

SPECIAL REPORT

no. 199

War's Gendered Costs: The Story of Ukraine's Women

Akanksha Khullar



NOVEMBER 2022

Abstract

Russia's invasion of Ukraine entered its eighth month in late October and shows no sign of abatement. The war has had massive consequences on Ukraine, and women and girls are bearing the disproportionate burden. The conflict has further exacerbated gender inequities that were already compounded by eight years of armed conflict in eastern Ukraine and, beginning in early 2020, by the COVID-19 pandemic. This report seeks to fill the gaps in literature on the massive consequences of the conflict on Ukraine's women.

Attribution: Akanksha Khullar, "War's Gendered Costs: The Story of Ukraine's Women," *ORF Special Report No. 199*, November 2022, Observer Research Foundation.

Introduction

On 24 February 2022, Russia commenced a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. Since then, 6,114 civilians have been killed and 9,132 wounded,¹ and extensive damage has been wrought on infrastructure including hospitals, schools, and residential houses. Economic conditions have deteriorated, and food insecurity has heightened. Human rights organisations accuse Russian soldiers of indiscriminate attacks that violate the laws of war.² Only a week into the hostilities, over one million people had already fled their homes to seek refuge elsewhere, including in foreign lands. In March 2022, the International Criminal Court

(ICC) opened an investigation into alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity in Ukraine³ amidst reports of women being raped, civilian deaths, and destruction of entire cities. However, given that Russia had withdrawn from the ICC in 2016⁴—after the court called the Crimea annexation an “occupation”—and Ukraine is unable to refer to the alleged war crimes by itself as it is not an ICC member, no action has yet been taken.⁵

Amidst the devastation caused by the war, it is the women and girls who are bearing the worst impacts. This gendered view of the Russia-Ukraine conflict has yet to be given the attention it deserves. This special report is therefore an effort to understand how the first eight months of the Russian offensive has impacted the lives of Ukraine's women and girls. It uses secondary sources including reports published by the Ukraine government, international

organisations, and aid agencies who are working on the ground; as well as media coverage and reports by various United Nations (UN) agencies. The author has also conducted interviews with experts on gender issues, as well as Ukrainian individuals who have experienced Russian atrocities in the past and are currently settled in other countries.

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Women's Rights in Ukraine: A Brief History

Ukraine has recorded significant progress in bridging gender inequities in the past decade. Indeed, since the 2013 Maidan revolution⁶—also known as ‘the revolution of dignity’—women in Ukraine have become increasingly engaged politically, economically, and socially.

In 2017, Ukrainian women mirrored the global #MeToo movement, calling it “I’m Not Afraid to Say”⁷—a campaign that revolved around issues of rape, sexual harassment, and domestic violence. The campaign gave women a voice and boosted their confidence in speaking out against their aggressors. It also paved the way for a new law that criminalises domestic violence—previously considered only a civil offense—providing resources for the setting up of shelters, registry for offenders, and hotlines.⁸

Data also highlights the slow but steady rise in women’s political participation—from 3 percent of parliament seats in 1990 to more than 20 percent in 2021.⁹ Following local elections in October 2020, 42 percent of village councils and 28 percent of regional councils are today led by women,¹⁰ which in part can be attributed to the addition of gender quotas and affirmative action to the country’s elections code. The same patterns are seen in local politics: there has been a 13-percent increase in the proportion of women nominated as candidates by political parties, and a 12-percent rise in the share of women elected as councillors.¹¹

At the same time, Ukraine has ratified or joined most international agreements on gender equality.^a Furthermore, to guide its security efforts and ensure the incorporation of gendered perspectives across various fields, Ukraine has adopted a National Action Plan, which supported the implementation of UNSC's WPS agenda as early as 2016 for a period up to 2020, and its successor for the period up to 2025.¹²

