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‘I Became a Man’: The Unmaking of Transnational Marriages Among Displaced Ukrainians in Lithuania

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The 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine produced an unprecedented gender-selective displacement and separated millions of wives and children from husbands bound by the mobilisation law. This paper aims to examine and demonstrate how wartime displacement has unmade transnational marriages among displaced Ukrainian women in Lithuania. The primary data of the research is drawn from the multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted across five Lithuanian cities between 2024 and 2025. Based on 22 Ukrainian interlocutors (17 women and 5 men), the study traces how spousal roles, obligations, and emotional bonds were reconfigured and were eventually unmade under the pressures of separation. Grounded in transnational social fields theory, moral economy frameworks, and constructivist gender theory, the analysis identifies three interlocking processes driving marital breakdown: the enforcement of gendered moral scripts demanding that men fight and women wait; the progressive emotional alienation produced by protracted separation and diverging life trajectories; and the identity transformation of displaced wives who assumed traditionally male spousal roles in exile, encapsulated in the recurring phrase ‘I became a man’. The paper argues that these marital breakdowns, though perceived as individual cases of failures by the interlocutors themselves, are structurally produced outcomes of wartime moral regimes operating simultaneously across two societies. This study contributes to migration studies by foregrounding breakdown and fragility rather than resilience, and is based primarily on women’s accounts, a limitation that is explicitly acknowledged throughout.

Keywords: transnational marriage, wartime displacement, Ukraine, spousal roles, gender, Lithuania

INTRODUCTION

When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, millions of Ukrainians, predominantly women and children, fled to safety abroad, while men of fighting age were legally required to remain. This sudden gender-selective displacement produced an entirely new dynamic of transnational marriages. Couples were and still are abruptly separated across international borders, inhabiting radically different realities simultaneously. By late

2024, Lithuania was hosting approximately 47,500 Ukrainian temporary protection holders, the majority of whom are women (Office of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania, 2025). Behind these figures lie thousands of marriages stretched across the distance between a war zone and a sanctuary.

Existing scholarship on transnational families has emphasised resilience, care and the strategies families deploy to maintain solidarity across distance (Bryceson, Vuorela 2002; Baldassar 2007). Far less attention has been paid to breakdown as an analytical object. Although some research addresses divorce in the context of economic migration, the rupture of spousal relationships caused specifically by war-induced displacement remains a distinct and underexplored gap in the literature. War and forced migration, however, confront researchers with cases where transnational family life does not triumph over difficulties but collapses under its weight. This paper addresses that gap by examining the unmaking of transnational marriages among displaced Ukrainians in Lithuania.

By 'unmaking', reference is made to the process through which the emotional, communicative and moral bonds between spouses erode or fracture under the pressures of displacement, even when the marriage formally persists. The central question driving this analysis is the following: how has wartime displacement reconfigured spousal roles, obligations, and emotional bonds in Ukrainian transnational marriages, and through what mechanisms does this reconfiguration lead to marital breakdown? A recurring phrase among the displaced Ukrainian women in this study captures the phenomenon precisely: 'I became a man.' Voiced not as triumph but as resignation and disappointment. This phrase encapsulates the involuntary role inversions these women experienced and provides the analytical lens through which this paper proceeds.

Transnational marriage is understood here not in the narrow sense of unions between partners of different nationalities but following Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) and Charsley (2013), as marriages that operate across national borders, with spouses simultaneously embedded in distinct social, legal and moral fields. By this definition, the Ukrainian couples studied here, separated across international borders by wartime displacement and inhabiting radically different societal contexts, constitute transnational marriages in the fullest analytical sense. Additionally, by no means does this paper claim all Ukrainian transnational marriages have been unmade by displacement. This paper focuses analytically on those that have been unmade, treating them as diagnostic cases of the structural forces at work.

FROM LABOUR MIGRATION TO FORCED DISPLACEMENT: THE LITHUANIAN CONTEXT

Ukraine's migration flows have long been gendered, though their direction shifted significantly across two distinct periods. Before 2014, male labour migration predominated. Ukrainian men sought seasonal and construction work abroad, while wives managed households at home (Tolstokorova 2018; Tolstokorova, Ryndyk 2010). Women who did migrate faced intense moral scrutiny, widely framed in public discourse as abandoning their children and failing their families (Tolstokorova 2018). From 2014 onward, however, female migration grew remarkably as women entered service sector employment across Central and Eastern Europe, producing what scholars have called the feminisation of Ukrainian migration (Solari 2018). Khrenova and Burrell (2021) document how Ukrainian migrant women navigated competing moral demands, maintaining transnational care chains while facing criticism at home for the 'care drain' created in their absence.

