassuring statement because it could still be some kind of bluff. Later, there was an exchange of guys, and one guy came out and told me that [my partner] was safe and alive, that he was in captivity somewhere in the [temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine]." – Partner of a missing soldier, 22 years old.*

- **Communication with Government Agencies and International Organizations**

⁵⁹ Translated from Russian. — Ed.Note.

Another source from which wives/partners of missing soldiers receive and expect to receive information about the fate of their husbands/partners is through government agencies and international organizations. Wives and partners regularly attend meetings with representatives of international organizations, the Coordination Headquarters, Presidential Commissioners, and others. However, according to the respondents, they know best the situation with their husbands or partners.

*"I travel quite often. I come to Ukraine for rallies and to visit the Coordination Headquarters to ask some questions. **At the Coordination Headquarters, they cannot give any answers or information because all the information comes to them from us, our relatives.** That is, [to] all inquiries, all appeals that you submit anywhere, you hear in response: "We are waiting for the information you can provide" or "If you find out something, let us know." – Partner of a missing soldier, 22 years old.*

Women follow updates on the status of their husbands/partners in their personal accounts on the Coordination Headquarters's website and add information they find on their own through a chatbot. However, the study participants said they expect the authorities to update the information on the website.

"As far as I know, most of the information is supplied by citizens through the Coordination Headquarters. If you find your partner somewhere and report it... Or maybe your brothers-in-arms will report it or testify." – Partner of a missing soldier, 27 years old.

Therefore, they relied mainly on their efforts.

"I rely more on my strength. I actively search for information from these sources, such as Telegram channels. Well, this is my question,

and no one is doing it. " – Partner of a missing soldier, 27 years old.

Partners and spouses said that the most effective way to communicate with representatives of the Coordination Headquarters is to come to them with suggestions. Also, wives/partners can contact the Coordination Headquarters to refute and confirm specific information. For example, conducting a photo examination.

*"...We have a problem, for example. For instance, one mother has a photo of a guy from the Russian telegram chats, where a person clearly resembles her son, our boy, our [military branch]. **We have been trying to get through for six months to get a photo expertise done.** At first, we wrote to Lubinets and appealed to the investigator. But for them, it is a poor-quality photo, and they don't want to use it. And there is no other photo. **And so we come there, we tell them that there must be some kind of procedure, we do not demand that you confirm 100%, we will not hold you responsible, but do this research so that we understand whether we should pay attention to it at all.**" – Partner of a missing soldier, 33 years old.*

According to international law, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) shall confirm the status of a prisoner of war. However, the respondents described communication with this organization as poor. In their opinion, the ICRC fails to deliver this service since the Russian party does not provide up-to-date lists of prisoners of war. The study participants said that the ICRC might take a long time to respond to letters and appeals.

*"If you're not afraid to say that 'we were abandoned by our commanders,' and you're on camera, then of course you'll show up somewhere. And it's easy to find, at least to understand that they have the person, and then **to continue to seek help from the Red Cross or other organizations...** [To say]: **"Look, here's a video. He is a prisoner of war. Change his status. He is definitely there."** – Partner*

of a missing soldier, 35 years old.

Missing persons' partners often have no other choice but to become civil activists to seek the truth about their loved ones. They frequently create NGOs or family associations, attend meetings with international organizations, and fight for their partner and other missing persons.

"I provide them with all the information: about the hospital, about this website, and [about] how I received a message in [month] from an unfamiliar sender that he was in such and such a colony. And that was it. His data. And regular meetings with the Red Cross. I'm in constant contact with the regional representative, and I'm in contact with the [city] representatives. I'm also constantly involved in the training that they go through there. We also went to the head office in Geneva on an advocacy tour I co-organized. And we insisted that they fulfill their mandate or publicly declare that they are not fulfilling it. We had an eight-hour meeting with 100 families and representatives and talked to them individually. And now we plan to talk to them again, four people, about their activities. And to submit our demands to them in writing." – Partner of a missing soldier, 34 years old.

After finding evidence that a serviceman is in captivity, wives and partners may receive confirmation from the ICRC. In this case, their Personal Account status changes on the Coordination Headquarters' website: from missing to prisoner of war. Accordingly, the woman leaves the role of a searcher and moves to the role of an unofficial lawyer who lobbies for the release of her loved one from captivity.

Confirmation of Death

Unfortunately, some wives and partners of missing soldiers receive confirmation of their loved one's death. If the body is found in the Ukrainian government-controlled territory, the woman may be involved in the process of identification and transportation of the body, organization

and conduct of the burial. We have described this process in detail in the section “Death” Experience.” If the body is found in the temporarily occupied territory of Ukraine or the territory of another state, the woman must additionally wait for the exchange of bodies or de-occupation to be able to pick up and bury the deceased.

One respondent shared that she was able to confirm her husband's death after his comrades-in-arms who were with him at the battlefield were released from captivity. They told her that the soldier was killed in action. Women can also find their husbands/partners in the morgue. In particular, one of the study participants recognized her husband's body in a picture in a telegram channel where employees of one of the Ukrainian morgues published photos of the bodies of dead soldiers brought to them after the exchange of bodies. After that, she was given the investigator's contact information and went to identify the body and have it DNA tested.

*"These are forensic experts. Or those who work in the morgue. They threw away a photo of my husband. And he was recognizable. At least, the body that I could see was, well, whole. It was recognizable. **There was no doubt that it was him.** I mean, there was no disfigured face, you know, like you see on these websites, just a mess. I mean, I clearly understood that I had found my husband." – Partner of a fallen soldier, 37 years old.*

However, there are also cases when wives/partners, having gathered all possible evidence, accept the fact that their husband/partner has died. However, doubts and uncertainty may periodically return to them because they do not receive a definitive proof.

"...But one of them said: "There was a backpack near that body, it was my backpack. I recognized it". Like, it's [the partner]. He said: "We raised the drones for a few more days, then again. Those bodies are still lying there. No one has moved them." And then a shell hit this house. And I don't know what happened to the bodies [of the first and

second brothers-in-arms], but [the partner], well, if it was him, he must have been covered with rubble. And I just saw that there were exchanges of bodies, just [brigade number]. But later, I found out that someone tried to do it from our side and their side. They did it directly. The state did not do it. And there was hope that maybe... **And now the only thing I have is a point. A point on the ground where he should be, but, well, here too. If our troops regain this territory, I don't know how long it will take to find him. I don't know if it's realistic. And who will clear the rubble? And I just tried to start coming to terms with it, just in these first two weeks.**" - Partner of a missing soldier, 26 years old.

Despite all the evidence of the soldier's death, some respondents noted that only after the body was returned could they finally be convinced that their husband or partner was no longer alive.

Living with Uncertainty

If a soldier's beloved is unable to find out the circumstances of her husband's or partner's disappearance or prove the fact of his death, she has to accept this uncertainty and live with it. During this period, a woman experiences grief from an ambiguous loss.

*"And I have had attacks... I don't know if it's a panic attack or not, but there have been several times when I've had them, especially on some anniversaries, even at the beginning of the full-scale invasion. I vividly remember how it all happened, how we said goodbye and left. **I start thinking about it all, and I start to get overwhelmed when I start to admit that maybe he won't come back, maybe life, well, this life, is forever without him.** I start to cry. But I start to suffocate. And I start breathing very loudly."* – Partner of a missing soldier, 28 years old.

The respondents described living with the unknown as walking in circles from hope to complete despair. They also said that emotional exhaustion made them hypersensitive. Anything could be an irritant, sometimes completely unexpected. Also, for the wives/partners of missing soldiers, holidays become painful when longing and loneliness are exacerbated.

Wives and partners of missing soldiers may consider it their duty to believe and wait for their loved ones. Women may be afraid even to consider the idea that their husband or partner is dead and will not return.

*"It is tough. I don't know how women whose husbands died go through this state. But it seems to me that it is easier for them because they can live through this grief. I recently talked to a psychologist and said... She told me that "you haven't gone through the stages of grieving." I said: "I can't go through the stages of grief. What stages of grieving can I talk about? **If I admit the idea that he is gone, I already feel guilty for giving up,** to put it bluntly." – Partner of a missing soldier, 37 years old.*

*"Somehow, yes, it becomes a little easier after a year. **You just accept this story and the fact that you must live with it. And that's it. That's your life.**" – Partner of a missing soldier, 35 years old.*

"Missing a Loved One" Experience Well-Being

Mental Health

Talking about their psycho-emotional state, the study participants described such problems as anxiety, depression, apathy, and confusion. This state was most acute immediately after receiving the news of a missing husband/partner. Realizing what happened may take an indefinite time and be accompanied by emotional exclusion from social life.

"At first, you lie there like a stone and don't want to do anything. Yes, you go to work because you have it. And because it's like some kind of stability that you can cling to." – Partner of a missing soldier, 35 years old.

Sometimes, women may feel as if they put their lives on hold and seem to freeze in anticipation. This can be a signal that the wife/partner is going through a stage of denial (does not accept the fact of the disappearance of a loved one) and does not realize that the status of a missing person can be long-lasting and that they will have to live with it.

The respondents said they feel guilty towards their husband/partner for letting their everyday life go on. To a certain extent, women may perceive rest and other attempts to psychologically relieve themselves as a manifestation of disrespect for their loved ones, even as a betrayal. They may think that such behavior will disappoint their husband/partner.

"These are stupid and wrong thoughts, but still, I think when we see each other, he will see you wearing this, you wearing that. And I started thinking, what if he started thinking that it was so frivolous and uncaring of me that I was thinking, 'I want to buy a new blouse or a new pair of pants'." It's also hard to buy something without him because I'm emotionally attached to the fact that we used to shop together. And it's hard regarding what he'll think because, in three years, my outfits would have changed entirely. What was I doing, and what was I apprehensive about and thinking about? Was I thinking about him? Or was I thinking about some clothes? That is a question." – Partner of a missing soldier, 28 years old.

This pattern may be less pronounced, but it still affects how women plan their time and what they "allow" themselves.

"You know, somehow I don't feel guilty about having a rest. Sometimes, it comes to a point where you think you should be doing

something... And so you think you should do something so that it doesn't drag on, this state of not wanting to do anything. But in general, I'm probably more guided by my feelings. **I feel tired today, so I rest. [...] But I can't say I allow myself to have a super vacation. Perhaps I don't know, but I would like to go somewhere to the sea. But I have a feeling that this is too much.** As if there is some kind of limit to what kind of vacation is too much and what kind is not."

In addition, the wives/partners of missing soldiers may feel guilty and discouraged in their efforts to find and return their loved ones.

"I think I'm not doing enough. At the same time, I realize I am doing too much, even concerning someone else. Yet, I tell myself, "[Name], you're doing fine. You're doing well. You're fighting. You're doing well."
– A woman waiting for her partner to return from captivity, 27 years old.

The emotional state and mental health of women may be negatively affected by social attitudes and a weak culture of respect for servicemen and their families. Lack of tact and respect increases feelings of discouragement and despair.

*"It's just that mentally, you are constantly on the phone. In these chat rooms, someone will write something bad about your husband's unit, and you try to shut them up. **And so you're tense because you think: "What was it all for? This is who you are - that your husband is being abused in captivity, and you're standing in a queue with all these women, fighting for humanitarian aid. You're trying to save a little money on diapers** and everything because you see that everyone is on their own. You stand there, for example, in [the city], someone has come with their whole family to receive humanitarian aid, and you stand in a queue with a small child in the sun, and no one will let you through."* And such stupid thoughts come into my head, like "what's it all for?" I'd rather be spending time with my husband somewhere, and

none of this would happen.” – A partner waiting for a soldier to return from captivity, 27 years old.

Psychological Aid

Wives and partners of missing soldiers do not immediately seek psychological aid. Women often feel this need only when they see that their emotional state affects their physical health. At this point, they may feel confused, especially if they have no experience with psychological counseling.

Warriors' loved ones can get help by contacting mental health professionals at the Coordination Headquarters. However, the respondents said that they trusted the recommendations of civil society initiatives in this matter.

When women decide to seek psychological counseling or psychotherapy, they do not always receive an experience that meets their needs and helps improve their quality of life. Thus, according to the study participants, specialists from the Coordination Headquarters could assist formally, but they had already been burnt out from working on this topic. One of the respondents said that she had looked for a psychologist on the Internet but found “the wrong one” and did not receive the help she needed.

A common problem we identified during the study was that psychologists should have asked women additional and clarifying questions. The respondents said our interviewers might have been the first to listen to their entire story.

*“I feel better when asked a question, and I answer it. I can't just come and start telling my story. And I had a psychologist. Perhaps she used a certain methodology. **She would ask me one or two questions, and I would have to tell her. Then I'd sit there, looking at her, because I'd not be ready to speak. She'd ask me a question, and I'd tell her.** And somehow, it was not effective for me. I tried to*

answer some questions, for example, so that she could give me some advice, but she didn't. Her methodology was that I had to come to this conclusion on my own, to create some ideas that I didn't know how to say, some ideas that would help me. So I sat there and thought: "What's the point? I'm already helping myself and coming up with my ideas." It didn't help me much. I just didn't resume these sessions and didn't look for a new one." – Partner of a missing person, 33 years old.

Negative experiences with counseling and therapy may discourage wives/partners of missing soldiers from continuing to seek therapists. Moreover, some respondents said that they generally did not believe that treatment could be helpful for them, as it would not help them find their husband/partner and get out of the state of “living with the unknown.” For the respondents, honest communication was essential for continuing counseling or therapy when they were not given unreasonable expectations.

*"I found a girl who agreed to be my counselor. **And I liked that she told me right away, like, 'You can't do anything about it. The guys are not here. They are in captivity. And we will work, but you will feel as bad as you did before.'**" I liked the fact that this person was honest with me, both about me and my mental health. I worked with her on certain issues regarding the death of my aunt, the death of my grandfather, and the fear of getting a similar disease so that I wouldn't be overwhelmed by it. Because it all came together, and it was tough. It became much easier for me. But the therapy was over. And [it happened] just like she said: it was hitting you, and it will continue hitting you." - Partner of a missing soldier, 22 years old.*

The respondents also mentioned that they sought medical help when they felt symptoms of depression and apathy.

It should be emphasized that self-administered medication is harmful and may lead to a deterioration in health. Any medication-related issues should be resolved under the supervision and guidance of a medical professional.

*"It was tough. I worked with a psychotherapist for six months. **Six months after my husband's disappearance, I was prescribed antidepressants because I couldn't cope. I have been taking antidepressants for a year and two months now.** It was about nine to ten months after my husband's disappearance that I could talk about it. Before then, it immediately brought tears to my eyes."*

One of the most effective ways for respondents to receive psychological aid was to stay in psychological rehabilitation camps. The women found themselves in a safe and trusting environment among people who had similar experiences and could understand them. They were not afraid to talk about sensitive topics. The change of circumstances stabilized the respondents' psycho-emotional state and allowed them to switch to other things.

*"...But I felt that I needed help, that I could no longer cope. But it was when they told me about my son so I was overwhelmed. [...] **And it would have been a year, I was in rehabilitation, it would have been a year since my husband went missing. And, to be honest, I'm grateful that I was there at that moment because I wouldn't have gotten out of that state on my own, I think, psychologically.** And they called me and asked if I had a wish. When I told my children, they said: "Go, go!". Anyway, I underwent rehabilitation in [name]. It was an excellent team, and I liked the art therapy there. [When] we were leaving, we had tears because we somehow got together, and we still keep in touch." – Partner of a missing soldier, 50 years old.*

However, the format of support groups and group work is not suitable for all wives/partners of missing soldiers. The respondents said it is

difficult to share their pain and worries with others, as they feel someone may be going through an even worse situation.

Physical Health

Living with the unknown and a sense of uncertainty often harms women's physical health. Some of the study participants reported feeling tired and exhausted, as well as experiencing exacerbation of chronic diseases or general deterioration of their health.

*"I **sleep a lot**. I mean, in some periods, I sleep a lot. I can, for example, wake up in the morning, eat there, do some work, go to bed, and sleep until the evening." – Partner of a missing soldier, 27 years old.*

*"I don't remember when I realized I needed to do something about it. **My heart is constantly hurting. It's making me sick.** I went to massages for a while to get rid of these clamps, at least a little bit. It helped for a short time, just a short time." – Partner of a missing soldier, 22 years old.*

*"As I understand it, **due to stress, I developed heart problems.** I was examined. Nothing was found, no pathologies, no diseases. I had nothing. The doctors said it was all due to stress." – Partner of a missing soldier, 22 years old.*

Yet, women may put their health care on the sidelines because they want to continue actively searching for their missing husband/partner.

*"When it really hurts, **I've been to the doctor once during this time.**" – Partner of a missing soldier, 34 years old.*

On the other hand, the need to continue fighting for the fate of their husband/partner can motivate women to pay attention to their health.

One respondent said she also relied on her partner's potential decision on this issue.

*"Do I take care of myself in any way? It's hard to say yes. In the beginning, as soon as it happened, [...] when I realized that I am on my own, everything depends on me... And his fate, well, not fate, but all his affairs also depend on me, [that] I make decisions, **I was guided by [the thought] "yes, what would he say, what would he do" for a very long time in my head. And based on that, I made a lot of decisions, including about my health.**" – Partner of a missing soldier, 28 years old.*

Once spouses/partners get past the grieving phase, they may seek medical help more often.

Relationships and Recognition

Living with the unknown is a challenging experience that affects all spheres of life of the wife/partner of a missing soldier. Women must find new meanings in life and build a new routine while thinking they may never see their loved ones again. The study participants said that with the passage of time and the support of others, they managed to accept the situation, partially regain their strength, and move on with their lives.

*"...And it was challenging. But a certain moment came. There were different moments when I was losing heart, when I bought a suit and said: "Well, now I can die. This is the suit you will bury me in." [...] But thanks to the people who are around me, my family, my friends, thanks to the people who are just human, who I met on my way, with whom I hadn't even talked for many years, but they somehow responded to your need and volunteered to help you, to guide you They even helped me to hire an investigator who gave me advice. [...] **Thanks to all these people, I accepted this situation.** I have no choice but to accept it. Yes, indeed, there is only 1% hope, but it is still there. And I want it to be there. But **we still continue to live because***

my husband wanted us to live. We lived our lives. Not just to be there somewhere on the sidelines but to live it. That is why I am trying to do it. – Partner of a missing soldier, 40 years old.

