

“We need to protect the economy” — female employees of Metinvest Pokrovske Coal on choosing male professions for The Monitor

Journalists from one of the oldest international publications, The Christian Science Monitor (known as The Monitor), visited a coal mine in Pokrovsk, which is part of the Metinvest Pokrovske Coal Company. They spoke with women who decided to take on traditionally male roles. The report from this frontline enterprise covers the wartime challenges for the company, the women's motivation, and their role in the Ukrainian economy.



Kateryna Tolmachova started working in the Donbas coal industry in 2017.

But when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022 and men were called to military service, her career accelerated. For women like her, stepping into the critical roles the men left empty wasn't just an opportunity, but a duty.

“Who, if not us?” says Ms. Tolmachova, who recently became deputy head of the pumping division at Metinvest Pokrovske Coal. “If our men are taken to the army and protect us from there, we need to protect the economy.”

Nowhere is this shift more evident than in the coal mining industry of Donbas, where women have increasingly taken on critical roles to sustain both the war machine and their families. Ms. Tolmachova's journey from pumping machine operator to a leadership role highlights the expanding opportunities for women in the industry as more men get called to the front.

“Our women can do everything,” she says. “Now when the situation is hard, they understand that we have ... to be supportive, and able to adapt.”

Women's duty, in the mines

Metinvest Pokrovske Coal, one of Ukraine's newest coal mines, has been quick to harness the potential of female employees. Established in 1990, it was the last coal mine completed in the region before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Its coal powers blast furnaces of steel plants owned by the Metinvest Group.

The war has brought significant challenges to Metinvest Pokrovske Coal. Approximately 1,000 employees have been mobilized to the Ukrainian military, and about 1,500 have moved to safer regions with their families. In all, 130 employees have been killed and 232 injured due to the ongoing conflict. Before the war, Metinvest Pokrovske Coal employed around 8,000 people; now, this number has decreased to about 6,000.

In response, the company's female employees are taking on a greater share of the workload, and in more critical capacities. As Andriy Akulich, general director of Metinvest Pokrovske Coal notes, they make up almost a third of the current workforce (31%) compared with just under a quarter (24%) before the war. Those who stay often do

so to care for older relatives who are either unable or unwilling to leave. Women are turning to the mine for employment opportunities as there is a dearth of other jobs in various sectors, with most supermarkets and schools closed in the region.

Traditionally, he explains, women at the coal mine were confined to roles such as operating the elevator or managing the facilities where miners receive their lamps and oxygen equipment. These jobs were considered suitable for women, as they did not involve the strenuous physical labor required underground.

“Women have come to substitute men in some underground jobs like pumping and electrical machines,” he says. Before, “there were enough men to do these jobs. Women were not interested.”

However, the war has shattered conventional notions of what women can and cannot handle. Women who were once employed in administrative roles above ground now find themselves underground in a variety of roles.



Learning in a new environment

Metinvest’s training center, led by Larysa Batrukh, has adapted to this new reality. Previously, the center trained approximately 100 students per month, but now it trains around 50, including a small but growing number of women.

“There are about two to five female students per month training for underground positions,” Ms. Batrukh says.

Inside a large classroom with boarded-up windows, most chairs are stacked on empty desks. One woman was killed after a Russian missile hit the grounds of the training center.

But that did not deter Oksana Mariash, who returned to the mine after evacuating her daughter to Poland. She is training to become a pumping system operator, and focuses attentively on her lessons, aware that exams are approaching. “Of course, it is scary and hard when you hear explosions, but it is interesting to learn, and I really like my teachers.”

One of those instructors, Yevhen Mezhenny, oversees the education for technical positions, including welders and machine operators. He is impressed by the seamless transition of women into traditionally male-dominated roles.

“I’m surprised, but it is going very smoothly, with no big hiccups,” he says. “Ukrainian women are very smart and hardworking, and they put a lot of effort into studying. Many of them were previously teachers or accountants.”

A second job

Most of the women working or training at the mine also have significant responsibilities on the home front, too.

Tetiana Hrekova manages the demands of her job while caring for her 11-year-old son and her elderly parents. She begins her day at 4 a.m. to catch the bus, a crucial link in keeping operations running smoothly despite the war. She returns home at 5 p.m. and starts a fresh shift feeding the family and supporting her son’s online schooling.



"I can only hope that the war will be over soon and children will go to school," she says during her eight-hour shift deep in the coal mine. "We will not be afraid of leaving them above ground and be able to ... enjoy our work."

Olena Boiko, a native of Pokrovsk working in the chemical lab, has been at the company since 2008 and hopes to continue for many more years. "These are difficult times. Sometimes, we don't get enough sleep. The work is hard. The situation is tough. I'm grateful that the company hasn't abandoned us during these challenging times for Ukraine, and I hope peace will come soon," she says.

Coal mining is not the only sector where traditional gender barriers have been broken down as a result of the war. Women have also entered other traditionally male-dominated professions, such as driving buses or long-haul trucks. With road transport now being essential for importing and exporting goods in Ukraine, women's participation in these roles is vital.

"Today, Ukraine would not make it without women's contribution to the economy," says Ella Libanova, director of the Ptoukha Institute for Demography and Social Studies. "And we must remember that 4 million working-age Ukrainian women are abroad. There are fewer men serving in the army than Ukrainian women are abroad."

Mr. Mezheny, the instructor, concurs. "I don't know what would become of the economy of Ukraine if not for women," he says.

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