If Not Now, Then When? Childbearing Decision-Making in Ukrainian Cities During Russia's Full-Scale Invasion

Anna Popovych, *University of Wisconsin-Madison*
Brienna Perelli-Harris, *University of Southampton*
Theodore P. Gerber, *University of Wisconsin-Madison*

Abstract

We study views and experiences of childbearing decision-making during the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The existing literature on the impact of armed conflict on fertility has predominantly used quantitative methods and focused on post-conflict periods. In our study, we conducted 22 in-depth online-interviews and 3 focus-groups with women aged 18 to 39 residing in three Ukrainian cities. Although our sample cannot be viewed as representative, our interviews demonstrate a diversity of mechanisms behind fertility outcomes. On the one hand, war produces widespread fear, trauma, and uncertainty, economic woes and separation from loved ones, which lead to decisions to delay or forego childbearing. On the other hand, uncertainty about the war's duration, coupled with a strong sense of life's fragility and traditional views on family, can motivate a desire to have a child immediately. Pressure from social networks can simultaneously influence fertility control, by emphasizing war-induced dangers, and encourage childbearing, based on conservative values. While many perceive that conditions during war are simply too unfavorable for having children, others associate childbearing with a patriotic duty in the face of an enemy attack.

War can upend all aspects of social and personal life, including decisions about childbearing. Most studies on how armed conflict impact fertility and analyze quantitative data, usually collected well after the fighting ends (Lindstrom and Bernahu 1999; Agadjanian and Prata 2002; Randall 2005; Cetorelli 2014; Torche and Shwed 2015; Castro Torres and Urdinola 2019; Kraehnert et al. 2019; Torrisi 2020). Studies in this growing literature provide invaluable understanding of the long-term behavioral and medical impacts of war on fertility, and the corresponding consequences for population dynamics. Intuitively, war could both increase fertility (due to replacement and insurance effects, a desire to contribute to the long-term survival of the nation through childbearing, declining access to contraception, or accelerated life transitions in the face of potential doom) or decrease it (due to reluctance to have children in conditions of intense uncertainty, widespread violence, dislocation, and economic turmoil, long spousal separations while men serve at the front, or direct exposure to trauma). Not surprisingly, the research literature shows that war affects fertility in highly variable ways. The magnitude and direction of its consequences for the timing and overall completion of fertility depend on contextual factors such as the nature and duration of the conflict, as well as individual characteristics such as degree of exposure to violence, number of prior children (parity), and socioeconomic status. War can have offsetting effects within a particular context, e.g. accelerating fertility for some groups while slowing it for others.

Deepening our understanding of how people make decisions about having children during wartime requires delving into their thought-processes and attitudes towards childbearing. To address these gaps in the growing literature on war and family formation, we take a qualitative approach to study the impact of the war in Ukraine. Ukraine has experienced Europe's longest, most violent, on-going war since World War II, and there is no end in sight. The UN has estimated over 30,000 civilian casualties, with dozens dying from Russian missile strikes daily, and untold numbers of soldiers killed. In the immediate aftermath of the full-scale invasion in February 2022, millions of Ukrainian women and children fled the country, often for destinations in Western Europe; today, an estimated 7 million refugees remain abroad, while millions of others have been internally displaced. However, Ukrainian working-age men are forbidden to leave the country and are subject to military mobilization. The gendered nature of the refugee flows and military service expectations is relevant to war's potential impact on partnerships and fertility, as they point to widespread physical separation of spouses and also of children from fathers.

We conducted 22 semi-structured in-depth interviews (by Zoom) with 18-39 year old women living in Ukraine's two largest cities, Kyiv and Kharkiv, in spring 2023. Additionally, we conducted 3 online focus groups in December 2023 with Kyiv-, Kharkiv- and Odesa-based women of the same age and same number of children. Our informants had been living in Ukraine for more than one year after the start of Russia's full-fledged invasion in February 2022; i.e. if they fled abroad they had returned. Both Kyiv, Ukraine's centrally-located capital, and Kharkiv, near the country's north-eastern border with Russia, were threatened by approaching Russian forces in the early months of the war. Although neither city was occupied, and the immediate threats were turned back by Ukrainian counter-offensives in summer and fall 2022, all three cities have experienced frequent and continuing missile and drone attacks.