The respondents said they often had to support children, parents, and other relatives of their husband/partner and take responsibility for their moral and psychological state. On the one hand, the additional burden can help to keep up and mobilize strength. Yet, in such circumstances, it can be difficult for a woman to process her own grief, and she may feel tired.

*"I probably didn't have many of the problems that mothers have. Because, after all, we didn't have children. During this period, I only got two cats. Because I wanted to have children, but it didn't happen. **That's why we try to support his parents. Because his mother has completely abandoned everything and doesn't want any help, and it's even hard for me to do something, to bring her a cooker from [the city]: "No, no, no, you don't need to do anything. When [my son] comes back, then everything will be fine, then..."*** – Partner of a missing soldier, 35 years old.

Material Needs and Security

Finance

It is not always possible for women to put their work on hold to have time to grieve. In most cases, they must take care of their financial well-being so they continue working. In particular, women not officially married to a serviceman may find themselves in this situation. In this case, the salary of the missing soldier is usually paid to relatives, such as a warrior's parents or minor children. According to the law, families receive payments until the day the missing soldier is officially recognized

as dead or until the soldier is removed from the military unit's personnel lists.⁶⁰

Wives and partners often want to continue their professional activities to support family members, including children and parents.

*"Again, it's finances. **And I realize that I already have a child, my mother is unemployed, and I need to take care of it all. That is, I need to plan some savings for my child for the future.** [...] That is, most of it is still the material side. And my job is such that I need official work experience, and I should not lose it." – Partner of a missing soldier, 33 years old.*

Legal Issues

Women who do not have the status of an official wife face additional difficulties. In the previous sections, we have discussed some of the legal restrictions they face, including the right to body identification, benefits, and payments. At this stage of the journey, female partners may not be in a position to receive certain information or payments or influence decisions regarding property.

As of September 2024, a procedure was introduced to prove the fact of a relationship for couples not officially married. However, this lengthy process requires considerable emotional, physical, and time resources, which are not always available to grieving women. If the partners of missing soldiers start to prove the fact of the relationship, their mental health may deteriorate, as they have to go through bureaucratic procedures.

Vocation

The unstable moral and psychological state of the wives/partners of missing soldiers can negatively affect their ability to work and focus on

⁶⁰ National Social Service of Ukraine (2024, July 18). Payment of financial support to families of servicemen who went missing. nssu.gov.ua/news/vyplaty-hroshovoho-zabezpechennia-simiam-viiskovosluzhbovtziv-znyklykh-bezvisty.

specific activities. Moreover, they often do not have the time and energy to work because they are searching for information about their loved ones. Some study participants said they needed time to restore their emotional balance after receiving the news of the disappearance.

*"I've put it off for now. I don't have the resources. **The responsibilities I already have require more time than I currently have.** And I can't give up any of this to look for a new line of work. Well, neither time nor emotional resources." – Partner of a missing soldier, 37 years old.*

Sometimes, a woman may return to work tasks earlier because she cannot take additional vacations or find a replacement.

*"I had already been told through my colleagues [that] they had already found out about my condition and whether I was planning to go to work and so on. **So I had already realized that I had to go out and make a decision then. Because it was clear that work would not wait,** I was replaced for some time, but it can't last forever." – Partner of a missing soldier, 34 years old.*

Yet, professional activity can be a factor that helps women stabilize their moral and psychological state.

*"I can't stay idle for long. As they say, **I begin to invent anything to keep me out of the house.** Secondly, I love my job very much." – Partner of a missing soldier, 33 years old.*

*"And it was my desire to return as soon as possible. First of all, I love what I do, and this is my atmosphere. **I have a great job and a great place to work. It's my second home. And I realized that, on the contrary, it would be much easier for me mentally when I returned to the way it was before.** This is my job, and this is my place. Everything*

*is great. And I returned there. They were waiting for me there.” –
Partner of a missing soldier, 33 years old.*

“Disappearance” Experience Conclusions

We have broken down the experience of wives and partners of missing soldiers into the following elements:

- 1.** The connection is lost
- 2.** You receive notifications
- 3.** Going through bureaucratic hell
- 4.** Searching for a loved one
- 5.** Confirmation of death
- 6.** Living with the unknown

Living through this experience, women assume responsibility for finding their loved ones. On the one hand, this indicates that wives and partners fulfill the functions of the state, which should investigate the disappearance of a soldier and provide information about his fate to his family. On the other hand, such activities may be part of a coping strategy to curb anxiety.

Women facing the disappearance of a loved one may not have time to take care of their health and need quality psychological support that takes into account their experience. Also, due to the constant search for information about the fate of their loved one and psychological exhaustion, wives or partners may often be forced to quit their jobs.

Missing soldiers' beloved may eventually go through the experience of wives and partners waiting for their husbands or partners to return from captivity and/or the experience of wives and partners of fallen soldiers.

The Captivity Experience



A part of the Veteran's Journey

A part of the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved

Important processes and points

A serviceman's stay in captivity is one of the most challenging stages of the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved. In most cases, wives/partners of prisoners of war do not have information about the place and conditions of detention or the health of their husband/partner. They must actively communicate with government agencies and international organizations to secure his early release. In this part of the study, we focused on the emotions and opinions of women living through this experience. We partially relied on other studies and the roadmap developed by the Coordination Headquarters⁶¹ to clarify information on legal aspects and the specifics of the algorithm for communicating with responsible authorities, such as the military unit, the military enlistment office, and the Coordination Headquarters.

Loss of Connection

Recalling the last conversation with their husbands/partners, women said that they could sometimes guess or know about the problematic situation during combat missions and the risk of being captured.

"And when I talk to him, I say: 'I'm asking you simply: whatever it is, any opportunity to survive, take it.' I tell him: 'Because you will bury not only yourself but also me next to you.' And he told me, 'I promise you, but you have to promise me. Promise me that you will give me three sons.' I said: 'Okay. I promise you, just come back, [that's] the main thing.' – A partner waiting for a soldier to return from captivity, 25 years old.

"And then three days later, this so-called evacuation to honorable captivity began. I mean, I already realized that what he was telling me was true [and] that's what was happening. And they already knew about it." – A partner waiting for a soldier to return from captivity, 40 years old.

⁶¹ Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War (n.d.). Procedures for the family if a serviceman is captured, missing or killed. roadmap.koordshtab.gov.ua/prisoner-of-war.

A long-lasting loss of contact with a service member often precedes the news of a serviceman's capture. (This experience was also described in the section "The Experience of 'Disappearance'").

*"There were moments when he did not get in touch for four days, then 11 days. I went to the unit, crying, asking them to 'say something.' They told me: 'Why are you crying? Why are you coming here? If you are not on the list of dead and wounded, then everything is fine.'⁶²" But I kept going anyway. **Then, I received a plus sign in a text message from some unknown number. I wrote: "What is this?". They answered: "Yours is fine."**⁶³ Or, for example, a message from another number: "Everything is fine. Say hello to his mom. He loves you."⁶⁴ – Partner waiting for her partner from captivity, 40 years old.*

Receive Notifications

According to the official procedure, a report of capture should come from a military unit, the military enlistment offices.⁶⁵ Several study participants received information in this way. However, in some cases, women learned about the capture of their husband/partner from other sources: from fellow soldiers, from the news, social media, or by contacting official channels themselves after a long period of loss of contact.

*"And then [date] my husband's documents were found on the **enemy's Telegram channels** [TG channels]." – Partner of a prisoner of war, 47 years old.*

⁶² Translated from Russian - Ed. Note.

⁶³ Translated from Russian - Ed. Note.

⁶⁴ Translated from Russian. - Ed. Note.

⁶⁵ Legal Hundred (2022). Status of missing persons and prisoners of war.

legal100.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/2022_status_poloneni_h_i_znikli_h.pdf.

Partners/wives may receive information about the captivity of their loved ones from their brothers or sisters-in-arms if they had established communication before.

Confirming the Status of a Prisoner of War

After receiving news of captivity, wives/partners go through a large number of bureaucratic and legal procedures. Despite the existence of competent authorities, a significant share of responsibilities related to these processes falls on women.

"You just submit the information yourself. Surname, identification code, if you have one, passport. For example, height, weight, and eye color are important features. So you can describe all this calmly, sit there, and upload this information. I think this is a plus. The same way you can call the NIB [National Information Bureau], call the Red Cross, go to the police, file a report." – Partner of a prisoner of war, 35 years old.

According to some study participants, bureaucratic procedures have been partially improved. In particular, a detailed roadmap has been developed by the Coordination Headquarters for relatives of prisoners of war.⁶⁶

"Now there are roadmaps where everything is written. There are missing persons or prisoners or war, depending on a situation or status. They have created a personal account, a very convenient feature." – Partner of a prisoner of war, 35 years old.

Improved instructions and algorithms of actions make it possible to understand better what needs to be done here and now. However, after receiving the news of their husband/partner's capture, women find themselves in a crisis. During this period, the warriors' beloved go

⁶⁶ Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War (n.d.). Procedures for the family if a serviceman is captured, missing or killed. roadmap.koordshtab.gov.ua/prisoner-of-war.

through a state of shock, an acute phase of grieving, and become highly vulnerable. The need to go through bureaucratic procedures becomes an additional stressful factor and further destabilizes their psycho-emotional state.

*"And that was it. Well, on the 12th, we were informed that they had gone for a breakthrough. Their whereabouts are unknown. Well, I don't know how long I held out. Maybe ten days. **And my body gave up. I was just taken by an ambulance.**" – Partner of a prisoner of war, 35 years old.*

In the previous section, we said that in some cases, women may first receive news of a missing or possible death of a loved one and then find or receive information that their husband/partner is in captivity.

Women participants in the study said that in such circumstances, they searched for information about their loved one's capture on their own. The sources could be their husband's or partner's brothers / sisters-in-arms' testimonies, Russian Telegram channels, etc. We described the search process in more detail in the previous section.

*"A military officer who was present at the exchange went into one of the buses and started showing ten photos of missing persons from [name] region. Among these ten photos was a photo of my husband, who was identified. **Just from the photo on the bus, they said: "Oh, I've seen him."**" – Partner of a missing soldier, 28 years old.*

After receiving information about a soldier's possible captivity, wives and partners initiate a change of status from missing to prisoner of war by contacting the responsible institutions. The status can be officially changed after confirmation by the International Committee of the Red Cross. However, in some cases, evidence found by relatives of soldiers may not be accepted as they may be considered insufficient grounds for changing the status. In addition, considering the case takes a long time, women may not receive a response for months. For relatives,

confirmation of the status of captivity is essential, as it provides them with information about the colony in which the soldier is currently held.

The respondents who applied to the ICRC to confirm their POW status described its work as unsatisfactory. In particular, they said that the organization may take a long time to respond or not respond at all to letters and appeals.

Some of the responsible organizations stick to the procedures to accept the documentation and update the status, while others do not.

*"...And with a request to change it to 'captivity.' **They replied that "this is not considered a sufficient evidence. We need confirmation from the ICRC or the SSU (Security Service of Ukraine - Ed. Note).**" I did not have the SSU confirmation at that time. But when I did, I sent the documents again. However, I did not receive a response. **I waited for two or three months for the second request and didn't get a response**, but I kept in touch with [name]. This is the deputy who told me what happened. [...] And then I attributed it to the fact that sometime in this period, the information was lost, and it was inappropriate for them at the time. And even though I sent a request to change his status... [...] I did not receive a response and did not push them further. I just stopped. And that was it." – Partner of a missing soldier, 28 years old.*

*"We probably have a 'captivity' status in the Coordination Headquarters. **And the ICRC has not confirmed it, of course.**" – Partner of a missing soldier, 28 years old.*

Sometimes, women manage to obtain an official change of status, which is a significant relief for them, as it confirms the fact that their loved one did not die. As we have already emphasized, such changes are often the result of independent searches by wives/partners.

*"The ICRC is a separate topic nowadays. I don't understand why they exist as a separate entity. How did they help? I say: "You have already confirmed my husband on [date]. You have confirmed to me that he is in the colony. Thank you." **But what they confirmed was something that I myself found.**" – Partner of a prisoner of war, 40 years old.*

Sometimes, women need more evidence to apply for an official status change. However, new information gives them hope and encourages them to continue searching for their loved ones.

*"Despite the details of what happened, **we are holding on to the fact that he is alive, or at least was.** And we are looking and waiting." – Partner of a missing soldier, 28 years old.*

Such cases are an example of the intersection of the journeys of missing soldiers' beloved and those of the wives and partners of prisoners of war. Officially, a husband/partner may have the status of a missing person. However, his beloved identifies herself as the wife/partner of a prisoner of war and fights for his fate, just like other women who go through this path.

Fighting for Liberation in the Unknown

After wives and partners receive the news of their husband's capture and go through the first shock stage, they try to take control of the situation. They need to find levers of influence that will help them get information about their husband's condition and speed up the process of his release.

Women take on the role of unofficial advocates for soldiers, protecting their rights and interests. In particular, they communicate with government agencies (the Coordination Headquarters, the Defence Intelligence of Ukraine, the Security Service of Ukraine, and the National Police of Ukraine), international organizations such as the ICRC, the military enlistment offices, military command, military units, and soldiers' brothers and sisters-in-arms released from captivity. Women also follow

thematic groups on social media. Some respondents mentioned that they had tried to engage Russian human rights activists to try to visit the colony and check the condition of their husband or partner or make sure that he was actually there.

Communication with Those Released from Captivity

Yet, the key source of information about the whereabouts and physical and moral condition of a spouse/partner is the military, who were held captive next to him. After being released from captivity, such colleagues may help a woman search for her spouse or partner and give her brief news about their loved one.

*"I could learn about him only from the guys who come back and may pass something on. They may have seen him somewhere. Only a year ago, one guy came out, and it was from him [through him – Ed. Note]. He knew that [my husband] would be released, and he asked me to find him, to do my best for it. **So in this way, we find out at least where he is, in what condition.**" – Partner of a soldier released from captivity, 40 years old.*

Interaction with the ICRC

According to international law, the International Committee of the Red Cross must monitor the condition and location of prisoners of war in colonies and ensure communication with them. Participants in the study complained about the work of this organization and said that it did not fulfill its obligations. In particular, most women said they did not receive regular letters from their husbands or partners.

***"Well, that is, the person is confirmed. Where is the information? Where are the letters from him? He has the right to send letters or postcards every month. That is, there is no communication, we don't know anything at all, that is, the Red Cross doesn't know anything..."** –*

Partner of a prisoner of war, 35 years old.

The respondents said that during the two years of captivity, they received a letter once. Often, this letter was written quite formally, but it was of great importance for the emotional state of their partners/wives.

*"Only five months into his captivity did I receive a short letter from him: **"Hello, my beloved. I am alive and well. I am in captivity. I remember how there was a breath of fresh air, and then a letter came. It was such a hope."** – Partner of a prisoner of war, 27 years old.*

Search for Information on Social Media

The study participants said they followed both Ukrainian and Russian official and unofficial channels. Women are trying to find information about their husbands or partners, and about the exchange of prisoners of war.

*"...No, no one informs us. We read it in different groups. **This is often said on Russian telegram channels. There are usually some hints there, like, "We are waiting for our guys to be returned."***⁶⁷ *Well, we are, of course, Ukrainians, bad, and they are good. They are waiting for their guys. And we already realize that we are there. We are waiting. **We are already hopeful.** However, honestly, it doesn't always work out that way because there are allegations, and then there is nothing, no exchanges, nothing. And two weeks, and a month, and more. Then there is another round of allegations, another hope. **And then, after the exchanges, we look at photos, videos, our government agencies, the Coordination Headquarters, Mr. Lubinets' Telegram channel, and Facebook page. And we look at every face. And when you don't see your loved one, you wait for those lists and think: "What if."** Well, not yet, not yet." – Partner of a prisoner of war, 40 years old.*

⁶⁷ Translated from Russian - Ed.Note.

Interaction with the Coordination Headquarters

The Coordination Headquarters holds regular meetings for families of prisoners of war. At these events, wives and partners learn about negotiations for the release of their loved ones. Our respondents had different experiences with this body. Some of the participants had a positive evaluation of their activity.

*"It is open to communication. **This is the kind of institution that is designed for us to come and vent our emotions.** We even said, 'Please create these support groups for us.' We want to believe that our relatives will come back. Please give us a program for communicating with the military after captivity. How many have already returned from captivity, right? Give us books, we will read them so that we can occupy ourselves with something." – Partner of a prisoner of war, 27 years old.*

The Personal Account is a convenient tool for wives and partners, as they can receive updates regarding their spouse's or partner's status.

*"**The Coordination Headquarters, in my opinion, is doing a great job communicating with relatives. They are creating a personal account. Everything is there. You can receive notifications through Diia,** making communicating easier for relatives. Plus, the number of people in captivity and the influx of people is growing. [...] People need to understand that the representatives of the Coordination Headquarters actually spend a lot of time with families. Well, more than they should. They do not have to answer at 11 p.m. They don't have to calm the psycho-emotional state of their relatives. They don't have to listen to the cursing in their way." – Partner of a prisoner of war, 25 years old*

However, due to emotional stress, exhaustion from waiting for release from captivity, and a lack of information, wives and partners may aggressively attack representatives of the Coordination Headquarters.

Our respondents also mentioned such cases. Usually, such situations arise when wives and partners want to get information about their loved ones, and the headquarters staff has no news about it.

Creation of Public Associations

For more effective advocacy and mutual support, wives/partners and relatives of prisoners of war create family associations and NGOs.

"We created a chat room on Viber. There were 30 women there at the beginning. Now there are 250 because we communicate with each other on issues related to captivity and our battalion." – Partner of a prisoner of war, 27 years old.

An NGO status allows them to be more visible and carry more weight. Often, the purpose of establishing an NGO is to be represented in international delegations and to participate in closed meetings held by government agencies.

"...This public organization [was created] so we could have some kind of voice, you know? That is, it will be legal at the state level. His sister is an English teacher, her husband's native language. She took additional courses and got a diploma in technical translation so she could go to international meetings. Because we were told [that] we need a specialist who is fluent in English. We wrote letters to the Red Cross, and she translated everything into English, called them, and communicated in English. Not a single representative [of the military] was taken on international trips from the Coordination Headquarters." – Partner of a prisoner of war, 35 years old.

Family associations and NGOs also provide a sense of community and help wives and partners boost morale. Women come together to support each other and share their experiences overcoming legal challenges.

"We wouldn't have survived if it wasn't for this family union. We wouldn't have made it at all, so we would all be in psychiatric hospitals, or I don't know where." – Partner of a prisoner of war, 47 years old.

