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Shaping Ukraine's Next Generation of Business Leaders: Gender Imbalance, Outmigration, and the Transformation of Business Education



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Abstract

This study examines how gender imbalance and wartime disruption are reshaping business education and leadership formation in Ukraine. Male conscription, displacement, and outmigration have resulted in female-majority cohorts in many business programs, altering classroom dynamics, participation patterns, and leadership pathways.

Drawing on qualitative, practitioner-informed data from Ukrainian business students and early-career professionals, this research explores how these demographic shifts influence leadership identity, participation, and perceptions of authority within educational and organizational settings. While women increasingly assume leadership responsibilities in both academic and professional environments, institutional structures and norms have been slower to adapt, creating a misalignment between leadership practice and formal recognition.

To explain this phenomenon, the study introduces the concept of the *Leadership Legitimacy Gap*, defined as a transitional condition in which leadership responsibilities expand more rapidly than the institutional mechanisms used to recognize and legitimize authority. This gap is particularly visible in post-conflict environments, where crisis-driven adaptation accelerates changes in leadership practice while formal governance structures remain anchored in pre-conflict norms.

The findings suggest that gender imbalance is not only altering who participates in business education, but also how leadership is enacted, perceived, and legitimized. Women emerge as central actors in Ukraine's evolving leadership pipeline, yet their authority is often conditionally recognized within existing institutional frameworks. At the same time, patterns of passive adaptation and normative divergence highlight the uneven pace of institutional and cultural change.

By linking educational experience to broader post-conflict reconstruction dynamics, this study contributes to emerging scholarship on leadership formation in fragile and conflict-affected settings. It offers practical implications for educators, policymakers, and development practitioners seeking to align business education systems with the realities of demographic disruption, institutional transformation, and inclusive economic recovery.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

1.1. Background and Context

Studying the impact of gender imbalance and outmigration on business students in Ukraine during and after the Russian invasion is critical for understanding how the country’s future human capital, leadership pipeline, and economic recovery are being reshaped. The war has accelerated several interconnected demographic and educational shifts that will directly influence who participates in Ukraine’s reconstruction and who will lead its post-war economy.

Societal Transformation and Workforce Composition

Male conscription, large-scale outmigration, and prolonged displacement have substantially altered the composition of higher education. Business programs—traditionally male-leaning in many societies and particularly in a patriarchal and traditional-leaning country such as Ukraine—now enroll predominantly female student cohorts. A recent World Bank study describes Ukraine as exhibiting “deep-rooted gender biases” that “reinforce traditional gender roles,” contributing to persistent gendered patterns in education and labor market participation (The World Bank, 2025, pp. 27–28).

This demographic shift is especially pronounced at the AUK, where women outnumber men in undergraduate business studies by nearly 6 to 1. These trends will shape the future managerial and entrepreneurial landscape, influencing who will lead reconstruction efforts, launch new ventures, and occupy strategic roles in the post-conflict workforce.

Educational Equity and Learning Environments

Changes in gender composition also affect classroom dynamics, peer collaboration, and leadership development. Female-majority cohorts may experience shifts in team-based activities, communication styles, and participation patterns—raising questions about how pedagogical

strategies should adapt to maintain balanced, inclusive, and high-quality learning environments. Educators must consider whether existing curricula, leadership models, and assessment structures remain appropriate for a transformed student body facing unique wartime stressors.

Long-Term Economic Development and Gendered Recovery

Women are positioned to become central actors in Ukraine's economic recovery. Many are assuming roles as heads of households, primary earners, caregivers, and future leaders.

Understanding their educational experiences now provides early insight into the competencies, aspirations, and constraints shaping the country's emerging talent pipeline. At the same time, returning male conscripts will re-enter an economy that may no longer resemble the pre-war environment—echoing historical patterns observed after World War II (Goldin, 1991), where shifts in gender roles influenced long-term labor market trajectories.

Psychosocial and Social Considerations

Students today navigate trauma, instability, and prolonged family separation. Women in particular often shoulder additional emotional and caregiving responsibilities. These pressures shape academic engagement, professional identity development, and mental health needs.

Recognizing these challenges is essential for designing institutional support mechanisms that foster resilience and equitable outcomes.

Global Relevance and Post-Conflict Reconstruction

Ukraine offers a rare real-time example of a country experiencing conflict while simultaneously initiating processes typically associated with post-conflict reconstruction. Lessons learned from Ukraine's business schools—especially regarding gender, leadership preparation, and educational adaptability—can inform broader PCRD models in other fragile and conflict-affected states.

Understanding who is being educated, how they are being trained, and how demographic realities shape their leadership pathways is central to forecasting Ukraine's post-war economic transformation.

While comprehensive pre-war baseline data specific to classroom-level leadership dynamics in Ukrainian business education remain limited, existing literature suggests that pre-2022 environments were characterized by more balanced gender participation and more traditional leadership hierarchies (Silova, 2011). As such, the current female-majority classroom structure represents a significant deviation from prior norms, reinforcing the study's focus on emergent leadership adaptation under conditions of disruption.

1.2. Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development (PCRD)

Ukraine is now operating in what scholars call a concurrent conflict–post-conflict environment (*Barakat et al., 2013*). While Russia's aggression continues along the frontline, much of the country has already entered PCRD conditions. Government ministries implement EU-aligned reforms; cities rebuild damaged infrastructure; universities resume full academic operations; and the private sector reopens, relocates, or innovates under wartime pressure. Russia's deliberate targeting of energy systems, housing, industry, and educational institutions has created precisely the structural disruptions that PCRD frameworks aim to address. As a result, Ukraine is rebuilding and modernizing in real time, facing the dual challenge of defending sovereignty while laying the groundwork for long-term recovery and European integration (*Sakalasuriya et al., 2017*).

Macroeconomic analyses from institutions such as the Kiel Institute for the World Economy further highlight the scale of Ukraine's reconstruction challenge, including labor shortages, infrastructure damage, and dependence on external financing. While these analyses focus on

national recovery metrics, they reinforce the importance of human capital development—particularly leadership formation within higher education—as a critical yet underexamined dimension of reconstruction.

Why gender imbalance matters for PCRDR

One of the most consequential social effects of the war—and a central issue for PCRDR—is the emerging gender imbalance in higher education and the future workforce. Conscription policies, male out-migration, and elevated risks for men of military age have produced disproportionate female enrollment in universities, particularly in business, management, and social-science programs. This imbalance shapes PCRDR in three ways.

First, it influences the labor supply available for reconstruction, with women increasingly preparing to fill roles traditionally dominated by men.

Second, it affects the leadership pipeline, as women now constitute the majority of learners in fields that directly contribute to economic renewal, governance reform, and institutional modernization.

Third, it reflects broader demographic and social shifts—family separation, mobility constraints, and differential exposure to risk—that will have long-term implications for Ukraine’s post-conflict human capital.

In this sense, gender imbalance is not a peripheral issue: it is a structural feature of Ukraine’s PCRDR trajectory, shaping who will rebuild the economy, lead organizations, design policies, and sustain recovery in the years ahead. Understanding these dynamics is essential for analyzing post-conflict education, workforce development, and the future composition of Ukraine’s business leadership.

Theoretical Post-Conflict Timeline Applied to Ukraine

This section presents a conceptual timeline of post-conflict reconstruction and development (PCRD) using a “T-model,” where T0 represents the ceasefire and the formal end of major hostilities. The periods before and after T0 illustrate how Ukraine experiences disruption, early recovery, and the foundations of long-term reconstruction.

T–X: Wartime Disruption with Emerging Recovery Dynamics

The T–X phase describes conditions before the ceasefire, during which Ukraine continues to experience drone and missile strikes across its economic hubs while simultaneously confronting sustained frontline threats in the contested eastern and southern regions—particularly parts of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson oblasts. Yet, despite these pressures, large portions of the country display early signs of stabilization, institutional resilience, and economic adaptation. The period is thus characterized by two overlapping dynamics.

Wartime disruptions: Large-scale hostilities generate damage to infrastructure, displacement of populations, demographic changes due to conscription and outmigration, and pressure on public services and institutions. Education systems face interruptions, labor markets are strained, and many sectors operate under uncertainty. These disruptions create long-term structural challenges that future reconstruction must address.

Emerging recovery dynamics: Despite ongoing attacks, many regions exhibit patterns typically associated with early recovery. Economic activity continues in urban centers, businesses remain open, and public spaces including shops and restaurants show consistent engagement. Universities operate in hybrid or in-person formats, and government ministries move forward with reforms, including steps toward EU integration. These developments reflect societal resilience and indicate that certain components of recovery begin before the formal end of hostilities.

Together, these conditions form a hybrid wartime–recovery environment in which the groundwork for post-conflict reconstruction is already taking shape.

T0: Ceasefire and End of Major Hostilities

T0 marks the turning point at which organized violence declines to a level that allows systematic reconstruction to begin. A ceasefire triggers a rapid shift from crisis response to coordinated recovery.

Key developments at T0 include:

- immediate improvement in security conditions,
- large-scale return migration to stable regions,
- renewed domestic and international investor confidence,
- mobilization of international reconstruction initiatives, and
- transition of government ministries from emergency management to recovery planning.

This moment establishes the starting point for formal PCRD efforts across the country.

T+1 to T+36 Months: Stabilization and Reconstruction

The years immediately following the ceasefire constitute the core reconstruction period. The focus shifts toward rebuilding critical infrastructure, restoring essential services, and reestablishing institutional capacity.

Typical activities during this phase include:

- debris removal and emergency repairs to utilities and transportation networks,
- reconstruction of housing, energy systems, and public buildings,
- restarting industrial activity and supporting small and medium-sized enterprises,
- reintegration of displaced populations and demobilized personnel,
- implementation of governance and anti-corruption reforms, and

- modernization of education and workforce development systems.

During this period, demographic patterns shaped during T–X—such as gender imbalances in education—begin to influence workforce composition and leadership pipelines.

T+3 to T+10 Years: Long-Term Development and Transformation

The final stage involves transitioning from reconstruction to sustained national development. In this phase, institutions consolidate, economic growth stabilizes, and the country’s long-term strategic direction becomes defined.

Key characteristics of this stage include:

- deepening of institutional reforms and alignment with EU standards,
- long-term labor market restructuring,
- expanded civic participation and democratic governance,
- sustained infrastructure modernization, and
- emergence of permanent social and demographic patterns shaped by the war.

These developments determine the long-term trajectory of the post-conflict society and solidify the outcomes of the reconstruction period.

In summary, applying the T-model to Ukraine illustrates that reconstruction does not begin solely at the moment of ceasefire. Instead, elements of stabilization, adaptation, and reform are already visible during the conflict. T0 marks the formal start of coordinated recovery, while T+ phases capture the systematic rebuilding and long-term development needed to restore and modernize the country. The demographic and institutional conditions established during T–X—including shifts in gender composition in education and the workforce—play a critical role in shaping Ukraine’s future PCRD trajectory.

1.3. Statement of the Problem

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has triggered significant demographic shifts in the country's higher education landscape, not only within business schools but throughout the higher education system in general. Due to conscription laws, safety concerns, and widespread displacement, a growing number of young Ukrainian men have been drafted, have fled the country, or are otherwise absent from traditional educational pathways. As a result, many business programs—especially in urban universities such as The American University Kyiv (AUK)—are witnessing a marked gender imbalance, with young women comprising the vast majority of students. Also noted are the few sprinklings of young men who come from families least able to afford to move and live outside of Ukraine before their 18th birthday.

This imbalance, compounded by the stressors of an unending war, is altering classroom dynamics, peer collaboration, leadership development, and long-term professional aspirations. Despite these changes, there is limited empirical research (*Dryden-Peterson, 2011; Unterhalter, 2005*) examining how this gendered transformation affects student experiences, educational quality, and future workforce composition in a country undergoing both war and systemic economic disruption. These conditions suggest a misalignment between leadership responsibility and institutional recognition, a gap that this investigation later conceptualizes as the *Leadership Legitimacy Gap*.

Existing business curricula, faculty training, and institutional support systems were not designed to address such extreme demographic and social disruptions, nor are they fully equipped to anticipate their long-term implications. Without timely academic inquiry and responsive intervention, Ukraine risks missing a pivotal opportunity to support the emergence of a new demographic of business leaders, *i.e.*, women, who are increasingly occupying key roles in the

country's recovery. Equally important is the need to prepare returning men to reintegrate into a post-war economy and leadership environment that may differ significantly from the one they left, echoing the societal shifts experienced in the United States after World War II.

Core Issues this Research is Trying to Solve:

- How gender imbalance is influencing the quality of business education and student experience in Ukraine during the war.
- How outmigration is disrupting educational continuity, peer dynamics, and long-term workforce participation.
- Whether current business education structures are adequate to support the emerging female-majority student population.
- What interventions (policy, curriculum, leadership training) might be needed to close gendered gaps and support post-war reconstruction.

1.4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to examine how gender imbalance and outmigration are reshaping leadership formation, student experiences, and classroom dynamics within Ukrainian business education. Using qualitative analysis of classroom observations and practitioner-informed perspectives, the analysis explores how leadership is enacted, recognized, and negotiated in female-majority learning environments during wartime disruption.

This research seeks to:

- Investigate how demographic changes affect student learning experiences, classroom dynamics, and peer collaboration.
- Examine how leadership roles emerge and are distributed within female-majority cohorts.
- Analyze how institutional structures and cultural norms influence the recognition and

legitimacy of leadership.

- Identify implications for business education, workforce development, and post-conflict reconstruction.

1.5. Research Questions and Objectives

Primary Research Questions

- How has the gender imbalance caused by war-related conscription and male outmigration affected the educational experiences of business students in Ukraine?
- What are the perceived challenges and opportunities for predominantly female business student cohorts during and after the conflict?
- Are existing business education structures (e.g., curriculum, support services, faculty engagement) responsive to the new gender and socioeconomic realities in post-conflict Ukraine?
- How do business students perceive their future roles in Ukraine’s economic reconstruction, and are they being adequately prepared to lead?
- As female managers take on a greater share of leadership roles, are returning male conscripts ready to adapt and reintegrate into this evolving business environment?
- In an environment where traditional gender roles and societal expectations often relegated women to “softer” areas like education or social services, how prepared is the country to accepting and embracing this new, emerging reality of women leaders?

Research Objectives

- To document and analyze the demographic changes within Ukrainian business schools as a result of war-related gender imbalance and outmigration.
- To understand how these changes are shaping the academic, social, and leadership

development experiences of students—particularly women.

- To evaluate the responsiveness of business education institutions to the emerging needs of a female-majority student population.
- To explore the long-term socioeconomic implications of current student experiences on Ukraine’s post-war economic recovery and private sector leadership.
- To propose actionable recommendations for educators, policymakers, and development agencies to ensure inclusive and effective business education in a post-conflict setting.

1.6. Significance of the Study

This research matters because it addresses a critical and underexplored consequence of war: how forced demographic shifts—specifically gender imbalance and outmigration—reshape educational pathways and future economic leadership in a country fighting for its survival and eventual recovery.

- Addresses an Emerging Educational Crisis
 - Ukrainian business schools (and schools of higher learning in general) are facing unprecedented demographic shifts, with women now comprising the majority of students due to male conscription and outmigration.
 - This disrupts traditional pedagogical models, leadership development structures, and long-term labor force expectations, yet few studies explore how to adapt business education to this new reality.
- Links Education to National Recovery
 - Ukraine's economic recovery will depend on a new generation of business leaders, many of whom will be women.
 - This document helps stakeholders understand how to prepare and support this group

now—as students—so they can be effective in rebuilding the economy.

- **Contributes to Post-Conflict Development Models**
 - Ukraine serves as a live case study for future post-conflict countries.
 - Findings could inform international policy, donor strategy, and higher education reform efforts in similar war-torn or fragile contexts.
- **Elevates Marginalized Voices During War**
 - Women, displaced students, and youth navigating disrupted education rarely have their voices heard in national policy.
 - This research centers those voices to inform more inclusive policies on education, workforce planning, and gender equity.

This research will investigate the critical elements necessary for successfully reintegrating returning soldiers into a transforming post-conflict business landscape, where women are expected to play a more prominent role in leadership.

Who Benefits from This Research

Stakeholder	Benefits
Ukrainian Business Students	Improved understanding of their challenges and needs; empowerment training and programs; potential influence on curriculum and support programs.
Universities & Educators	Evidence-based insights to adapt teaching models, support services, and leadership training; recruit more women leaders from industry to also act as role models.
Policy Makers & Education Ministries	Data to guide reforms in higher education policy, especially around gender equity and post-war workforce development.