The 2022 invasion produced a qualitatively different migration. It was forced, sudden, and asymmetrically gendered by law rather than economic circumstance. The Ukrainian

government banned military-aged men from leaving the country, meaning that the post-2022 displacement was almost exclusively comprised of women and children (Deimantas, Şanlıtürk 2024). This created an entirely new category of transnational marriage, one shaped not by economic calculation but by wartime emergency.

Lithuania responded to the influx through the EU Temporary Protection framework, granting displaced Ukrainians access to residence permits, employment rights, healthcare, and social assistance (Petrylaitė, Petrylaitė 2024). By September 2025, 47,534 Ukrainians held valid temporary protection permits in Lithuania (Office of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania 2025). Research on their integration reveals persistent challenges, including language barriers, credential recognition difficulties, and an uneven access to psychological services (Urbanavičė et al. 2024), alongside a strong bonding social capital within Ukrainian community networks (Juozeliūnienė 2020; Pavlova et al. 2023). Critically, the literature on displaced Ukrainians in Lithuania has to date examined integration and community formation rather than the marital and intimate consequences of prolonged separation. Additionally, while Poland hosts the largest concentration of displaced Ukrainians in Europe, the post-2022 consequences of displacement for transnational marriages for displaced Ukrainians remain unexamined across all host countries, including Lithuania, which this paper addresses directly.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis draws on three interconnected theoretical frameworks. The first is the concept of transnational social fields, defined by Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) as sets of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices and resources are unequally exchanged and transformed across geographic space. In the present case, displaced Ukrainian couples inhabit a social field stretching between war-torn Ukraine and Lithuania, in which daily events on one side immediately echo on the other. A battle or a bombing in Ukraine might alter the emotional atmosphere of a household in Kaunas. A wife's decision to seek employment or end her marriage in Lithuania could carry serious implications for community standing back home. Crucially, resources within this field are distributed radically unequally. Wives in Lithuania accumulate access to welfare, employment, legal independence, and social networks, while husbands in Ukraine experience the loss of familial presence, reduced authority, and physical danger. As Al-Sharmani (2017) demonstrates in her study of Somali-Finnish couples, such resource asymmetries within transnational social fields are highly gendered and can enable wives to make choices, including ending marriages, that would previously have been practically or socially impossible or quite difficult.

The second framework is constructivist gender theory as developed in the context of migration by Pessar and Mahler (2003), whose framework of 'gendered geographies of power' holds that gender is imagined and lived across multiple social and spatial scales, and that individuals' positions within power hierarchies shift with migration. Gender roles are understood here not as fixed attributes, but as socially constructed performances continuously renegotiated under structural pressure (Butler 1990; Pessar, Mahler 2003). The 2022 war introduces an extreme new scale to these gendered geographies. Ukrainian men are called to perform traditional warrior masculinity. Ukrainian women are positioned as homeland mothers expected to endure separation with firm loyalty. Yet, as Pessar and Mahler (2003) emphasise, such scripts are fluid and contradictory, and many women in exile have been compelled to enact precisely the roles from which this script excludes them.

The third framework is moral economy, understood here following Fassin (2009) and Baldassar (2007) as the shared norms, values and obligations governing what family and community members owe one another in times of crisis. In transnational contexts, migrants navigate between two or more moral economies simultaneously. In the Ukrainian wartime case, the homeland's moral economy demands sacrifice, loyalty, and patriotic endurance; men are valorised for combat and stigmatised for evasion, while women are lauded for suffering nobly and condemned for any perceived abandonment or self-seeking. The receiving society's moral framework, in Lithuania and more broadly across Western Europe, tends to prioritise individual welfare, consent, and psychological well-being to a greater degree. The tension between these two moral economies infiltrates the marriages under study and is a primary mechanism driving their unmaking. Emotions are understood not as merely private experiences but as socially structured and morally enforced responses to collective situations (Hochschild 1983). They flow through this moral economy and do cultural work: shame, guilt, loyalty and resentment are not incidental feelings but structurally produced forces shaping marital outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a multi-sited ethnographic design following Marcus (1995), who argued that transnational social phenomena cannot be captured through observation in a single location. The unmaking of transnational marriages among displaced Ukrainians unfolds across multiple Lithuanian cities, Kaunas, Vilnius, Šiauliai, Visaginas and Utena, reflecting the dispersed settlement patterns of this population. The fieldwork was conducted between November 2024 and December 2025.