Participation in Rallies and Actions

Wives and partners join rallies and actions in support of prisoners of war:

- Organize events with other members of the association of families of prisoners of war or the civil society organizations they belong to;
- Unite with representatives of other associations, relatives, friends of prisoners of war, and other people with similar experiences.

The opportunity to participate in such events and draw attention to the problems of prisoners of war is significant for wives and partners. It gives them a sense of involvement in the struggle that brings their husbands or partners home. In addition, meetings at rallies and events create a sense of unity and mutual support, allowing them to share their experiences and find understanding. This experience is precious and helpful for the loved ones of prisoners of war.

*"I was the first to leave the occupied territory, but I was with my child. My friend left, and we were the first: "Let's go to the rallies. Let's order the same hoodies with the same slogans." We already know each other. We know the guys' names. Because we don't know who, where, and with whom. We have our groups by the colonies. I know a colony where my husband is, but I don't know about any conditions or others. Why am I doing all this? Because I have been immersed in all this from the beginning and have seen the results. **I see the results: wives who have created public organizations... that their husbands are back. We are looking for ways to return [our men] because you can keep on saying that Russia is not giving them back, but you***

need to do something to make it give them back. And all these two years, this problem seems to exist, but in the background. No one talks about the total number of prisoners of war. And each [military] unit pulls the blanket over itself, each on its own ..." – Partner of a prisoner of war, 27 years old.

"We are like a family. We go out almost every week. We socialize at the rally, get together, talk, and have some events. Yes. We support each other." – Partner of a prisoner of war, 40 years old.

Captivity Experience Well-Being

Mental Health

Wives/partners of prisoners of war have minimal access to news about the fate of their loved ones. Usually, they only know that their husband/partner is alive and in captivity. This leads to constant anxiety, depression, and exhaustion.

"When my husband was captured, [I was so shocked that] I would not leave the apartment for a month. I would sleep with my child until noon. I would close all the curtains because the nights were restless. At that time, ***I didn't want to do anything. I'd walk around like a zombie, looking for information on my phone,*** and there would be no information there. There was this group, and I probably looked through thousands of photos of dead guys because you were looking for information. You go to bed every night and look, look, look, look. ***And I was in such a terrible state, especially since there was no news from my husband."*** – Partner of a prisoner of war, 27 years old.

The perceived need to live for others may be the only motivation for supporting yourself during this period. Wives and partners hold on to the idea that their loved ones and families need them.

*"Because sometimes... especially when there is some kind of exchange [of prisoners of war] and you realize that he is not there, you feel like you die, as if you die, and that's it. You're, I don't know, broken down into some kind of particles... a lot of them have already died in these two years. And then you get up in the morning and think: "Yeah, right. **You have to wait. No one else will do it but you.** No one will wait or fight. Because, well, only your loved one needs you, no matter what they say. **Plus, you have a son.**" – Partner of a prisoner of war, 40 years old.*

In some cases, the wives/partners of prisoners of war live in this stage in a frozen state, supporting only those activities that can influence the fate of their husband/partner. For them, the point of return to a full life can only be the return of the soldier home.

*"I want my husband to appreciate it. **I just want him to realize that it was all for his sake.** I could have just sat and waited, but I did it for him so he would be a little grateful. [...] And this struggle is no longer about love. It's about the fact that you made a vow to a person. [...] **We are waiting for this meeting to happen, for that spark to come back, we want all these feelings, we want everything.**" – Partner of a prisoner of war, 27 years old.*

For some of the study participants, permanent employment or another occupation was a way of psychological self-support, allowing them to distract themselves from negative thoughts and challenging experiences.

*"Since the moment [my husband] was taken prisoner of war, I have never been so actively engaged in various activities in my entire life as I was during this period. **I have already been going to dancing classes. It was bachata and zumba. [...] I picked up these practices for myself when I had panic attacks, from which I got myself out. [...]***

I mean, I used these things directly.” – Partner of a prisoner of war, 27 years old.

It's worth noting that while this method may temporarily improve morale, in the long run, it can lead to even greater exhaustion and burnout.

*"It's terrible. When I was in this state, it seemed to me that I was going to die, that my life would end here and now. **There are moments when you realize you can reach this state right now if you let go.** If you do something for a second, distract yourself, ground yourself, you don't have to reach that point.” – Partner of a prisoner of war, 27 years old.*

Some respondents said their morale and psychological state deterioration may have prompted them to seek professional support. However, some reported no effect or a weak effect of psychotherapy. Part of the reason for this may be the lack of specialists who can work with trauma related to the experience of war and the conditions of wives/partners of prisoners of war.

***"I even went to a psychiatrist because I still had problems with sleeping, or rather falling asleep. He prescribed me an antidepressant but told me not to take it.** We weighed the benefits of antidepressants for my symptoms against the harm to the baby because I was still nursing. He said: "If you can, better avoid taking it." So I didn't take it. I also started paying a little more attention to sleep hygiene, using my phone less, and going for walks. It worked. [...] However, **psychologists usually say this is a normal reaction to abnormal circumstances in which you have been for a long time. But it doesn't make me feel any better.** I understand this is a normal reaction, but let's do something. There is nothing they can do.” – Partner of a prisoner of war, 37 years old.*

It should be emphasized that self-administered medication is harmful and may lead to a deterioration in health. Any medication-related issues should be resolved under the supervision and guidance of a medical professional.

Some women, on the contrary, reported positive experiences with psychological counseling and psychotherapy.

"For the first time in my life, I deliberately went to see a psychologist. It's great. I recommend it to every person, whether they are civilian or military. If you feel you need help, you can go through five psychologists. They may not be right for you, and the sixth one will be the right psychologist for you. This is absolutely normal." – Partner of a prisoner of war, 27 years old.

Support groups and meetings with associations of women and families of prisoners of war were more effective for the women participants. According to the respondents, the opportunity to share their feelings with people who had similar experiences and could understand their condition greatly supported them.

"We talk with each other and try not to stress ourselves out anymore but to relax. Yesterday, after a meeting with our girls (they came from all over Ukraine to attend this meeting), we went and had a good time. It was a relief for everyone." – Partner of a prisoner of war, 40 years old.

Physical Health

We have identified two factors that can provoke a deterioration in the physical health of a captured soldier's loved one:

- **Response to acute stress after receiving a message** about the capture of a husband/partner;

- **Exhaustion due to the bureaucratic and legal procedures** that women go through.

*"2022 was a terrible year. Very, very terrible. I'm telling you, **I had called an ambulance very often.**" – Partner of a prisoner of war, 40 years old.*

*"In the first year, my teeth crumbled a lot. I had eight teeth dental work done. It was 2022. [...] **Headaches from constant pressure, from stressful news, situations.** Lately, my stomach has not been working well. I think it's a nervous effect. I started eating very quickly: throwing food in my mouth, swallowing it, and that's it. Yes, I don't have any problems, but I understand that they might come later." – Partner of a prisoner of war, 42 years old.*

Warriors' beloved may neglect their health problems and postpone visits to medical facilities because of matters related to the return of their husbands or partners from captivity.

If women have minor children or are caretakers for other relatives, they may experience additional anxiety about their well-being and future due to their deteriorating health.

***"I cried in the hospital because I was afraid that my children would be orphans.** Because their father was gone, I was here for the first few days, thinking everything was over. I mean, it was terrifying." – Partner of a prisoner of war, 35 years old.*

Deteriorating health can also lead to undesirable changes in appearance, such as weight gain, hair loss, deterioration of skin, and wrinkles. This, in turn, further depresses women and negatively affects their morale.

"...And then my hair started falling out. Well, not just fall out. It was

*falling out in clumps. [...] It was a condition like that. Well, my hair killed me, let's say. **So, while the hospital knocked me out, my hair destroyed me. Because my husband was very fond of long hair.** [...] I had thick hair, it was nice. That was it. And when it fell out, I just cried so much that I can't tell you."* – Partner of a prisoner of war, 35 years old.

Changes in appearance caused by stress can cause wives and partners to fear rejection by their loved ones after they return from captivity.

*"...And you need him to come back, and for you not to be ugly. I keep thinking that he will come back and say: "Why do I need you so old now?" Well, you know, **two years have passed, we have changed.**"* – Partner of a prisoner of war, 40 years old.

Yet some study participants said they began to care for their health over time.

*"My health is perfect now. A year ago, I thought I shouldn't focus on just one thing. After all, **captivity is captivity, but there must be something else.**"* – Partner of a prisoner of war, 27 years old.

Relationships and Recognition

The study participants said that after receiving the news of their husbands' or partners' captivity, they could feel separated from other people and the environment. The women also noticed that over time, the level of support for the families of prisoners of war from society decreases, and people around them become less tactful and sensitive to their experience. We assume this is due to an underdeveloped culture of respect for military personnel and their families. Wives and partners of soldiers who went missing also shared similar experiences with us.

*“...Because people are not interested in this. I always say that in 2022, the whole of Ukraine was Mariupol. The whole world knew [the location]. Now it's 2024, and I realize that new heroes and problems are emerging. Then there was Bakhmut, then something else, something else. Well, we shouldn't forget that. Everyone who is there is a hero. If there was no Mariupol, there would be no half of Ukraine. **What did they fight for? What did these guys die for? Now they're in captivity so that they can be treated like this? When we go to the rallies, there are a lot of comments: “Yeah, these are paid participation campaigns” or “Why are you doing this? It doesn't help anything.”** – Woman waiting for her partner from captivity, 40 years old.*

***“It's annoying – these stupid questions. “Well, tell me, there was an exchange. Isn't he there?”** I tell everyone: “If he is there, I will immediately post it on social media.” So he's not there, and my whole world turns upside down. I'm dying in there somehow. And you keep writing to me and writing and writing. It's just really annoying. **Or when they say: “What are you doing?”, “Why are you doing nothing, and he's still not home?”** – Partner waiting for her partner from captivity, 40 years old.*

Wives and partners may hear inappropriate statements addressed to them. Most often, they relate to the payments that family members of a prisoner of war may receive and the possible relationships of a warrior's beloved with other men. A woman may also face distrust from relatives who fear she will not be faithful to her husband or partner while he is in captivity.

***“...And my mother-in-law told me, like: “If you really want to, you can do anything without anyone knowing.”** Well, it's unpleasant to hear this, but you understand it in your mind. She is also afraid that this is it. That I would start living my life and forget about her son. But who*

will pull him out? What will happen to his children? Will I let him communicate with the kids? Probably, they have such concerns there.” – Partner of a prisoner of war, 35 years old.

Also, wives/partners of prisoners of war may face condemnation because of their appearance and “inconsistency” with the image of a grieving woman that others consider correct.

*“I was walking around like this, saying hello to my in-laws and other relatives. I’m walking away, two steps, and they say: **“Look at this [an insulting word], look at this.”** [...] And you just want to tell them to fuck off.” – Partner of a prisoner of war, 35 years old.*

The study participants also shared that their social circles changed after the news of their husbands’ or partners’ captivity. Women often said that they stopped communicating with some of their relatives or friends, which affected their feelings of loneliness and isolation from society.

*“Actually, the war and our personal and family situation opened our eyes to many things and showed us who is who. Because the circle of friends has changed dramatically, **many people have dropped out.**” – Partner of a prisoner of war, 47 years old.*

Although communication with some of their family members had ceased, the respondents said there were often people around them who still provided them with support and assistance.

***“I have people with whom I can just talk and cry.** There’s a lump in my throat. I have the support of close people, and, in fact, [the war] revealed who is really close and who, unfortunately... 20-30 years of friendship, and it turns out that it was not genuine.” – Partner of a prisoner of war, 47 years old.*

Some respondents shared that they could make new acquaintances and find close people among those who had similar experiences in the communities of wives/partners and families of prisoners of war.

"My main social circle is the girl I met in the early days. She is a military wife. She asked her husband: "Give me some contacts, contacts of a wife of someone like you," because she didn't know anyone. And he gave her my contact. We started to communicate. She is my closest friend, and she is like family, like a sister." – Partner of a prisoner of war, 40 years old.

Wives and partners of military members who have children must find ways to keep their children connected to their father while he is in captivity. Fulfilling this responsibility can be a significant challenge for women. This process becomes even more complicated when the children are young. In this case, the mother has to explain to them what war and captivity are in general, trying not to traumatize the children and remain emotionally stable.

*"We also live with his parents, so the children know their father. That is, I can live with my parents. Well, I don't want this line of family to be lost for my kids. **I want them to have this connection with their paternal grandparents. To hear stories about their dad.** To hear their grandmother's stories: "And here's where your dad was when he was a kid." Because the elder child will be 10 in the summer, she remembers him. And the younger one is 5. And she doesn't remember him. She knows from a photo, from a picture, that it's her dad. The elder daughter is telling me: "I forgot my dad." I said: "What do you mean?" – "Well, the feeling of dad. I mean, his hugs there, how he was with me, how we talked to him." – Partner of a prisoner of war, 35 years old.*

"...We go to every rally with my son. I say: "We're going to the rally, so

our dad can be home.” And my son says: “But we went to the rally. Where is Dad?” I said: “Our dad is very far away.” – “Why is he far away?” I said: “Well, because the bad guys won’t let him go.” But I don’t tell him in detail because a child grows up and will talk about things that are not necessary. And to those who do not need to know. **“Why don’t they let him go?” – “Because our dad is very strong, and they are afraid of him.” I tell him that. He said: “Are they bad guys who launch missiles?” I said: “Yes, those are the bad guys.” That’s our short dialogue.** I say, “Dad loves you very much and wants to see you very much.” I bought him toys as if from my husband, but not much. Sometimes, he asks for them himself. We have photos of him with his dad hanging there. He sees him, [says] “That’s my Dad,” and knows his name. And that’s it. **I don’t cry around my child like some wives do. One day, the time will come, his Dad will come, and I just say, “It’s not time yet.”** And sometimes he wakes up and says: “Are we going to the rally with you today?” I say: “No, we’re not attending the rally today.” He said: “Maybe we won’t go to the kindergarten, but will go to the rally?” – Partner of a prisoner of war, 27 years old.

Material Needs and Security

Families of captured servicemen are paid a monthly allowance.⁶⁸ To receive this cash assistance, they must apply to the military unit commander. In particular, the wife, adult children, and captured servicemember are entitled to financial assistance.

However, a soldier's beloved, who was not officially married to him, is not eligible for financial support from the state. At the same time, some of the study participants noted that stress and anxiety negatively affected their ability to work.

“Sometimes, I pull myself together and try to do something. It’s so

⁶⁸ Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (2024). The Law of Ukraine “On Social and Legal Protection of Servicemen and Members of Their Families,” Number 2011-XII. zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2011-12#n95.

slow. It takes a long time... Sometimes I don't work. I just want to be among people so I don't have to be alone. It's different every time." – Woman waiting for her partner from captivity, 42 years old.

Performing work tasks can also be complicated by the need to combine work and matters related to the captivity of a spouse/partner: advocacy trips and meetings with families of prisoners of war, attending rallies, legal and bureaucratic procedures, and searching for information about a spouse/partner.

"They immediately tell me: "Look, we have a problem with staff, a problem with vacations. If you need to go somewhere for one or two days, you must arrange it between yourself who will replace you." I immediately realized that this was not my option. I mean, I don't know when I'll need to go to [the city in the center]. What if it's my shift? Not everyone will want to change with me." – Partner of a prisoner of war, 40 years old.

It can also be challenging to adapt a standard work schedule to the routine that wives/partners of prisoners of war are rebuilding in response to the stress and challenges they face. This problem is especially relevant for the first time after the news of the capture when women are in the acute grieving phase or are just beginning to emerge from it.

"They offered me to work at home. But it's a full-time job. It's six hours. Well, it's like a call center: you can work in the morning, in the evening, during the day, you know, it's a swap with someone. But it's easier to do it when you're physically at work. You can approach the person, talk to them, and change the environment. Not when you're working at home. Plus, I realized that if I were working at home, I would always be at home. And I will have to give up those moments that pull me out. Sport, for example. I mean, I have to redo my whole schedule somehow. Plus traveling to [the city in the center]. Yes,

employers understand your problems. But because these meetings are not always directly scheduled, they are far away, planned discretely, and you must go away. And this does not suit everyone. It's a bit difficult.” – Partner of a prisoner of war, 35 years old.

Some participants also mentioned feelings of fear and helplessness, as they were left alone with potential threats and did not know who could support them in case of a dangerous situation. Women were concerned not only for their safety but also for the well-being of their family members. They felt anxious that in case of danger, they would have to defend their family and protect their interests alone.

*“And now it's tough. **There is no one to stand up for me as a woman. There is no one. So, you have to learn to stand up for yourself. For myself, for my children.** I see how my eldest son is afraid when there is a conflict. Well, somewhere, the men had a conflict. And we are there. We have to go through certain places. And I watched, and my children turned pale because they realized that I couldn't protect them physically. Unfortunately, and I realize that. And it's terrifying.” – Partner of a prisoner of war, 35 years old.*

Housing and Environment

The everyday life and routine of wives/partners of prisoners of war often change. In the previous parts of this section, we wrote that after a soldier's capture, they must take on new roles related to seeking information about their loved one's fate, representing his interests, and engaging in public activities. Yet, women must continue dealing with the usual household and financial issues and ensure the family's well-being. However, they cannot consult their husbands/partners on essential decisions and share responsibility, which creates additional pressure.

“...And, of course, it's very depressing when you realize that all this has fallen on your shoulders as a woman. And it's a burden. It's really

a burden.” – Partner of a prisoner of war, 27 years old.

The situation is further complicated for those women who were forced to move because of the hostilities. In this case, they must also get used to a new place and build their lives almost from scratch.

*“I would like to say that **the quality of life has significantly deteriorated**. I cook as little as possible, something simple. I don't exercise. Because I used to have such a sporty family, home comfort, regular workouts, well, it was great, cheerfulness, strength. **I had a good life. And now I'm in [a city in the West] eating pasta, and that's from humanitarian aid.**” – Partner of a prisoner of war, 37 years old.*

Life Skills and Adaptability

Although the journey of a prisoner of war's beloved is complex and lengthy, the study participants said that over time, they found the strength to get used to the current state of affairs. Most respondents managed to cope with new responsibilities and workload, devote time to themselves, and build a routine that maintained their morale.