Stakeholder	Benefits
NGOs & International Donors	Practical recommendations for targeted aid, leadership fellowships, and skills-building programs for Ukrainian women.
Future Employers & Business Community	Better understanding of the emerging talent pipeline, including strengths and gaps among future business leaders.
Researchers & Scholars	A valuable contribution to the literature on gender, education, and post-conflict recovery.

This research is timely, human-centered, and strategically important for anyone involved in Ukraine’s education system, economic recovery, or gender equality efforts. It gives voice to those on the frontlines of a generational transformation.

1.7. Definition of Key Terms

- **Gender Imbalance**

A disproportionate representation of one gender over another within a specific context—in this case, the predominance of female students in Ukrainian business schools due to the conscription or outmigration of young men during the Russian invasion.
- **Outmigration**

The departure of individuals or families from their home country or region, often due to conflict, economic instability, or the search for safety. In this research, it refers to Ukrainian families—especially those with sons—leaving the country to avoid conscription or war-related risks.
- **Business Education**

A field of higher education that includes training in management, finance,

entrepreneurship, marketing, and leadership. This study focuses on how war-induced demographic and socioeconomic changes affect students enrolled in such programs.

- **Post-Conflict Reconstruction**

The process of rebuilding social, political, and economic systems after a conflict. This includes rebuilding institutions, infrastructure, and human capital—especially through education and workforce development.

- **Socioeconomic Shifts**

Changes in the social and economic status or environment of individuals or communities, such as those caused by war, displacement, or shifts in gender roles and family structures.

- **Student Experience**

The academic, social, emotional, and developmental journey of students within the higher education environment. This includes classroom interaction, access to resources, faculty engagement, peer learning, and leadership development.

- **Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)**

Individuals or families who have been forced to relocate within their own country due to conflict or disaster. Many Ukrainian students fall into this category, affecting their ability to access consistent education.

- **Leadership (Context-Specific Definition)**

In this analysis, leadership is defined as the observable enactment of influence, coordination, and decision-making within academic and early professional settings, particularly in conditions where formal authority structures are weak, disrupted, or absent. Leadership includes both formal roles and informal behaviors such as initiating discussion, organizing group work, facilitating collaboration, and assuming responsibility

under conditions of uncertainty.

- Leadership Pipeline

The process of identifying, developing, and nurturing future leaders, particularly within business and organizational contexts. This study examines how the current gender imbalance affects the development of future business leaders in Ukraine.

- Leadership Legitimacy Gap

A transitional condition in which leadership responsibilities expand more rapidly than institutional mechanisms for recognizing authority

- Educational Resilience

The capacity of students and educational institutions to withstand, adapt to, and recover from disruptions caused by conflict or crisis. It includes maintaining academic progress and emotional well-being despite challenges.

- Conscription

A government policy mandating military service, especially during wartime. In Ukraine, conscription has removed many young men from educational pathways, contributing to gender imbalances in universities.

1.8. Scope and Delimitations

This research focuses on the educational and socioeconomic shifts within Ukrainian business schools during and after the Russian invasion of 2022, with particular attention to the impact of gender imbalance and outmigration on student experiences. Specifically, it examines how the predominance of female students—driven largely by the outmigration of young men to avoid conscription—affects classroom dynamics, peer collaboration, and the broader formation of future business leadership in a post-conflict Ukraine.

The research will delve into:

- The changing demographics of business students, particularly the increasing gender disparity.
- How this shift influences educational engagement, academic discourse, and career expectations among students.
- Student voices and lived experiences, gathered through interviews and surveys, to understand how gender imbalance and outmigration have reshaped their learning environment.
- The implications of these shifts for post-conflict recovery, particularly in rebuilding Ukraine's business sector through inclusive and adaptive business education.
- Recommendations for curriculum and institutional reforms responsive to the emerging realities of gender-skewed enrollment and the loss of male students due to war-related displacement.

Limitations of the Study:

- This research is limited to business education programs and does not generalize findings across other disciplines such as engineering, health sciences, or humanities. Although it can be inferred that similar occurrences are experienced in other disciplines and other programs, they are beyond the scope of this study.
- It does not provide a comprehensive economic analysis of labor market impacts resulting from male outmigration, nor does it include in-depth military or political analysis of conscription policy.
- Historical gender norms in Ukrainian education will be referenced only where necessary for context.

- The study is qualitative in nature and does not employ predictive modeling or demographic forecasting techniques.

1.9. Theoretical Framework and Underlying Assumptions

This research is grounded in Post-Conflict Reconstruction (PCRD) Theory (*Sakalasuriya et al., 2017*), which provides a multidisciplinary framework for analyzing how societies rebuild institutions, identities, and capacities after periods of conflict. PCRD theory emphasizes that recovery must be holistic, addressing not only infrastructure and governance but also the restoration of education, social cohesion, and economic development. Education, in particular, is viewed as a transformative force in post-conflict settings—capable of fostering leadership, civic engagement, and human capital development.

In the context of Ukraine, the most recent Russian invasion of 2022 has disrupted the higher education landscape, triggering massive displacement and demographic shifts. One of the most visible impacts is the gender imbalance in university classrooms, particularly in business schools, where a growing majority of students are women. This is largely due to the outmigration of young men who have fled the country to avoid conscription or to seek safety and economic stability abroad.

Within this framework, several truth assumptions guide the research design and inform the interpretation of findings:

- *A significant gender imbalance currently exists in Ukrainian business schools.* Male outmigration and conscription have led to a predominantly female student population in many programs, especially in business education.
- *Outmigration has both educational and societal consequences.* The absence of male students alters peer interactions, participation styles, and long-term leadership pipelines

within Ukraine's business ecosystem.

- *Classroom composition influences learning outcomes.* Homogenous gender dynamics can affect classroom discourse, group dynamics, and professional identity formation.
- *Business education is essential to post-conflict recovery.* Business schools are uniquely positioned to develop future entrepreneurs, managers, and public-sector leaders who will shape the country's reconstruction.
- *Student experiences offer valuable insight into systemic change.* Capturing the lived experiences of students is critical for understanding how demographic and societal shifts affect education at a granular level.
- *Sociocultural norms around gender and leadership are in transition.* As women increasingly dominate academic spaces and enter professional pipelines, traditional gender roles are being redefined in ways that merit institutional attention and adaptation.
- *Educational institutions are not passive actors.* Universities, especially business faculties, have the agency to implement curriculum changes, leadership development initiatives, and support systems that respond to the realities of post-war gender imbalance and migration.

PCRD Theory, when paired with these assumptions, enables a deeper exploration of how Ukraine's higher education institutions—specifically business schools—are both shaped by and responding to the broader disruptions of war. The theory supports the idea that rebuilding a nation requires more than physical infrastructure; it also requires a recalibration of educational systems to promote equity, resilience, and inclusive growth.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This literature review examines existing research relevant to understanding gender imbalance and outmigration impacts on business education in post-conflict Ukraine, framed within PCRD Theory, gender studies, and leadership development literature. It establishes how your research fills critical gaps in both theoretical and practical domains.

2.2. Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Education

PCRD Theory emphasizes holistic recovery encompassing infrastructure, governance, social cohesion, and human capital development through education (*Barakat et al., 2013*). Studies indicate that higher education can accelerate economic stabilization by fostering critical thinking, leadership, and employability skills (*Paulson, 2006*). In Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Afghanistan, educational recovery required trauma-informed pedagogy, institutional reforms, and investment in faculty development (*Sperling & Winthrop, 2016*).

2.3. Gender Imbalance in Post-Conflict Education

Conflicts often induce gender imbalances when men are conscripted or migrate. Rwanda's post-genocide education system saw a surge in female enrollment, leading to increased women's participation in business and governance (*Debusscher & Ansoms, 2013*). However, Unterhalter (*2005*) warns that numerical dominance does not equate to empowerment, as curricula and leadership models often remain male-oriented, constraining women's professional development despite majority representation.

Pre-war Ukraine exhibited entrenched patriarchal norms in business education (*Silova, 2011*). Thus, the emerging female-majority cohort requires re-examining pedagogical approaches to ensure inclusive leadership preparation. In the Ukrainian case, pre-war business education

environments reflected more conventional gender distributions and leadership expectations. The wartime shift toward female-majority cohorts therefore represents not merely a demographic change but a structural departure from prior institutional norms.

2.4. Outmigration and Educational Disruption

Outmigration disrupts educational ecosystems, as observed in Kosovo, Bosnia, and Syria. Large-scale male departures diminish male participation in higher education, affecting group dynamics, peer learning, and classroom interactions (*Dryden-Peterson, 2011*). Moreover, remaining students—often women and less affluent youth—face additional burdens, including economic strain and caregiving roles, influencing academic performance and leadership development (*Chatty, 2010*).

National labor market dynamics discussed in this narrative draw on The World Bank analysis (*The World Bank, 2025*) of female employment trends in Ukraine, which documents widening gender gaps, care burdens, and migration pressures since 2022. While this macro-level evidence establishes structural context, it does not capture how these dynamics manifest within higher education and leadership formation—an empirical gap this research addresses.

2.5. Gendered Dimensions of Leadership Development

Research shows that women’s leadership in post-conflict settings contributes to economic resilience (*UN Women, 2015*). Yet, traditional norms often inhibit their professional advancement. In Liberia and South Sudan, women graduates struggled with limited mentorship opportunities and male-dominated networks (*El Bushra, 2000; Bennett et al., 1995*).

Recommended interventions include intentional mentorship, curricular integration of gender-sensitive leadership, and institutional policy reforms to cultivate female leaders.

2.6. Educational Institutions as Agents of Change

Universities are active agents shaping post-conflict recovery (*Bruns et al., 2021*). Business schools can foster inclusive economic growth by adapting curricula to new demographics, integrating trauma-informed approaches, and aligning entrepreneurship training with local market needs. However, without strategic reforms, gendered inequities persist even when women dominate classrooms.

2.7. Gaps in Existing Literature

Current literature shows:

- Limited empirical studies on business education in active war contexts like Ukraine.
- Few analyses on reintegration challenges for returning male conscripts into feminized educational and professional spaces.
- Minimal research capturing student-centered qualitative experiences reflecting rapid gender-demographic shifts.

2.8. Theoretical Implications

My research applies PCRD Theory while integrating Gender Role Theory to explore shifting gender norms, and Transformational Leadership Theory to assess leadership identity formation within Ukrainian business education. This multidimensional approach addresses gaps in understanding how educational institutions adapt to societal transformations during and after conflict.

2.9. Contribution to Literature and Practice

My study will:

- Provide real-time qualitative data on Ukrainian business education during war.
- Elevate female student voices in leadership and management discourse.
- Inform policy, curricular, and institutional interventions for gender-inclusive educational

and economic reconstruction.

- Offer models for other fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS) integrating gender-sensitive educational leadership frameworks in recovery planning.

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Chapter 3 - Conceptual Framework

3.1. Introduction

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine has dramatically reshaped the country’s social, demographic, and educational landscape. While much attention has focused on macroeconomic and humanitarian impacts, less has been said about how these disruptions are altering the everyday dynamics of university classrooms—spaces where the next generation of Ukrainian business leaders is being formed.

Within this context, the AUK provides a distinct and revealing case study. Since 2022, its undergraduate business program has experienced a marked gender imbalance, with female students comprising the overwhelming majority of enrolled learners.

The analysis draws limited contextual insight from The World Bank (*The World Bank, 2025*) report *Female Employment in the Context of Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine*, which documents that women’s participation in Ukraine’s labor market has increased during wartime, albeit under constrained and unequal conditions. Whereas that report focuses on labor market outcomes, the present research turns attention to educational experiences—examining how female-majority classrooms are redefining participation, confidence, collaboration, and leadership before students enter the workforce.

3.2. Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations

The conceptual framework guiding this study integrates multiple strands of theory to explain how gender imbalance and outmigration shape educational and psychosocial experiences within a post-conflict learning environment.

Ecological Systems Theory (*Bronfenbrenner, 1979*) situates the student at the center of nested systems—from family and peers to institutional structures and national policy. War and

displacement have disrupted these systems, fragmenting traditional networks and altering how students relate to their academic community.

Gendered Organizations Theory (*Acker, 1990*) explains how gender shapes the routines and norms of institutions. In the AUK business program, classrooms traditionally designed for balanced participation now operate under a predominantly female demographic, which affects not only interactional patterns but also perceptions of competence, authority, and leadership. Social Capital Theory (*Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988*) highlights the role of relationships, trust, and peer networks in shaping educational outcomes. Outmigration and online learning have disrupted bonding capital within cohorts, while simultaneously increasing bridging capital through international exposure, particularly among students who maintain academic or family ties abroad.

Transformative Learning Theory (*Mezirow, 1991*) underscores that deep learning often occurs through disorienting experiences. The war, gender imbalance, and hybrid learning environment represent precisely such disorienting contexts that can trigger reflection, adaptation, and redefinition of self-concept among business students.

Resilience and Post-Traumatic Growth Framework (*Masten, 2001; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004*) provides a psychosocial lens for understanding how students respond to adversity. AUK's undergraduate business students, many of whom balance uncertainty, displacement, and emotional strain, exhibit emerging patterns of resilience and agency that may foreshadow a more inclusive model of Ukrainian leadership.

Within this study, leadership is operationalized as an enacted practice rather than a formally assigned role, aligning with the interpretive focus on observed behaviors in disrupted environments.

3.3. Focus of the Study

This research explores the following central questions:

- How does gender imbalance, shaped by wartime outmigration and demographic shifts, influence the academic and social experiences of undergraduate business students at the American University Kyiv?
- The study assumes that the gendered composition of classrooms is not a neutral variable but a determinant of interaction patterns, confidence levels, learning engagement, and leadership identity formation. A female-majority environment challenges traditional assumptions about participation and hierarchy, allowing researchers to observe how women exercise agency and leadership in academic contexts once dominated by male voices.

It also examines how outmigration—through the physical absence of male peers, the online participation of displaced students, and the transnational connections maintained by many—creates new social ecologies within the AUK learning community. These changes are not merely logistical or demographic; they are sociocultural, influencing how students construct meaning, belonging, and purpose in education during wartime.

3.4. Proposed Conceptual Model

The proposed conceptual model links macro-level disruptions to micro-level classroom experiences through a series of mediating factors:

Level	Constructs	Illustrative Indicators
Macro	Gender imbalance and student outmigration	Wartime conscription policies, migration flows, remote attendance, female-majority enrollment

Level	Constructs	Illustrative Indicators
Mediating <i>(Institutional)</i>	Classroom interaction patterns, teaching methods, peer dynamics, access to mentoring	Participation frequency, confidence in group discussions, faculty inclusion practices
Mediating <i>(Psychosocial)</i>	Perceived belonging, leadership identity, motivation, resilience	Self-efficacy, teamwork satisfaction, stress coping, civic orientation
Outcome <i>(Individual)</i>	Academic engagement and future orientation	Academic performance, leadership role-taking, intention to work or study abroad

The model hypothesizes that gender imbalance influences students’ perception of leadership and participation norms, while outmigration modifies access to networks and affects belonging and engagement. Institutional supports—such as inclusive pedagogy, cross-cultural teamwork, and trauma-informed teaching—moderate these effects.

Building on the conceptual model presented above, the study introduces the concept of the *Leadership Legitimacy Gap*, a transitional condition in which leadership responsibilities expand more rapidly than institutional mechanisms for recognizing authority. Wartime demographic disruption accelerates leadership practice within organizations and educational environments, while formal governance structures adapt more slowly. Figure 3.2 illustrates this dynamic across the wartime and post-conflict timeline.