Data were gathered through three complementary methods. The primary method was an ethnographic interviewing and open-ended conversation in the tradition of Spradley (1979), conducted in naturally occurring social settings, including community gatherings, Ukrainian cultural events, and everyday shared environments. Interviews and conversations were conducted primarily in Russian, with English used in more international observational settings. All quotations in the manuscript are the researcher's own translations into English. No voice recorder was used; notes were taken simultaneously during interviews as much as possible, to allow participants to express themselves freely without the presence of recording equipment. In observational settings, detailed fieldnotes were produced shortly after each encounter, following Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (2011), in most cases within one to two hours. This approach introduces a degree of reconstructive memory, which is acknowledged as a limitation below. Systematic observation was also conducted across Ukrainian community settings, including community gatherings, Ukrainian cultural events, NGO support meetings, and informal social environments across the five cities. Its primary function was to access the behavioural enactment of the moral scripts that interlocutors also narrated verbally, and to situate individual accounts within collective dynamics. The degree of researcher involvement varied by context, from an active participation in social gatherings to a quiet presence at more formal events where participation would have been intrusive or inappropriate (Spradley 1980). Finally, documentary analysis was carried out on Lithuanian government policy documents, NGO integration reports, and Ukrainian-language social media communities, which confirmed ethnographic patterns and situated individual experiences within broader discursive structures. This study was conducted in accordance with the established ethical principles for qualitative social research. Participation was voluntary; interlocutors were informed that their participation had

no effect on anything beyond the research and that they could withdraw at any time. In all observational settings, the researcher was introduced as a researcher and given a brief opportunity to introduce the study. Five of the 22 interlocutors were recruited through these observational settings. All identifying details were anonymised. Formal institutional ethics approval was not obtained prior to data collection.

In total, 17 Ukrainian women and 5 Ukrainian men were engaged as interlocutors. After all, the inclusion of male voices, though proportionally smaller, was analytically necessary. The reconfiguration of spousal roles cannot be examined solely from wives' perspectives. The gender imbalance among interlocutors also broadly reflects the demographic reality of Ukrainian displacement, in which women significantly outnumber men among those who have left Ukraine. Fieldnotes were coded iteratively using the Saldaña's (2013) first and second cycle coding framework, moving from descriptive thematic codes toward the focused analytical categories, gendered moral scripts, emotional alienation, and identity reconfiguration, that structure the findings below.

Several limitations must be stated. The data are structurally one-sided: husbands remaining in Ukraine were largely inaccessible, and their experiences are known primarily through their wives' accounts. The five male interlocutors, all of whom had left Ukraine through legal exemptions and relocated to Lithuania, provide only a partial counterbalance. They represent a specific, atypical subset of Ukrainian husbands rather than those remaining in Ukraine under mobilisation. The findings should therefore be read mostly as an account of how displaced Ukrainian women experienced and narrated marital unmaking, not as a symmetrical analysis of both spouses' realities. The sample was constructed through purposive and snowball sampling appropriate to the interpretive aims of this research. Findings are not intended as statistical generalisations. Marital outcomes beyond the fieldwork period lie outside this study's purview. All participant names have been replaced with numbers, and identifying details altered, to protect confidentiality. The reliance on post-encounter fieldnotes for observational data introduces a degree of reconstructive memory; while notes were produced within a short time of each observation, this should be borne in mind when assessing the precision of material drawn from those settings. Interview data, by contrast, was recorded simultaneously in written notes during the encounter itself. Additionally, the findings are shaped in part by the specific conditions of the Lithuanian host-country context, in particular, the relatively favourable labour market access available to Ukrainians in Lithuania. The pace and degree of identity reconfiguration documented here may not transfer straightforwardly to host societies with more restricted integration conditions, and future comparative research across host countries would be needed to assess the scope of these findings.