Despite progress, however, gender inequities remain persistent, buoyed by patriarchal norms that promote discrimination and systemic biases against women and girls. Indeed, Ukrainian women continue to face serious barriers to meaningful economic, civic and political participation, which are hindered further by risks of economic fragility, poor health outcomes, and exposure to violence. A 2019 study by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) found that 75 percent of Ukrainian women reported having been the subject of some form of violence since the age of 15, with one in every three having experienced sexual violence.¹³ In spite of changing mindsets, the labour force participation rate of women also continues to remain lower than

that of men.¹⁴ For those who are part of the labour force, they suffer a 22-percent pay gap compared to their male counterparts, as well as a 32-percent gap in pensions.¹⁵ Moreover, women comprise more than 72 percent of all recipients of social assistance, and they shoulder the greatest burden of unpaid domestic and care work in households.¹⁶

These inequities—deeply embedded in Ukraine's social fabric—have been compounded by the war that has raged in eastern Ukraine since 2014. The past eight years of conflict in the eastern part have not only deepened pre-existing inequalities but have created new ones, increasing women's exposure to war crimes, especially gender-based violence, arbitrary killings, rape, and trafficking. More than 1.5 million people—nearly two-thirds of them women and children—have already been displaced internally due the conflict and do not have access to essential services such as healthcare, housing, and employment.¹⁷

a These include the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of the 4th World Conference for Women; the Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and its Optional Protocol; International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions; and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security (WPS).

The COVID-19 pandemic then came to Ukraine on 3 March 2020,¹⁸ threatening the gains, however modest, that have been made vis-à-vis women's rights, particularly in economic empowerment and access to healthcare. This experience is, however, not unique to Ukraine. Like their counterparts in many other countries in the world, Ukrainian women have now been placed at a higher level of subjective poverty and economic insecurity, experiencing lower employment rates, insufficient access to medical services, and increased exposure to physical and psychological domestic abuse owing to the prolonged restrictions on mobility.¹⁹

These negative consequences are even more acute for women belonging to minority groups including Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), Roma women,^b and women with disabilities. These

marginalised groups have had to face additional challenges related to residence registration, lack of work and livelihoods, and limited access to medical and social services.²⁰

There is no doubt, therefore, that gender inequities are persistent in Ukraine—in part owing to patriarchal structures, and also as a result of the past eight years of internal conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic. It is amidst these compounded challenges that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has severely impacted social cohesion and the resilience of local communities, and worsened gender inequities.

b Romas are an ethnic group of traditionally itinerant people who originated in northern India but live in modern times worldwide, principally in Europe. There are some 50,000 people in Ukraine who self-identify as Roma.

The Gendered Impacts of the War

The women of Ukraine have not been mere spectators in the prolonged conflict. From when the conflict first erupted, Ukrainian women have fought in the military and territorial defence forces, and have served on the diplomatic and informational front lines. They have also saved lives as doctors, nurses, hospital workers, and volunteers. Those living overseas have organised mass protests calling for an end to the war.

Disregarding both their significant contributions and their additional burdens, decision-makers have largely kept women on the sidelines, whether on humanitarian efforts, peace-making, or other areas that directly impact their lives. At the formal

decision-making level, the centralisation of power and increased role of the military has only made it more difficult for women to exert influence in political and administrative decision-making processes. Women's lack of participation has further failed to ensure that their needs and priorities, including of those most vulnerable and marginalised, are being given adequate attention and thereby mitigated.