*“You sometimes think: “I can't do anything. I've been traveling for two years. I haven't achieved anything.” It's hard. **You just find such things that support you**. For example, I like [dancing]. I used to dance professionally at school. I graduated from a choreography class. **And now I go dancing**. That's an hour where I can remember that I am a woman.” – Partner of a prisoner of war, 35 years old.*

At the same time, some wives and partners have little time to rest and care for themselves. In particular, women who have young children or care for other family members face this challenge.

“In general, time for myself is when the children sleep and I surf the

***Internet. That's it."** – Partner of a prisoner of war, 37 years old.*

Preparing for Return of a Spouse or Partner from Captivity

Some respondents said they were preparing for the return of their husband or partner. Most often, women mentioned taking specialized psychological courses and creating savings for the rehabilitation of their loved ones after captivity. At such classes, they learned about a soldier's psychological state after returning, how a couple's first meeting might go, and what challenges they might face in their future lives.

*"What are these resources? They have different focuses—for example, some public organizations. The Coordination Headquarters organizes **a series of sessions with a psychologist.**" - Partner of a prisoner of war, 35 years old.*

Women realize that the experience of captivity changes both their husbands or partners and themselves. They can set aside time to find new ways to establish an emotional connection and build a life together. In particular, the respondents studied the experience of soldiers released from captivity and their loved ones to have realistic expectations and better prepare for re-acquainting with their husbands or partners.

*"...Because they say that they come as different people, and you start your whole life over again, from the beginning. **You get to know each other again. You get used to each other. Because I became a different person,** he became a different person. It's tough. And it's scary. Because many families break up because of all this. **You need to prepare yourself mentally for this.**" - Partner of a prisoner of war, 40 years old.*

*"**Yes, I try to keep in touch.** There have been a lot of interviews with those released from captivity. **I want to understand at least a little bit***

about what they are going through so that I don't seem to be wearing rose-colored glasses. Because there is very unpleasant news when wives wait and wait and don't know how to deal with such men. And their values change, and their comrades are more important to them than their families. And families break down.” - Partner of a prisoner of war, 42 years old.

At the same time, while waiting for their husband or partner to be released from captivity, women can live in their fantasies about the future, sometimes losing touch with reality. In this way, they try to detach themselves from the painful present and tune in to positive thinking.

“And for some reason, it seems that when he is released through exchange, I will have a lot of strength and energy, and I will not be as miserable as I am without him. **It seems as if everything will be good, and all the bad things will disappear immediately with his return.** I understand with my mind that this will not be the case, but with my emotions...” - Partner of a prisoner of war, 42 years old.

“Well, I bought some things for him. I make some plans, but they change over time. Well, what you have planned for one period of your life may last a year or two. **I often imagine introducing him to our son. They are very, very similar. I will write texts for future posts, like how a father and son meet.** Psychologically, I mostly prepare myself. Plus, you keep it in your head all the time... Since I am a wife, not a sister, not a mother, I have to plan my life and my financial decisions [with the idea of] what [my husband] would do, whether I can make such a purchase.” - Partner of a prisoner of war, 37 years old.

Experience “Liberation from Captivity”

Among the study participants were women whose husbands or partners had already returned from captivity. Our research is only the beginning, and we believe that the experience of wives and partners of soldiers released from captivity requires more in-depth study.

Receiving an Exchange Notification

Wives/partners of prisoners of war, despite their constant involvement in the release of their loved ones and communication with the Coordination Headquarters, do not know for sure when prisoners of war will be exchanged and whether they are on the exchange lists. First, women or other family members receive a call from the Coordination Headquarters. Then, they receive a notification about the status change in their Personal Accounts. A respondent who received a phone call about the return of her loved one said that she even checked whether it was a fraud, as the number was unknown.

*“They called from the Coordination Headquarters. In fact, the Coordination Headquarters had my mom's number, and they called her first, but she didn't hear the phone. So they called me and informed me. God, **it seemed to me that this was going on forever.** They said solemnly: **“We want to tell you the good news...”** I had a million thoughts then. I thought, of course, that he was alive. I was already happy that someone had seen him because, for the last 11 months, we did not know whether he was alive or not. They say that [my husband] is back home and will call you back when he has a phone. And that was it. I don't remember anything else. Then I drifted away. His mom lives two houses away from us. I ran to her in my pajamas and autumn boots for some reason. **I said: “[My husband] was exchanged. She said: “What do you mean? How do you know?”** And I'm the critical one in the family, so I usually say: “Here, let me check those numbers. Maybe they're scammers.” I say the same thing to myself: “Pull yourself together, you wimp.” **I open the phone***

to check what kind of number it is." – Partner of a soldier released from captivity, 37 years old.

You are receiving a first call

After prisoners of war return to the territory controlled by Ukraine, they receive a phone. Thus, they can call their loved ones and stay in touch. Accordingly, wives and partners begin to feel their husbands' return at this stage, even before the first meeting after the exchange. The study participant said that all the time her loved one was awake, she was also awake and stayed in touch with him.

*"And they were already on their way from there. The journalist dialed me on the way, and they recorded the sensitive moments and how he was calling. The Coordination Headquarters informed us about their release at one o'clock in the afternoon, and at nine o'clock in the evening, they arrived in [the village]. They were given backpacks of prisoners released from captivity that included phones, soap and water, and all that stuff. He called from this new number, and we talked until the evening. **Then we texted all night because he didn't sleep at all for the first three days, and I was with him.**"* – Partner of a soldier released from captivity, 37 years old.

Seeing Your Loved One for the First Time After Captivity

"The woman who had received her loved one back from captivity, she already has everything." - Partner of a soldier released from captivity, 37 years old.

After being released from captivity, the soldiers will undergo physical and psychological rehabilitation. According to the official protocol, the

soldiers first undergo a basic medical examination in designated facilities, followed by the necessary procedures and treatment. Relatives and friends can see them only after a week of quarantine. This meeting is emotionally intense for the couple.

*"The general protocol is a week of quarantine, during which neither your family comes to you, nor you are allowed to go to the city. You just put your head together and realize what kind of world you're in. Then, there will be two more weeks of examination, and the family can come. [...] **When I came to see him the second weekend, I had booked a hotel in [the city] at the last minute. And then, at the last minute, he was writing a leave request, and they told him: "You can be given a leave until seven o'clock this evening."** He said, "I want to submit a leave request until Monday." They said: "No, no, no, someone like you went out, took a car, smashed the car, his daughter was injured, got into an accident, so we're not letting you go for the night." Where is the logic? There is no logic. **And we spent the night in the isolation room**, which is really like some kind of dungeon where people with scabies are sent. Where, excuse me, the pillows stink of urine, where there is an air conditioner, but it doesn't turn on because there are four meters between it and the socket, and there is no extension cord. It's just some kind of surreal situation. And so I tried to pull him out of all this." – Partner of a soldier released from captivity, 37 years old.*

Taking Care of Your Loved One

According to the study participant, medical staff attitudes and competence, as well as protocols for treating released prisoners of war, do not always meet the required standards. Therefore, women take on the role of caregivers for their husbands/partners and start caring for their health independently.

"Sleep is a separate issue. According to the protocol, a person may

*stay awake for the first three days, which is normal. Then, **if the sleep does not improve, they must give medication. Three weeks passed, and no one gave him anything.** He began to have some terrible headaches, sleeping for about two hours a night, and so on for three weeks. During the day, he could have just passed out for about two hours.” – Partner of a soldier released from captivity, 37 years old.*

Conclusions: “Captivity of Your Loved One” Experience

We have broken down **the experience of wives and partners waiting for their husbands or partners to return from captivity** into the following stages:

1. You lose connection
2. You are receiving a notification of captivity
3. Confirming the status of a prisoner of war
4. Fighting for release in the unknown

Living through this experience, women may not have time to take care of their health and need quality psychological support. Also, wives and partners of prisoners of war often need legal advice, as they can create public organizations to represent and protect the interests of their husbands or partners and communicate with government agencies and international organizations.

It should be said that this experience has ramifications that should be explored in more detail in the subsequent iterations of the study:

- Trial of a spouse or partner in captivity;
- Death of a spouse or partner in captivity;
- Exchange (release from captivity) of a spouse or partner.

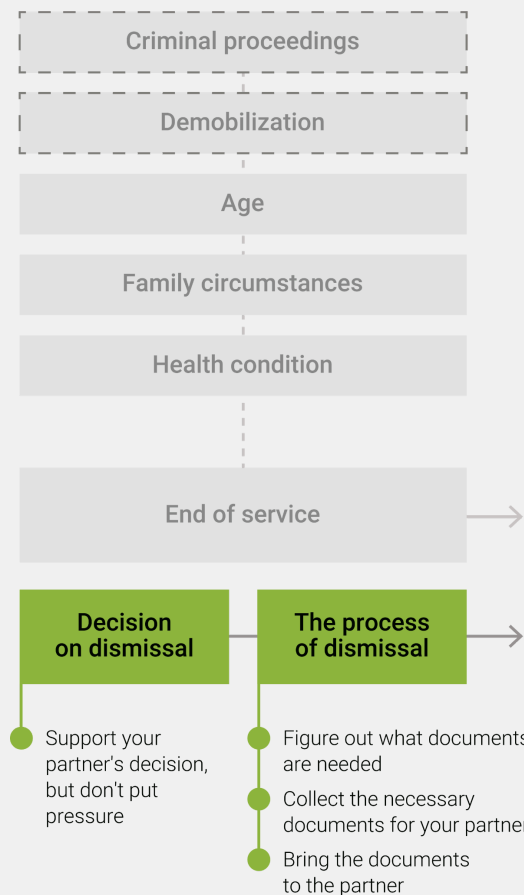
We have broken down **the experience of wives and partners of soldiers released from captivity** into the following components:

1. You are receiving the notification
2. You are receiving your first call
3. You are seeing your loved one for the first time after captivity
4. You are taking care of your loved one

The wives and partners of prisoners of war live an experience full of challenges that affect their well-being. They take care of the family and household, fight for the release of the soldier after he is captured, and help him recover when he returns home. However,


these women's role and contribution often remain invisible and unrecognized by stakeholders.

End of Service



 A part of the Veteran's Journey

 A part of the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved

 Important processes and points

This part of the report is devoted to the end of a soldier's service. Although this process is simple and predictable, it can often be delayed due to bureaucratic procedures.

Grounds for Dismissal

Since the demobilization campaign in Ukraine has not yet been announced and mobilization is ongoing, the following grounds for dismissal during martial law have been established:

- By age;
- For health reasons;
- For family reasons or other valid reasons;
- In connection with the entry into force of a court verdict of guilty, which imposed a sentence of imprisonment, restriction of liberty, or deprivation of military rank;
- In connection with the release from captivity.

This study focused on the most common grounds for discharge: health reasons and family circumstances (the need to care for a family member with a disability or to support three or more children under 18).

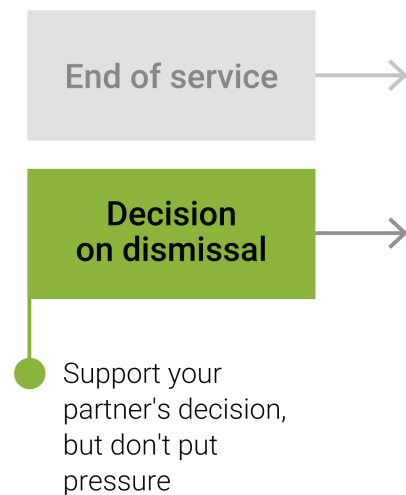
During recruitment, we could not identify and involve women whose loved ones left military service due to age. Dismissal due to imprisonment is based on unique experiences that require a separate analysis. Therefore, we did not consider these groups of women.

It is worth noting that some of our respondents' husbands and partners (and/or relatives) had experience of service and discharge before the full-scale invasion. Accordingly, these women had already experienced the process of completing their loved one's service and transitioning to civilian life (we called them experienced wives and partners). Certain aspects of their journeys differ from those of women who did not have this experience.

Thus, experienced wives and partners may be less confused and more knowledgeable about the discharge procedure, treatment, rehabilitation, transition of a loved one to civilian life, collection of documents, and

other tasks that usually fall on a woman after the end of her husband's or partner's service. However, this experience makes it easier to go through these processes again, as experienced wives and partners often face new obstacles on their loved ones' journey to civilian life.

Your loved one decides to end service



Study participants said it was often difficult for their husbands or partners to decide to leave. In particular, servicemen could have deferred making this decision for the following reasons:

- A perceived sense of duty breach;
- Desire to stay with brothers and sisters-in-arms;
- Uncertainty about civilian life in general.

When planning to leave the military, soldiers realize that they must leave the environment they were accustomed to during their service and re-adjust to the world outside the military. Similar findings were recorded in the study of [Journeys of Veteran Women and Men](#).⁶⁹ It should also be borne in mind that veterans' expectations and opinions of society may change after their combat experience.⁷⁰ The women respondents said

⁶⁹ Veteran Hub (2023). *Journeys of Veteran Women and Men*. drive.google.com/file/d/1gSlkhpMoJHDFNgO6FV0o-y6oA99ieq6a/view. veteranhub.com.ua/analytics/doslidzhenya-shlyahu-veteraniv-i-veteranok/.

⁷⁰ Гуковський, О., & Ковалик, Т. (б.д.). Повернення з війни: перший місяць. Це Ок [Gukovsky, O., & Kovalik, T. (n.d.). Returning from war: the first month. It's OK] tseok.com.ua/veteran/homeagain.

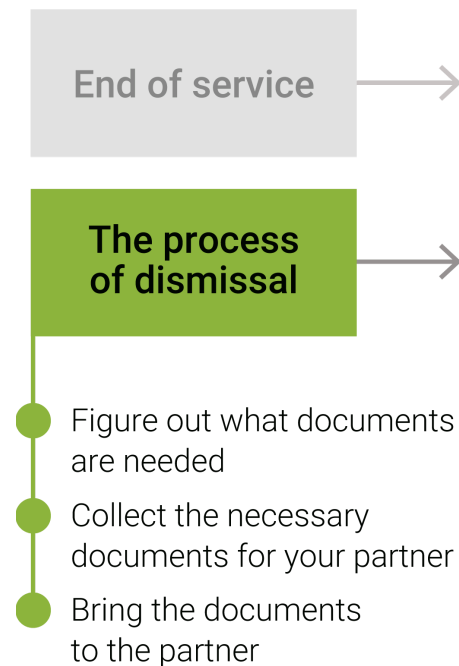
that they tried not to pressure their loved ones regarding the decision to leave, as they respected their choice and feelings.

*“Because it is tough for him to perceive himself as a non-military man. He does not understand how he will live. And what he will do. The decision to demobilize is his decision. **I did not influence this decision because I am for conscious decision-making.** This is a rather difficult decision. And I understand it. And if I hadn't made it, I would probably have felt some guilt later.” – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 40 years old.*

However, if women are facing significant domestic difficulties at this stage, they may feel guilty about hoping that their husband or partner will decide to leave and be with them.

After the decision to discharge is made, servicemen find themselves in a situation where they need to gradually return to civilian life, possibly rebuilding their identity as civilians. Warriors' loved ones go through this process with them.

You are helping your loved one with bureaucratic issues



Discharge for Family Reasons

This study covered four stories about military members being discharged for family reasons. We noticed that such circumstances were not always the only reason for service members to leave the service.

According to the study respondents, there may be additional factors for dismissal on this ground, in particular:

- **General deterioration of the soldier's health;**
- **Consequences of injuries.**

A research participant whose loved one resigned due to the need to care for a loved one (a family member with a disability) also said that in such cases, military personnel may experience a conflict between the desire to care for their family and the desire to stay with their brothers and sisters-in-arms.

"[...] They have such a strong fraternity that I couldn't think of saying

to him, "Stay with me." You feel some kind of civic duty. [...] **Even this time, [my husband] was not going to quit.** The only thing that made him resign was the wording of the resolution: his wife, third-group disability, and cancer. **He discussed the issue of his physical condition, that he could no longer be as capable as before because his knee was very painful.** He would also like to switch to a UAV operator [...]." – Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 27 years old.

A female respondent, whose boyfriend resigned from the service due to having many children (three or more children under 18), said they faced difficulties in completing the paperwork. The woman said that the procedure for dismissal on such grounds is generally complicated, as there currently needs to be a specific list of documents that must be submitted.

"[...] He was discharged under this article, and he had three children to support. He was involved in their upbringing. When we consulted with lawyers, we were told that when I go on maternity leave, I must take a certificate from the maternity hospital where I am registered. Then, this certificate should be attached to the entire package of documents and submitted to the combat group so that they could register it there as he was preparing for discharge. We did this, and the combat group constantly complained. [...] **They said that we would not accept these documents until there was a third child. Although this is a violation.** [...] But he was at 'zero' position until the last moment." – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 due to having many children, 34 years old.

Military units may require different documents to formalize dismissal on these grounds since there are no legal requirements for completing service due to having many children. Such legal conflicts become an additional stressor for warriors' beloved.

*"[...] The draft law has changed. The draft law itself does not contain this provision. It is enough to have dependent children. But there is a certain resolution number 560, which requires that children be dependent. **But you have to be registered as a father on their birth certificate.** And now we have a choice: either during these six months when they won't disturb him, he will adopt children, or we have to think of something else." – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 due to having many children, 34 years old.*

The situation becomes even more complicated if women have to perform additional duties, such as caring for young children and preparing documents.

*"And when the child was about a month old, he was already discharged because all these procedures take time. It's really very hard for me, a child without any vaccinations. It's scary to take him to the store. **I mean, I can't leave my child with my older children. I can't do basic things like buy groceries.**" – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 due to having many children, 34 years old.*

Discharge for family reasons can be considered the most stigmatized reason for ending service, as far as others' attitudes are concerned.

*"They reacted differently. The girls whose husbands are at war were not all so positive about it. **Some said: 'Who will fight then?'**" – A partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 due to having many children, 34 years old.*

Such condemnation from society is a psychological burden for servicemen and veterans, as it increases the feeling of guilt over the completion of their service. In addition, such reactions hurt the warriors' beloved. Under such conditions, veterans and their families may feel uncomfortable transitioning to civilian life. Moreover, stigmatization can

prevent them from experiencing certain emotions (e.g., the joy of being together again) and lead to a sense of isolation from the community of the military and their beloved, which makes it difficult for couples to turn to them for support when needed.

Discharge for Health Reasons

The study participants described the discharge process for health reasons as lengthy and bureaucratic, requiring the preparation of many documents. In particular, the respondents talked about the difficulties they and their loved ones faced during the Military Medical Commission (MMC) and the Medical and Social Expert Commission (MSEC). Given the importance of this stage for wounded soldiers, we have covered it separately.