PROFILE OF INTERLOCUTORS

The interlocutors consist of Ukrainian women and men residing across five Lithuanian cities. All female interlocutors are mothers; their husbands remain in Ukraine due to military service, draft evasion, or mobility restrictions. Length of separation ranges from 12 months to three years. Several women are contemplating or actively pursuing divorce; others describe their marriages as emotionally ended but legally intact. Male interlocutors all left Ukraine through legal exemptions, including medical certificates, student visas, and international truck driver programs, and had relocated to Lithuania by the time of the fieldwork. The Table below provides the profile of all interlocutors. Age estimates are approximate where participants were reluctant to specify.

Table. **Profile of all interlocutors (*n* = 22), Lithuania, 2024–2025**

Participant	Location	Date	Age	Approx. duration of stay	Gender	Status
1	Šiauliai	24 Nov.	30	16 mos	Female	Displaced Ukrainian
2	Visaginas	25 Dec.	34	14 mos	Female	Displaced Ukrainian
3	Visaginas	25 Dec.	29	12 mos	Female	Displaced Ukrainian
4	Visaginas	25 Dec.	37	18 mos	Female	Displaced Ukrainian
5	Šiauliai	24 Nov.	42	12 mos	Female	Displaced Ukrainian
6	Kaunas	25 Sep.	33	28 mos	Female	Displaced Ukrainian
7	Kaunas	25 Sep.	38	30 mos	Female	Displaced Ukrainian
8	Kaunas	25 Aug.	45	32 mos	Female	Displaced Ukrainian
9	Kaunas	25 Jun.	31	24 mos	Female	Displaced Ukrainian
10	Vilnius	25 Nov.	36	34 mos	Female	Displaced Ukrainian
11	Vilnius	25 Feb.	40	22 mos	Female	Displaced Ukrainian
12	Vilnius	25 Feb.	44	36 mos	Female	NGO Employee
13	Utena	24 Dec.	35	12 mos	Female	Displaced Ukrainian
14	Kaunas	25 Oct.	28	30 mos	Female	Displaced Ukrainian
15	Kaunas	25 Dec.	39	32 mos	Female	Displaced Ukrainian
16	Kaunas	25 Jul.	41	28 mos	Female	Displaced Ukrainian
17	Kaunas	25 Jul.	27	20 mos	Female	Displaced Ukrainian
18	Kaunas	25 Mar.	38	26 mos	Male	Displaced Ukrainian
19	Vilnius	25 Apr.	26	18 mos	Male	Displaced Ukrainian
20	Kaunas	25 May	41	30 mos	Male	Displaced Ukrainian
21	Kaunas	25 Jun.	35	24 mos	Male	Displaced Ukrainian
22	Vilnius	25 Aug.	33	22 mos	Male	Displaced Ukrainian

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Gendered Moral Scripts: Men Fight, Women Wait

One of the clearest patterns to emerge from the fieldwork is the immense pressure that Ukrainian spouses felt to fulfill gendered moral scripts during the war. Scripts that put them at odds with each other's realities. The cultural narrative, both in Ukraine and within displaced communities, is reduced to a simple equation. Men must fight for the homeland, and women must wait faithfully for their return. Any deviation invited moral sanction.

The expectation that men fight manifested as both external and internal pressure. Many husbands had no choice but to remain in Ukraine due to the government's ban on military-aged men leaving, but beyond this legal constraint lay a powerful social valorisation of combat. Wives recounted how male relatives and friends in Ukraine glorified those who

enlisted. 'Every man is expected to be a hero now,' said one interlocutor (Participant 5). Men who sought to avoid frontline duty risked being labelled '*ukhylanty*', dodgers, a derogatory term carrying intense social stigma. This moral pressure fell heavily even on husbands who had left legally. Participant 20, who obtained permission to leave as the father of three minor children, described the guilt of being abroad: 'Everyone back home knows I left. It does not matter why. They see a man who is not fighting.' His sense of emasculation was compounded by his failure to find a stable employment in Lithuania for over a year, leaving his wife as the household's primary earner and decision-maker.