The Leadership Legitimacy Gap

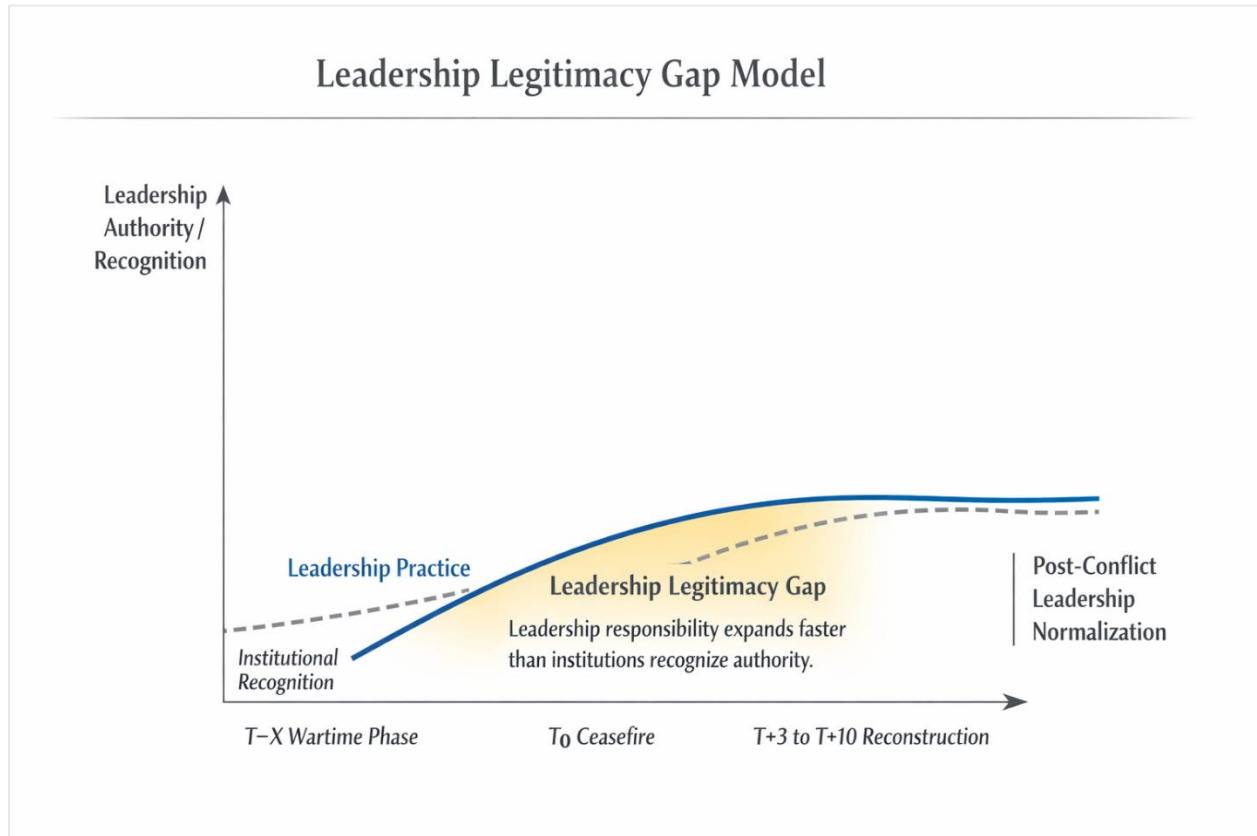


Figure 3.2

Building on the conceptual model presented above, the study introduces the concept of the *Leadership Legitimacy Gap*, a transitional condition in which leadership responsibilities expand more rapidly than institutional mechanisms for recognizing authority. Wartime demographic disruption accelerates leadership practice within organizations and educational environments, while formal governance structures adapt more slowly. Figure 3.2 above illustrates this dynamic across the wartime and post-conflict timeline.

In contexts of demographic disruption, leadership responsibilities may expand rapidly as organizations adapt to labor shortages, institutional strain, and social uncertainty. Individuals who were not previously expected to occupy leadership roles—particularly women in traditionally male-dominated professional environments—may assume operational leadership responsibilities in order to sustain organizational continuity.

However, institutional mechanisms for recognizing and legitimizing authority often evolve more slowly. Formal leadership hierarchies, promotion structures, and normative expectations

surrounding authority may continue to reflect legacy institutional arrangements even as leadership practices shift in response to crisis conditions.

The concept therefore refers to a transitional institutional condition in which leadership responsibility expands faster than the mechanisms used to recognize and legitimize leadership authority.

In the Ukrainian context, this gap becomes visible within female-majority business education environments shaped by wartime conscription and outmigration. Women increasingly assume coordination, organizational, and decision-making responsibilities within educational and professional settings, yet institutional expectations surrounding leadership authority remain partially anchored in pre-war norms.

Conceptually, the *Leadership Legitimacy Gap* is expected to be most visible during the T–X wartime phase described earlier in the post-conflict timeline. Over time, particularly during the T+3 to T+10 reconstruction period, institutional structures may gradually adapt as leadership practices demonstrated during crisis conditions become normalized and formally recognized.

This concept provides an interpretive lens for analyzing how demographic disruption influences leadership formation within educational institutions and how those dynamics may shape the long-term leadership pipeline for Ukraine’s post-conflict reconstruction.

3.5. Linking to Broader Context

While The World Bank (*The World Bank, 2025*) findings suggest that women’s increased economic participation is an essential condition for Ukraine’s post-war recovery, the current research extends that argument into the educational sphere. It argues that the feminization of Ukraine’s business classrooms—observable at AUK—is not a temporary anomaly but a precursor to a structural transformation in national leadership and economic participation.

AUK's business students represent a microcosm of Ukraine's future leadership class. The predominance of women in this environment offers a rare opportunity to study how gender composition shapes confidence, communication, and ethical reasoning—traits critical for leading organizations in a society recovering from conflict. Moreover, the intersection of gender imbalance and outmigration provides insight into how displaced or transnational identities contribute to new forms of learning resilience and global perspective.

3.6. Framing the Study as an Alternative Perspective

This conceptual framework positions AUK's classrooms as laboratories of societal change. Unlike macroeconomic analyses that emphasize labor participation and policy, this study foregrounds the educational experiences through which future economic and civic leaders are being shaped. It treats gender imbalance not simply as a wartime byproduct but as a transformative condition—one that challenges traditional hierarchies, redistributes voice and authority, and nurtures new models of collaborative leadership.

From this perspective, Ukraine's post-conflict future will be determined not only by its economic recovery but by the values and capabilities cultivated in its classrooms. The AUK business program, with its diverse and predominantly female student body, thus becomes an emblematic site for observing how education can accelerate social inclusion, resilience, and nation-building in times of profound upheaval.

This chapter established the conceptual lenses guiding the study, drawing on post-conflict reconstruction, human capital development, gender imbalance, and education–business linkages to frame the inquiry. These perspectives inform how practitioner experiences are interpreted, but do not predetermine analytic outcomes. The following chapter outlines the methodology through which these conceptual lenses were operationalized in an applied doctoral context. Specifically,

Chapter 4 documents the research design, participant context, data sources, and analytic process used to examine practitioner sense-making among business students and middle managers operating in wartime Ukraine.

Chapter 4 – Methodology

4.1. Research Design and Applied Orientation

This study adopts a qualitative, applied research design aligned with the objectives and standards of the Doctor of Professional Practice (DPP) (Creswell, 2013). The purpose of the research is not to generate generalizable theory or to test hypotheses under controlled conditions, but to produce practice-relevant insight grounded in lived organizational experience within a context of prolonged crisis and anticipated post-conflict recovery.

The research is situated at the intersection of higher education, workforce development, and post-conflict economic reconstruction in Ukraine. Given the volatility of the research environment, the embedded professional status of participants, and the applied nature of the research questions, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate (Yin, 2018). This approach allows for the examination of meaning-making, judgment, and adaptive behavior among practitioners navigating uncertainty, disruption, and institutional transition.

Consistent with DPP expectations, rigor in this study is established through *methodological transparency, systematic documentation of analytic decisions, and clear differentiation among data types*, rather than through statistical replication or theoretical generalization.

This study adopts a qualitative, practice-based research design with ethnographic and interpretive elements. While not a formal ethnography, the researcher's embedded role as a faculty member enabled sustained observation of naturally occurring interactions, providing depth consistent with ethnographic inquiry. This hybrid approach allows for both systematic thematic analysis and contextually grounded interpretation of leadership dynamics as they emerge in real time.

4.2. Research Context and Participants

The study focuses on undergraduate business students, as well as graduate students enrolled in master's programs in Ukraine who concurrently occupy middle-management or supervisory roles across a range of industries, including retail services, consulting, operations, education, public and professional administration. The graduate student participants represent a distinctive practitioner cohort: individuals who are simultaneously engaged in advanced management education and responsible for organizational decision-making under wartime conditions. Participants were selected based on their dual positioning as learners and practitioners. Their perspectives provide insight into how macro-level demographic shocks—such as population outmigration, gender imbalance, and labor market disruption—are translated into micro-level organizational challenges and strategic considerations. This embedded practitioner status distinguishes the participant group from traditional student populations and strengthens the applied orientation of the research.

All participant responses were collected through open-ended prompts designed to elicit reflective, experience-based responses rather than factual reporting. Responses were anonymized prior to analysis, and ethical considerations related to confidentiality, consent, and participant vulnerability were addressed throughout the research process. Interview prompts focused on leadership experience, classroom participation, perceptions of authority, and views on institutional structures.

4.3. Methodological Transition and Clarification of Analytic Scope

To strengthen methodological transparency and align the study with applied doctoral research standards, the methodology was refined to make explicit how diverse materials were identified, categorized, and analytically employed. Early drafts of the study emphasized research design, participant context, and qualitative orientation; however, the breadth of materials consulted—

including practitioner responses, institutional documents, demographic indicators, and reflexive records—necessitated clearer documentation of analytic boundaries.

Rather than treating all materials as equivalent data, sources were subsequently grouped according to their functional role in supporting practitioner-focused inquiry. This refinement does not alter the applied orientation of the study; instead, it clarifies how heterogeneous materials were handled in a disciplined and transparent manner throughout the research process. The sections that follow detail this categorization and its role in ensuring analytic rigor, auditability, and coherence.

4.4. Data Sources and Organization

This applied doctoral study draws on multiple forms of qualitative and contextual material to examine business student experiences in wartime and post-conflict Ukraine. Consistent with the DPP framework, data were selected and organized based on their functional role in supporting applied insight, rather than hierarchical distinctions between “primary” and “secondary” sources.

All materials were grouped into five analytic categories, each serving a distinct and explicitly defined purpose within the research design.

4.4.1. Practitioner-Generated Qualitative Data

The core data for this study consist of open-ended responses collected from MBA students who concurrently hold middle-management roles across multiple sectors in Ukraine. These responses reflect practitioner sense-making grounded in active organizational responsibility during wartime conditions. Responses were compiled, anonymized, and reviewed iteratively. This dataset constitutes the primary source of insight into how demographic change, gender imbalance, and labor disruption are experienced and interpreted at the organizational level.

4.4.2. Institutional and Policy Documentation

To contextualize practitioner perspectives, the study incorporates publicly available policy reports, strategy documents, and institutional publications produced by international organizations, national

authorities, and professional service firms. These materials were not treated as evidence of individual experience, but as representations of prevailing recovery narratives, governance priorities, and policy assumptions shaping Ukraine’s post-conflict environment. Their role is explicitly contextual rather than evidentiary. In addition to formal documentation, the study was informed by informal discussions with international development practitioners, including personnel affiliated with the United Nations and the World Bank, as well as graduate students from other Ukrainian universities. While these interactions were not systematically analyzed as part of the core dataset, they provided contextual background and helped triangulate broader observations regarding student experiences and institutional conditions in Ukraine.

4.4.3. Demographic and Structural Indicators

Descriptive demographic materials—including enrollment data, emigration statistics, gender distribution figures, and visual indicators—were reviewed to establish the structural conditions surrounding higher education, labor markets, and population mobility. These indicators are used illustratively to demonstrate patterns of absence, overrepresentation, and imbalance, rather than for statistical inference or hypothesis testing.

4.4.4. Scholarly and Applied Conceptual Frameworks

Select academic and applied literature on post-conflict reconstruction, human capital development, workforce transformation, and gender equity was consulted to provide interpretive language and conceptual reference points. These sources function as analytic lenses that inform discussion, rather than as theoretical constructs to be tested or validated.

4.4.5. Reflexive and Positional Materials

Finally, reflexive materials—including field observations and reflective writing produced during my residence and teaching in Ukraine—were maintained to document positionality, access, and interpretive stance. These materials are used to enhance transparency and ethical awareness, not as data representing participant experience.

4.4.6. Analytic Use and Transparency

Materials were organized according to these categories prior to formal analysis. The analytic process was iterative and integrative: practitioner-generated qualitative data were examined as the central focus, while institutional documents, demographic indicators, conceptual frameworks, and reflexive materials were used to contextualize, inform, and bound interpretation. This categorization and use process is fully documented to ensure transparency and transferability of method, consistent with applied doctoral research standards. Representative examples of analytic artifacts corresponding to these categories are provided in Appendix B.

4.5. Practitioner-Generated Qualitative Data (Core Data)

The primary data source for this study consists of open-ended qualitative responses from the aforementioned group of students. These responses reflect practitioner sense-making grounded in direct organizational responsibility during wartime conditions. Participants were invited to reflect on issues including workforce disruption, leadership transition, gender imbalance, talent shortages, and perceptions of post-war economic recovery.

Responses were compiled into working documents and reviewed iteratively. Attention was paid to recurring concerns, contrasts across organizational contexts, and shifts in emphasis across responses. These practitioner narratives constitute the core evidentiary base of the study and serve as the foundation for the findings presented in subsequent chapters.

4.6. Institutional and Policy Documentation (Contextual Data)

A second category of material includes publicly available policy documents, recovery frameworks, and strategy reports produced by international organizations, national authorities, research institutions, and professional service firms. These materials articulate formal recovery priorities, governance structures, and institutional assumptions regarding economic reconstruction, workforce development, and gender equity in Ukraine.

These documents were not treated as evidence of individual experience, nor were they used to validate or refute practitioner claims. Instead, they function as contextual reference points, representing dominant policy narratives and institutional expectations against which practitioner perspectives can be situated.

4.7. Demographic and Structural Indicators (Descriptive Data)

The study also incorporates descriptive demographic and structural indicators, including enrollment and admissions data, population mobility statistics, gender-distribution figures, and visual representations of workforce participation. These materials were used to establish baseline structural conditions shaping higher education, labor markets, and organizational capacity.

These indicators were used illustratively rather than inferentially. No statistical modeling or hypothesis testing was undertaken. Instead, demographic materials serve to demonstrate patterns of absence, imbalance, and concentration, providing structural context for practitioner narratives.

4.8. Scholarly and Applied Conceptual Frameworks as Analytic Reference

While Section 4.4.4 identified scholarly and applied conceptual frameworks as a category of materials consulted, this section explains how those frameworks were used analytically to inform interpretation without serving as objects of analysis themselves. Select academic and applied literature on post-conflict reconstruction, human capital development, workforce transformation, and gender equity was consulted to inform interpretation and discussion. These sources provide analytic language and conceptual scaffolding, enabling clearer articulation of patterns observed in practitioner data.

Consistent with the applied orientation of the DPP, conceptual frameworks were used pragmatically rather than deductively. They were not treated as theories to be tested, but as lenses that support disciplined sense-making.

4.9. Reflexive and Positional Materials (Transparency Data)

Finally, reflexive materials—including field observations, analytic memos, and reflective writing produced during the researcher’s residence and teaching engagement in Ukraine—were maintained throughout the research process. This section elaborates how reflexive and positional materials identified in Section 4.4.5 were maintained and used to enhance transparency and ethical awareness, rather than as sources of participant data. These materials document my position within the environment, access to participants, emotional proximity to the research context, and interpretive assumptions.

Reflexive documentation was not treated as data representing participant experience. Instead, it functions as a transparency mechanism, supporting ethical awareness and disciplined interpretation.

4.10. Analytic Process

Analysis followed an iterative, inductive approach appropriate for applied qualitative research (*Braun & Clarke, 2006*). Practitioner-generated qualitative data were reviewed repeatedly to identify recurring patterns, points of tension, and areas of convergence and divergence across responses. Rather than applying a predetermined coding scheme, themes emerged through progressive engagement with the data and comparison across practitioner narratives.

Materials from different categories were not collapsed into a single evidentiary pool. Each category retained a distinct analytic role, allowing for triangulation without conflation and ensuring that practitioner voices remained central to the analysis.

4.11. Methodological Rigor and Transparency

Rather than aiming for replicability of outcomes, this study prioritizes replicability of process. Another applied researcher working in a comparable post-conflict or high-disruption educational

setting could follow the same procedures—data categorization by analytic function, iterative review of practitioner narratives, contextual referencing through institutional documents, and reflexive documentation—to conduct a similar inquiry.