Paperwork

Wives and partners take care of the paperwork required for discharge from service if the service member cannot handle these matters due to health reasons, the need to be at the military unit or other reasons.

***“Honey, you need to bring it tomorrow.”** The next day, his loved one is getting in the car and driving from [city in Poland] to [city in Ukraine]. And at the end of June, we already understood that he would be discharged, so he started handing over his internal documents. In the end, he arrived.” – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 to care for a loved one, 36 years old.*

The study participants described the transparency and clarity of the discharge procedure differently. Among the respondents were those who had a positive experience of receiving consultations and legal assistance from the military unit in which their husband or partner served.

*“It was fine. They helped, assisted, and many of those involved in this brigade knew his situation. And in general, **this brigade has a***

***patronage service**, which even helps with all these documents. So, there were no bureaucratic obstacles. Plus, we have a good relationship with the commander. In this regard, the brigade works very well.” – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 29 years old.*

Yet, some study participants complained about the need for more precise procedures, communication, and problems with paperwork. In particular, they discussed situations where documents were lost and had to be re-submitted.

*“He talked to the lawyers and sent me **the list of documents he had to have**. I couldn't give him the originals because I was going abroad and I had to have different documents in case of an emergency. He was still in the hospital [when] they started to discover all this. We made notarized copies, just in case. **We sent them. A month later he wrote to me: “They were lost somewhere. Bring them again, please.”**” – Partner of a soldier who resigned from service in 2022-2024 to care for a loved one, 36 years old.*

*“Yes, there is anxiety. **Because the laws are changing, and we don't know what will happen next.**” – Partner of a soldier discharged from service in 2022-2024 due to having many children, 34 years old.*

Passing the MMC and the MSEC

According to the current legislation, injury is not enough for a serviceman to be discharged for health reasons. In particular, a soldier must undergo a military qualification commission and an MSEC to complete service. The wives and partners of the wounded usually play the leading organizational role in this process.

The respondents said they took over preparing all the documents for the commissions, as their loved ones could not do this due to their health

conditions. That is why wives and partners must be able to freely represent the interests of service members during the MMC and MSEC, as they are aware of all the details of the veteran's health condition. However, as our respondents testified, they only sometimes managed to do so without conflict.

*"MSEC. This is a separate organization... Which, perhaps, should not exist in our country. At least in the form it is. It's just a mockery. Everywhere we went to the doctors, I went with him. I had all the documents. I was the only one who talked to the doctors. [...] **When we came to the MSEC, I was not allowed to enter the room. Even when he asked.** I was sitting near the office, and I heard him say: "Let my wife come in. I don't know about the documents. I don't understand anything. She was the one who was doing everything." – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 39 years old.*

The respondents shared that it was emotionally difficult, as they constantly faced disrespect and misunderstanding. It is worth noting that such stressful situations are especially harmful for veterans recovering from injury.

*"[I] said: "Now I'm going to write and call everywhere. Because this is a brutal attitude, they pushed me to the point when they started saying: "**You must have gone to war on purpose to get a disability.**" – Partner of a discharged soldier, 39 years old.*

End-of-Service Stage Well-Being

Material Needs

The respondents emphasized that discharge from service takes a significant amount of time. This, in turn, delays the processing of financial assistance from the state. We would like to emphasize that soldiers who have completed their service for health reasons (after

being wounded) want to quickly complete all the documents, primarily to receive payments and be able to continue treatment and/or rehabilitation. Due to lengthy bureaucratic procedures, veterans and their families may find themselves in a vulnerable position due to a lack of funds for medical needs. In addition, the protracted process of discharge takes away the emotional and psychological resources that soldiers need to recover.

*“Deregistration from the [military] register is around the beginning of spring. At the beginning of summer – formally, there was already information that I would have a disability. I was entitled to a pension from discharge, but it was given only in the fall. [...] **That is, there was a gap of six months when there was no financial support.** I used to joke that I was performing the function of state support for veterans, people with disabilities, pensioners, and other segments of the population.” – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 29 years old.*

Soldiers released from captivity are also entitled to financial assistance. To do so, they must provide a certificate of captivity and other documents.

For the most part, soldiers who return from captivity have health problems and need long-term treatment and rehabilitation. They undergo the first treatment stage at the state's expense and receive additional state support. However, this assistance is not always enough for recovery. Later examinations and procedures must be paid for by the soldier's family, which can strain their financial situation.

*“But for almost the entire spring and June, **virtually all of his salary, which he received there, was spent on his treatment: pills,** various examinations. So we lived on my money, which I earned.” – Partner of a soldier released from captivity, 34 years old.*

To confirm the status of a person with a disability and receive appropriate payments, a soldier released from captivity must undergo a MSEC examination. However, in some cases, going through this procedure, collecting the necessary documents, and receiving funds can take a long time.

“In December, he passed the medical examination and was granted a disability. But yesterday (the interview was conducted in July – Ed. Note), he received his first pension. Because all this time, it was as if he was not entitled to receive these payments. Of course, it's not much, but it's a disability due to the war, the third group. But still, it is some money that we can rely on.” – Partner of a soldier released from captivity, 34 years old.

Conclusions: the “Service” Stage (Discharge)

We have divided the experience of women going through discharge with a spouse or partner into the following parts:

- 1.** A loved one decides to quit
- 2.** Helping your loved one with bureaucratic issues

A serviceman may decide to end his service for various reasons. In the case of discharge for family reasons, women can influence this decision, but the final choice is up to the soldier. Wives and partners can only support their loved ones and help them collect and process documents. At this stage, women may need legal advice. The wives and partners of soldiers who are discharged for health reasons accompany them at all stages of the process, including during the passage of the MEC and the MSEC. Couples going through the experience of being discharged from service may face misunderstanding and judgment from others.

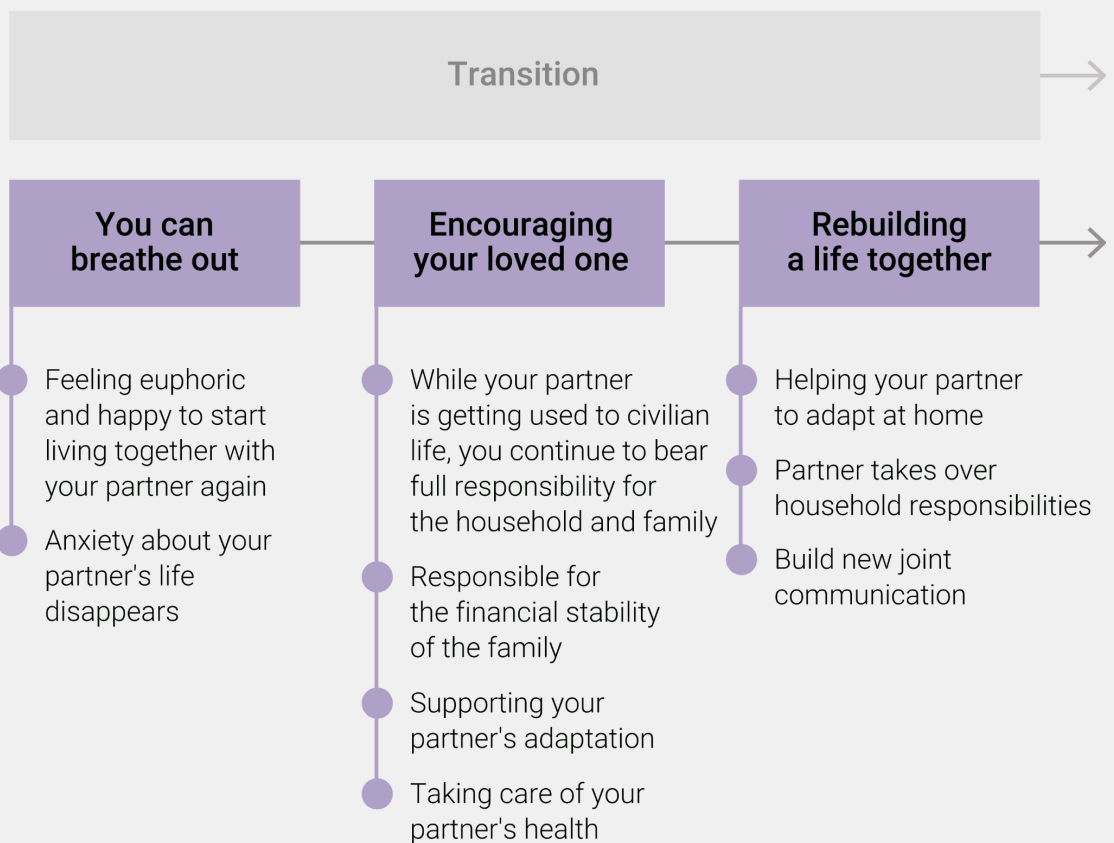
Conclusions: “Service” Stage




“The “Service” stage commences with the deployment of a spouse or partner and lasts until completion of his service. This is a transformational stage on the Journey of a Warrior's Beloved. During this stage, a woman acquires the identity of “wife or partner of a serviceman.”

For women, this stage is full of uncertainty, anxiety, and trials that they have to go through on their own. From the beginning to the end of their loved one's service, wives and partners need support for their well-being.

During the “Service” phase, women must change to adapt to new conditions. They must take care of the family and its well-being independently, and support their husband or partner. We observed that women who are or have been at this stage complained of deteriorating health and financial situation.

Transition



-  A part of the Veteran's Journey
-  A part of the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved
-  Important processes and points

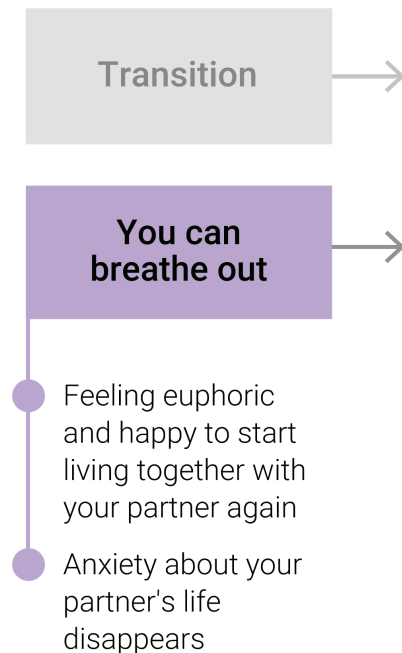
This part of the report is devoted to the experience of women whose husbands and partners have been discharged from military service and are transitioning to civilian life. This is an essential and sensual stage that women live through virtually together with their loved ones.

In the [first study](#), we saw how closely the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved and the [Journeys of Veteran Women and Men](#) are intertwined at this stage and how significant the role of a wife or partner becomes during the transition.⁷¹ This time, we investigated women's challenges when their husbands or partners' transition to civilian life.

⁷¹ In the Study, "Journeys of Veteran Women and Men," this transition is described as a crossover between military and civilian cultures. This stage can also be called "reverse culture shock" as it involves reintegration from one environment to another, taking into account relatively new cultural, social and economic norms.

Cited from: Veteran Hub (2023). Journeys of Veteran Women and Men. 20, 28-31
drive.google.com/file/d/1gSlkhpMoJHDFNgO6FV0o-y6oA99ieq6a/view.

You Can Breath Out



After the paperwork is finalized and the discharge process is completed, the stage of returning to civilian life and the recovery process begins. The study participants often described their emotions as significant relief, happiness, and uplift during this period.

***"...I was so happy! Words cannot explain what I was feeling inside, how happy the children were that they were finally with their dad."** – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 to care for a loved one, 36 years old.*

***"It made me feel better. [...] I know that he is there for me. We always have fun together, we do something. Either we go somewhere, or we cook dinner together, or we see our friends, or we can just lie around and chat. My general state has become calmer. I even started sleeping better. This is also about a basic need for security. He has always given me that."** – Partner of a soldier who was discharged from service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 36 years old.*

At first, women may think that their husbands/partners' discharge from the service is unrealistic, and therefore, they would want to constantly make sure that their loved one has really returned to civilian life.

"[...] For the first month, I did not believe that he had returned. I would fall asleep, and I was scared he might say the next day: "That's it, darling, the vacation is over. I have to go." I would be on the alert for two months. I would wake up in the middle of the night, he's there, I'm not alone, he's there. It took me three months to get used to the fact that, thank God, he is finally back." – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 to care for a loved one, 36 years old.

Supporting your loved one

Transition



Encouraging
your loved one



- While your partner is getting used to civilian life, you continue to bear full responsibility for the household and family
- Responsible for the financial stability of the family
- Supporting your partner's adaptation
- Taking care of your partner's health

Yet, the transition to civilian life is, in most cases, accompanied by the need to resolve legal, financial, domestic, and medical issues. After discharge from service, veterans may need additional treatment and ongoing health monitoring. However, after completing their service, they no longer have access to military hospitals, and their families have to pay for medical services.

*"When he resigned, **there was no help anymore**. Yet, he had no permanent employment and was still looking for a job." – Partner of a soldier who resigned from service in 2022-2024 to care for a loved one, 55 years old.*

During this period, women must mobilize efforts to support their families again. This may concern the family's financial situation. Often, only the

wife or female partner can work at this point. Besides, the couple must spend additional money on the former serviceman's treatment and rehabilitation.

*"I can't buy everything with this money because while my husband was there, there were moments when I didn't have enough money at all. Even though I didn't buy anything for myself anymore, because I understand that **there is not enough money for all the things he needs, and he needs them just to survive.**" – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 due to having many children, 34 years old.*

In addition, access to professional care can be problematic. Injuries and wounds sustained during hostilities require the attention of highly qualified healthcare practitioners with experience treating injuries.

*"But now we need more help with referrals on who to go to for treatment. **Because there are some things, such as the consequences of shell shock, that a civilian cannot go to a military hospital with, he has to go to a family physician.** We went to a family physician for high blood pressure, and she referred us to a cardiologist and a neurologist. We went to a private hospital. As usual, there is no cardiologist in the civilian hospital. They say he is on sick leave." – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 due to having many children, 34 years old.*

This issue is crucial not only for those veterans who have been discharged from service for health reasons and/or due to injury but also for all veterans in general. Because during military service and combat missions, there is a significant risk of chronic deterioration of physical and mental health.⁷²

⁷² Войтюк, Т. (2023, 18 лютого). «Побратими змінюються на очах». Як військовому впоратися зі стресом на передовій. Суспільне Новини [Voytyuk, T. (2023, February 18). "Brothers-in-arms are changing before our eyes". How a soldier can cope with stress on the front line. Suspilne Novyny]. suspilne.media/361398-pobratimi-zminuutsa-na-ocah-ak-vijskovomu-vporatisa-zi-stresom-na-peredovij/.

The respondents told us how they found ways to support and improve the psychological state of their husbands/partners on their own. They helped them avoid trigger episodes and move on.

A couple may face the most significant number of challenges at the beginning of cohabitation after a spouse or partner's discharge. During this period, household management and several other issues fall on the shoulders of wives and partners: cooking, cleaning, childcare, allocating the family budget, finding housing, dealing with bureaucratic problems, etc. A woman begins to perceive her lover as dependent, as someone who needs attention where it was not necessary before.

"I can only compare it to the first year of my child's life. The older one is two. The little one was born. I did not sleep. This is how I felt during the first six months of my husband's return from the army to civilian life because I had to hold everyone in my arms." – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 to care for a loved one, 36 years old.

*"I can say now that he is absolutely not adapted to everyday life. My child is almost 17, and I completely forgot this experience of looking after a child. **But he is now like a little child.** "Where is my T-shirt? Where are my socks? I don't have anything to shave with?"* – Partner of a soldier discharged from service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 40 years old.

In addition, respondents said that they often also had to take care of the mental state of their spouse or partner and other family members.

*"I continue to do a lot of work on adaptation and psychological rehabilitation. **And he is grateful to me for the conversations. For the fact that we talk a lot. For the fact that I quietly, gently guide him, direct him.** I am looking for the right words."* – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 to care for a loved one, 36 years

old.

Yet, some study participants said their efforts were taken for granted. Women may feel alone and “invisible” as the Journey of the Warrior’s Beloved and their efforts to help their husbands/partners adapt to civilian life may be seen as secondary or not recognized by society.

*“...The main task of adaptation was on me. **Few people were interested in what I was feeling at that time.** My husband was a hero for everyone. I just stayed in [country in Europe] with my children all year.” – Partner of a soldier who left the service during 2022-2024 to care for a loved one, 36 years old.*

As we said above, women face their husbands' or partners' inability to adapt to life outside the military, see their confusion, and find themselves in the role of a guide—all of which affect their comfort and perception of the relationship. Yet, they realize that their loved one needs time to recover and transition to civilian life, and they may deliberately suppress their desires, needs, and ambitions.

*“**You have to remove your desires and preferences again** and not insist that he urgently does something for you. He won't do it. And it's hard to realize that. He has to do what he wants to do. **You just need to have a lot of patience. It's self-sacrifice because,** without it, there is no way.” – Partner of a soldier who was discharged from service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 40 years old.*

If a man/partner finds it difficult to return to civilian life, the woman adapts to this situation and enters his “semi-military” state. She becomes part of his community. **That is, we deal with a soldier's transition and his beloved's transition.** A woman becomes his guide to civilian life and a partner in everything that concerns his life after discharge.

The context of war can slow down a partner's transition to civilian life. Since the fighting is ongoing, the partner may maintain close contact with his fellow soldiers and look for ways to remain involved in the army.

*"My husband is also a freelance military chaplain, so **we go to the guys, visit them at the front, help them.** That is, to say that we should stay away from the war, but we don't." – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 39 years old.*

In some cases, difficulties in returning to civilian life may contribute to veterans' desire to return to the military.

*"And my husband is telling me this: "[...] They are recruiting a new regiment. I want to join. **I cannot work at a civilian enterprise.** It's hard for me. I'm going back to the Armed Forces." – Partner of a soldier who resigned from service in 2022-2024 to care for a loved one, 36 years old.*

In some cases, service members may also want to return to service after being released from captivity. Women may be sympathetic to their husband or partner's choice but try to focus their loved one's attention on his health.