The case of Participant 18, who left Ukraine on a medical exemption, illustrates how the war's moral economy could fracture a marriage from both directions. Participant 18 described feeling 'unnecessary' in family decisions after joining his wife and children in Lithuania, where his wife had already built an independent life. His wife, for her part, had learned, in his own words, to live without him (Participant 18). Their communication had narrowed to arguments about finances and the children's schooling. What destroyed the marriage, Participant 18 reflected, was not the physical distance but the moral distance. His exemption from the fight, however, legally legitimate, had nonetheless positioned him as failing the script that assigns men the role of protector.

Participant 22, an IT contractor who left through a business travel exemption, offered a similar account from a different angle. His spouse had gradually built financial independence and social integration in Poland. When asked whether he felt the marriage had changed, he said: 'She used to ask me about every decision. Now she does not. She does not need to. I understand why, but it is not easy to understand.' This quiet shift in relational authority, from a husband whose input was sought to one whose involvement became peripheral, recurs across the male interlocutors' accounts and speaks directly to what Pessar and Mahler (2003) identify as the restructuring of gendered power hierarchies through migration.

The parallel moral script imposed on women was equally demanding. Wives were expected to remain loyal to their distant husbands while embodying firm resilience, not divorcing, not seeking personal fulfillment that could be perceived as betrayal, and not complaining. 'You don't let them know how lonely you are, or that you cried all night,' said one interlocutor, 'because you don't want to be the weak link. They have it worse' (Participant 5). This comparative sacrifice logic, which positioned whatever the wife endured in exile as less than what her husband endured near the front or war-torn towns, systematically suppressed women's emotional expression and compounded their isolation.

The consequences within marriages were concrete. One interlocutor (Participant 1) recounted that whenever she tried to share her difficulties in Lithuania, her husband would redirect the conversation to the horrors he had witnessed: 'Do you know what I saw today? A building bombed.' She understood his trauma, but the effect was the invalidation of her own experience. Over time, she stopped sharing anything negative from her life, producing what she described as a sterile communication pattern. The marriage that had once accommodated vulnerability from both sides became one in which neither partner felt permitted to need the other. This is the intimate face of what the moral economy of war produces: not only heroism and endurance, but a systematic erosion of the relational conditions that make marriage possible.

Emotional Alienation and Communicative Breakdown

Alongside moral strain came a gradual erosion of emotional intimacy. Nearly all female interlocutors described some form of communicative breakdown over the months and years of

separation. What began in many cases as daily digital contact, video calls, constant messaging, and the sharing of small domestic details eventually reduced to infrequent, loose exchanges. The trajectory was often the same: initial intensity, then the encroachment of practical realities, then emotional fatigue, then silence.

Participant 2 described the early period vividly. She and her husband would message day and night, sharing every detail of the children's lives and their respective surroundings. Within a year, logistics had crowded out intimacy. Her husband's schedule, shaped by front deployments and unreliable internet, made sustained conversation impossible. Her own days were consumed by resettlement paperwork, school enrollments, and employment. By the time he was online, she was exhausted; by the time she was available, he was offline. Communications that had once been emotionally sustaining began occurring 'whenever we can, maybe once every few days' (Participant 17). Participant 21, a truck driver who had always worked away from home, observed that while distance had always been part of his marriage, the quality of the separation had changed: 'She used to wait for me to call. Now she has her network here, her friends, her work. She does not wait anymore. She has moved on, not from me exactly, but from needing me.'

The content of communication also narrowed. Many couples, consciously or not, avoided sharing negative emotions to protect each other, resulting in exchanges that became purely logistical. One interlocutor described her video calls as 'like talking to a colleague, polite, but no intimacy' (Participant 9). This polite distance was safer than confronting the reality that neither partner could genuinely be there for the other. Beyond a certain point, the emotional bond withers from neglect. Several women described feeling they were 'keeping up appearances of a marriage' rather than living one (Participant 9).

Participant 19, studying in Lithuania when the invasion began, described communication with his wife in Slovakia as having shifted from emotional support to accusation: 'She blamed me for not coming to her. I felt guilty for continuing my studies when my friends were joining the army. We stopped talking about anything real.' The guilt he carried for being abroad and safe, combined with his wife's resentment at his absence, transformed conversations into sites of recrimination rather than connection. This pattern, where both partners feel morally aggrieved and neither feels understood, recurs across the data and represents what might be called a communicative impasse produced by the war's moral demands.