Rigor is established through explicit documentation of data roles, transparent analytic procedures, and reflexive acknowledgment of positionality. This approach aligns with applied doctoral standards emphasizing credibility, transparency, and transferability. An audit trail of analytic artifacts reviewed during the research process is documented in Appendix B. These materials informed conceptual framing and analytic boundary-setting but were not treated as primary data sources.

4.12. Ethical Considerations

All participant identifiers were fully anonymized. Pseudonyms are used where illustrative examples are provided, and all identifying details—including names, organizations, and specific roles—have been removed or generalized to protect participant confidentiality while preserving analytical relevance.

4.13. Summary

This methodology reflects a deliberate effort to balance applied relevance with scholarly rigor. By explicitly documenting how diverse materials were identified, categorized, and used, the study makes visible the analytic decisions underpinning its findings while remaining firmly grounded in the professional practice orientation of the DPP.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

5.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the interpretive core of the study, examining how gender imbalance and wartime disruption interact with institutional legacy to shape leadership formation within Ukrainian business education. Building on the conceptual framework outlined in Chapter 3 and the methodological approach described in Chapter 4, the discussion moves beyond descriptive patterns to analyze how leadership roles are imagined, enacted, and legitimized within female-majority classroom environments.

Periods of large-scale disruption have historically produced similar dynamics across diverse contexts (*Goldin, 1991*). For example, in post-conflict Bosnia, wartime America during World War II, and periods of rapid social transformation in China, women assumed expanded educational and professional responsibilities while institutional recognition of their leadership lagged behind. These historical parallels underscore a recurring pattern: role expansion often precedes normative and structural acceptance. The Ukrainian case examined here reflects this broader phenomenon, intensified by prolonged conflict and demographic shock.

Building on these observations, this study examines how gender imbalance and wartime disruption are reshaping leadership formation within Ukrainian business education. As male conscription, displacement, and outmigration alter the demographic composition of classrooms and organizations, women increasingly assume leadership responsibilities in both academic and professional settings. However, institutional structures and normative expectations have been slower to adapt, creating a misalignment between leadership practice and formal recognition. To explain this dynamic, this study introduces the concept of the *Leadership Legitimacy Gap*, defined as a transitional condition in which leadership responsibilities expand more rapidly than

the institutional mechanisms used to recognize and legitimize authority. This gap provides the central interpretive lens for the study and links empirical observations to broader institutional dynamics in post-conflict environments.

The sections that follow interpret empirical findings through three interconnected lenses: internalized gender norms, institutional lag, and normative readiness for leadership. Together, these lenses illuminate a central tension—women’s increasing responsibility and visibility within educational and organizational spaces alongside continued constraints on leadership legitimacy. Rather than treating these dynamics as temporary anomalies, this chapter argues that they reveal critical gaps where post-conflict reconstruction, leadership development, and educational reform efforts are most urgently needed.

To maintain analytic clarity, the discussion is organized around three interrelated interpretive themes that emerged consistently across practitioner narratives, classroom observation, and institutional context. These themes are not treated as discrete findings but as overlapping dynamics shaping leadership formation in post-conflict Ukraine: (1) leadership enacted without corresponding legitimacy or recognition, (2) gendered moral labor and voluntary role acceptance within educational and organizational settings, and (3) normative readiness for institutional transformation amid post-Soviet structural legacies. The sections that follow elaborate these themes through empirical illustration and interpretive analysis.

The findings suggest that this misalignment persists as a structural feature of institutional adaptation. Across practitioner narratives, classroom interactions, and organizational experiences, women frequently assume operational leadership responsibilities—coordinating teams, managing projects, and sustaining institutional continuity—while formal authority structures remain slower to adapt.

As introduced earlier, this phenomenon reflects the *Leadership Legitimacy Gap*. In the context of wartime Ukraine, this gap becomes particularly visible as demographic disruption accelerates women's participation in education and organizational life while legacy governance structures continue to shape how authority is distributed and validated. These findings extend beyond descriptive patterns to reveal how leadership is enacted, recognized, and negotiated within disrupted institutional environments.

5.2. Interpretation of Findings

These interpretations reflect practitioner sense-making drawn from participants who simultaneously occupy managerial roles and graduate learning environments. The findings therefore illuminate perceived organizational dynamics rather than providing direct institutional observation. Accordingly, the analysis should be understood as interpretive insight into how emerging professionals conceptualize leadership, authority, and gender within organizations operating under wartime conditions. These interpretations are informed by post-conflict reconstruction theory, gendered organizational theory, and institutional perspectives on leadership and authority, which together provide a framework for understanding how leadership is enacted and legitimized under conditions of structural disruption.

5.2.1. Internalized Gender Norms, Post-Soviet Mentality, and Voluntary Role Acceptance

Although the majority of individuals examined in this research were born after Ukraine's independence and have lived entirely within a Western-oriented, market-based political and economic system, post-Soviet institutional legacies continue to shape governance structures, organizational behavior, and social attitudes (*North, 1990; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012*). These individuals have not experienced Soviet governance directly; however, they have been socialized within systems and institutions that retain hierarchical decision-making practices, limited

transparency, and uneven accountability rooted in the post-Soviet transition period (*Kornai, 2000; The World Bank, 2017*).

Importantly, this influence does not reflect ideological attachment to the Soviet past, but rather the persistence of institutional arrangements that have proven resistant to reform (*Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; World Bank, 2020*). Despite Ukraine's sustained and explicit orientation toward European integration, governance structures—particularly within public administration—continue to exhibit characteristics associated with centralized authority and informal power networks (*OECD, 2018; European Commission, 2023*). These institutional norms extend into the private sector through regulation, legacy leadership practices, and expectations surrounding authority, even as market-based and Western business models increasingly dominate in form and intent (*EBRD, 2021*).

Within this context, a subset of women express voluntary acceptance of traditional gender roles and do not perceive male-dominated leadership structures as inherently problematic (*UN Women, 2022*). This acceptance is less a product of generational ideology and more a reflection of social conditioning within institutions that reward conformity, discourage contestation, and normalize unequal access to power (*Bourdieu, 2001; Acker, 2006*). For some individuals, gender hierarchies are viewed as stable, inevitable, or beyond meaningful individual influence.

Resistance to change in this environment often manifests passively rather than overtly. Rather than overt resistance, participants demonstrated forms of passive adaptation, including selective engagement, pragmatic compliance, and strategic withdrawal from formal processes perceived as ineffective or misaligned with lived realities. Individuals may outwardly align with reform-oriented discourse—particularly that associated with European Union standards, Western integration, or gender equity initiatives—while privately disengaging from efforts that challenge

established power relations (Scott, 1990; Helmke & Levitsky, 2004). Such passive or passive-aggressive resistance reflects adaptive strategies developed within systems where institutional change has historically been slow, uneven, or externally driven (Grzymala-Busse, 2010).

These dynamics became especially visible within business education settings, where students articulated divergent interpretations of gender and leadership despite comparable professional experience. During classroom discussions in my *Global Leadership and Personal Development* masters course, one female student, Tatiana, a Ukrainian middle manager based in Portugal, challenged the premise that gender differences persist in professional advancement, stating:

“I have never felt limited or disadvantaged in my corporate career because I am a woman. Opportunities have been based on performance, not gender.”

Tatiana is Ukrainian working for an international company but is based outside in Portugal. Her perspective reflects a genuine lived experience shaped by a professional environment situated within the European Union, where institutionalized gender-equality frameworks, legal protections, and corporate diversity norms are more firmly embedded. Her account illustrates how institutional context can significantly reduce the visibility of gender-based constraints and contribute to perceptions of gender neutrality.

However, this interpretation was forcefully contested by another student, Krystyna, also a Ukrainian middle manager with extensive international transactional experience. Krystyna disagreed vehemently with the assertion that gender is neutral in professional settings in Ukraine and described her experiences conducting business internationally, where she observed that being an attractive, blond woman often undermined her professional credibility. Rather than being treated as a serious decision-maker, she reported being perceived as a distraction, with her authority and expertise frequently questioned or minimized.

The contrast between these two perspectives underscores a critical distinction between individual perception and structural reality. While Tatiana’s experience reflects how institutional environments can buffer individuals from gendered constraints, Krystyna’s experience demonstrates how quickly such constraints reassert themselves in settings where patriarchal norms are more explicit. Within the Ukrainian corporate context—where senior leadership and executive roles remain overwhelmingly male—these dynamics suggest that inequality persists less through formal exclusion than through normalization and habituation.

The persistence of corruption and oligarchic governance further reinforces these patterns. Concentrated political and economic power, combined with limited institutional trust, shapes perceptions that advancement is determined more by networks than merit (*Transparency International, 2022; World Bank, 2023*). For women pursuing business and management education, this environment can diminish the perceived returns of leadership aspiration, encouraging self-selection into less visible or less contested roles despite high levels of educational attainment (*ILO, 2021; OECD, 2020*).

These dynamics present a significant challenge to Ukraine’s efforts to align with European Union governance standards. Membership into the European Union requires readiness not only legal and regulatory reform, but also shifts in organizational culture, accountability, and inclusion (*European Commission, 2023*). Gender equity in leadership and professional advancement is increasingly recognized as an indicator of institutional maturity rather than a peripheral social objective (*The World Bank, 2021; OECD, 2019*). As such, the persistence of post-Soviet institutional norms and oligarchic influence constitutes a structural barrier to inclusive development.

Within business education environments, these institutional legacies shape student expectations, participation patterns, and leadership identity formation (*Marginson, 2016; AACSB, 2020*). Even in female-dominant classrooms, some students internalize assumptions that leadership pathways remain informally constrained, dampening engagement with leadership development opportunities. Consequently, gender imbalance in education must be understood as embedded within broader political-economic structures that continue to influence behavior across generations.

Recognizing the distinction between generational exposure to Western-oriented systems and the persistence of post-Soviet institutional legacies provides a more precise interpretation of the study's findings. It underscores that gender imbalance in post-conflict Ukraine is sustained not by outdated ideology alone, but by historically conditioned governance structures and power relations that shape individual agency, normalize voluntary role acceptance, and constrain leadership outcomes (*North, 1990; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012*).

5.2.2. Adaptive Leadership and Institutional Lag

This section examines the first interpretive theme: the growing divergence between leadership enacted in practice and leadership formally recognized within institutional structures. The findings indicate a growing divergence between leadership exercised in practice and leadership formally recognized within Ukrainian organizations. As wartime conditions, labor shortages, and institutional strain have intensified, women have increasingly assumed adaptive leadership roles essential to organizational continuity. These roles include coordinating operations, managing teams, sustaining external relationships, and making decisions under uncertainty. However, the expansion of responsibility has not been matched by a proportional redistribution of formal authority, titles, or decision-making power. These patterns further reinforce the persistence of

misalignment between leadership practice and institutional recognition, as adaptation occurs without corresponding structural change.

This divergence reflects an institutional lag rather than a lack of leadership capacity or social acceptance (*North, 1990; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010*). Leadership hierarchies in Ukraine demonstrate a degree of permanence, shaped by post-Soviet organizational structures and historically gendered authority norms. While these hierarchies are not static, they adapt more slowly than leadership practices on the ground. As a result, women's leadership is increasingly accepted in functional and operational terms, even as formal governance structures remain unevenly responsive. In many cases, this misalignment is sustained not through overt resistance, but through passive adaptation—where individuals accommodate existing structures while informally adjusting their behavior to navigate institutional constraints. This dynamic is often sustained through passive adaptation, where individuals accommodate existing institutional structures while informally adjusting their behavior to navigate constraints, rather than directly challenging them.

Krystyna's classroom account illustrates this gap clearly. Despite her managerial competence and extensive international experience, she described situations in cross-border transactions where her authority was undermined by gendered perceptions, particularly in male-dominated cultural environments. Her experience demonstrates that leadership effectiveness alone does not guarantee legitimacy; legitimacy is mediated by institutional norms, symbolic authority, and culturally embedded expectations. Women may therefore lead successfully while continuing to encounter resistance at the level of recognition and influence.

Within the Ukrainian context, this pattern has become more pronounced under wartime conditions. Participants frequently described women assuming expanded coordination and

decision-making responsibilities in their organizations as men became absent due to military service, injury, displacement, or migration. These adaptations were frequently described by participants as normalized within their organizational environments. However, they are often framed as situational or provisional rather than as grounds for permanent restructuring of leadership hierarchies. Consequently, adaptive leadership gains risk remaining partial rather than fully institutionalized.

The findings suggest neither rapid transformation nor structural stagnation, but a transitional phase characterized by misalignment between evolving leadership practice and slower-moving institutional structures. Normative acceptance of women leaders appears to be advancing more quickly than formal mechanisms for authority allocation, promotion, and governance inclusion. This dynamic further supports the interpretation that women may represent an early cohort demonstrating higher normative readiness for leadership legitimacy in post-conflict institutional environments. This misalignment produces a persistent leadership gap, reinforcing the broader pattern identified in this study as the *Leadership Legitimacy Gap*.

The temporal lag between women's leadership in practice and its formal institutional recognition constitutes a critical gap in Ukraine's leadership ecosystem. It is within this gap that the most immediate needs—and the greatest opportunities for intervention—are located. Addressing this gap requires targeted efforts to convert adaptive leadership into durable institutional authority, ensuring that crisis-driven role expansion translates into long-term leadership inclusion rather than remaining contingent or reversible.

5.2.3. Context of the Media Materials

These media-based exercises are discussed here because student responses to contested cultural material revealed gendered differences in normative readiness and leadership legitimacy that

directly inform interpretation of the study's findings. While leadership roles and authority structures are shaped institutionally, leadership legitimacy is also contingent on normative readiness—the willingness of individuals and groups to recognize, accept, and sustain authority in pluralistic contexts. Such readiness becomes especially visible when students are confronted with contested social representations involving identity, inclusion, and cultural boundaries. Two primary media cases were used in my Media and Society bachelor's course to prompt structured discussion and written reflection. These dynamics are directly relevant to leadership legitimacy, as they shape the conditions under which authority is recognized, accepted, or informally resisted within evolving institutional environments.

The first involved a well-known Levi's advertising campaign in which two nearly identical versions of the same commercial were produced. In one version, the narrative concludes with a heterosexual pairing between a man and a woman; in the second, the same storyline culminates in a same-sex pairing between two men. The commercials are otherwise identical in tone, pacing, cinematography, and symbolism. Clearly the goal of the two advertising clips is to target different markets, as well as implicitly *exclude* certain demographics in their campaign. This dual-version strategy provided students with a controlled comparison through which to examine identity signaling, strategic exclusion, and cultural risk in global branding.

The second case involved a selected episode of the American television sitcom *Will & Grace*, a show that is historically significant for its mainstream portrayal of gay characters in U.S. media beginning in the late 1990s. In the episode excerpt shown, the characters Will, Grace, and Jack engage in a brief comedic interaction involving the comparison or touching of one another's chest or breasts. The scene is framed explicitly as humor, contains no nudity, and lacks sexualized intent. Students were asked to evaluate whether such content would be considered

obscene under Ukrainian cultural standards and legal frameworks, including reference to the Miller Test, and how generational attitudes might shape audience reception.

Together, these cases allowed for comparative analysis across commercial media, entertainment media, sexual orientation, censorship, and cultural norms, while remaining sufficiently bounded to avoid provocation or sensationalism. These materials are not examined for their cultural content alone, but for what they reveal about how leadership legitimacy is socially constructed and contested within evolving normative environments.

5.2.4. Observed Gender-Based Divergence in Responses

Across both assignments, student responses revealed a consistent gender-based divergence in attitudes toward non-traditional relationships and media representations involving LGBT identities.

Female undergraduate respondents demonstrated markedly higher levels of openness, tolerance, and contextual reasoning. Their responses frequently framed LGBT-related content as comedic, symbolic, or reflective of broader social change rather than as morally problematic or culturally threatening. Many female students explicitly distinguished between personal comfort and societal acceptability, emphasizing that discomfort does not justify censorship. Several respondents also acknowledged generational shifts, noting that while such content may have been controversial in Ukraine in earlier decades, contemporary audiences—particularly younger cohorts—are increasingly accustomed to diverse representations in global media.

Male respondents, by contrast, more frequently expressed discomfort, awkwardness, or skepticism. Importantly, this resistance was rarely articulated as explicit opposition. Instead, male students often framed LGBT representations as culturally incongruent, unnecessary, or likely to provoke discomfort among “older generations” or “traditional audiences.” While many

male respondents acknowledged that the content would likely not meet legal definitions of obscenity, they nonetheless expressed hesitation toward its normalization within Ukrainian media contexts. This pattern reflects passive resistance rather than overt rejection, aligning with broader post-Soviet adaptive behaviors discussed earlier in this chapter.