*"Of course, there were some selfish moments. I mean, you're with me, we're together, we're planning some kind of future, we want to have a child. And then how do you cross it all out? You leave, and what happens to me? How do I deal with this? And on the other hand, if I looked at his condition objectively... **I didn't refuse, I said: "Okay. If you've already decided to go, fine. But first, put yourself in order and get yourself straightened out. Well, you realize that you won't be effective there, plus you may eventually become a burden to your guys."** And, in principle, these things worked. These were arguments to which he responded well. Because he is objectively ill, he objectively needs to be treated. And I said: "Okay. Let's make a deal.*

You get treatment, everything as we decided, as we planned. And then you choose. Do you want to? Good.” - Partner of a soldier released from captivity, 34 years old.

We have said that while waiting for their partner/husband to return from the service, women may withdraw from those with different attitudes towards mobilization. After discharge, the spouses/couple may also avoid contacts that may be irritating for both of them. In particular, the respondents used the pronoun “we” when discussing the social circle.

*“Plus, now that the mobilization hysteria has begun, there are even fewer people around us because **they don't understand us, why we support it, and we don't understand them.**” – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 39 years old.*

Rebuilding a Life Together



The study participants said that after their spouses or partners were discharged from service, they needed time to get re-acquainted with

each other, to get to know each other, to see what changes had taken place in their characters, and to get used to each other.

*"It's a new relationship we're building. I won't say that I have fallen out of love with him, that I have fallen in love with him in a new way, no. I love him, but I understand both by the look in his eyes and the inner content that another person has come. **Yes, this is my husband; he looks like my husband, but, by what is inside him, this is my other husband. And I need to understand what is wrong with him. And he needs to understand what has changed with me over the past year.** Why did I become so harsh, so blunt? I don't accept anything. Having taken over the family management, I realized that I really wanted to give everything back to my husband at once. But this is impossible because he needs care just as much as I do." – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 to care for a loved one, 36 years old.*

*"I understand that, given how long he was at the front, **a person needs at least three months to realize that he is no longer in the service but in civilian life.** [...] Everything is great now. There was a moment about three months later when there was some kind of misunderstanding. We hadn't lived together for two years. And here we are... Seeing the same person in the same room 24 hours a day, seven days a week, is quite difficult. And I realized that, too. So I just had to be patient." – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 36 years old.*

If wives and partners notice changes in their loved one's behavior, they may justify them.

*"...A military man **is used to the fact that if there is an order, it must be done here and now. I am not like that.** And sometimes [I say], "Yeah, I have to do it, okay, I'll do it later." And this "later" is very*

annoying for him. Because: "I told you to do it. Do it. Why don't you do it now, especially if you're free at the moment?" – Partner of a soldier who was discharged from service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 39 years old.

During the service of loved ones, women establish a new routine, which takes time and effort. They invent rituals that help them overcome sadness, fears, and anxiety. **After a soldier is discharged, different scenarios are possible:**

- **The husband or partner adapts to the changes introduced by his beloved;**
- **The couple returns to a routine familiar to both of them;**
- **The couple builds a new life together.**

The fulfillment of each scenario is a laborious endeavor that requires both partners to be involved.

*"When my husband returned, I can't say he took over immediately. He probably walked around the house for a week: "Where is that thing?". I was already on a well-established routine. I was used to doing some things either in my way or by myself. Don't touch me. Breakfast is my time. I have to drink my coffee in silence, not in a hurry. And he said: "That's it. Come on. Why are you taking so long? Come on." It was, let's say, annoying at first. **Like, what do you mean? I lived here without you once, don't tell me.** And then the pre-war times came back." – Partner of a soldier discharged from service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 39 years old.*

The women we talked to were aware of the risks associated with the consequences of their loved one's combat experience after his return. They realized that it would be a difficult path. However, this awareness does not exclude the presence of fears and worries, situations in which they may not know how to behave.

*“There was a situation when he woke up and said: “I dreamt that I was fighting with someone, and I just grabbed your head and realized that your hair was long. And I woke up because I realized that it wasn't that.” **It scared me at first, but, in principle, I understood what was coming when I agreed to a relationship with such a man. I understood that it would be difficult.**” – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 19 years old.*

Released service members and their families follow a path of recovery that may differ from that of soldiers who have not experienced captivity. They face many challenges that they need to learn to overcome. Sometimes, in such a situation, women not only provide emotional support to their loved ones but also take on the role of a kind of psychologist.

*“I usually don't know what has changed right away. But I see that the mood has changed. The state has changed. I ask. It's normal. Not that I'm cautious. I don't start behaving as if I have to treat him differently. **I don't change our communication the way we have it. I just always communicate quite gently and tolerantly.**” – Partner of a soldier released from captivity, 34 years old.*

Some women respondents shared that their husbands or partners drank alcohol because of the difficulties of returning to civilian life. This aligns with the information we received while studying [Journeys of Veteran Women and Men](#). In particular, we learned then that at the beginning of the transition to civilian life, they might develop and/or adopt harmful habits such as smoking, alcohol, drugs, and stimulants.⁷³ Such practices

⁷³ Veteran Hub (2023). *Journeys of Veteran Women and Men*. 129.
drive.google.com/file/d/1gSlkhpMoJHDFNgO6FV0o-y6oA99ieq6a/view.

can also be manifestations of **destructive coping mechanisms**,⁷⁴ which aim to intentionally “distract” and “switch” oneself.⁷⁵

“From time to time, there is a moment when a glass becomes your friend. But at first, it was excruciating for me. How come? Because a person destroys himself in this way, a person does not realize it. I try to talk, and there's a wall of misunderstanding. I don't know what to do in such a situation. I don't know if anyone would advise me or if there are any doctors. However, a person needs to realize that this path is not for him but leads to the abyss. Somehow, we fought with this green snake for a while, more or less successfully overcoming it.”
– Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 due to having many children, 47 years old.

It is important to understand that not only veterans undergo personal changes but also their wives/partners. Through different stages of the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved, women gain new experience and overcome many physical and psychological challenges. This cannot but leave its mark.

“As my husband says, our relationship, as he feels, has become stronger. He has more trust and confidence in me, perhaps. It is also a new and interesting experience for him that [there is] a person who went through his war with him. He says it was vital to realize that someone supported him. And, well, he appreciates it.” – Partner of a soldier discharged from service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 40 years old.

The study participants emphasized that the transition to civilian life is complex and requires patience and endurance from both partners.

⁷⁴ Coping mechanisms are thoughts and behaviors aimed at reducing external stressors. Destructive, maladaptive, or unhealthy coping mechanisms are practices that have negative consequences for mental health. Quoted from: Algorani, E. C., & Gupta, V. (2024). Coping Mechanisms. StatPearls Publishing. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK559031/.

⁷⁵ Veteran Hub (2023). Journeys of Veteran Women and Men. 170–171. drive.google.com/file/d/1gSlkhpMoJHDFNqO6FV0o-y6oA99ieq6a/view.

Returning soldiers and their loved ones often rethink their lives and find new values. This is another reason why, after reunification, loved ones need to get to know each other again.

Partially experienced separation and anxiety can lead to women not wanting to spend long periods without their loved ones and feeling anxious about them when it comes to parting ways.

"I wish now I was trying to be simpler with him. First of all, I'm thrilled that we can be together and don't have to go somewhere and part. And secondly, objectively, it's hard for him in terms of not having... not having electricity there. We also explored the space for inclusivity. Although he said: "Let me go there alone, I'll move around in the chair by myself," in reality, there is a need for insurance somewhere. Something else is needed. Well, it's hard. It's tough on my own. But [when I need to] I go for a manicure, I go to the beautician." – Partner of a soldier released from captivity, 34 years old.

Yet, the study participants said their relationship became even stronger despite the couple's challenges transitioning to civilian life.

"On the contrary, it seems that we have become even closer. He has rethought some things, I have rethought some things." – Partner of a soldier released from captivity, 37 years old.

The opportunity to support each other and share difficulties also strengthens relationships and positively affects the morale of both women and men.

"...I mean, we were brought together by these common experiences. He's generally like, well, it's hard for him to trust people. And he partially... well, he had feelings for me, but he was doubtful whether it would work out. And now he tells me, "He didn't expect that it could

be that someone cares about him so much.” He appreciates it. And what about me? I have a feeling that I want to take care of him. And I do it not because I have to, not as a duty. And it doesn't cause me any difficulties. I don't have to force myself. I just want to care because I see that the person gives me a lot of warm emotions and feelings in return.” – Partner of a soldier released from captivity, 34 years old.

The study participants said that it was essential for them not to immerse themselves entirely in the life of their loved one and their experience but to remain wife and husband. By preserving these roles, they see a successful transition for both.

*“My advice for those women whose husbands is at the discharge stage: **do not forget that you are first and foremost a husband and wife.** His experience is significant but should not be the focus of everything.”* – Partner of a soldier discharged from service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 19 years old.

“Transition” Stage Well-Being

Mental Health

After the return of a loved one, women are less attentive to their psycho-emotional state. They begin to consider their problems and experiences as less critical, prioritizing the needs of their husband or partner.

*“If I compare, for example, the reasons why I might be in a bad mood [and] the reasons for it, then **sometimes I feel like mine are not that important and not worthy of attention. And I need to pull myself out somehow, and I don't want to burden him.** If he sees me, he tells me: “What happened? Go ahead and tell me.” And he is focusing on this.”*
– Partner of a soldier released from captivity, 34 years old.

Relationships and Recognition

During the interviews, women shared that they not only did not feel public support but also saw incompetence on the part of others: people did not know how to behave so as not to harm or offend, which can cause even more social misunderstanding.

“Even my mother, she was not interested. She wasn't interested in him returning, how to communicate properly, or what to ask. How many people did you kill, and how did you feel in captivity... This is also about boundaries and education. People do not understand that if you are afraid of a person in a military uniform who is protecting you at the cost of his life, this is not the veteran's problem. This is your problem. And you need to go to a therapist and figure out why you are so scared. Or are you biased...” – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 36 years old.

This trend can also be observed in other areas of life, for example, in everyday life (a spouse or partner can spend more time on things related to their loved one's needs) and in communication with others.

“If we talk about the circle of friends, for me, it has narrowed a bit now in the sense that I spend more time with him because I try not to leave him alone after the operation.” – Partner of a soldier released from captivity, 34 years old.

Conclusions: the “Transition” Stage

We have divided the experience of transition to civilian life into the following elements:

1. You can breathe out
2. You support your loved ones
3. You are rebuilding your life together

After a serviceman completes his service and becomes a veteran, he enters the Transition phase. This is when they return to civilian life and integrate into a new environment. Together with the veteran, his wife or partner goes through this stage.

Warriors and their families face many challenges at this stage of the Journey. Transitioning to civilian life requires long and hard work, much of which falls on the shoulders of veterans' wives and partners. A man and a woman returning to a life together are different people who need time to get used to each other. Despite the general exhaustion, the wife and partner may ignore their needs and focus only on supporting their loved ones.

Wives and partners become the central guides of soldiers on the way to liberation and return to civilian life. However, women acquire all the necessary knowledge and skills while gaining experience. They create strategies to adapt to new conditions and find ways to support their loved ones. At this stage, social policy and stakeholders must support women and try to simplify their meaningful work.

Relationships

We touched upon relationships by analyzing the experience of wives and partners of service members and veterans. However, we did not plan to consider this area of life separately in this study. Yet, the experience of the soldier's beloved is inextricably linked to it and can sometimes be intertwined with the experience of parenthood. In this section, we have tried briefly outlining what happens to a couple's relationship when a spouse or partner is serving. It should be said that for this section, we have included only stories of women in heterosexual relationships.

Changes in Relationships

The first study of the [Journey of the Warrior's Beloved](#) showed what problems spouses/couples face due to the service of their spouse/partner, in particular, due to remote communication.⁷⁶ We examined what women experience during a long absence of communication, how they cope with emotions in such situations, and how they generally succeed or fail to maintain relationships at a distance.

The participants of the second study also shared with us their experience of maintaining a personal connection with their spouse/partner during his service. Talking about changes and difficulties in their relationships, the respondents mentioned **emotional detachment** on both sides. This is when a person cannot or does not want to interact with others or the world around them on an emotional level. For example, they watch less news and avoid confidential conversations with loved ones. During the service, the serviceman and his beloved can consciously use this strategy to protect themselves from difficult experiences.

*"I notice that he has become colder there, but I realize this is normal. [...] I realize that the same thing is happening to me. **I don't feel as much joy as I used to feel, for example, or any such emotions.** Just because it's protection." – Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024,*

⁷⁶ Veteran Hub (2023). *The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved*. 40.
drive.google.com/file/d/1wSwEoA5zSMZ60L2AziXsZpy70uuue1Xi/view.

36 years old.

"It is tough to get used to the fact that he is in circumstances where he is... not like he does not want to talk, does not care, or has fallen out of love. No, it's not like that." – Partner of a soldier who retired from service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 45 years old.

Some study participants said they and their loved ones needed time to start sharing feelings and understanding each other's experiences. A woman and a man find themselves in circumstances for which they were not prepared. They have to adapt to new realities independently, yet they support each other.

*"It took a lot of time to realize that **your husband's feelings have not changed. It's just that it's as hard as it's ever been for him. He doesn't know how to deal with it.**" – Partner of a soldier discharged from service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 45 years old.*

*"...We discuss our experiences, our fears. It's necessary because who do we tell it to? Even though you have to be strong and so on, **emotions have to come out, and they come out very easily with words.**" – Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 30 years old.*

The main obstacle for women in the context of releasing their own emotions and talking about their feelings is the fear of harming their partner and the understanding that it is harder for him now (we mentioned this in the first study of the [Journey of the Warrior's Beloved](#).)⁷⁷

"I shared something with him, but not everything. Rather, very often,

⁷⁷ Veteran Hub (2023). *The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved*. 40.
drive.google.com/file/d/1wSwEoA5zSMZ60L2AziXsZpy70uuue1Xi/view.

*when he is in situations like this and annoyed by everything, he needs to talk... And I just listen. And he shares with me different things. **I can tell him some things related to everyday life. Not some of my own experiences.*** – Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 27 years old.

Because of this, communication may seem “superficial” and lead to a loss of intimacy. The study participants said they lose points of intersection because they live in different realities and are excluded from each other's contexts.

*“...We live some kind of **parallel lives**. He tells me something about what he does, and often, I can't even comment on it. I don't have that context. I don't understand how to react to some of the things he says. And then he's like: “Okay, that's it, I've told you, now you tell me.” And I do. These stories have no common points. I am living my own life, and he is living his own. And I don't know if we will be able to combine these contexts in any way later.”* – Partner of a recently mobilized soldier, 31 years old.

Inclusion in such contexts through communication helps spouses and couples in relationships stay connected, maintain intimacy, and support each other.

*“...I want him to feel sorry that being alone is so hard for me. He probably also wanted me to feel sorry for him somehow, to support him, that he was also in such mortal danger there. **We are each on our own wave with our failures. And somehow we couldn't support each other in that.*** – Partner of a recently mobilized soldier, 26 years old.

Strategies for Maintaining Relationships

Analyzing the experience of the study participants, we saw that they consider the following strategies for maintaining relationships during the service of a loved one to be the most effective:

- Sharing emotions;
- Paying attention to each other's feelings through dialog;
- Talking about their feelings and needs.

Even though the respondents said they did not want to burden their husbands/partners with their problems, they saw conversation as a way to maintain intimacy. Numerous studies of relationships in which a man/woman serves also confirm that **communication** is one of the most effective strategies for overcoming problems in a couple.

*"...I admit that it is harder for him than for me. We build as much open contact and support as possible. I can cry and talk about what's hard for me. **Mostly, we try to talk about our needs "by words through the mouth" as much as possible.**" – Partner of a soldier serving from 2022 to 2024, 27 years old.*

Such emotional mutual support positively impacts the overall well-being of both women and men. However, this model of relationship is not inherent in all couples, because building such openness takes time and work. In particular, the spouse or partner must:

- Realize that their loved one is not always ready to listen;
- Understand the state of the partner; and
- Allow the partner to be emotional without judgment;
- Consider that the partner may be under the influence of circumstances that are not directly related to the relationship.

It is important to emphasize that relationships can be strengthened even in such challenging conditions. A man and a woman can reassess each other as life partners, begin to perceive each other differently and change their attitudes toward each other.

*"Whereas earlier, I had complaints about my husband, but they have completely disappeared. **I realize how wonderful he is, how well he did everything, and how much I appreciate him.** And if he comes back, when he comes back, I will not tell him anymore: "You're not doing this, you're not doing that," things like that." – Partner of a recently mobilized soldier, 26 years old.*

*"...it seems to me that **the relationship has become even stronger.** Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, we have not quarreled once." – Partner of a recently mobilized soldier, 44 years old.*

Ways to Maintain Intimacy at a Distance

80 years ago, women used to write letters to their husbands at the front, and such communication had a delayed effect (months could pass between sending and receiving correspondence, and life events could change). Instead, modern technologies, including mobile communication, allow for real-time communication. On the one hand, this provides more opportunities to maintain closeness. On the other hand, prolonged absence of communication increases anxiety and contributes to the emergence of the worst thoughts.

It is worth noting that most of the participants in our study had rules for communicating with their husbands/partners during the service: their loved one warned them about the possible lack of communication and determined its duration and the time after which they could start to worry.

When the connection is available, spouses and couples use different ways to maintain intimacy, such as text messages, phone calls, video calls, watching movies together, and playing online games.

*"...A routine of just **talking on the phone.** That's all. Later, we slowly **found a way to watch movies together** and spend evenings together*

online. Whenever possible, listen to music, play some games, and so on.” – Partner of a soldier serving from 2022 to 2024, 27 years old.

All this does not replace live communication and tactile intimacy, but it brings it closer to reality and helps maintain a sense of living together through spending time together.

Maintaining close and trusting relationships with military personnel requires joint work on them. Such relationships may seem fragile because of the many challenges that couples have to overcome and the risks they face. However, if both the woman and the man try to maintain a personal connection, this relationship turns from fragile to the strongest.

In particular, to maintain a relationship, a couple has to overcome fears (such as the fear of being hurt, the fear of not being supported, and the fear of being burdened with their problems), learn to be honest during crises, and share feelings when they seem unimportant.

To maintain long-distance intimacy, a man and a woman must find new ways to stay in touch and spend time together. The results of this part of our study are in line with the study [Sexual Life of Soldiers after Injuries](#)⁷⁸ in which respondents shared with us their experience of maintaining and supporting personal connection, including intimacy.

