

The Ukrainian First Lady in Vogue

How Olena Zelenska is meeting the war head on.

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"I have always known that Ukrainian women are the best. Finally, the world will see the face of a Ukrainian woman," said Olena Zelenska, wife of the president of Ukraine, in a recent interview.

Zelenska's biggest public event to date was her interview and photo shoot for Vogue magazine's October 2022 issue. The first lady's appearance in the fashion magazine sparked a wave of criticism: Ukrainians disliked literally everything about it.

But she explained that she "takes every opportunity to talk about Ukraine. And this was a huge opportunity, because Vogue is read by millions of people, tens of millions of people all around the world. It's a very popular publication. And to talk to them directly was an obligation."

Zelenska has been working hard to ensure that Ukrainian women's war stories become widely

known. One of the first lady's heroines is Oksana Balandina, a nurse from Lysychansk. She shielded her companion, Viktor Vasilyev, when a mine exploded near them. Oksana lost both legs and four fingers and spent more than a month in the hospital — where she married Viktor. Now they are going to Germany, where she will be fitted with custom-made prosthetics.

Another of Zelenska's heroines is 15-year-old Liza Chernyshenko. She was in a car with four adults fleeing Popasna, which was under Russian fire. When their car was fired on and the driver was seriously wounded, Liza got behind the wheel. She was shot, too: two perforating wounds to her legs, a bullet to her knee and a torn toe. She continued driving for 30 kilometers, only losing consciousness in Bakhmut. But she got everyone out alive.

Ukrainian women are the public face of the country's humanitarian catastrophe. They shelter their families and friends in cellars to protect them from Russian shelling. They take their children and elderly relatives out of the country into exile around the world. And they try to return home.

Ukrainian women are also defenders of their homeland. At present 37,000 women are serving in the Ukrainian armed forces, including more than one thousand in command posts.

Medical facilities are 80% staffed by women. More than half of the country's entrepreneurs are women; more than half of aid volunteers are women.

Olena Zelenska is playing an unprecedented active role in the humanitarian and political defense of her country. The first independent visit of a first lady from a foreign country to the United States was by Olena Zelenska. She was also the first spouse of a foreign leader to come alone to the U.S. Congress and speak. Her husband spoke to Congress via video link at the beginning of the war, but her personal emotional contact with congressmen was equally important.

As she began her speech, Zelenska said that she would be addressing the U.S. lawmakers as a mother and daughter, not as first lady. She told them stories about Ukrainians, about children who died in Ukrainian towns far from the front lines. She asked for weapons for Ukraine, "not to go to war on foreign territory, but to protect our homes and our right to wake up alive in them."

Olena Zelenska received the Dissident Human Rights Award for Ukraine at the Memorial for the Victims of Communism in Washington.

She met with U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and the head of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Samantha Power, and she visited the Memorial to the Victims of the 1932-1933 Holodomor. She had talks with American officials about humanitarian aid to Ukrainians, including a program to provide psychological and social support.

Before the Russian invasion, the first lady of Ukraine did what the wives (or husbands) of leaders usually do. She was involved in culture, education, human rights with a focus on women's equality and the empowerment of Ukrainian women.

As soon as the war began, Olena Zelenska and her children, Oleksandra and Kyrylo, disappeared from the public eye as demanded by the presidential family's security detail. They moved locations often, were forbidden to use any cellular devices, and they couldn't even have video chats with Volodymyr Zelensky. They only spoke on arranged calls over secure phone lines.

But on May 8, everything changed, and a new stage began. Olena Zelenska became a public figure again when she met with U.S. First Lady Jill Biden on her trip to Ukraine.

Since then, President Zelensky's wife has given many interviews to the press. She speaks about Ukraine's fight against Russia and about her own humanitarian projects, such as the campaign to provide psychological help to millions of Ukrainians. In recent weeks, she has also stepped up her social media presence, using her status as first lady to raise awareness of Russia's actions against civilians.

Many Ukrainian women supported Zelenska's Vogue photo shoot, some by launching an online flashmob called #sitlikeagirl — other Ukrainian women took photos of themselves in the same pose as the first lady in her cover photo.

The aim of Olena Zelenska's activity is clear: to show that Ukrainian women aren't "victims of war" — they are part of the resistance.

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