Responses to the Levi's commercials further illustrated this asymmetry. Several male students viewed the dual-version strategy as a pragmatic marketing tactic rather than a normative statement, expressing doubt about the cultural suitability of the same-sex version for Ukrainian audiences while simultaneously expressing respect for the brand's calculated risk. Female students, in contrast, more frequently interpreted the campaign as a quiet normalization of diversity and a reflection of evolving global values. In this sense, leadership legitimacy also functions as a knowledge-filtering mechanism, shaping whose contributions are recognized, whose perspectives influence discussion, and how knowledge is constructed within classroom and organizational settings.

5.2.5. Why This Evidence Matters

This section develops the third interpretive theme by examining how normative readiness shapes the conditions under which leadership authority is recognized, contested, and legitimized.

Crucially, these findings emerge from direct classroom engagement rather than abstract survey instruments, reinforcing the value of higher education spaces as microcosms of broader social transformation. Unlike standardized surveys, classroom discussions and written reflections allow students to articulate ambivalence, contradiction, and conditional acceptance—features that are often flattened or obscured in quantitative instruments. The classroom thus becomes a site where institutional legacy, generational change, and individual agency intersect in real time. These dynamics are directly relevant to leadership legitimacy, as they shape the conditions under which

authority is recognized, accepted, or informally resisted within evolving institutional environments.

The gendered asymmetry observed in these undergraduate responses mirrors the broader demographic and attitudinal shifts identified throughout this study. This pattern suggests that women may represent an early cohort demonstrating higher normative readiness for institutional change within Ukraine's evolving leadership environment. Their responses suggest greater familiarity with global discourse, higher tolerance for ambiguity, and a stronger capacity to decouple personal values from principles of legal protection and media pluralism.

This pattern is especially significant because normative readiness functions as a precondition for leadership legitimacy, shaping whose authority is likely to be accepted as post-war institutions are reconstituted (*Inglehart & Welzel, 2005*). As the country advances toward deeper European integration, norms surrounding freedom of expression, minority rights, and cultural inclusion increasingly function as indicators of institutional maturity. The relative openness demonstrated by female undergraduate students suggests that women may serve as primary carriers of normative adaptation, particularly within education-to-workforce pipelines that will shape post-war reconstruction.

By contrast, the ambivalence expressed by male students—though not hostile—signals potential friction points in future leadership environments. Passive resistance to norm change, even when framed as cultural caution, can slow institutional reform and reinforce informal hierarchies.

When combined with male underrepresentation in educational spaces due to conscription, out-migration, and wartime disruption, this dynamic raises important questions about how leadership norms will evolve once demographic balances shift again.

In this sense, the classroom evidence does more than illustrate attitudes toward non-traditional representation or media censorship. It reveals how gender imbalance in education intersects with normative readiness, shaping not only who will occupy future leadership roles, but how those roles will be understood, exercised, and legitimized in post-conflict Ukraine.

5.2.6. Implications for Education and Reconstruction

These findings underscore the importance of higher education institutions—particularly in post-conflict societies—as spaces where cultural continuity and institutional transformation are negotiated. The classroom operates as both a reflective and generative environment: it mirrors societal tensions while simultaneously shaping future norms. In Ukraine’s case, undergraduate classrooms at institutions such as AUK offer early insight into how gendered cohorts may differently interpret freedom of expression, inclusion, and cultural pluralism. These dynamics also reinforce the persistence of a gap between leadership enacted in practice and leadership formally recognized within institutional structures, highlighting how normative readiness and institutional adaptation jointly shape leadership legitimacy in post-conflict environments. These patterns also reflect broader forms of passive adaptation, in which individuals navigate institutional constraints without directly contesting them, reinforcing the persistence of misalignment between leadership practice and formal recognition.

Recognizing these dynamics is essential for education policy, leadership development, and reconstruction planning. Gender-neutral frameworks that ignore attitudinal divergence risk producing graduates whose formal qualifications are not matched by shared normative foundations. Conversely, intentionally designed curricula that foster critical engagement with controversial topics may accelerate institutional convergence with European norms while respecting cultural context.

5.2.7. Post-Soviet Institutional Legacy

Whereas earlier sections of Chapter 5 examined how post-Soviet legacies manifest at the individual, cultural, and classroom-experience level, this section shifts the focus to the institutional architecture that continues to reproduce hierarchical authority and gender-stratified leadership pathways.

These institutional patterns did not disappear with independence. Rather, they evolved into a hybrid governance culture that blends formal democratization with deeply embedded informal norms. Organizations — including universities — often retain hierarchical, compliance-oriented practices in which initiative flows downward and authority is rarely questioned. Within that framework, students frequently internalize the expectation that their role is to *perform well within the system*, not to reshape or challenge it.

This legacy helps explain several findings in this study:

- women dominate numerically in business and social-science programs
- yet both men and women often describe leadership roles as exceptional and positional rather than broadly accessible
- students expect to adapt themselves to existing structures rather than expect those structures to adapt to them.

The war accelerates some changes — especially in female participation and responsibility-taking — but institutional inertia remains powerful. Post-Soviet legacies shape not only what students aspire to, but also how they perceive the legitimacy of ambition itself. This legacy therefore shapes not only how students understand leadership, but also how business education is experienced — as preparation for navigating hierarchical systems rather than as a space for cultivating transformational, equity-oriented leadership. In this way, institutional legacy

functions less as an explicit constraint and more as a quiet boundary on what students perceive as realistic, legitimate, or worth pursuing.

5.2.8. Voluntary Role Acceptance

This section addresses the second interpretive theme: how gendered moral labor and voluntary role acceptance sustain leadership asymmetries even in female-majority educational environments. One of the more subtle — but consequential — findings emerging from this research is the way students appear to voluntarily accept role expectations placed upon them. Female students, in particular, frequently assume caretaker, coordinator, or stabilizing roles — both academically and socially — without describing these expectations as externally imposed. Instead, they narrate them as *natural*, *appropriate*, or *simply necessary* in the current environment.

This does not imply passivity. On the contrary, many women demonstrate high agency expressed through support-oriented leadership, such as organizing group work, ensuring peers stay engaged, and maintaining morale during uncertainty. However, the willingness to step organically into these roles risks reinforcing the very gendered asymmetry that this study identifies. When women internalize responsibility for social cohesion and academic continuity, their leadership becomes normalized but undervalued — expected rather than recognized. Male students, meanwhile, often position themselves at the system's edges — not hostile to participation, but less anchored to community-based responsibility and more inclined to evaluate future opportunity in terms of mobility or exit.

The result is a form of gendered moral labor: women sustain the learning environment; men weigh whether to remain within it. This voluntary role acceptance complicates traditional frameworks of oppression or constraint. The system does not force women into these positions

— rather, women choose them because doing so feels ethical, relationally appropriate, and socially stabilizing in wartime. Yet the cumulative effect continues to reproduce gendered expectations about who leads *quietly* and who leads *visibly*.

5.2.9. Passive Resistance

At the same time, my research observation also reveal a quieter, passive resistance to institutional and social pressures. Students rarely articulate overt political or ideological dissent. Instead, non-compliance — when it appears — tends to be subtle, informal, and relational. Examples include pragmatic reinterpretation of academic expectations, quiet workarounds, selective participation, or privately held skepticism regarding top-down directives.

This behavior aligns with long-standing patterns across post-Soviet societies, where formal authority has historically been seen as distant, inconsistent, or extractive. Rather than confronting authority directly — a risky and often futile move — individuals cultivate small zones of autonomy. This form of passive resistance complements the broader pattern of passive adaptation identified throughout the study, reinforcing the persistence of misalignment between leadership practice and institutional recognition.

In the contemporary university context, this may include:

- completing requirements only to the minimally acceptable level
- prioritizing survival, psychological stability, or family obligations over institutional expectations
- maintaining outward conformity while internally disengaging

For some students — particularly men facing uncertainty around conscription — passive resistance becomes a protective mechanism for preserving optionality. For women, it can coexist with extraordinary effort: they may sustain systems publicly while privately resisting emotional

overexposure or future-role pressure. Instead of claiming their seat at the table, being seen as having the same voice and presence, women in my class appear to be more acquiescent and non-confrontational so as to maintain order and the status quo.

Thus, resistance here is not dramatic — it is strategic quietness. It confirms that institutional legitimacy remains conditional and that students cooperate with the system because doing so is useful, not because they fully trust it.

5.2.10. Oligarchic and Governance Spillovers

Finally, these dynamics cannot be separated from broader governance patterns within Ukraine — including the enduring influence of oligarchic networks, patronage structures, and uneven institutional reform. Even as Ukraine undertakes significant anti-corruption and transparency initiatives, citizens continue to experience governance as fragile, personality-driven, and contingent.

Students, therefore, grow up in an environment where:

- power is personalized rather than institutional
- advancement is frequently associated with relationships
- formal rules coexist with informal negotiation
- trust in systems is conditional, adaptive, and pragmatic

These governance spillovers shape educational experience at a subconscious level. Leadership is understood less as a function of competence and public accountability, and more as a position embedded within networks of influence and negotiated obligation. For many women — already navigating gendered constraints — this reinforces the perception that visible leadership is inaccessible, political, and morally ambiguous, whereas community-oriented responsibility is virtuous, safe, and achievable.

At the macro-level, this interplay raises a critical concern for Ukraine's post-conflict reconstruction: if women continue to carry responsibility without corresponding authority, the system risks reproducing inequity at the very moment when inclusive leadership is most needed.

5.3. Implications for Education Policy

Having examined how leadership norms and legitimacy are formed within business education environments, this section considers what these findings imply for higher education policy and institutional design in post-conflict Ukraine.

A central tension emerging from this study is the distinction between recognition and normalization. Within female-majority educational environments, women's leadership behaviors—such as coordination, conflict mediation, continuity-building, and emotional labor—have become normalized. These contributions are expected, relied upon, and embedded in everyday institutional functioning. However, normalization does not equate to recognition. Leadership labor that is normalized often becomes invisible, unmarked as leadership, and disconnected from authority, status, or advancement. As a result, women may carry increasing responsibility without receiving corresponding legitimacy or influence. This distinction is critical in post-conflict contexts, where institutional survival depends on adaptive leadership, yet formal structures lag in acknowledging who is actually sustaining them.

5.4. Pedagogical Challenges in Heterogeneous Gender Belief Systems

One of the most complex pedagogical challenges emerging in Ukrainian business education during wartime is not numerical gender imbalance alone, but ideological heterogeneity among women themselves. Contrary to assumptions that female-majority classrooms naturally produce shared aspirations or unified leadership trajectories, observations from classroom interaction,

group work, and reflective assignments reveal a far more fragmented landscape of beliefs about gender, leadership, and professional ambition.

Within the same classroom environment, two distinct orientations frequently coexist. On one end are women who actively pursue leadership, professional advancement, and international mobility. These students tend to articulate future-oriented goals, demonstrate high engagement in leadership exercises, and view business education as a pathway to influence, autonomy, and institutional participation in Ukraine's reconstruction. Their discourse often aligns with European or global leadership norms emphasizing agency, merit, and visibility.

At the same time, a second group of female students explicitly or implicitly rejects leadership aspiration as a personal objective. These students do not necessarily lack competence or engagement; rather, they frame stability, family orientation, and relational responsibility as more appropriate or desirable life paths. Leadership, in this view, is perceived as burdensome, politically risky, morally ambiguous, or incompatible with wartime realities. Importantly, this orientation is often expressed not as resignation, but as a *deliberate value choice*.

The coexistence of these orientations within the same learning environment produces pedagogical tension. Leadership-focused curricula—particularly those emphasizing assertiveness, public authority, or career acceleration—may be received unevenly. While some students interpret such content as empowering, others experience it as misaligned with their self-concept or life priorities. Resistance, when it emerges, is rarely confrontational. Instead, it appears through disengagement, quiet skepticism, or reframing leadership discussions as irrelevant, unrealistic, or culturally external.

These dynamics are further reinforced through peer normalization of gender hierarchy. In classroom discussions, group projects, and informal interactions, students frequently reproduce

assumptions that leadership remains exceptional rather than expected, positional rather than distributed. Even in female-majority settings, traditional hierarchies may be reinforced socially, with visible leadership aspiration subtly marked as atypical or excessive. In this context, women who pursue leadership may face soft social costs, while those who adopt stabilizing or supportive roles are often rewarded with peer approval and relational trust.

From an institutional perspective, this creates a significant interpretive risk. When students voluntarily accept traditional or non-leadership roles, institutions may mistakenly interpret this acceptance as evidence of equity, choice, or cultural alignment. In reality, such patterns may reflect adaptive behavior within constrained structural conditions, rather than genuine freedom of opportunity. The danger lies in policy paralysis—a situation in which universities and policymakers hesitate to intervene, fearing that leadership development initiatives may appear intrusive or culturally insensitive.

This ambiguity complicates reform efforts. Intervening too aggressively risks alienating students who perceive leadership agendas as externally imposed or misaligned with wartime priorities. Failing to intervene, however, risks entrenching gendered pathways that limit long-term leadership diversification precisely at a moment when Ukraine faces acute labor shortages, institutional rebuilding, and the need for expanded leadership capacity.

As observed in Ukrainian classrooms, the challenge is therefore not one of inclusion versus exclusion, but of recognition versus normalization. Women are present, engaged, and often indispensable to institutional functioning. Yet presence alone does not guarantee leadership development, nor does voluntary role acceptance ensure equitable outcomes. For business education in post-conflict Ukraine, the pedagogical task is not to mandate leadership aspiration,

but to make leadership *legible, plural, and ethically accessible*—without presuming that silence or compliance signals satisfaction or equality.

Key Policy Challenge: Respecting Individual Belief Without Reinforcing Structural Inequality

A central policy dilemma emerging from this study concerns how education systems can respect individual beliefs and value plural life choices without unintentionally reinforcing structural inequality. In the Ukrainian context, this challenge is especially pronounced due to wartime disruption, deep-rooted institutional legacies, and the coexistence of competing gender norms within the same educational spaces.

On the surface, voluntary role acceptance may appear to signal autonomy, cultural alignment, or personal preference. Many female students articulate choices that prioritize family stability, emotional labor, or non-visible forms of contribution over formal leadership aspiration. From a policy perspective, honoring such preferences aligns with principles of individual agency and respect for cultural diversity. However, when these choices occur within environments shaped by long-standing gender hierarchies and constrained opportunity structures, they cannot be interpreted in isolation.

The policy risk lies in conflating *choice* with *equity*. When institutions interpret voluntary withdrawal from leadership pathways as evidence that existing systems are fair or sufficiently inclusive, they risk overlooking the structural conditions that shape those choices in the first place. In such cases, respect for individual belief becomes a rationale for institutional inaction. These dynamic produces what can be described as benign neglect—a state in which inequality persists not because of overt exclusion, but because it is rendered invisible through the language of personal preference.

Designing education systems under these conditions requires a distinction between non-coercion and non-intervention. Respecting individual beliefs does not necessitate neutrality in institutional design. Educational systems can acknowledge diverse aspirations while still actively challenging the structural norms that limit how those aspirations are formed, recognized, and rewarded. The goal is not to prescribe leadership ambition, but to ensure that leadership remains accessible, legible, and institutionally supported for those who wish to pursue it.

In practice, this means avoiding both extremes: mandating leadership participation on the one hand and retreating into cultural relativism on the other. Overemphasis on leadership training can alienate students who experience such agendas as externally imposed or disconnected from wartime realities. Yet absence of intentional leadership development—particularly in female-majority environments—risks reproducing the very hierarchies that post-conflict reconstruction seeks to dismantle.

The Ukrainian case illustrates how policy paralysis can emerge when institutions hesitate to act, uncertain whether intervention constitutes empowerment or intrusion. However, the findings of this study suggest that the greater risk lies not in doing too much, but in doing too little. When leadership labor is normalized but not recognized, and when stability-oriented roles are socially rewarded without corresponding pathways to authority, education systems quietly encode inequality into their everyday practices.

Therefore, the core policy challenge is not how to change what students believe, but how to design institutional environments that expand the range of legitimate outcomes. Respecting belief must coexist with structural accountability. Education systems must ensure that opting out of leadership reflects genuine choice rather than constrained expectation, and that opting in does not carry social or institutional penalties.