We asked informants how the war has shaped their own and their friends' and family members' romantic relationships, their views of partnerships and childbearing, and their recent actions and future plans regarding marriage, divorce, separation, and pregnancy. Our interviews are not representative of the larger urban population of women of childbearing age who have remained in Ukraine during Russia's full-scale invasion. Moreover, they represent only one point in time, albeit an important one that has received little attention in previous research, while the conflict is underway

and attendant risks to life and well-being are very much part of lived daily experiences. However, our interviews provide unique evidence of diverse patterns and logics of response in the realms of partnerships and childbearing to the challenges posed by war. Thus, they contribute a different perspective on the questions about the demographic consequences of war that ultimately must be addressed with quantitative research conducted after the war ends.

Our findings indicate that the negative and positive effects of armed conflict on childbirth may overlap and counterbalance each other. They also highlight the simultaneous salience of many of the mechanisms previously described, in action. On the one hand, war induces widespread fear, trauma, and uncertainty, compounded by economic hardships and separation from loved ones, leading to decisions to delay or forego pregnancies. On the other hand, uncertainty about the war's duration, combined with a strong sense of life's fragility and conservative baseline attitudes towards childbearing, can motivate a desire to have a child despite war-induced dangers and challenges. We pay special attention to the social pressure that can account for the effects of war on fertility in both directions. Ideas circulating in one's social circles can influence decisions to avoid pregnancies due to acknowledged risks, while also promoting births — especially unplanned ones — due to common perceptions of children as essential for families, age limits for childbearing, and stigma around abortions. Nationalist discourse, responding to the war-induced demographic crisis, can additionally be used to justify the paradoxical desire to procreate during unsettled times. In general, ideational climate and social networks should be considered in predictive models of fertility during armed conflicts.

Preliminary Findings

Several distinct themes permeated our conversations with interviewees from all three cities. Often, these themes activated one another, overlapping, and coexisting even when they appeared contradictory. We begin with foundational ideas about childbearing among Ukrainian women. Next, we explore our interviewees' experiences as the armed conflict unfolds and their perception of how the war has shaped their daily lives. We then delve into the mechanisms behind potential negative and positive effects of Russo-Ukrainian armed conflict on fertility.

1. The interviews reveal potential *negative* impacts related to fears and uncertainties arising from the conflict that lead to delay, as expressed by these informants:

> IDI-6: Everyone is waiting. Everyone is holding back and waiting for better times. As long as they can still afford to wait, well, as age allows. (…) Because it's tough. Well, because, firstly, yes, carrying, giving birth, and raising a child from infancy is somehow... I think that... Although at any age, there are expenses for a child. But when a child is a bit older, you can plan things, and they can eat something… a baby needs, you understand, food and everything else. But as I think about it, there are also diapers and all that. It's not a cheap pleasure. And then, for example, I live in a city where at 9 in the morning, there's demining. In the evening, sirens keep blaring endlessly. We have bombings. Well, we didn't have them for probably 2 weeks... We're holding back and waiting. Well, that also matters. Because, you see, even when a woman carries a child and goes through it all herself, the child still goes through it too. Well, I have the same opinion. Well, I'm also holding back.
>
> IDI-12: Probably because it's very scary. It's very scary to start being a mother. Not only can you not ensure your own safety and life, but now there's a child depending on you. And you're responsible for her. She can't escape without you. That's it. It's extremely scary, to the maximum. (…) And now, first of all, it's scary because I don't know what will happen

tomorrow , really to the maximum. If something happens to my husband, I will be in shock. I'll be shocked myself, and even more so with a child.

2. The interviews also revealed *Positive* impulses toward childbearing. For example, this woman was surprised to see how her thinking had changed.

> IDI-7: I caught myself thinking about it about six months ago—how I suddenly wanted children! Well, it's probably on the level of instincts, I suppose. (…) I don't know why. But I didn't have that (smiled) before the war. (…) [S]ome people might be afraid that they haven't done it earlier, like... how to say it, both being a mom and the war going on already, and it's uncertain what will happen, and... many haven't fulfilled themselves as mothers. Some people... Well, I don't know. I've thought about this many times too, like... Some people give birth, I think, for many reasons... Many military wives get pregnant, a lot of them. Because I also think, well, there might be something like that. What if he doesn't come back? At least, if there's a child, it's his continuation. I think people might have these kinds of thoughts. And many think, why not now? What if tomorrow there's a complete cutoff, and we'll never have the opportunity to give birth? I think many people think like that (smiled).

This quote reveals uncertainty about the end of the war, coupled with the need to conform to dominant ideas about childbearing in Ukrainian society.