For some women, digital communication did not merely decline but mutated into something altogether different: surveillance. One interlocutor recounted an incident that she described as the moment she knew that her marriage was over. Her phone had died while she was at work, and she ran home to charge it, knowing her husband in Ukraine would be waiting. She was perhaps an hour or two late in responding. The exchange that followed was not an expression of worry but of accusation. Her spouse insisted that she had been with another man. She recalled thinking, 'I was running home to charge my phone, so he does not get angry. What kind of life is this?' (Participant 3). The episode cleared up something that she had long sensed but not yet named. The same technology that had once sustained their connection had become an instrument of control, with expected response times functioning as a measure of fidelity. When the logic of care collapses into the logic of monitoring, the relationship had already fundamentally changed for her.

For some, breakdown became complete. Participant 2's relationship progressed from a loving daily contact to strained check-ins, to open hostility, and eventually to radio silence except for legal formalities. She described the affection turning to 'despise from both sides,'

with each conversation ending in arguments about who had it harder. Such quarrels, painful from the outside, reflect a deeper truth. When partners cannot meet each other's emotional needs over a prolonged period, frustration and blame fill the void left by intimacy.

Not all marriages followed this trajectory. A minority of couples in the study appeared to endure precisely because they relinquished the dominant wartime moral scripts and reworked their obligations in pragmatic terms. One interlocutor described her husband hiding in a village with her parents, surviving on money she sent: 'I don't really care that he is not fighting. It is better than he is dead' (Participant 14). Here, the husband's inability to fulfill the warrior role is not framed as moral failure, and the wife's breadwinning is not narrated as gender deviance but as necessary family preservation. The couples who survived the separation most intact were those who, in effect, negotiated their way out of the moral economy of war and into a more situational ethics of mutual survival.

Identity Reconfiguration: Women Becoming Men in Exile

At the heart of this study is the phrase 'I became a man' (Participant 16), a sentiment expressed directly or indirectly by numerous displaced Ukrainian women. Having been thrust into sole household responsibility, those women found themselves performing roles traditionally associated with husbands. These roles might include earning income, making major family decisions, navigating institutions, and providing security, on top of the caregiving labour traditionally assigned to wives. This section examines how this role reconfiguration shaped both individual identity and the marital relationship.

Before the war, many of the marriages in this study followed relatively conventional gendered divisions of labour by Ukrainian standards. The husband was typically the principal breadwinner; the wife managed home and children, often with employment secondary to her domestic role, if any. The invasion ended this arrangement overnight. Women who fled to Lithuania had to navigate relief centres, housing searches, school enrollments, and employment largely alone. The Lithuanian context was a facilitating structural condition for this transformation: the relative linguistic accessibility of the labour market for Ukrainians, given the widespread understanding of Russian in Lithuania and the comparatively well-resourced integration infrastructure, enabled economic independence to take hold more rapidly than might have been the case in host societies with greater employment barriers. According to Perchinig and Perumadan (2025), approximately 66% of working-age displaced Ukrainian women in Lithuania had found employment by early 2023. Interlocutors in this study worked as cleaners, shop assistants, translators, and NGO staff. 'I had no choice. I became the breadwinner overnight,' said one mother of two (Participant 10).

The decision-making burden was equally transformative. Women determined alone which city to settle in, which schools their children would attend, and whether to remain in Lithuania or return to Ukraine. Some described this newfound authority as empowering: 'For the first time, I didn't have to ask anyone's permission. I just did what I thought was best' (Participant 11). Others conveyed the weight: 'Everything is on me now, money, kids, safety, our future. I feel like both their mother and their father' (Participant 10). This latter formulation, being both mother and father, was commonly used and essentially synonymous with 'I became a man' (Participant 16). It captures the dual burden and the dual role these women assumed. It is worth noting that the experience of performing both parental roles is not unique to displaced Ukrainian women: single parents and primary caregivers in many societies, including Lithuanian mothers raising children with absent or insufficiently involved

fathers, may describe analogous dual burdens. The Ukrainian wartime case is analytically distinct, however, in two respects. First, the role inversion is compounded by the wartime moral economy: the husband's absence is not merely practical but is framed within a powerful public discourse of sacrifice, heroism, and obligation that weighs on both spouses simultaneously. Second, the transformation is experienced as sudden and involuntary by women who had previously operated within a more conventional gendered division of labour, making the subjective rupture particularly acute.