Additional Caregiving Burden

The Russia-Ukraine war is causing a re-distribution of family roles and functions, thereby adding to the onerous plight of women. Women in Ukraine have customarily been viewed as the primary caregivers and domestic workers tasked with the responsibility of nurturing their families, especially the children and the elderly. They have limited control over assets and productive resources, and are required to do most of the work on fulfilling the humanitarian needs of displaced people, locals and households. Indeed, 95 percent of single-parent households are headed by single mothers.^{21,22}

As Russia's assault on Ukraine led to the destruction or closing down of hundreds of schools, childcare and eldercare centres, and hospitals, women's care burden has increased manifold. This has left them little time, if at all, to care for themselves. Compounding the care burden are other consequences of war such as strained community resources, high demand for volunteer work, and the absence of men. The martial order issued by the

Ukraine State Border Guard Service—right at the beginning of Russia's invasion as tens of thousands of civilians fled the country—mandated men between 18 to 40 years old to stay back and fight.²³ Thus, the women are no longer dealing with only the increased caretaking or unpaid work demands but are also responsible for making up for the lost household income. According to the May 2022 Rapid Gender Analysis report of the UN Women and CARE, "More and more women from diverse backgrounds in Ukraine were becoming involved in volunteering and providing assistance ever since the war commenced and also performing vital roles in the humanitarian response in local communities."²⁴ In this sense, the ongoing war has brought about a shift in gender roles where more and more women—in the absence of their husbands—are emerging as heads of household.

Migration and Displacement

As of March 2021, the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) confirmed that there were almost 1.5 million internally displaced people in Ukraine, of which 58.56 percent were females and 41.44 percent were males.²⁵ Experience in past conflicts has shown that military interventions can cause a migration crisis or else amplify an existing one, where women and children are among the first to be displaced. This brings the risk of double or triple displacement for those who have been already displaced.

Amidst Russian shelling and bombing, Ukraine is being confronted with an unprecedented crisis of great numbers of women and children fleeing their homes to search for a better life or simply to stay alive. According to the UN, as of July 2022, at least 12 million people have fled their homes since Russia's offensive began.²⁶ Of this number, more than 5.2 million have left for neighbouring countries and are being recorded as refugees across Europe; more than 3.5 million of them have applied for temporary residence in a foreign country.²⁷ Within Ukraine, some seven million people are internally displaced.²⁸

The UN's International Organisation for Migration (IOM) estimates that more than half of those either fleeing the country or are displaced are women.²⁹ The IOM data suggests that as of July 2022, at least 65 percent of women are still trying to find safety in different parts of Ukraine.³⁰ These numbers are only expected to increase significantly in the coming months as the offensive continues.

Yet, it is not the displacement alone that increases the security risk for Ukrainian women and young girls. As thousands of refugees seek shelter and safety, the danger of women being trafficked heightens as they look for help for themselves and their children. Exploiting their situation and vulnerability, traffickers offer transport, work or accommodation, thereby luring women to leave with them.³¹

These situations could lead to sexual exploitation where women are forced to trade sex for shelter, transport or safety. In addition, women who have been forced to flee often rely on hastily opened and unvetted sources of shelter—many of which are overcrowded and under-resourced. In many of these shelters there is poor hygiene, lack of basic supplies, and absence of safety measures, together posing a direct threat to the health and lives of women.³²

Some groups of refugees have in fact, faced additional barriers to reaching safety where the existence of shelter has not necessarily guaranteed access. There are reports of Roma women and children—who are facing immense challenges in their attempts to cross the border given their lack of economic resources and basic legal documentation—being forced to queue for long hours until all ethnic Ukrainians are processed.³³ This housing discrimination and segregation in poor conditions is together only adding on to the problems of women belonging to minority communities, putting them at even greater risk.

Impeded Access to Health Services

Prior to Russia's invasion, the women of Ukraine were already suffering from lower health outcomes, including in mental health.³⁴ As protection structures and support systems have broken down as a result of Russia's military offensives, there is a massive contraction in routine health services and restrictions, which in turn has created additional barriers to women's access to even basic health services such as sexual and reproductive care.