> IDI-23 : I want to give life to one more person. This is my dream, which I promised to myself after February 24th. (…) I believe that if God gives it to me, it will happen now. I won't wait for victory. (…) We had plans, he called me in 2014, yes. We were planning to have a second child. But then, somehow, we got caught up in our careers. I had a good job, and he did too. And somehow, our careers and routines took over. After the 24th, I realized that all material possessions are just nonsense. Honestly, it's true. I told myself - work can wait, so can a career. It's not waiting for us at home. At home, there are living people waiting for us. You know, as Leo Tolstoy said, "Happy is he who is happy at home." (Olena, 35, Kyiv)

For some husbands who are on the front lines, experiencing parenthood is also a priority in the situation of uncertainty about your life. It is also important for them that their children's future is what they are shedding blood for today.

> IDI-15: In terms of creating families, for example, in my opinion, servicemen try to establish families because they are afraid of missing out on this opportunity. They want to experience what family life is like in the future, even though it might be... well, short-lived. In the sense that they get married, and then one of them deploys, or both of them are on the frontlines. To experience that happiness. Plus, some even manage to have children during these brief periods. Not necessarily to leave a heritage, I don't think that's the primary concern now, but in my view, the main purpose of a family is procreation.

3. Finally, we discuss possible role of Ukrainian demographic crisis and nationalist sentiments in boosting Ukrainian fertility. In some cases, women expressed a sense that bearing children is a patriotic act that will help preserve the nation in the future:

> IDI-2: It's about families, we need to revive the nation (…) we need to have children. I know that there are a lot of pregnant women now, a lot indeed. And we need to revive. We won't give in, because Russia says we should all perish, as they say, 'These Ukrainians should be killed even in the womb.' But we won't let that happen. We will revive. (Hanna, 26, Kharkiv, currently pregnant with her first child)

These brief snippets only hint at the rich and complex themes regarding the impact of Russia's full-scale invasion on plans and actions related to childbearing in Ukraine.

References

Agadjanian, Victor, and Ndola Prata. 2002. "War, Peace, and Fertility in Angola." Demography 39 (2): 215–231.

Annan, Jeannie, and Moriah Brier. 2010. "The risk of return: intimate partner violence in Northern Uganda's armed conflict." Social science & medicine 70(1): 152-159.

Brunborg, Helge, and Ewa Tabeau. 2005. "Demography of Conflict and Violence: An Emerging Field." European Journal of Population 21(2-3): 131–144.

Castro Torres, Andrés Felipe, and B. Piedad Urdinola. 2019. "Armed conflict and fertility in Colombia, 2000–2010." Population Research and Policy Review 38: 173-213.

Cetorelli, Valeria. 2014. "The effect on fertility of the 2003–2011 war in Iraq." Population and Development Review 40(4): 581-604.

Fargues, Philippe. 2000. "Protracted National Conflict and Fertility Change: Palestinians and Israelis in the Twentieth Century." Population and Development Review 26(3): 441–482.

Jayaraman, Anuja, Tesfayi Gebreselassie, and Sethumadhavan Chandrasekhar. 2009. "Effect of Conflict on Age at Marriage and Age at First Birth in Rwanda." Population Research and Policy Review 28(5): 551–567.

Kraehnert, Kati, Tilman Brück, Michele DiMaio, and Roberto Nisticò. 2019. "The Effects of Conflict on Fertility: Evidence from the Genocide in Rwanda." Demography, 56, 935–968.

Le, Kien and My Nguyen. 2022. "War and Intimate Partner Violence in Africa." SAGE Open 12(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440221096427.

Lindstrom, David P., and Betemariam Berhanu. 1999. "The Impact of War, Famine, and Economic Decline on Marital Fertility in Ethiopia." Demography 36(2): 247–61.

Neal, Sara, Nicole Stone, and Roger Ingham. 2016. "The Impact of Armed Conflict on Adolescent Transitions: A Systematic Review of Quantitative Research on Age of Sexual Debut, First Marriage and First Birth in Young Women under the Age of 20 Years." BMC Public Health 16(1): 225-37.

Randall, Sara. 2005. "The Demographic Consequences of Conflict, Exile and Repatriation: A Case Study of Malian Tuareg." European Journal of Population 21(2-3): 291–320.

Saile, Regina, Neuner, Frank, Ertl, Verena, and Catani, Claudia. 2013. "Prevalence and predictors of partner violence against women in the aftermath of war: A survey among couples in Northern Uganda." Social Science & Medicine. 86: 17–25.

Shemyakina, Olga. 2013. "Patterns in Female Age at First Marriage and Tajik Armed Conflict." European Journal of Population 29(3): 303–343.

Torche, Florencia and Uri Shwed. 2015. "The Hidden Costs of War: Exposure to Armed Conflict and Birth Outcomes." Sociological Science 2: 558-581.

Torrisi, Orsola. 2020. "Armed Conflict and the Timing of Childbearing in Azerbaijan." Population and Development Review 46(3): 501-556.