The transformation was not only functional but perceptual. One interlocutor shared that she had changed her appearance, cutting her hair short and wearing more utilitarian clothes. She had not seen her husband in person in years and worried, half-jokingly, 'Will he even recognize me? I look and act so different now' (Participant 14). Participant 2 reflected on how 'small' her pre-war world had been and described travelling alone across borders, dealing with officials, and building networks of other women. 'I am not the timid wife who waits for her husband to decide things,' she said. 'In some ways, I feel I grew into a stronger person here. I had to' (Participant 2). What Butler (1990) describes as the performative construction of gender is visible here in its most concrete form. Under structural compulsion, those women enacted a gender different from the one their marriages had been built around.

That reconfiguration carried direct consequences for the marital relationship. As wives became more self-reliant, husbands reported feeling peripheral. Participant 20 described the shift as humiliating. His spouse had taken over financial management and the children's schooling, and his attempts to reassert involvement were met with resistance. 'She had stopped needing me as a partner,' he reflected. The NGO worker (Participant 12) recounted a case she had observed of a husband who rejoined his family in Lithuania after being released from military service due to injury. The wife had built a functioning household around her own routines. The husband, struggling with PTSD, attempted to reassert authority over the children, only to find neither wife nor children responsive to his previous role. In a meeting, he described feeling 'useless', and she described feeling 'incredibly angry' that he expected to resume the head-of-family role when he had no understanding of what their new life entailed. Their roles had permanently realigned, and the marriage could not accommodate both the old expectations and the new reality simultaneously.

The phrase 'I became a man' (Participant 16) was not, in the end, a statement of celebration. It was said with a sigh, a shrug, a bitter laugh. It conveyed resilience, certainly, but also the involuntary forfeiture of partnership. 'I have learned to do everything on my own. Great. But I wish I didn't have to,' said Participant 16. What those women longed for was not to demonstrate that they could perform masculinity or the role of the husband but to have their husbands present as genuine partners, sharing burdens rather than being absent from them. One interlocutor captured the loss precisely: 'We have grown into different people. I became more than just his wife; I became something else here. And he became something else there. These two people, I don't think they match anymore' (Participant 8). The unmaking of her marriage was the unintended consequence of her own making. A self-built under duress that no longer fit the relationship in which it had originated.

CONCLUSIONS

The displaced Ukrainian marriages examined in this study reveal how transnational marital bonds can be fundamentally unmade by the combined forces of wartime moral demands, protracted physical separation, and asymmetric resource access across national borders.

The analysis has traced this unmaking through three interlocking processes: the enforcement of gendered moral scripts that placed husbands and wives in structurally incompatible positions; the progressive erosion of emotional intimacy through communicative breakdown; and the radical identity reconfiguration of women who became, in their own formulation, men in exile.

In terms of the study's objectives, these three processes together answer the central question of how wartime displacement reconfigures spousal roles and leads to marital breakdown. First, the application of transnational social fields theory demonstrates that displaced Ukrainian couples inhabited an extreme form of transnational simultaneity in which resource access, physical safety, and daily experience diverged so sharply that the shared life on which marriage depends became practically untenable. Wives acquired safety, legal status, income, and social networks abroad; husbands lost familial presence, authority, and in many cases their sense of purpose. This asymmetry enabled some women to exit marriages that would previously have been difficult to leave, echoing Al-Sharmani's (2017) findings on Somali-Finnish couples. Second, the moral economy of war generated a set of obligations that few couples could consistently fulfill, producing cycles of guilt, resentment, and mutual misunderstanding that accelerated emotional estrangement. Third, the identity transformations undergone by displaced women, forced rather than chosen, produced selves that no longer fit the relational structures their marriages had assumed.