In post-conflict Ukraine, where human capital constraints are acute and leadership capacity is a national priority, this balance is not merely a pedagogical concern—it is a reconstruction imperative. Universities, particularly business schools, occupy a pivotal position in shaping how future leaders understand authority, responsibility, and legitimacy. Policy approaches that recognize this dual responsibility—protecting individual agency while actively resisting structural reproduction—are essential to building inclusive, resilient post-war institutions.

5.5. Implications for Workforce Development

While education policy shapes leadership formation at the institutional level, workforce development determines whether these emerging leadership capacities are recognized, rewarded, or constrained once students enter the labor market. The pedagogical tensions observed in female-majority classrooms do not dissipate upon graduation; rather, they are often reproduced and reinforced through workplace structures, promotion practices, and informal norms governing authority and advancement.

One of the most consequential dynamics observed in the Ukrainian labor market is the reinforcement of traditional roles through employer reliance on women's self-selection into supportive or stabilizing positions. In contexts characterized by labor shortages, organizational volatility, and leadership gaps created by conscription or displacement, employers frequently depend on women to provide continuity, coordination, and relational management. These roles are critical to organizational functioning, yet they are often framed as natural extensions of personal disposition rather than as indicators of leadership capacity.

This framing enables organizations to justify unequal promotion trajectories or compensation structures without explicit discrimination. Gender norms—such as assumptions about risk tolerance, availability, or long-term commitment—are invoked implicitly to rationalize why

leadership roles are deferred, provisional, or reserved for others. Because women may voluntarily accept or even prefer supportive roles under conditions of uncertainty, these outcomes appear consensual rather than structural. Over time, this produces a labor market environment in which inequality is sustained through interpretation rather than exclusion. Voluntary withdrawal from leadership pipelines further complicates workforce development strategies. Some women consciously step back from advancement opportunities, particularly when leadership roles are perceived as unstable, politically exposed, or incompatible with wartime caregiving responsibilities. In isolation, such decisions reflect individual agency and adaptive judgment. However, when aggregated across organizations and sectors, they contribute to the narrowing of leadership pipelines and the concentration of authority among a smaller subset of actors.

This creates a fundamental tension between individual agencies and national economic efficiency. From an individual perspective, prioritizing stability, flexibility, or non-visible influence may be rational and even protective. From a national perspective, particularly in a post-conflict economy facing acute human capital constraints, widespread underutilization of leadership capacity represents a structural inefficiency. The labor market may appear functional in the short term, but it risks long-term fragility if leadership development remains contingent on informal selection and traditional expectations.

Crucially, these dynamics mirror those observed in educational settings. Just as leadership labor becomes normalized without recognition in the classroom, it often becomes indispensable yet undervalued in the workplace. Workforce development systems that rely on passive progression—waiting for leadership ambition to self-declare—are ill-suited to contexts shaped by disruption, demographic imbalance, and institutional mistrust.

The findings suggest that effective workforce development in post-conflict Ukraine requires attention not only to skills acquisition and employment placement, but also to how leadership is identified, legitimized, and sustained within organizations. Without such attention, labor markets risk translating educational gains into occupational continuity rather than transformation—preserving stability while postponing structural change.

Emerging Economy Lens: Workforce Utilization as a Structural Constraint

Viewed through an emerging economy lens, the underutilization of educated women represents not merely an equity concern, but a structural constraint on development capacity. In the context of post-conflict, labor markets are expected to perform dual functions: absorbing displaced populations while simultaneously generating leadership, coordination, and institutional rebuilding capacity. When highly educated segments of the workforce are systematically concentrated in supportive or non-decision-making roles, the result is a misalignment between human capital availability and national development needs.

In Ukraine's case, this constraint is particularly pronounced. The feminization of higher education, especially in business and management programs—has produced a cohort of graduates with formal training, wartime adaptive experience, and cross-functional exposure. Yet workforce practices often fail to translate these capabilities into leadership authority or advancement pathways. From a development perspective, this constitutes latent capacity: skills that exist are exercised informally but remain insufficiently mobilized at the institutional level. This pattern stands in direct contradiction to post-conflict labor shortages and reconstruction imperatives. As organizations face shortages of managerial talent, governance expertise, and ethical leadership, the sidelining or under-recognition of qualified women introduces inefficiencies that compound existing structural fragilities. Rather than alleviating labor scarcity,

traditional role allocation reproduces bottlenecks—limiting succession planning, slowing institutional learning, and increasing dependence on a narrow leadership pool.

Importantly, this dynamic does not arise from a lack of participation. Women are present across sectors, engaged in organizational life, and frequently central to operational continuity. The constraint emerges instead from how leadership is defined, distributed, and legitimized. When leadership remains narrowly associated with positional authority rather than functional contribution, emerging economies risk mistaking participation for utilization.

From a reconstruction standpoint, this misalignment carries long-term consequences. Post-conflict recovery depends not only on rebuilding infrastructure, but on expanding the pool of legitimate decision-makers capable of navigating complexity, scarcity, and social trust deficits. Failure to fully integrate educated women into leadership pipelines delays this expansion and perpetuates institutional vulnerability.

In this sense, workforce development becomes a strategic development issue rather than a neutral labor market process. Recognizing and mobilizing existing leadership capacity—particularly among educated women—is not about accelerating social change for its own sake, but about aligning human capital deployment with reconstruction realities. In emerging economies recovering from conflict, the cost of underutilization is not abstract; it is borne in slower recovery, weaker institutions, and missed opportunities for durable transformation.

5.6. Gender, Leadership, and Reconstruction

The findings of this study highlight a complex intersection between gender norms, leadership formation, and the broader process of national reconstruction. While wartime disruption has created conditions that expand women's participation in educational and professional environments, these changes coexist with enduring cultural frameworks that continue to shape

perceptions of leadership, family roles, and social responsibility. Understanding this tension is essential for interpreting the long-term implications of gender imbalance within Ukrainian business education and the country's post-conflict recovery trajectory. However, these findings also suggest the risk of underutilization of women's leadership potential. Without corresponding institutional adaptation, the expansion of women's participation may not fully translate into leadership recognition or advancement, limiting both individual opportunity and broader economic recovery outcomes.

From this perspective, the findings extend beyond gender participation alone and point to a broader structural challenge: the alignment of leadership practice with institutional recognition. Without such alignment, expanded participation may not translate into durable leadership inclusion, reinforcing the persistence of a legitimacy gap in Ukraine's emerging leadership pipeline.

5.6.1. Cultural Resistance to Transformative Gender Models

Despite the numerical dominance of women in many business and social-science classrooms, the emergence of female-majority learning environments does not automatically translate into widespread endorsement of transformative gender models. Observations from classroom interaction, reflective assignments, and practitioner narratives indicate that traditional conceptions of family structure, authority, and leadership remain influential across segments of the student population.

For many students, particularly those socialized within post-Soviet institutional contexts, traditional family and leadership structures continue to carry strong normative legitimacy. Leadership roles are often perceived as hierarchical, positional, and historically masculine, while women's contributions are more readily associated with stability, coordination, and relational

responsibility. These perceptions do not necessarily reflect hostility toward women in leadership; rather, they reveal deeply embedded expectations about how authority should be exercised and by whom.

Another factor shaping these attitudes is the perception that certain gender-equality frameworks originate externally rather than organically within Ukrainian society. Among some students, discourses emphasizing gender parity, diversity initiatives, or institutional equity reforms are occasionally interpreted as Western policy imports linked to European integration agendas.

When reforms are perceived in this way, they may generate ambivalence rather than enthusiasm, even among individuals who personally support women's professional advancement.

Importantly, this ambivalence is not limited to male respondents. Some female students expressed limited resonance with formal gender-equity frameworks, instead framing professional success in terms of individual competence, resilience, or personal choice rather than structural transformation. In these cases, leadership aspiration coexists with a preference for maintaining familiar social arrangements regarding family roles and authority structures.

These dynamics suggest that wartime shifts in responsibility do not automatically produce lasting normative change. While women have assumed expanded roles across educational and professional settings during the conflict, there remains a risk that these changes could partially recede once wartime necessity diminishes. If leadership expansion is interpreted primarily as a temporary adaptation to crisis conditions rather than as a legitimate structural transformation, the post-conflict period could see a gradual reassertion of traditional expectations.

5.6.2. Tension Between Cultural Continuity and Developmental Necessity

At the same time, Ukraine's post-conflict reconstruction will require substantial expansion of its leadership and professional capacity. Rebuilding national infrastructure, restoring economic

activity, and integrating more deeply with European markets will demand the mobilization of the country's full human capital base. In this context, gender imbalance within educational institutions presents both a challenge and an opportunity.

Post-conflict recovery historically depends on the effective utilization of available talent across the entire population. Societies emerging from conflict frequently face labor shortages, institutional disruption, and rapid demands for managerial and entrepreneurial leadership. Under such conditions, expanding the leadership pool becomes a practical necessity rather than solely a normative aspiration.

For Ukraine, where wartime displacement and demographic disruption have reduced the available workforce, maximizing human capital utilization will be particularly important.

Women who currently dominate university classrooms represent a significant portion of the country's emerging professional and managerial cohort. Their educational experiences, leadership development opportunities, and career trajectories will therefore play a central role in shaping the country's economic recovery.

However, the persistence of traditional gender expectations may complicate this process. When leadership remains symbolically associated with male authority, even female-majority educational environments may not automatically translate into broader institutional transformation. In practical terms, traditional gender acceptance could conflict with reconstruction needs in several ways. First, it may slow the pace at which women move into senior leadership roles despite possessing the necessary qualifications. Second, it may limit the expansion of leadership pipelines at a moment when organizations require new sources of managerial capacity. Third, it may delay institutional modernization in sectors attempting to align with European governance and corporate standards.

These dynamics create a central dilemma for policymakers, educators, and institutional leaders engaged in Ukraine's reconstruction process. On one hand, respecting cultural autonomy and existing social values remains essential for maintaining legitimacy and social cohesion. Attempts to impose externally defined gender models without sensitivity to local context risk generating resistance or disengagement. On the other hand, structural inequities that limit access to leadership roles may constrain the country's ability to mobilize its full human capital potential during reconstruction.

Navigating this tension requires a balanced approach that neither dismisses cultural continuity nor ignores developmental necessity. Higher education institutions—particularly business schools—may play a critical role in mediating this balance. By fostering leadership development, encouraging inclusive professional norms, and creating environments where diverse leadership models can emerge organically, universities can contribute to gradual institutional adaptation without framing change as externally imposed.

In this sense, gender dynamics within Ukrainian business education should not be interpreted simply as a question of representation. Rather, they represent a broader negotiation between cultural identity, institutional evolution, and the practical demands of rebuilding a nation after conflict. The long-term trajectory of Ukraine's leadership landscape will depend not only on who occupies positions of authority, but also on how societies reconcile deeply rooted cultural traditions with the developmental imperatives of post-conflict recovery.

5.7. Practice-Informed Takeaways for Post-Conflict Business Education

This section steps back from analysis to reflect on what the findings of this study *mean in practice* for business education in post-conflict settings. Rather than offering formal

recommendations or policy prescriptions, it highlights several key takeaways that emerged consistently from student experiences, classroom observation, and institutional context.

Because Ukraine is still at war and its reconstruction path remains uncertain, the goal here is not to propose fixed solutions. Instead, this section identifies patterns worth paying attention to as educators and institutions navigate gender imbalance, leadership development, and recovery.

5.7.1. What the Findings Suggest About Educational Design

Institutions should recognize that treating all students identically does not produce equitable or effective outcomes. In classrooms where women make up the overwhelming majority, existing leadership models often remain unchanged—even though the student population has fundamentally shifted.

Female students frequently take on organizing, coordinating, and emotionally supportive roles that keep learning environments functioning during wartime. These contributions are essential and should be explicitly recognized and rewarded as leadership. As a result, women carry responsibility without gaining corresponding authority or recognition.

Another pattern concerns the difference between doing leadership work and being seen as a leader. Many women demonstrate leadership behaviors daily, but do not view themselves—or are not viewed by others—as leaders in the traditional sense. When leadership is defined narrowly as visibility, assertiveness, or formal authority, much of the leadership already happening in these classrooms remains invisible.

Finally, leadership education should not be designed in isolation from historical and institutional context. Students' expectations are shaped by post-Soviet institutional legacies, war-related uncertainty, and limited trust in systems. Educational designs that assume stable institutions or merit-based advancement often feel disconnected from students' lived reality.

5.7.2. What This Means for Leadership Development

Leadership development programs should be designed to start from where students actually are—not where ideal models assume they should be.

Many students already value collaboration, empathy, fairness, and inclusion, but they do not always recognize these qualities as leadership. These behaviors should be made visible—through reflection, discussion, and feedback—to ensure students recognize that leadership is not limited to hierarchy or position.

At the same time, students do not all relate to leadership in the same way. Some women actively seek leadership roles, while others consciously prefer stability, family focus, or behind-the-scenes contribution. Treating leadership as an obligation rather than an option risks creating resistance or disengagement.

What emerges from the findings is the importance of multiple leadership pathways—approaches that respect individual agency while still expanding what leadership can look like in practice.

5.7.3. Practical Considerations Emerging from the Study

Institutions should address several recurring practical considerations.

First, mentorship matters—especially informal and peer-based mentorship. In contexts where authority is often distrusted or politicized, relationships play a central role in how leadership confidence develops.

Second, business education that ignores power, governance, and institutional realities leaves students underprepared. Students are already navigating corruption risk, weak institutions, and informal networks. Acknowledging these realities openly helps align education with real-world conditions rather than idealized models.

Third, institutions must anticipate and prepare for future reintegration challenges. When men return from conscription or displacement, leadership norms and gender dynamics may shift again. Preparing students for this transition—rather than assuming a smooth return to pre-war norms—can reduce tension and regression.

These are not “best practices” in a universal sense. They are lessons emerging from this specific context, offered to inform reflection rather than dictate action.

5.8. Practical Recommendations for Institutional Adaptation

To translate these findings into policy-relevant action, several targeted interventions should be implemented.

First, education policy should formally recognize and institutionalize emergent leadership dynamics within female-majority cohorts. This includes integrating leadership development frameworks that move beyond traditional hierarchical models and instead emphasize collaborative, adaptive, and situational leadership.

Second, national education and labor policies must anticipate the reintegration of returning male populations. Structured transition programs must be developed to support re-entry into academic and professional environments that have undergone demographic and cultural transformation.

Without such preparation, reintegration will likely produce friction, disengagement, or resistance to evolving leadership norms.

Third, policymakers should actively align workforce development initiatives with gender-responsive recovery strategies. This includes targeted funding for female leadership programs, entrepreneurship initiatives, and international exchange opportunities that accelerate leadership readiness among women positioned to contribute to reconstruction.

Finally, donor and international development programs should explicitly incorporate higher education as a strategic pillar of post-conflict reconstruction. Leadership formation within universities represents a critical, yet under-leveraged, component of long-term economic recovery.

5.8.1. Institutional Adaptation

Institutions should adapt leadership development frameworks to reflect the realities of female-majority cohorts and the increasing prevalence of informal leadership roles within business education. Traditional models that prioritize hierarchical authority and formal titles should be complemented by mechanisms that recognize coordination, initiative, and collaborative leadership as legitimate forms of leadership practice. This may include integrating leadership reflection components into coursework, incorporating peer and faculty-based leadership assessments, and embedding leadership development more explicitly across the curriculum rather than confining it to standalone courses.

In addition, universities should expand access to external professional and leadership development opportunities. Participation in international conferences, academic symposiums, externships, and exchange programs can provide students—particularly women—with exposure to diverse leadership environments, professional networks, and global standards of practice. These experiences are especially valuable in post-conflict contexts, where local institutional structures may lag behind emerging leadership dynamics.

Institutions should also formalize mentorship structures both within and outside the university. Internal mentorship programs can connect students with faculty and senior peers, while external mentorship initiatives can link students to industry professionals, alumni networks, and international partners. Such programs can help bridge the gap between leadership practice and

recognition by providing guidance, validation, and access to professional pathways that reinforce leadership identity and advancement.

These institutional adjustments are critical to ensuring that leadership development keeps pace with the rapid demographic and social changes shaping Ukraine's post-conflict educational environment.

5.8.2. Reintegration of Male Students

Institutions should proactively design structured reintegration pathways for male students returning from military service, displacement, or prolonged absence from formal education.

These pathways should extend beyond technical or academic re-skilling to address the social, psychological, and identity-related challenges associated with re-entry into transformed educational environments. In many cases, returning students will encounter classrooms that are not only academically advanced but also socially and demographically different from those they previously experienced.