Damage and destruction of medical facilities, along with a shortage of service providers and critical supplies, have severely compromised the delivery of health services such as maternal care for the estimated 265,000 women who were pregnant when the conflict erupted,³⁵ and specialised services

for gender-based violence survivors. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has said that by 24 March, at least 64 hospitals and healthcare facilities had been bombed and shelled.³⁶ In one incident, on 9 March, a maternity hospital in Mariupol was bombed, resulting in the death of at least one pregnant woman and her unborn child.³⁷

Lack of access to healthcare has thus become a serious problem for those remaining in Ukraine, with medical supplies diminishing as the conflict continues. In the past six months of the war, pregnant women in Ukraine—shielding from Russian bombardment and to protect their babies—have been reported giving birth in subway stations, underground shelters, basements and bunkers.³⁸ Estimates suggest that nearly 80,000 women are likely to give birth in the next three months in Ukraine.³⁹ If these expectant mothers continue to be deprived of critical maternal health services, they will be forced to give birth in difficult conditions, endangering their own life and that of their child. This could have detrimental impacts not only on their physical health but also their mental well-being. Indeed, the stress of war and limited access to healthcare could together overload women's capacity to cope, further leading to an increased number of pregnancy complications, premature births, and stillbirths.

Life has not been easier for those who have fled Ukraine. Upon their arrival in a foreign country, migrants—majority of whom are women—are facing immense difficulty to access healthcare services primarily due to lack of registration documents or because those health systems are already overloaded, to begin with, and thereby further stressed by the multitude of refugees arriving in a very short period of time.⁴⁰

Sexual Violence and Rape

Gender-based violence has remained persistent in Ukraine, with 90 percent of cases of violence targeting women.⁴¹ According to a study published by the UNFPA in 2019, 75 percent of Ukrainian adult women have experienced some form of violence since the age of 15, with one in every three reporting having experienced physical sexual violence.⁴² There is no dearth in evidence to prove that the outbreak of conflict often deepens inequities and creates new ones, further increasing the exposure of women and girls to various forms of dehumanising experiences, including rape, violence, torture, and exploitation.⁴³

Since the Russian invasion, there have been reports of women being raped following the execution of their husbands; and of women being raped in front of their family members—a deliberate

tactic to tear apart the fabric of the Ukrainian family, break the spirit of the women, and instil a sense of hopelessness and despair.⁴⁴ A national hotline set up to monitor cases of domestic violence, human trafficking, and gender-based violence has received multiple reports of sexual violence.⁴⁵ The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has said that as of 3 June 2022, the Human Rights Monitoring Team had received reports of 124 alleged acts of conflict-related sexual violence across Ukraine.⁴⁶

In a June 2022 UN Security Council (UNSC) meeting, Pramila Patten, the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict, reiterated the UN's commitment to prevent sexual violence in Ukraine and prosecute perpetrators. She told the council that there is a gap between the international resolutions aimed at preventing rape and other sexual assaults during conflicts, and the reality on the ground for the most vulnerable, women and children in Ukraine.⁴⁷ She stressed upon the elements of the Framework of Cooperation on the Prevention and Response to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence⁴⁸ agreed upon by the Government of Ukraine and the Office of Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence.

The framework—signed on 3 May—aims to enhance protection and response to conflict-related sexual violence in the military context of Russian operations in Ukraine. So far, however, Russia has continued to deny all allegations of sexual violence. Russia’s ambassador to the UN, Vassily Nebenzia, has repeatedly emphasised that Russian soldiers are subject to strict rules prohibiting violence against civilians. He has accused Ukraine and Western members of the Council of issuing allegations without evidence.⁴⁹

For rape victims either in Ukraine or among those finding shelter in a foreign land, their health risks are significant. They are at high risk of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV, as well as pregnancy and internal physical injuries—these would all require specialised medical assistance that may not be available amidst the ongoing conflict.