From a broader disciplinary perspective, these findings contribute to migration studies and sociology by centring failure and fragility rather than resilience. Much existing scholarship emphasises the strategies through which transnational families maintain solidarity across distance. This paper demonstrates that under extreme conditions of forced separation, the same transnational social fields that can sustain family ties can also accelerate their dissolution. The Ukrainian case also illuminates the gendered dimension of displacement in a compressed and unusually visible form. The processes of female empowerment and male status loss that scholars of economic migration have traced over the years were here produced almost overnight, with correspondingly acute consequences for intimate relationships. It should be noted, however, that the findings are situated within a specific host-country context. Lithuania's strong public and institutional support for Ukrainian refugees, shaped by the historical memory of Soviet occupation and geographic proximity to the conflict, created a relatively enabling environment for displaced women to access employment, social services, and community networks. Lithuania's labour market was also comparatively accessible to Ukrainians, facilitating economic independence more rapidly than might have occurred elsewhere. The pace and character of the identity transformations documented here may therefore be partly specific to this context, and future comparative research across host countries with varying integration conditions would be needed to assess the broader transferability of these findings.

Important limitations circumscribe these findings. The data are primarily derived from women's accounts; the five male interlocutors, all of whom had left Ukraine legally and were present in Lithuania, represent an atypical subset of Ukrainian husbands. The experiences of men who remained in Ukraine under mobilisation are known in this study only through their wives' perceptions. Future research that accesses those men's perspectives directly, whether through remote interviews or fieldwork in Ukraine, would substantially enrich the analysis. Additionally, this study's analytical scope ends at the moment of the fieldwork; the long-term trajectories of these marriages, whether toward formal dissolution, reunion, or renegotiation, remain beyond its purview and would require longitudinal investigation.

The phrase 'I became a man', spoken by a displaced Ukrainian woman (Participant 16) who had no intention of doing so, encapsulates the unintended transformations that this conflict has brought on intimate lives. It speaks not only to a personal reinvention under difficulties but to the collapse of an entire relational order and the emergence of a self that the original marriage could no longer contain. Behind the vast statistics of displacement and mobilisation are husbands and wives making agonising choices between loyalty to loved ones and loyalty to survival, between the person they were before the war and the person the war has made them.

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„Aš tapau vyru“: transnacionalinių santuokų iširimas tarp Lietuvoje gyvenančių perkeltųjų ukrainiečių

Santrauka

2022 m. Rusijos plataus masto invazija į Ukrainą sukėlė precedento neturinčią, lyties požiūriu diferencijuotą priverstinę migraciją, atskyrusią milijonus žmonų ir vaikų nuo vyrų, kuriems taikomas mobilizacijos įstatymas. Šio straipsnio tikslas – ištirti ir atskleisti, kaip karo nulemta priverstinė migracija prisidėjo prie transnacionalinių santuokų iširimo tarp Lietuvoje gyvenančių perkeltųjų ukrainiečių moterų. Empiriniai tyrimo duomenys surinkti 2024–2025 m. atliekant etnografinius lauko tyrimus penkiuose Lietuvos miestuose. Remiantis 22 informantų (17 moterų ir 5 vyrų) interviu, analizuojama, kaip dėl priverstinės migracijos ir užsitęsusio išsiskyrimo kito sutuoktinių vaidmenys, įsipareigojimai bei emociniai ryšiai. Analizė grindžiama transnacionalinių socialinių laukų teorija, moralės ekonomikos perspektyva ir konstruktyvistine lyčių teorija. Tyrimas atskleidžia tris tarpusavyje susijusius procesus, skatinančius santuokų destabilizaciją: lyties pagrindu apibrėžtus moralinius lūkesčius (vyrai privalo kovoti, o moterys – laukti); stiprėjantį emocinį susvetimėjimą dėl užsitęsusio išsiskyrimo ir skirtingų gyvenimo trajektorijų; perkeltųjų žmonų tapatybės transformaciją, joms perimant tradiciškai vyrams priskiriamus ekonominius ir sprendimų priėmimo vaidmenis. Ši transformacija atsispindi dažnai respondentų kartojamoje frazėje: „Aš tapau vyru“. Straipsnyje teigiama, kad santuokų iširimai, nors dažnai suvokiami kaip asmeninės nesėkmės, iš tiesų yra struktūriškai nulemti karo laikotarpio moralinių vertybių, veikiančių dviejose skirtingose visuomenėse. Tyrimas prisideda prie migracijos studijų, pabrėždamas transnacionalinių santuokų trapumą, ir daugiausia remiasi moterų pasakojimais, kartu pripažįstant šį tyrimo ribotumą.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: transnacionalinės santuokos, priverstinis perkėlimas, Ukraina, sutuoktinių vaidmenys, lytis, Lietuva