To support this transition, universities should implement targeted support structures, including facilitated peer groups, counseling services, and reintegration workshops that provide space for reflection, adjustment, and dialogue. These mechanisms can help address potential disorientation, mitigate feelings of alienation, and support the reconstruction of academic and professional identity in a context where leadership roles and peer dynamics may have shifted. Institutions should also ensure that reintegration frameworks are designed to promote inclusion rather than hierarchy restoration. Structured team-based learning, mixed-cohort collaboration, and guided leadership exercises can help returning male students integrate into existing classroom dynamics without displacing the leadership roles already assumed by female peers.

The goal is not to revert to pre-war norms, but to foster adaptive, collaborative leadership models that reflect the realities of post-conflict transformation.

Finally, sufficient institutional scaffolding must be in place to balance support with accountability. While returning students may require flexibility and targeted resources, expectations regarding participation, collaboration, and professional development should remain consistent to ensure equitable learning environments. Well-designed reintegration systems can therefore reduce friction, support psychological adjustment, and strengthen long-term leadership capacity across both returning and continuing student populations.

5.8.3. Policy-Level Responses

Policymakers should align higher education reform and workforce development strategies with the demographic realities produced by wartime disruption. The emergence of female-majority cohorts in business education is not a temporary anomaly but a structural shift that will shape Ukraine's leadership pipeline in the coming decade. As such, national education policy should explicitly incorporate gender-responsive leadership development, including targeted funding for leadership programs, entrepreneurship initiatives, and international exchange opportunities that accelerate the transition of female students into managerial and decision-making roles.

At the same time, policy frameworks must anticipate the reintegration of returning male populations into both educational institutions and the workforce. This requires coordinated planning across ministries responsible for education, labor, and social policy to ensure that re-entry pathways are structured, supported, and aligned with evolving workplace dynamics.

Without such coordination, reintegration may produce friction between pre-war expectations and post-war realities, potentially slowing both institutional adaptation and economic recovery.

International donors and development agencies should also recognize higher education as a strategic pillar of post-conflict reconstruction. While current recovery efforts often prioritize infrastructure and macroeconomic stabilization, the formation of human capital—particularly leadership capacity within business and management fields—remains underleveraged. Funding mechanisms should therefore support university-based leadership development programs, mentorship networks, and global exposure initiatives that strengthen Ukraine’s future managerial class.

Finally, policymakers should promote stronger alignment between universities and industry through public-private partnerships that facilitate internships, applied learning opportunities, and early-career leadership pathways. Such alignment ensures that educational outputs reflect labor market needs while accelerating the integration of graduates into sectors critical to reconstruction. In this context, business education should be viewed not only as an academic function, but as a strategic instrument of national recovery and institutional transformation. Failure to align education policy with these emerging dynamics risks underutilizing a critical segment of Ukraine’s future leadership capacity while creating avoidable friction during post-war reintegration.

5.8.4. Classroom-Level Interventions

Faculty should adapt classroom practices to reflect shifting participation dynamics and the emergence of informal leadership within female-majority cohorts. Traditional assumptions about balanced participation and leadership distribution may no longer hold in post-conflict educational settings. As such, instructors should take a more intentional role in identifying, structuring, and reinforcing leadership behaviors within group-based learning environments.

One effective approach is the implementation of structured, rotating leadership roles within team assignments. By assigning responsibility for coordination, communication, and decision-making across different students, instructors can ensure that leadership opportunities are both distributed and visible. This not only reinforces leadership development but also helps normalize diverse leadership styles, particularly those that emphasize collaboration, facilitation, and adaptability. Faculty should also incorporate guided reflection into coursework, prompting students to examine how leadership emerges within teams and how it is recognized—or overlooked—by peers. Reflection exercises can include questions such as who assumed leadership roles, how decisions were made, and whether leadership contributions aligned with formal recognition. These activities help make implicit leadership dynamics explicit, directly addressing the Leadership Legitimacy Gap identified in this study.

In addition, classroom design should encourage mixed-perspective collaboration and inclusive dialogue. Structured discussions, case-based learning, and small-group activities can be used to engage students with differing viewpoints, particularly on topics related to leadership, authority, and social norms. Such approaches are especially important in environments where gendered differences in normative readiness may influence participation and interpretation.

Finally, instructors should remain attentive to the broader psychosocial context in which students are learning. Flexibility in assignment structure, awareness of external stressors, and the integration of supportive yet academically rigorous expectations can help sustain engagement without lowering standards. In post-conflict environments, effective teaching requires not only content delivery, but also the deliberate cultivation of inclusive, resilient, and leadership-oriented learning spaces.

5.8.5. Contextual Boundaries of Recommendations

These recommendations are grounded in the specific institutional, cultural, and wartime conditions observed in Ukraine. While not universally prescriptive, they offer contextually informed guidance for educators, policymakers, and development practitioners operating in similar post-conflict environments. Their relevance lies in aligning leadership development, educational design, and institutional adaptation with the realities of demographic disruption and evolving social norms.

At the same time, the applicability of these recommendations depends on local institutional capacity, cultural context, and the pace of post-conflict recovery. As such, they should be adapted rather than adopted wholesale, with careful consideration given to existing governance structures, educational systems, and labor market conditions. The following section synthesizes these findings and recommendations, situating them within the broader context of leadership development and post-conflict institutional transformation.

5.9. Chapter Synthesis

The preceding sections of Chapter 5 examined practitioner perspectives on leadership development, gender dynamics, and institutional expectations within the context of wartime higher education in Ukraine. Through qualitative analysis of participant narratives and classroom observations, several recurring patterns emerged regarding how leadership behaviors are performed, interpreted, and recognized among emerging professionals. These observations reveal the complex interaction between wartime demographic disruption, evolving participation patterns in higher education, and longstanding institutional expectations regarding authority and leadership identity.

One of the most visible changes identified in the analysis is the increasing presence of women in roles traditionally associated with coordination, decision-making, and organizational stability.

Participants frequently described situations in which women assumed responsibilities that extended beyond formal academic expectations, often providing structure, continuity, and collaborative leadership within classroom and professional environments. Tetiana, reflecting on leadership dynamics emerging during the war, observed that “a new female leadership is actively developing in the country, but it is not leadership of choice—it is leadership of survival.”

Her observation captures the broader context in which many leadership behaviors are emerging: a wartime environment in which demographic shifts and labor shortages have accelerated changes in participation across both educational and professional institutions.

At the same time, the analysis suggests that while leadership responsibilities are expanding, institutional recognition of those responsibilities often evolves more slowly. Participants frequently described leadership behaviors that were carried out through informal coordination, peer support, and organizational facilitation rather than through formally recognized authority positions. Kateryna, for example, noted that “women graduating from modern educational programs bring new leadership models with them. They often emphasize democratic approaches, focus on team support, and develop subordinates individually.” These perspectives suggest that emerging leadership practices may be evolving more rapidly than the institutional frameworks traditionally used to recognize leadership authority.

The broader socio-economic context further shapes these dynamics. Wartime mobilization and migration have significantly altered the demographic composition of both educational institutions and the labor market, creating new leadership demands across multiple sectors of the economy. Participants described a growing need for individuals capable of assuming organizational responsibility in environments characterized by uncertainty, labor shortages, and rapid institutional adaptation. Volodymyr, a graduating MBA student, illustrated the scale of

these changes by noting that “for the first time, women in Ukraine are working as miners, heavy equipment operators, and long-haul truck drivers. These shifts will have long-term effects on workplace culture.” Such developments highlight the broader structural transformation occurring within Ukraine’s workforce and underscore the potential long-term implications of wartime demographic change.

Taken together, these observations suggest that wartime disruption has altered patterns of participation and responsibility within both educational and organizational environments, while many institutional expectations regarding leadership recognition remain structurally unchanged. The synthesis presented in this section integrates the empirical observations and interpretive themes developed earlier in the chapter in order to clarify the broader implications of these dynamics for leadership formation, institutional adaptation, and post-conflict reconstruction. The analysis proceeds by first reconnecting the study’s core observations before integrating the three interpretive themes identified in the findings. It then examines the structural tension between expanding leadership responsibilities and institutional recognition—conceptualized in this study as the *Leadership Legitimacy Gap*—and considers the implications of these dynamics for educational institutions and organizational environments operating within post-conflict contexts. Taken together, these findings position the concept as a defining feature of leadership formation in post-conflict environments. The Ukrainian case demonstrates that demographic disruption alone does not produce structural transformation; rather, transformation depends on the extent to which institutional systems adapt to recognize and legitimize emerging forms of leadership. This study therefore contributes to post-conflict reconstruction and leadership development scholarship by linking demographic change to institutional adaptation, highlighting the conditions under which expanded participation can translate into durable leadership inclusion.

5.9.1. Reconnecting the Study's Core Observations

The preceding analysis identified several recurring patterns regarding leadership behaviors, classroom participation, and gender dynamics within Ukrainian business education during wartime. While the earlier sections of this chapter examined these dynamics through interpretive themes and participant narratives, it is useful to briefly reconnect the discussion to the core empirical observations that emerged across classroom interactions and practitioner perspectives. One of the most consistent observations was the persistent gender imbalance within business classrooms. Wartime mobilization, migration, and broader demographic disruptions have significantly altered the composition of the student population, often resulting in women representing a substantial majority in many academic settings. Participants frequently described this imbalance not only as a demographic consequence of the war but also as a factor influencing classroom dynamics, collaboration patterns, and leadership participation within group work and project-based learning environments.

Within these settings, women frequently assumed coordination, organizational, and stabilizing roles during collaborative activities. Participants described situations in which female students facilitated communication among team members, organized project responsibilities, and maintained continuity when group members faced disruptions related to wartime conditions. These contributions often reflected leadership behaviors in practice, yet they were not always explicitly recognized as leadership within traditional frameworks that associate authority with formal titles or hierarchical roles.

At the same time, participant responses revealed mixed attitudes toward evolving gender norms and leadership expectations. While some respondents viewed the increased presence of women in leadership and decision-making roles as a necessary adaptation to wartime realities, others

expressed concerns about how shifts in team composition might influence decision-making styles and organizational outcomes. For example, Yulia, a 2nd year MBA student, suggested that “if predominantly female teams are making decisions, they might prioritize strategies without taking a risk, which could impact company innovation and growth.”

Such perspectives illustrate that attitudes toward changing gender dynamics remain varied, reflecting broader societal debates regarding leadership styles, risk-taking, and organizational performance.

These observations also reflect the institutional context in which these dynamics unfold. Many of the expectations surrounding authority, leadership recognition, and organizational hierarchy remain shaped by historical institutional norms inherited from the post-Soviet period, even as wartime disruption accelerates changes in participation and responsibility. As a result, the expansion of leadership behaviors among emerging professionals often occurs within institutional structures that have not yet fully adapted to these shifts.

Taken together, these findings position the *Leadership Legitimacy Gap* as a defining feature of leadership formation in post-conflict environments. The Ukrainian case demonstrates that demographic disruption alone does not produce structural transformation; rather, transformation depends on the extent to which institutional systems adapt to recognize and legitimize emerging forms of leadership. This study therefore contributes to post-conflict reconstruction and leadership development scholarship by linking demographic change to institutional adaptation, highlighting the conditions under which expanded participation can translate into durable leadership inclusion.

This study therefore contributes to post-conflict reconstruction and leadership development scholarship by demonstrating that demographic disruption alone does not produce institutional

transformation; rather, transformation depends on how leadership is recognized, legitimized, and integrated within evolving institutional systems—a dynamic captured in the *Leadership Legitimacy Gap*.

5.9.2. Integration of the Three Interpretative Themes

The observations described in the preceding section reveal patterns that extend beyond isolated classroom dynamics. When considered collectively, the findings suggest three interpretive themes that help explain how leadership behaviors are emerging and evolving within wartime Ukrainian educational environments. These themes—leadership without recognition, gendered moral labor and voluntary role acceptance, and normative readiness for institutional change—provide an interpretive framework for understanding how expanding responsibilities intersect with established institutional expectations regarding authority and leadership legitimacy.

The first theme, leadership without recognition, reflects the frequent gap between the performance of leadership behaviors and the formal acknowledgement of those behaviors as leadership. Participants repeatedly described situations in which women organized team activities, facilitated collaboration, and maintained group continuity during academic projects. These actions often involved coordinating responsibilities, mediating disagreements, and ensuring that work progressed despite disruptions associated with wartime conditions. While such activities represent clear examples of leadership in practice, they were not always interpreted by participants as leadership roles in a formal sense. Instead, these contributions were frequently framed as cooperation, responsibility, or teamwork rather than as expressions of authority or leadership capacity. This pattern suggests that leadership behaviors may be evolving more rapidly than the institutional frameworks traditionally used to recognize and define leadership roles.

The second theme, gendered moral labor and voluntary role acceptance, reflects the tendency for women to assume stabilizing and organizational responsibilities within group environments.

Participants frequently described female students taking on roles that involved maintaining communication, supporting team cohesion, and ensuring that collaborative tasks were completed successfully. These activities often required emotional and relational labor that extended beyond formal academic requirements. Importantly, such responsibilities were not always imposed externally but were frequently accepted voluntarily by participants who viewed these roles as necessary for maintaining group effectiveness. At the same time, this pattern raises questions about how leadership contributions are interpreted and valued, particularly when they emerge through relational coordination rather than through formal authority structures.

The third theme, normative readiness for institutional change, captures the uneven attitudes expressed by participants toward evolving gender norms and leadership expectations. While many respondents acknowledged the growing presence of women in leadership and decision-making roles, perspectives differed regarding the implications of these changes for organizational performance and institutional development. Some participants viewed these shifts as a natural and constructive adaptation to wartime realities, while others expressed reservations regarding how changing team compositions might influence leadership styles or strategic decision-making. As Yulia observed, “if predominantly female teams are making decisions, they might prioritize strategies without taking a risk, which could impact company innovation and growth.” Such perspectives illustrate that while institutional environments are adapting to new demographic realities, normative attitudes toward leadership and authority continue to evolve unevenly across individuals and contexts.

When considered together, these themes reveal an important structural tension that underlies many of the observations described throughout this chapter. Wartime disruption has expanded the responsibilities undertaken by emerging professionals—particularly women—within both educational and organizational environments. However, the institutional mechanisms used to recognize leadership authority and legitimacy have adapted more slowly. As a result, leadership behaviors may become increasingly visible in practice even as formal recognition structures remain anchored in historically established expectations. This tension forms the basis of what this study conceptualizes as the *Leadership Legitimacy Gap*, a structural condition in which expanding responsibility and demonstrated leadership capacity outpace the institutional recognition of those roles. The following section examines this dynamic in greater detail and considers its broader implications for leadership formation and institutional adaptation in post-conflict contexts.

5.9.3. The Leadership Legitimacy Gap

The integration of the interpretive themes discussed in the preceding section reveals a structural tension that underlies many of the observations identified throughout this study. While wartime disruption has expanded the responsibilities undertaken by emerging professionals—particularly women—within both educational and organizational environments, the institutional mechanisms used to recognize leadership authority have adapted more slowly. As a result, a gap emerges between the performance of leadership responsibilities and the formal recognition of those roles within institutional structures.

This study conceptualizes this dynamic as the *Leadership Legitimacy Gap*. The term refers to a condition in which individuals assume increasing responsibility for coordination, decision-making, and organizational stability while institutional recognition mechanisms remain anchored

in historically established expectations regarding authority and leadership identity. In such environments, leadership is frequently performed through practice rather than formally acknowledged through titles, status, or institutional authority. In analytical terms, this concept emerges when three conditions occur simultaneously: leadership responsibilities expand due to institutional necessity, authority structures remain anchored in historically established recognition systems, and emerging professionals perform leadership functions without corresponding formal validation.

Participants repeatedly described situations in which women facilitated group organization, resolved conflicts, and ensured the continuity of collaborative work, yet these contributions were often interpreted as routine cooperation rather than as expressions of leadership.

The emergence of this gap is closely linked to the broader demographic disruptions caused by the war. Mobilization, migration, and workforce shortages have created circumstances in which individuals must assume responsibilities earlier and more frequently than would typically occur under stable institutional conditions. Participants described the resulting strain on organizational capacity and leadership pipelines. As Oleks, a graduating MBA student noted, “the outflow of highly paid professionals reduces the availability of management and technical staff,” limiting the availability of experienced leaders within many sectors of the economy. In such contexts, emerging professionals are often required to assume leadership functions informally in order to sustain organizational operations.