Education

According to Ukraine’s Education Ministry, over 1,800 schools and universities have been damaged or destroyed since the Russian invasion.⁵⁰ Other schools are being used as information centres, shelters, supply hubs, or for military purposes by both warring parties. As a result, millions of boys and girls in the past eight months have been deprived of proper education, with young girls being at a

particular risk of losing years of schooling and social development. Save the Children notes that in areas of conflict like Ukraine, girls are 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than boys.⁵¹ The COVID-19 pandemic has already shown how educational disruptions make it more difficult for girls to return to school once the crisis dissipates.⁵²

Some children have turned to online schooling initiated by the Ministry of Education. Girls, however, are finding it difficult to even engage with these online sessions due either to increased care burden at home, the unwillingness of parents to allow them, or the lack of access to digital means.

Putting girl’s education on the back-burner will prove detrimental for the girls’ own health—they will be at greater risk of early marriage, early pregnancy and child birth, and gender-based violence. It also threatens their financial independence and other parameters of social empowerment, while having additional repercussions on the welfare of her own family, her community, and the larger economy.

Food and Energy Crisis

Ukraine is a major source of wheat for the World Food Programme, which provides food assistance to 115.5 million people in more than 120 countries across the globe.⁵³ Meanwhile, Russia is one of the world's top three crude oil producers, as well as the second largest producer—and largest exporter—of natural gas.⁵⁴ Even before the war, Ukrainian women's access to food and energy had historically been more precarious than men's; women-headed households were more likely to be food insecure.⁵⁵ The ongoing war has added another challenge to the crisis as it has massively disrupted production and export processes and essential commodities are becoming increasingly scarce. These shortages drive price hikes in turn. The cost of food in Ukraine has risen by 50 percent since the beginning of 2022, whereas crude oil prices—currently up by 33 percent—are projected to rise above 50 percent by the end of the year.⁵⁶

When there is not enough food to go around, women in patriarchal societies are required to cut down their own intake to save food for other members of the household. This trend has become glaringly visible in Ukraine, driving worsening malnutrition and anaemia among women and young girls.⁵⁷


With their access to resources such as land or financial credit as well as formal employment now becoming more limited than ever, along with the expanding gender gaps in pay and pensions, Ukraine's women are not only dealing with the rising food and energy crisis but are also left with no credible assets to fall back on.

Conclusion

The women of Ukraine are shouldering a disproportionate weight of Russia's military invasion: they are left without access to services; burdened with additional unpaid work; and have become even more vulnerable to sexual violence and abuse. There has been no accountability on the part of political leaders to adopt measures that will ensure that the women's concerns are being heard. At the same time, there has been no show of accountability at the global stage to safeguard and protect the women who are being massively affected by the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

The imperatives in Ukraine include safeguarding the health, dignity and rights of women and girls. This report makes the following recommendations to prevent the further regression of women's rights in Ukraine.

1. Ukrainian women need to be included in decision-making platforms on de-escalation, conflict prevention, mitigation and other processes.
2. National and international efforts must be made towards scaling up the delivery of life-saving sexual and reproductive health services, medical equipment and supplies, and strengthening the network as well as resources of civil society organisations that could provide assistance to women whose lives have been upended by the conflict.
3. Accountability can both act as a deterrent for the crimes that are being carried out against the Ukrainian women and help bring about a decrease in sexual violence during peacetime. Thus, there is an urgent need to ensure accountability—whether in international or domestic jurisdictions—for sexual and gender-based crimes in Ukraine.

4. The gendered element of all war crimes must be emphasised and highlighted during international trials, and must be taken into account as courts hand out their decisions and sentencing.
5. Funds need to be raised and investments made in educational programmes directly targeted at Ukrainian women and girls.
6. Promote and protect the right to food by targeting the specific nutrition needs of women and girls.
7. The international community along with the national forces must actively listen to women activists, IDPs, doctors, nurses, and those fighting on the frontlines, and work to mainstream their needs and concerns across all levels. 