Parenthood

The service of a spouse/partner changes not only the dynamics of the relationship but also the attitude of the spouses/couples toward parenthood. The Veteran Hub studied this topic⁷⁹ and created the manual [Conscious Parenting During the Wartime](#).⁸⁰ While researching the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved, we noticed how wives/partners of military personnel feel about the birth of a child while their

⁷⁸ Veteran Hub (2023). *The Study “Sexual Life of Soldiers after Injuries.”* drive.google.com/file/d/10tDmz5dpGxiVGG4psv2l5EQxHztZsjdx/view.

⁷⁹ Veteran Hub (2023). “Conscious Parenting During the Wartime” Project. parents.veteranhub.com.ua.

⁸⁰ Veteran Hub (2023). “Conscious Parenting During the Wartime” Project. drive.google.com/file/d/1VHpwBUm5yj5OYCn7i7BArb2foJd6J92x/view.

husband/partner is serving and how they cope with parenthood on their own.

The first step towards parenthood can be realizing the desire to become parents and planning a pregnancy. However, a couple may postpone even talking about it due to the war and the service of a husband/partner. Women respondents said that the uncertainty of their husband's/partner's military service made planning for parenthood difficult. Women also shared that they were aware of the complexity of the pregnancy period and were not ready to go through it without their loved ones by their side. In addition, despite the desire to have a child, they did not decide to become parents because their husband/partner would not see their child grow up. Women need to live this experience together.

*“...Because I'm a little bit afraid of it. Because it's hard for me, **I put all my energy into supporting myself somehow. And I don't know how to include a child in this.** Secondly, I think **the pregnancy period is quite difficult. And I didn't want to go through it alone.** I still wanted support. And that's why I'm not in for it right now.*

***But on the other hand, I don't know how long it will last.** I'm 27, and waiting another three years is probably too much. I'd like to do it until I'm 30, for example. Perhaps, after 30, it will be more difficult. If we talked about it before, we even thought that I would work and he would take care of the child.” – Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 27 years old.*

A service member's period of adaptation after service may also make planning a pregnancy uncomfortable. In particular, spouses/couples may put this issue on hold until the spouse/partner can find a new job and restore their financial well-being.

*“I'm not exactly a childfree person, but I can't say that I'm a fan of children. You know, I want, want, want. **At first, he was treated for a***

very long time. Then he had no money because he didn't work anywhere. While he was there, he restored his business. Before that, everything was based on my income.” – Partner of a soldier who left the service in 2022-2024 for health reasons, 36 years old.

Women respondents who decided to go through the stages of pregnancy and childbirth while their loved one was serving in the military said that they experienced double stress: the difficulties associated with bearing a child were compounded by worries about their husband/partner's life.

*“When they were leaving [the city in the East], I was dying of toxycosis because **I had a tough first month of pregnancy. And I remember the night they left, that I didn't sleep, that I was so sick. I couldn't sleep, and he didn't get in touch.**”* – Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 36 years old

Yet, other participants in the study said that pregnancy, on the contrary, helped them to cope with separation from their husbands/partners more easily. Women block their emotions to avoid harming the child due to stress.

Wives and partners of soldiers raising young children alone while their loved ones are serving face other challenges. In particular, women have limited time for their affairs, as they must constantly look after their children. It is challenging for mothers with children under five years old to find a solution in this situation.

*“There are such children's rooms. They mostly take children from the age of 5. I had a child who was two years old; now he is three years old. I looked, and there are some for IDPs, some for art therapy. Of course, if someone would look after the child... **I was recently in a shopping center in [settlement], and I took my child to a nanny, a free service, 40 minutes.** There were just some toys she was playing with. **During these 40 minutes, I went to the store, bought new***

clothes, and tried them on. It was great for me. I relaxed so that I could even try on clothes without my child. Because I used to buy new pants in the spring. I went in with her; my child was so active that she ran around. **If a nanny were to watch her, I could have an hour and a half of art therapy there. It would be great.** – Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 36 years old.

From the beginning of the husband's/partner's service, the parenting responsibilities previously performed by the father are assigned to the mother. A woman has to change her role behavior, which can exacerbate the relationship between mother and children. The respondents said that they lacked a second adult in the process of raising a child.

“...And these are also moments when I miss my husband. Because she is probably a little afraid of him, but sometimes even this is useful: [with him] she sits up straight, doesn't wiggle, and obeys. And with me, she can get **on my nerves and try to demand her own way.** **And the further it goes, the harder it will be with her.**” – Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 36 years old.

Another difficulty of fatherhood in the conditions of service of a husband/partner is the growing up and development of children without a father. A serviceman cannot watch his son or daughter grow and change and take part in his/her upbringing.

Other respondents shared that the distance and separation helped to reboot relationships in their families. Children and parents began valuing their time together and spending it better.

“...It somehow shook everything up, our relationship between the three of us. For example, my son and my husband had a difficult relationship. [...]. But when it all started, it was very sudden – bam! – and we all became closer. All these troubles we had faded into the background, with only 10 or 20 percent remaining. **The priorities**

changed, and we all began to appreciate each other more. We became closer because of the fear of losing each other. I think we began to forgive each other more, to be more tolerant.” – Partner of a soldier serving in 2022-2024, 45 years old.

The service creates challenges for parenthood. One of them is that couples are forced to postpone the beginning of parenthood due to the absence of a husband or partner. Women with children live through the experience of single motherhood. In particular, they have to explain the context of the war to young children and establish the process of raising adult children without the participation of another adult.

Ending the Relationship

We used only three interviews to analyze the path of wives and partners who divorced or broke off relationships with servicemen. In this study, we did not cover all the variations of the Journey but only made a first exploration to better understand what experiences women go through after their relationships with servicemen and veterans.

In the first iteration of the study [Journey of the Warrior's Beloved](#)⁸¹ and the study [Journeys of Veteran Women and Men](#), we mentioned the term “military culture” to refer to the unique traits and characteristics of the military service experience. One of the study's conclusions was that servicemen's and veterans' wives/partners do not belong to military culture, as their contribution is often not recognized, and men themselves try to “protect” them from this influence. However, our female respondents, describing their journey, said they often were between the military and civilians.

One of the challenges such women face in the divorce/breakup process is an identity crisis. After all, during their relationship, they undergo a complex and unique experience that shapes their identity as a military wife/partner and partially makes them a part of the army culture, albeit

⁸¹ Veteran Hub (2023). *The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved*. 91.
drive.google.com/file/d/1wSwEoA5zSMZ60L2AziXsZpy70uuue1Xi/view.

unrecognized. The end of a relationship with a serviceman should, in fact, deprive a woman of this identity, but this process is more complicated.

*"The journey of a warrior's beloved does not finish with the end of the relationship. That line [February 24] divided life into before and after. And when you face this yourself, you go through this meat grinder of feelings once again. For example, you still have an overreaction to your friends who have men by their side. It was envy, resentment, misunderstanding. The military say: "Oh, civilians, you don't understand us." In the same way, perhaps, women [of soldiers] can say to civilian women: "You don't understand us." What has changed now? **As soon as I began feeling like a warrior's partner, I stopped being one.** Just like that, all of a sudden. I mean, I started to feel like I was in one group. And the other group is those women who have their husbands by their side, they are civilians, for now. And those who say: "No, I'll hide him under my skirt, I'll carry him in the trunk," and so on. We are not talking about these people. I mean, to return to that group, I have already had an experience..." – Partner who divorced a soldier in 2022-2024, 24 years old.*

Going through Conflicts

One of the stages that a couple goes through before deciding to divorce is a period of conflict. In this report, we do not cover all possible variations of conflicts and do not analyze their causes; we only emphasize the experience of wives/partners at this stage of the Journey. Service, separation, emotional and physical stress faced by a warrior and his beloved lead to quarrels and misunderstandings between them. This can happen both during service and after a soldier's discharge. The study participants said that the conflict can often be caused by sudden changes in the behavior of the husband/partner and a complete lack of understanding of him.

The respondents said that when they first manifested changes and conflicts, they tried to understand the reason for their loved ones' new

behavior and change their behavior accordingly to eliminate possible irritants. For example, one woman said that when the couple started quarreling, she decided to see a psychologist to understand how to improve their relationship.

*"We used to see each other, we would create pleasant surprises for each other. I mean, I was always very happy. He could come to [the city], I could come to him. And it was warm, nice, but there were some difficult conflicts. And he kept telling me that "I don't understand you." **I went to work with a psychologist to understand him. Then I went to a psychological training, and worked on my relationship as well. And, in fact, things improved a little bit then.**" – Partner who broke up with a soldier in 2022-2024, 24 years old.*

During this period, as well as throughout the entire Journey, women may be afraid to talk to their loved ones and discuss unpleasant moments in order not to destabilize their condition in an environment when their lives are constantly in danger.

*"I guessed that there had already been an affair. **I was afraid to talk to him because I realized that I was going to start this topic, it would be difficult for him, painful, he would get nervous or something. I didn't know how he would react to all this. He would go off to some task, I would tell him as it is, he would be gone. And I will live my whole life with a sense of guilt. I was very afraid to raise this topic. I just burned everything inside myself, and kept everything so stable on the outside.**" – Partner who divorced a soldier in 2022-2024, 24 years old.*

Women respondents also often said that the cause of conflicts and misunderstandings was the temperament or character of their husbands or partners, not the war.

"I think he had such a temperament, but the service sharpened [it]."

He is quite a moral person, I admire him for the way he looks at the situation. But still, I see such aggression that it intensified during his service. I can't say for sure. If, for example, we had been together for at least a year before the service, I could tell the difference.” – Partner who divorced a soldier during 2022-2024, 24 years old.

One of the respondents said that conflicts in the relationship began after the soldier was discharged from service. The woman recalled that they were fighting because her husband was a heavy drinker. We mentioned this destructive behavior of veterans when describing their adaptation to civilian life in the Transition section.

***“We started having conflicts. If before that we used to say, 'yes, let's do this, let's do that...'. Yet, I emphasized that 'you can go somewhere with your friends'. I have no direct evidence, but I know it happened. You can waste money, but you can take that money instead and spend it, for example, on physical and psychological rehabilitation or other things that can really help you. Because neither drugs, nor gambling, nor friends with whom you just sit day and night, will get you out of this state.”** – Partner who broke up with a soldier in 2022-2024.*

Deciding to End the Relationship

Deciding to end a relationship and divorce is a long-term process in the lives of soldiers' wives or partners. It lasts from the first “red flags” and thoughts of a complete breakup to the first announcement of intentions, separation from each other, and the legal fact of divorce if the couple was married.

This is also an emotionally difficult period, even if the decision is made by her husband/partner, not the woman. She may blame herself for not saving the relationship. The respondents said that they could have made this decision earlier if their loved one had not been a military man.

“The status of ‘wife of a serviceman’ or ‘wife of a wounded serviceman’ had a significant impact. I wouldn’t have been so scared, maybe. And maybe I would have done it faster because the warning bells were there even earlier. And the injury delayed this moment. I mean, [this is] my responsibility, in any case, a disaster happened to us or our family. I even thought, “I will put you on your feet, and then we will decide what to do with us next.” Because when it’s a matter of life and death, you don’t think about relationships. It would have been easier morally if he hadn’t been injured, hadn’t had such a combat experience, hadn’t been a veteran. Much easier, I think.” – Partner who broke up with a soldier in 2022-2024, 31 years old.

One of the reasons why women delay the decision to divorce/break up a relationship is the fear of being judged by society.

“..That day, I guess, I realized there would be a divorce and that I would go through it. And that it would be difficult, that it would be emotional. I frankly say that I was afraid of social disapproval. We were such a great couple that no one could think we could have any problems.” – Partner who broke up with a soldier in 2022-2024, 31 years old.

After the end of the relationship, ex-wives/partners of soldiers may hide this fact during communication or not go into details, avoiding judgment or unnecessary questions. Women may be left alone and not receive the necessary support in a crisis.

“When I divorced, I thought that every dog would hate me. I thought I would go out on the street, and people would start pointing fingers and saying, ‘When he had money, she was with him, and he got hurt, he was left without money, he was left disabled, and she took off.’ And that was very scary for me. But then I realized that I had a story.

I started working with a psychologist. I realized that I didn't have to justify myself to anyone. And that it was enough for me to know that this decision was right for me. And it was already easier for me.” – Partner who divorced a soldier in 2022-2024, 31 years old.

The end of a relationship with a serviceman or veteran is a difficult period in a woman's life, accompanied by doubts, attempts to restore the relationship, and fears of judgment from others. However, this means the end of the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved. Leaving the status of a military wife or partner can take time. After leaving such a relationship, a woman can retain her identity as a person involved in military culture.

Getting Your Life Back on Track After the End of the Relationship

Relationship with Your Ex-Spouse/Partner

The study participants reported that after the end of the relationship, they kept in touch with their ex-husband/partner in a distant way. For example, they followed his life, supported fundraising for military needs, and communicated with his family. Especially if he continued to serve and participate in combat. This experience of a former sweetheart encourages women to keep in touch with him and find out the latest information about his condition.

Women may continue communicating with their ex-husband/partner if they have joint obligations, such as raising a child. The respondents also said they could not cut off communication because of their shared experience of being in a critical situation. They realized that the soldier/veteran needed their support.

“Now we communicate like distant relatives. We communicate without complaints. We do not raise the topic of why this happened at all. But as far as help or advice on documents is concerned... Today, we are going to [location]. He wants to consult a lawyer. And with all this, it's not even my initiative. It's my mother's initiative, who believes that I have to fulfill my duty to him, to my child, so that he

*gets money and my child gets alimony. So, even though I'm divorced, I still realize that, he is involved with me to some extent. First, through the child, **he still realizes that the only person who understands and accepts him is still me.** Because I saw what he was like and going through, I changed his diapers for him. I saw his tears, how weak and desperate he could be, how vulnerable he could be, and at the same time how angry and strong he could be. **That is, not his friends, not his parents, but still me.**" – Partner who divorced a soldier during 2022-2024, 31 years old.*

Relationships with Family and Friends

If a couple has young children and the soldier continues to serve after the divorce, later, when the children grow up, the mother should explain to them what war is and where their father is. Such conversations are crucial for shaping the child's worldview. Therefore, a woman must learn to talk about their family's military experience in a tolerant and environmentally friendly way, in a form that is accessible to children. In addition, a woman may face the need to continue caring for loved ones: to take care of them and to provide psychological support, in particular, to the parents of her ex-husband/partner. In such a situation, women may neglect their needs and postpone their experiences to accumulate resources and support the morale of others.

Life after the End of the Relationship

The process of ending the relationship and the time immediately afterward was a turbulent period in our respondents' lives. In addition to worrying about the breakup and related legal issues, they were also challenged by the need to organize their everyday life and financial situation. As we said in the previous sections, women's concentration and ability to work may decrease during these stages, which affects their financial situation. If a husband/partner needs care after being injured, the wife/partner may spend all her time caring for him and, therefore, also lose the opportunity to earn money (see section "Discharge from Service"). Thus, after the end of the relationship, women may find

themselves without stable financial support and have additional financial obligations related to the arrangement of separate housing.

*“Plus, all this was going on in the background: your routine, your everyday life, that is, your responsibilities as a mother, your responsibilities to earn money, pay for the apartment, pay for food. And in these moments, this life is very depressing... **I'm getting out of a marriage, I have a small child in my arms, I don't have a place to live, a job, no savings, and I still have debts. Because before the divorce, my ex-husband drove into someone's car. And I had a credit card, and I paid him for it with my credit card.**” – Partner who divorced a soldier during 2022-2024, 31 years old.*

The responsibilities a woman used to share with her husband/partner now mostly become her responsibility: dealing with household, housing, and financial issues, raising children and ensuring their well-being, etc.

*“This is a unique experience. **The hardest part was the divorce and the life that fell on me.** However, what was the paradox? I had been doing it before. But when you realize that it's official, that's it. It's such a responsibility.” – A partner who divorced a soldier in 2022-2024, 31 years old.*

In the previous sections, we said that during the military service and after his discharge, wives/partners' health deteriorates, including chronic diseases and sleep disorders. The same reaction of the body can be observed and even intensified during the period of breakup, as women also experience stress and receive additional household burdens. However, after they overcome all the legal and domestic challenges associated with this process and distance themselves from their ex-husband/partner, their condition begins to level off.

*“And when I started these transformational processes inside me, he said: “You've already started to look better.” That is, those **who knew***

me, they saw that it was good for me.” – Partner who divorced a soldier during 2022-2024, 31 years old.

To maintain and improve their psycho-emotional state, women can seek help from psychologists.

*“I was exhausted, I was surging with adrenaline. And on that adrenaline, I was doing so well in sports... I was fragile. I mean, it happened gradually. At first, I was confined to myself, I felt bad, I was already having panic attacks, but I realized that my condition was terrible, and I gradually worked with myself. Therapy came later. **I found a therapist who suited me only at the end of our relationship and after the divorce.**” – Partner who divorced a soldier in 2022-2024, 24 years old.*

Starting a New Relationship

In this iteration of the study of the Journey of the Warrior’s Beloved, we could only briefly examine the stage of starting a new relationship after divorce. The respondents told us they started dating, but this process was complicated. Since the war is ongoing and men can potentially go to serve, new relationships can also be built with the military.

*“...And as for whether I distance myself. For example, I started some time ago to have some personal life there, to go on dates. **And I realize that I am starting to communicate with the military again.** Although there is such a lack of coherence here: either a draft dodger, or a military man, or a veteran. I think, “Yes, I already have a veteran. He is there. Let’s leave him here. That is, either the military man or the draft dodgers.” – Partner who divorced a soldier in 2022-2024, 31 years old.*

The women in the interviews also said that their ex-husbands or partners were unaware of their attempts to build new relationships.

Life after the end of a relationship with a serviceman does not start from scratch. Yet, this stage becomes a turning point in a woman's life. A woman can continue to support her ex-husband's or partner's family, take care of the circumstances of the soldier's service, and support him. However, it is essential that at the same time she tries to set up a new life and, if she wants, start a new romantic relationship. This step can be difficult, but it symbolizes the full start of the next stage in a woman's life.

The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved: Key Findings

1. The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved is inextricably linked to the Journeys of Veterans, which their husbands and partners go through. Yet, it is separate and has its own elements.

The journey of a warrior's wife and partner begins with the decision of her spouse to join the service, or with the receipt of a draft notice, or the beginning of a relationship with a serviceman or veteran. From that moment on, the warrior's beloved's life is connected with the stages and processes her loved one goes through during and after service. The warrior's beloved becomes the person who accompanies him on the Veteran's Journey. Yet, the wives and partners of servicemen go through their own separate Journey, which has its own elements.

