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“Working in a Mine is a Way for Women to Participate in the War Effort, Keeping the Ukrainian Economy Going”: The New York Times Reports from Metinvest and DTEK Assets

Using examples from Metinvest and DTEK, the New York Times, one of the world's leading media outlets, has shared the stories of Ukrainian women who, in difficult times for the country, often take up historically male professions.

More and more women are replacing men mobilised in Ukraine’s army. But there are not enough of them to make up for the labour shortage affecting the country’s economy.

On a recent morning in eastern Ukraine, Karina Yatsina, a mine worker, was busy operating a conveyor belt in a dim, 1,200-foot-deep tunnel. Lights flickered at the end of the shaft, illuminating miners carving out the coal seams.

A year and a half ago, Yatsina, 21, was working as a nanny. Then friends told her that a mine in the eastern town of Pavlohrad was hiring women to replace men drafted into the military. The pay was good and the pension generous. It wasn’t long before Yatsina was walking through the mine’s maze of tunnels, a headlamp strapped to her red helmet.

“I would have never thought that I would be working in a mine,” Yatsina said, taking a short break in the sweltering heat of the tunnel. “I would have never imagined that.”

Yatsina is one of 130 women who have started working underground at the mine since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022. They now operate conveyors that carry coal to the surface, work as safety inspectors or drive the trains that connect the different parts of the mine.

“Their help is enormous because many men went to fight and are no longer available,” said Serhiy Faraonov, the deputy head of the mine, which is run by DTEK, Ukraine’s largest private energy company. Some 1,000 male workers at the mine have been drafted, he said, or about a fifth of the total workforce. To help to make up for the shortage, the mine has hired some 330 women.

They are part of a wider trend in Ukraine, where women are increasingly stepping into jobs long dominated by men, as the widespread mobilisation of soldiers depletes the male-dominated workforce. They have become truck or bus drivers, welders in steel factories and warehouse workers. Thousands have also voluntarily joined the army.

In doing so, these women are reshaping Ukraine’s traditionally male-dominated workforce, which experts say has long been marked by biases inherited from the Soviet Union. “There was this perception of women as second-class and less reliable workers,” said Hlib Vyshlinsky, the executive director of the Kyiv-based Centre for

Economic Strategy.

Vyshlinsky said that Ukrainian women had long been excluded from certain jobs, not only over the physical demands but also because such roles were considered too complicated for them. Women, he said, could drive trolley buses, but not trains. “It was full of stereotypes.”

The current influx of women into the Ukrainian job market has echoes of the munitionettes, the British women who worked in arms factories during World War I, and the women — memorialised in the iconic posters of Rosie the Riveter — who went to work in the United States during World War II.

But even with the influx of women into the workforce, they will not be enough to replace all the male workers who have left, economists say. Three-quarters of Ukrainian employers have experienced labour shortages, a recent survey showed.

Before the war, 47% of Ukrainian women worked, according to the World Bank. Since then, some 1.5 million female workers, about 13% of the total, have left Ukraine, Vyshlinsky said.

“The share of women currently working in Ukraine is higher than before the war,” Vyshlinsky said. But too many have left Ukraine to allow the country to overcome its workforce shortages, he said.

The phenomenon of women joining the workforce has been particularly evident in the mining industry.

After Russia invaded in 2022, the Ukrainian government suspended a law that had barred women from working underground and in “harmful or dangerous” conditions. Now, they are a regular presence in the cramped lift shafts that take workers to the depths of the mines.

“I was surprised. It’s unusual to see a woman with a shovel doing a man’s work,” said Dmytro Tobalov, a 28-year-old miner, not long after a woman walked past him and other burly miners who were resting on benches in a tunnel, waiting to board the elevator back out of the mine.

Tobalov, who works at a mine in Pokrovsk, in the eastern Donetsk region, said 12 men had left his group of miners for the army, replaced by 10 men and two women. “They’re doing great,” he said of the women.

Several women said they had joined the Pokrovsk mine, owned by Metinvest, Ukraine’s largest steelmaker, because it offered stable jobs in a war-ravaged economy. Valentyna Korotaeva, 30, a former shop assistant in Pokrovsk, said she lost her job after a Russian missile landed near the shop, causing the owners to pack up and leave. She now works as a crane operator at the mine, moving large metal machines under repair in a warehouse.

How long Korotaeva can keep her job will depend on the situation on the front line. Russian forces have been creeping closer to Pokrovsk in recent weeks. Russia frequently shells the area, and the mine’s management has prepared evacuation plans in case it becomes too dangerous to remain there.

Several women said working in a mine was a way to participate in the war effort, keeping the Ukrainian economy going while men fight on the front. Coal mines have been a lifeline for many towns and cities in eastern Ukraine, employing tens of thousands of people and contributing significantly to the government budget through taxes.

Yulia Koba, a former child psychologist who joined the Pokrovsk mine in June as a conveyor belt operator, described it as a multipronged effort, with women in the rear supporting men on the front. “They’re there and we’re here,” she said.

Koba said male colleagues had been sceptical when she took on her new position, with some believing that women had no place in the mine’s dark and dusty tunnels.

“What are you doing? Why are you here and not somewhere above ground?” she said she was asked.

But over time, Koba added, the men gradually overcame gender stereotypes and understood that women could do the job just as well as men. If women “go to serve in the armed forces, why can’t they take on traditionally male positions in the mine?” she said.

Companies have also tried to bring more women into the labour market through training programmes.

The Pokrovsk mine started a programme earlier this year that has so far enabled 32 women to work underground. Reskilling Ukraine, a Swedish non-profit organisation, has offered accelerated training courses for women wishing to become truck drivers. More than 1,000 women applied this year, but the organisation has the funds to train only 350, said Oleksandra Panasiuk, the programme coordinator.

“A lot of women wanted to be drivers, but, for a long time, society didn’t really allow them to do that,” Panasiuk said. “That’s changing.”

At the Pavlohrad mine, several women hired during the war are now hoping to make a career for themselves and move up the ladder. Yatsina, the former nanny who is now a conveyor belt operator, said she would like to become an electromechanical technician. “I’ve thought about it,” she said, a faint smile creeping onto her youthful face. “I like it here.”

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The New York Times

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