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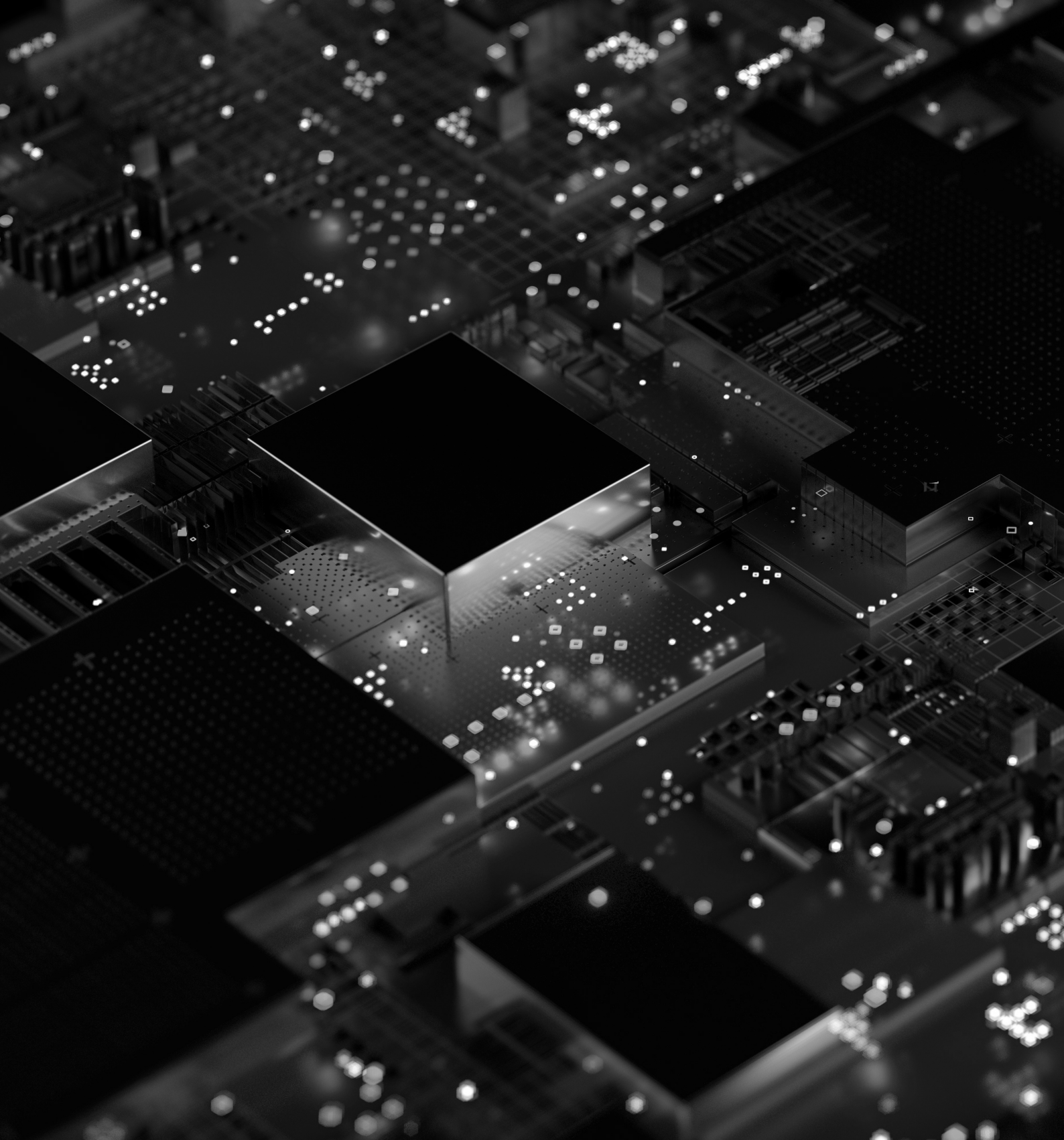
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About the Author

Akanksha Khullar is the Country Coordinator for India at the Women's Regional Network.

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**20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area,
New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-35332000. Fax : +91-11-35332005
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org**