2. Throughout the entire Journey, the warrior's beloved's well-being deteriorates.

The experience of waiting for a husband or partner to return from war and captivity, experiencing separation and fighting for the fate of a loved one affects a woman's well-being. Wives and partners experienced a deterioration in their overall well-being at all stages of the Journey. Women's physical and mental health deteriorates, which affects their ability to effectively build a career and receive education. Stress and anxiety about the life of a husband or partner can reduce a woman's ability to work and professional fulfillment.

In the absence of a husband or partner, women have an additional burden: they are responsible for the well-being of other family members and the household as a whole. Also, wives and partners of soldiers have difficulty establishing communication with others. Their social circle changes, as people around them do not always understand how to support a person with such experience without retraumatizing them. In addition, wives and partners may not have the emotional resources to communicate with others. Their financial situation may also deteriorate

due to their husband's or partner's service and the context of war, which can also affect their material well-being. Usually, the warriors' beloved have to continue working to ensure the proper financial situation of the family.

3. The experiences of the wives and partners of prisoners of war, missing persons, captives, and the dead are three separate experiences that differ from each other. Living them are separate branches of the Journeys. These experiences have in common that the partners go through these life stages alone, without a husband or partner.

These experiences transform the Journey from the moment of notification of capture, disappearance, or death. Further, the passage of each of these experiences takes place along different branches with separate processes and elements. Unlike the other stages, these parts of the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved are completed by warriors alone, without a spouse or partner. They have to communicate with various stakeholders, go through intricate bureaucratic procedures, while living through a difficult experience related to the fate of their loved one. Depending on their experience, wives and partners take on the role of a searcher, a lawyer, or become those who keep the memory of the soldier alive.

4. Regardless of when the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved begins, partners and wives go through similar experiences of adaptation and acceptance and acquire the identity of a warrior's beloved.

Wives and partners whose Journey has recently begun (up to six months after the beginning of the husband's or partner's service) go through the same stages as those women whose Journey began earlier (during the ATO/JFO or full-scale invasion).

5. Relationships with a spouse or partner are an important overarching background to the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved.

Relationships with soldiers are transformed by the experiences they go through. Their Journeys change them and their relationship. They have to find new tools to communicate, support each other, maintain closeness in the conditions of service, and return to civilian life. The

relationship between parents and children also undergoes transformations.

Being married or in a relationship with a serviceman or veteran is what determines the role of a warrior's beloved and her Journey. Yet, the Journey ends with divorce or breakup. The experience can have a further impact on a woman's life. The relationship with the ex-husband or partner can continue in a different format because of caring for the warrior and joint parenthood. In this study, we have only made the first exploration of the changes in the sphere of relationships during the "Service" stage. This aspect of the life of a soldier's beloved needs to be further studied.

6. With the beginning of the "Service" stage, other warriors' beloved become an important part of a woman's environment.

Women living through similar experiences can best understand what is happening in the life of a wife or partner through the service of a loved one. They often become an important support when a woman feels separated from society or misunderstood by others.

Yet, even though they walk the same path, different experiences on the Journey, the position of the husband or partner in the service can affect the understanding between wives and partners of soldiers.

Recommendations

Our research has shown that the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved is extremely challenging and full of anxiety, injustice and difficulties. Women often feel lonely and abandoned, as they are entrusted with responsibilities and duties that should be handled by society and the state.

Ensuring that society recognizes the work of warriors' beloved is essential to building and developing policies aimed at the well-being of military families. **Therefore, we have developed general recommendations for government agencies, civil society, and service providers that apply to the entire Journey of the Warrior's Beloved and are relevant to all levels of government policies to support such families:**

Officially recognize wives, partners and other family members of soldiers as beneficiaries of veterans' policies, and policies aimed at supporting military families.

Continue researching the experiences of wives and husbands, partners and family members of soldiers and veterans, and use this information to develop policies related to their well-being.

Develop and popularize programs that focus on supporting the wives and partners of soldiers and veterans not only within global educational and volunteer projects and at the level of communities, local governments, and local initiatives.

We have also prepared recommendations for each of the areas of well-being, including: health, relationships, vocation, material needs, housing and physical environment, life skills, and spirituality.

On the Journey of the Warrior's Beloved, changes occur in all areas of well-being: overall well-being deteriorates, and each stage has different needs. The purpose of developing these guidelines is to improve the well-being of the warriors' and veterans' loved ones and to support them at each stage of the Journey.

Health: Physical and Mental

The study participants said that since the beginning of their journey, they have been experiencing anxiety and stress for a significant part of the time. This, in turn, has a negative impact on their condition. Women can experience depression, panic attacks, and a general deterioration in their moral and mental state. Yet, some of the study participants complained that the psychological assistance offered to the partners of servicemen is not always helpful. In some cases, free assistance is provided only in large cities, which limits the opportunities for some women. Also, assistance is not always provided by people who have experience working with soldiers' spouses or partners or who are generally knowledgeable about this topic on a professional level, which is why psychological counseling is not effective.

The geographical factor also affects women's ability to join support groups, which are mostly created in large cities. Some participants said that they could organize such communities themselves or use online platforms, but this can be called a local solution to the problem.

Another problem is the targeted provision of information about psychological counseling, support groups, and other services that wives and partners of military personnel need. Some women cannot use such services because they do not know where and how to get them.

Recommendations

- To develop educational programs for psychological assistance providers that would improve their skills in working with soldiers' partners and wartime challenges.
- Development and work protocols for mental health professionals working with wives and partners of fallen soldiers, prisoners of war and missing servicemen.
- Systematize information about psychological services available to the warriors' beloved in the form of maps, online tools, printed materials, etc. and disseminate information about such resources.
- Ensure access to psychological support services (e.g., art therapy, support groups, group and individual counseling) for women living in villages and small towns.

Wives and partners of military personnel also face deteriorating physical health. This is partly due to constant stress and lack of time for proper health check-ups. Yet, benefits for medical treatment and medicines are not always available to the wives and partners of servicemen and veterans.

Also, some of the study participants said they faced problems related to the lack of educational materials on diseases that are more dangerous in military operations. Examples include viral diseases and diseases transmitted through blood contact. For example, soldiers who provide medical care to each other may not always be able to follow all the preventive measures required for first aid (e.g., wearing gloves or checking that gloves are not torn during the provision of care). Although such situations are common, there are not always systematic measures to regularly check the health of soldiers and their families. Also, information about such risks is not always disseminated to servicemen's spouses, partners and families.

Recommendations

- Develop educational materials for the wives and partners of servicemen and veterans that will explain the health risks they may face.
- Formulate recommendations for wives and partners of servicemen and veterans on how to check and take care of their health.
- Develop a roadmap and/or algorithm of actions for medical care for wives and partners of servicemen and veterans, which will reduce additional stress in case of need for such assistance

Relationships: Family and Friends, Brothers and Sisters-in-arms, Civilian Environment

At all stages of the Journey, warriors' beloved feel isolated from society. This feeling arises from the fact that the country lacks a developed culture of gratitude to military personnel and veterans. The study participants said that, in addition to the lack of recognition of their partners' heroism and the challenges faced by their families, they also faced outright disregard or devaluation of their experiences.

In addition, women often face a lack of tactfulness on the part of others. This may include inappropriate questions about women's finances, personal life and appearance. In some cases, servicemen's partners may face aggression and accusations against them and their partners.

Stereotypes about soldier's beloved and the "right" behavior for them are also problematic. People's ideas about how women "should" behave may include the "right" ways to grieve, the right to free time, restrictions on how partners can communicate with others, etc. Thus, in addition to being misunderstood by others, the loved ones of warriors may also face

condemnation and restrictions imposed on them by others based on their own subjective judgments about law and morality.

This significantly worsens the mental state of wives/partners and other family members of soldiers, and creates a feeling that people around them are hostile to them.

Recommendations

- Create and implement initiatives to develop a culture of gratitude and respect for soldiers.
- Develop educational programs for children and adults that will promote a culture of gratitude and respect for soldiers in everyday life.
- Continue to create and disseminate materials on correct and non-traumatic communication with the wives and partners of military personnel and veterans.
- Conduct a series of information campaigns aimed at overcoming the stereotyping of warriors' beloved at different stages of the Journey.

Women who are living through the loss of a loved one are traumatized by the lack of a culture of honoring the memory of fallen soldiers. First, it creates a sense of injustice and demoralizes. Secondly, it complicates the process of grieving and coping with the loss. In a vulnerable period when loved ones and families of soldiers are experiencing a tragedy, it is important for them to feel support, unity with the community, and to see that others show respect for the fallen soldier and honor his memory. If practices of honoring fallen soldiers are not developed in the community, women may feel alone in their grief and separated from others.

Recommendations

- To work on developing and promoting a unified state policy of gratitude to fallen soldiers for their contribution and honoring their memory.
- Develop recommendations and advice on how to help and communicate tactfully with the families of fallen soldiers.

The study participants noticed that it was increasingly difficult for them to communicate with the civilian population due to the feeling of being cut off from society, misunderstanding and ignoring their experience. In particular, with those who were not part of the military or volunteer community, or with relatives or close friends of military personnel and veterans. This leads to negative scenarios of interaction between the warriors' beloved and others or the cessation of communication in general, and increases the feeling of isolation and misunderstanding.

Recommendations

- Highlight the experience of servicemen's wives, partners, and veterans in society to reduce the gap in understanding each other.
- Avoid stereotyping the experience of servicemen's and veterans' wives and partners when providing psychological services to servicemen's and veterans' wives and partners.

The women in the study said that in some cases, they took on the role of support for the entire family. Women's functions in such situations include informing family members and close friends about the status of their husband or partner, emotional support when sharing news, and general psychological support. Often, the family members of the soldier need such care. If the soldier has relatives who were under his care, this

responsibility is transferred to his beloved during the period of service. In such circumstances, the efforts of wives and partners may be taken for granted and not be properly recognized. Women may find themselves in a situation where others expect them to support them, but do not provide support in return.

Recommendations

- To develop informational and educational psychological materials for families of servicemen that would highlight the peculiarities of the experience of military wives and partners and help maintain a balance in communication between family members and close friends.

Wives and partners of military members who have young children are very vulnerable to changes in routine and spend more resources on household chores. Yet, most parenting issues fall on women and solving household problems. Often, female partners are not able to get help due to financial or other problems, which leads to the fact that they do not have time for rest and for themselves.

Recommendations

- Make kindergartens, babysitters and/or playrooms and development centers available to wives and partners of servicemen, including in shopping centers and other public places, namely:
 - Create additional opportunities specifically for soldiers' wives and partners and their children (e.g., additional playgroups);
 - Ensure access to existing services (e.g., creating a more flexible process for enrolling in groups).
- Reform the labor law system to allow the wives and partners of soldiers to take additional leave, similar to the system introduced

for single mothers (10 days of additional paid leave).⁸² This will allow the wives and partners of currently serving servicemen, prisoners of war, missing, and deceased soldiers to receive additional rest.

Women with young children have an additional responsibility: to explain to their sons and/or daughters what war is and to tell them about the dangers their fathers face. Explaining the specifics of wartime, the concepts of captivity, missing, and death can be a challenge for warriors' beloved. It can be difficult for them to present such complex concepts to young children in a way that does not traumatize them. Soldiers' loved ones should also look for ways to keep the child connected to the father while he is serving.

Recommendations

- Develop a program and/or materials for parents to help them have conversations about the context of war with children of different ages.
- Develop a program and/or materials for children that explain the context of war.
- Develop educational programs and/or materials that address the topic of parenting in crisis situations.

Vocation: Education, Work, or Other Occupation

The study participants said they often lacked information about the types of assistance both the state and NGOs provided. This applies to psychological, legal, financial, educational assistance, as well as information about support groups, grants, etc. In addition, respondents

⁸² Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (2023). *Law of Ukraine "On Vacations" Number 504/96-BP, Article 19* zakon.rada.gov.ua/rada/show/504/96-%D0%B2%D1%80#Text.

said that such assistance is generally not available outside of large cities.

Recommendations

- Systematize and disseminate information on services available to families of servicemen and veterans, including mapping available services in different regions and localities of the country.

Material Needs and Security: Property and Wealth, Legal Security

Warriors' beloved often face the need to draw up documents related to the military service of their husbands or partners. The study participants complained about ineffective interaction with the military enlistment offices, the National Police, the military unit, and other responsible authorities in this regard. In particular, they noted the lack of clear action plans for specific situations, required document templates, and the like. Responsible authorities are not always ready to help and may shift responsibility for processing certain documents to each other, forcing women to go through bureaucratic procedures several times.

Recommendations

- Simplify the existing procedures for submitting and processing documents, particularly for cash assistance.
- Simplify the algorithm for obtaining the statuses of prisoners of war and missing persons.
- Develop transparent and detailed action plans, roadmaps, and procedures for addressing legal issues and obtaining certificates and documents.

According to the study participants, one problem in communicating with the military enlistment offices, the Coordination Headquarters, military units, and other institutions is the lack of empathy among their staff members. Most of the women we spoke with faced rude attitudes and tactless statements. They also said they did not receive qualified assistance. Yet, some respondents had positive experiences with these bodies and reported improvements in their work.

Recommendations

- Conduct training on empathic and ecological professional communication for employees of the military enlistment offices, military units, and other bodies that interact with military spouses and partners.
- Develop recommendations for employees of the bodies mentioned above, including tips and educational materials necessary for building empathetic and ecological professional communication with service users (wives and partners, other family members of servicemen, military men, women, and veterans).

The most vulnerable are the soldiers' beloved who did not officially marry their partners. Others may consider their relationship superficial and frivolous. In addition, because they are not officially married, the partners of servicemen face restrictions on their rights, in particular, if they need to get information about their partner's fate from the military unit, resolve legal or financial issues, apply for benefits and payments, stay with their partner in the hospital after an injury, or participate in organizing the funeral of a loved one.

As of September 2024, Ukraine has introduced procedures for proving the fact of a relationship for unmarried couples. However, the process is bureaucratic and time-consuming, and going through all the procedures

requires significant emotional resources, which negatively affects the women's morale and mental state.

Recommendations

- Analyze the challenges faced by the soldiers' partners who were not officially married but needed to prove the facts of the relationship. Based on the information obtained, update and simplify existing procedures.
- Develop guidelines for soldiers' beloved on the procedure for proving the fact of a relationship based on the experience of women who have undergone these procedures.
- Create a roadmap that explains the procedures for proving the fact of a relationship and obtaining the status of an official wife after the death of a partner.

Warriors' beloved can become vulnerable to manipulation and fraud, especially in crises. In particular, the wives and partners of captured and missing soldiers may go through this experience. When they join the search for their husband or partner, they may follow Russian telegram channels or websites and come across fake information. In addition, Russian fraudsters are specifically looking for information about the families of prisoners of war and contacting them to obtain money fraudulently.

Recommendations

- Develop educational materials and consultations on information security, safe use of the Internet, and ways to recognize fraud and identify the reliability of information sources.
- Inform the population about the procedures for responding to the disappearance of their loved ones.

Housing and the Physical Environment

The study participants often said that they lacked help and support during times of crisis and during the stages of the Journey associated with changing their routine. This usually concerns household chores, as during the service, women are given responsibilities that the couple had previously shared or that were the responsibility of their husband or partner. Women with households are particularly vulnerable in this regard. Warriors' beloved have to do double duty in the face of constant stress and anxiety about their spouses' well-being. The study participants said it would be a great help for them to engage qualified help for reasonable payment or to receive help on a volunteer basis.

Recommendations

- Develop a system of support and assistance that will allow wives and partners of military personnel to send requests to volunteers and receive support and assistance in everyday issues.
- Encourage the work of organizations with transparent and controlled pricing that women can turn to for temporary hiring of assistants and helpers.

Some study participants noted the need for consultations on particular legal and financial matters. Women's requests may relate not only to the service of their husbands or partners but also to other aspects of the

new routine, such as financial management, registration of property rights, and others.

Recommendations

- Study the requests of military wives and partners on legal and financial issues and identify the topics that are most in demand.
- Develop educational materials and roadmaps based on the research findings.

Life Skills and Spirituality

The study participants said that a part of their journey is rethinking their lives and values. This sometimes leads to a desire to change their occupation, learn a new profession, or try themselves in other areas. In some cases, the desire to change activities is also dictated by the necessity and changes in life that women face while going through the journey of the warrior's beloved. An example is the changes that occur in everyday life during the adaptation of a partner after discharge from military service. At this stage, there is a need to build a new routine and adapt to new responsibilities faced by women. The search for new meanings and the desire for change are also relevant for women going through a loss.

However, warriors' spouses do not always have information about training programs, grants for starting their own businesses, and other opportunities. In addition, even when information is available, there are no comprehensive training programs that explain how to apply for grants, how to plan for funding for grants, and how to help women effectively use the available opportunities.

Recommendations

- Create a website with up-to-date information on educational and entrepreneurial opportunities available to warriors' wives, partners, and other family members.
- Develop training materials that will cover the preparation of grant proposals, documents for starting a business, and starting a business in general.
- Create a list of employers with a policy that is friendly to veterans and their families. Encourage employers to disseminate information about their vacant positions among the soldiers' and veterans' families and friends.

For veterans' wives and partners, transitioning to civilian life can be a joyful but highly stressful period. During this time, soldiers and their loved ones re-acquaint each other and get used to a new routine, searching for new meanings and, if necessary, new directions of self-realization. The wives and partners of veterans become support for their loved ones, but they do not always have the appropriate skills to provide such support. The experiences and needs of women at this stage are often put on the back burner, even though they also need support and recovery.

Recommendations

Develop informational materials for servicemen's wives and partners explaining how to help themselves and their partners adapt to civilian life.

The study participants also emphasized the need to create materials for the families of captured soldiers. Women lack information about the process of rehabilitation and recovery of soldiers after captivity,

including recommendations from families who have already gone through or are going through this process.

The respondents said that it is essential for them to prepare for the return of their loved ones and to feel that society honors the contribution of Ukrainian soldiers and is also waiting for the release of prisoners of war. Information materials dedicated to the recovery of servicemen released from captivity will be of practical value to their families and loved ones. Still, they will also give them a sense of visibility and recognition.

Recommendations

- Develop informational materials on the rehabilitation of soldiers after captivity, including those based on the experience of soldiers who have gone through this stage.
- Establish support groups and communities of wives, partners, and other family members of POWs and soldiers released from captivity to share experiences and support each other.

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