At the same time, institutional expectations regarding leadership authority remain influenced by historical organizational norms. Many of the authority structures within Ukrainian institutions—including universities and private sector organizations—continue to reflect hierarchical leadership models that developed during earlier institutional periods. These frameworks tend to

associate leadership legitimacy with formal titles, seniority, or established authority rather than with collaborative coordination or relational leadership practices. As a result, the forms of leadership that emerge through wartime adaptation may not always align with the institutional models used to define and recognize leadership roles.

The *Leadership Legitimacy Gap* therefore represents more than a temporary organizational challenge. It reflects a broader institutional tension in which evolving leadership practices intersect with historically embedded expectations regarding authority and legitimacy. While wartime necessity accelerates the redistribution of responsibilities among emerging professionals, institutional recognition structures often adjust more gradually. The result is an environment in which leadership capacity expands in practice even as formal recognition remains uneven or delayed.

Understanding this gap is critical for interpreting the broader implications of leadership formation in post-conflict environments. If leadership responsibilities continue to expand without corresponding institutional recognition, organizations may experience persistent tensions between demonstrated capability and formal authority. Conversely, if institutions adapt their recognition mechanisms to reflect evolving leadership practices, emerging professionals may play a central role in shaping more inclusive and adaptive leadership models during the reconstruction period. The *Leadership Legitimacy Gap* therefore represents a transitional institutional condition in which leadership practice evolves faster than the structures used to define and legitimize leadership authority. While the concept emerges most visibly within classroom and early professional environments, the dynamics it reflects are not limited to educational settings. Similar tensions between expanding leadership responsibilities and slower institutional adaptation are likely to appear across organizations and institutions participating in

Ukraine's broader reconstruction process.

5.9.4. Gender Dynamics in Post-Conflict Reconstruction

This section examines the tension between the numerical presence of women in wartime classrooms and the continued normative legitimacy of traditional leadership expectations within Ukrainian society. While female participation in business education has expanded dramatically during the war, the cultural frameworks that define legitimate leadership authority remain more closely aligned with historically male leadership models. This tension produces a form of cultural continuity that slows the institutional recognition of emerging leadership behaviors.

Participation Versus Utilization

A central finding of this study is the distinction between participation and utilization. Women currently represent the majority of students in many Ukrainian business classrooms due to wartime conscription patterns and male outmigration. However, numerical presence alone does not automatically translate into recognized leadership authority.

Within classroom projects and group work, women frequently assumed organizational roles such as coordinating tasks, facilitating communication, and maintaining group cohesion. These activities were essential to project completion and often required significant emotional and organizational labor. Yet these contributions were rarely framed by students themselves as leadership.

Instead, such behaviors became normalized expectations rather than formally acknowledged authority roles. This dynamic reflects what may be described as an invisible labor trap, in which leadership behaviors are relied upon but not institutionally recognized. The result is a paradox in which leadership capacity expands while formal leadership recognition remains constrained.

From a reconstruction perspective, this dynamic also presents a bottleneck risk. Ukraine's post-

war recovery will require a rapid expansion of managerial and organizational leadership across both public and private sectors. If institutions continue to rely primarily on traditional leadership pools while underutilizing emerging talent within female-majority educational cohorts, the reconstruction process may face unnecessary capacity constraints.

Perceptions of Western Institutional Influence

Another theme emerging from the data concerns the perception that gender equality discourse is sometimes viewed as externally driven rather than organically developed within Ukrainian society.

Several students framed gender parity discussions as reflecting broader Western or European institutional frameworks associated with EU integration, international development organizations, or global policy initiatives. In these cases, resistance did not necessarily stem from rejection of women's participation itself, but from skepticism toward perceived external normative pressure.

This perception reinforces the broader pattern identified in this study, in which leadership practice outpaces institutional recognition. Leadership behaviors within educational environments are evolving rapidly in response to wartime conditions, yet institutional narratives explaining these changes are sometimes framed in ways that students interpret as externally imposed rather than domestically grounded.

Addressing this legitimacy gap may therefore require reframing leadership transformation not primarily as a diversity initiative but as a functional necessity for national resilience and economic recovery. When connected to Ukraine's own wartime experience and reconstruction needs, leadership diversification may be perceived less as a foreign policy import and more as a practical response to national circumstances.

Passive Resistance and Adaptive Uncertainty

Resistance to changing leadership norms within the classroom rarely appeared as overt opposition. Instead, it often manifested in more subtle forms such as hesitation, skepticism, or strategic quietness during discussions.

For some male students, this passive resistance may function as a protective mechanism during a period of profound uncertainty. Conscription policies and the broader wartime environment create an unstable social horizon for many young men. In such contexts, maintaining familiar leadership expectations may provide a sense of psychological continuity and preserved status within an otherwise unpredictable environment.

Interestingly, a degree of resistance also appeared among some female students. While women often demonstrated leadership capacity in collaborative settings, not all expressed a desire to translate these experiences into formal leadership aspirations. Some participants described leadership roles as politically exposed, socially demanding, or incompatible with the stability they sought during wartime.

These responses highlight an important finding of this research: women within wartime educational environments do not constitute a monolithic group with uniform leadership ambitions. Instead, their perspectives reflect ideological heterogeneity, shaped by personal circumstances, risk tolerance, and future expectations.

Temporal Dynamics of Cultural Adaptation

The persistence of cultural continuity during wartime should not necessarily be interpreted as institutional stagnation. Rather, it may reflect the temporal dynamics described in the study's T-model of post-conflict social adaptation.

During the T–X wartime phase, societies often prioritize stability and continuity as coping

mechanisms under extreme stress. In this phase, institutional norms may evolve more slowly than practical behaviors.

More durable social transformations tend to consolidate during the T+3 to T+10 post-conflict period, when reconstruction efforts create new institutional demands and organizational opportunities. It is during this stage that emerging leadership practices may begin to solidify into accepted social norms.

Within this framework, the wartime business classroom can be understood as a transitional microcosm in which students experiment with new forms of collaboration, leadership, and authority before these patterns are fully institutionalized in the broader economy.

The *Leadership Legitimacy Gap* observed in wartime Ukrainian business education illustrates how demographic shocks can accelerate the emergence of leadership practice faster than institutions adapt their mechanisms for recognizing and legitimizing authority.

If educational institutions recognize and cultivate this emerging leadership capacity, they may accelerate Ukraine's transition from adaptive wartime leadership to durable post-conflict leadership legitimacy.

5.9.5. Educational Institutions as Transitional Spaces

The empirical setting of this study—the business classroom—provides a particularly revealing vantage point for examining how leadership identities emerge during periods of institutional transition. Across both undergraduate and master's-level programs, universities are not simply sites for acquiring technical knowledge; they are environments in which students interpret social expectations, negotiate authority, and develop assumptions about leadership legitimacy. In wartime Ukraine, these processes become especially visible as demographic disruption reshapes classroom composition and participation patterns, creating learning environments in which

traditional leadership expectations are increasingly questioned and renegotiated.

Within the female-majority classrooms observed in this study, leadership behaviors frequently emerged through informal coordination, peer support, and responsibility for maintaining group cohesion. Students who assumed these roles were not always formally designated as leaders, yet their actions reflected competencies associated with managerial authority, including problem-solving, communication, and organizational coordination. These interactions illustrate how leadership identity can develop through practice even when institutional structures do not explicitly recognize or reward those behaviors.

Educational institutions therefore function as transitional spaces in which evolving social norms intersect with existing institutional frameworks. While curricular structures and formal hierarchies often reflect legacy assumptions about authority and leadership pathways, everyday classroom interactions increasingly reflect more collaborative and distributed forms of leadership emerging from demographic change and wartime disruption. The classroom becomes a microcosm in which emerging norms are tested before they are fully institutionalized in professional and organizational environments.

In this sense, the classroom observations presented in this study offer early indications of how leadership legitimacy may evolve in Ukraine's post-conflict reconstruction. Universities do not merely transmit professional skills; they also shape the expectations through which future leaders interpret authority, responsibility, and organizational participation. In post-conflict environments, universities often function as early arenas in which evolving leadership norms emerge and are tested before they are fully institutionalized within organizations and governance structures. As demographic shifts continue to influence higher education, these institutional environments may play an important role in shaping the next generation of Ukraine's business leadership.

5.9.6. Implications Across Institutional Contexts

While the empirical focus of this study centers on business classrooms within Ukrainian universities, the dynamics observed in these environments may also offer insight into how leadership authority evolves within organizations during periods of post-conflict transition. Educational institutions represent one of the first social arenas in which demographic shifts, evolving gender expectations, and emerging leadership practices intersect. As such, the leadership behaviors observed within classrooms may foreshadow similar patterns within professional and organizational contexts as Ukraine's reconstruction unfolds.

From an educational perspective, these findings suggest the need to reconsider how leadership development is conceptualized and practiced within business education. Traditional leadership education often emphasizes hierarchical authority, formal managerial roles, and clearly defined organizational structures. However, the classroom dynamics described in this study indicate that leadership frequently emerges through informal coordination, peer facilitation, and responsibility for maintaining collaborative learning environments. Students who assume these roles may not hold formal authority, yet their actions demonstrate competencies commonly associated with organizational leadership, including communication, initiative, conflict mediation, and group coordination. Recognizing these forms of informal leadership may require educators to expand how leadership competencies are identified, practiced, and evaluated within business curricula. Preparing students to operate in environments characterized by institutional uncertainty and evolving authority structures may therefore become an increasingly important component of leadership education in post-conflict settings.

The findings also carry implications for the organizations that will employ the next generation of Ukrainian professionals. As demographic disruptions reshape educational participation and

career pathways, emerging professionals may assume leadership responsibilities earlier than anticipated. In such contexts, responsibility may expand more rapidly than formal authority, creating situations in which individuals coordinate teams, manage projects, or sustain organizational continuity without corresponding recognition within established hierarchies. These dynamics closely mirror the *Leadership Legitimacy Gap* identified earlier in this chapter, where leadership practice evolves more rapidly than the institutional mechanisms used to legitimize authority.

An additional dimension shaping leadership development in this context involves differential access to international professional opportunities during wartime. Female students, who are generally permitted to travel internationally, may participate in internships, academic conferences, exchange programs, and professional engagements abroad. These experiences provide exposure to global professional networks, leadership models, and organizational practices that extend beyond the domestic educational environment. Male students of conscription age, by contrast, often face travel restrictions that limit their participation in comparable opportunities. Over time, this asymmetry in international exposure may further accelerate leadership development among female students while delaying similar opportunities for their male counterparts. Such patterns may contribute to shifts in professional confidence, global connectivity, and leadership readiness among emerging graduates entering Ukraine's post-conflict workforce.

More broadly, the classroom interactions examined in this study suggest that expectations surrounding authority, participation, and professional voice may gradually evolve as new cohorts enter the labor market. Female-majority educational environments may influence how collaboration, leadership participation, and organizational inclusion are interpreted within

workplaces. While these shifts are unlikely to occur uniformly across institutions, they may contribute to gradual recalibration of leadership norms within sectors engaged in Ukraine's reconstruction.

Taken together, these observations suggest that the leadership dynamics observed within university classrooms may foreshadow similar tensions within post-conflict organizations.

Universities therefore do not merely prepare students for existing institutional structures; they also function as early environments in which emerging leadership norms are practiced before they are fully reflected in the formal arrangements of workplaces, industries, and governance systems.

5.9.7. Balancing Cultural Continuity and Institutional Change

The patterns identified throughout this chapter ultimately point toward a broader societal tension that often accompanies post-conflict reconstruction: the need to expand leadership capacity and modernize institutions while simultaneously preserving cultural continuity and social legitimacy. Ukraine's ongoing transformation illustrates how these pressures interact within education, organizations, and the wider governance environment.

Post-conflict development frequently requires rapid institutional modernization. Governments and international partners emphasize reforms aimed at improving transparency, expanding leadership participation, and aligning institutional structures with global economic and governance standards. In the Ukrainian context, these reforms are closely tied to broader aspirations for economic recovery, democratic consolidation, and integration into European institutional frameworks. Expanding leadership capacity—including the growing participation of women in professional and organizational roles—forms an important component of this modernization process.

At the same time, institutional transformation does not occur within a cultural vacuum. Leadership expectations, gender norms, and organizational authority structures are shaped by long-standing historical experiences and social traditions. Ukraine's institutional landscape reflects a complex interaction of post-Soviet governance legacies, national identity formation, and evolving societal values. Efforts to accelerate institutional change therefore often encounter sensitivities surrounding cultural autonomy, historical continuity, and skepticism toward externally driven reform agendas.

These tensions are particularly visible within educational settings, where new ideas about leadership participation and organizational authority intersect with inherited social expectations. The classroom interactions examined in this study suggest that students are already negotiating these dynamics in subtle ways—experimenting with collaborative leadership practices while remaining aware of broader societal norms that may shape how such practices are received beyond the university environment. In this sense, the *Leadership Legitimacy Gap* identified earlier in the chapter reflects not only institutional lag but also the gradual negotiation between evolving leadership practices and established cultural frameworks.

From an International Political Economy perspective, this tension highlights a central dilemma facing post-conflict societies. Economic reconstruction and institutional modernization require adaptive leadership structures capable of responding to new developmental challenges. Yet reforms perceived as externally imposed or culturally insensitive risk generating resistance, undermining both legitimacy and sustainability. Successful institutional evolution therefore depends not solely on the speed of reform but on the ability to balance modernization with respect for local social norms and historical experience.

The findings of this study suggest that Ukraine's educational institutions may play an important

role in navigating this balance. By providing environments in which emerging leadership practices can be tested and debated, universities serve as intermediary spaces where new institutional possibilities interact with existing cultural expectations. These interactions may contribute to gradual adaptation rather than abrupt transformation, allowing leadership norms to evolve in ways that remain socially grounded while responding to the developmental demands of reconstruction.

Ultimately, the challenge facing Ukraine—and many post-conflict societies—is not simply whether institutions will change, but how that change will occur. Effective reconstruction requires institutional innovation and expanded leadership participation, yet these developments must unfold in ways that maintain social legitimacy and cultural continuity. The evolving leadership dynamics observed within Ukrainian business education therefore reflect a broader process through which post-conflict societies negotiate the relationship between tradition, reform, and the demands of long-term development.

5.9.8. Contribution of the Study

This study contributes to the emerging body of research examining the relationship between education, leadership formation, and institutional transformation in post-conflict societies. While existing scholarship has explored gender participation in post-conflict education and workforce development, relatively little attention has been given to how wartime demographic disruption influences leadership development within business education itself. By focusing on the lived experiences of students navigating higher education during an active conflict, this research provides insight into how leadership identities form within rapidly changing institutional and social environments.

One key contribution of this study is its examination of gender dynamics within wartime

business education. The demographic imbalance created by conscription policies and male outmigration has produced female-majority classrooms in Ukrainian business programs.

Observing how these environments shape participation, collaboration, and leadership behaviors provides early insight into how the country's future leadership pipeline may evolve. The findings suggest that demographic shifts in education may influence leadership development long before students formally enter professional roles.

A second contribution lies in the incorporation of practitioner-informed perspectives on leadership formation. Drawing on classroom observation, student engagement, and direct interaction with business students across Ukrainian institutions, the study captures leadership dynamics as they emerge in real time. This practitioner vantage point offers a granular perspective on leadership development that complements more traditional institutional or policy-focused analyses within the post-conflict reconstruction literature.

The study also introduces the concept of a *Leadership Legitimacy Gap*, referring to a transitional condition in which leadership responsibilities expand more rapidly than the institutional mechanisms used to recognize and legitimize authority. The findings suggest that individuals—particularly women—may assume significant operational responsibilities within educational and organizational contexts while formal structures of authority adapt more slowly. Identifying this gap provides a conceptual lens for understanding how leadership authority evolves during periods of rapid institutional change.

Finally, the research highlights uneven normative readiness for institutional transformation.

While classroom environments may reflect emerging leadership practices and expanding participation, broader institutional and cultural frameworks often evolve more gradually. This uneven pace of change underscores the complexity of post-conflict institutional development,

where educational environments, professional organizations, and societal expectations adapt at different rates.

Taken together, these findings position the *Leadership Legitimacy Gap* as a critical feature of leadership formation in post-conflict environments. The Ukrainian case demonstrates that demographic disruption alone does not guarantee structural transformation; rather, the alignment between leadership practice and institutional recognition remains contingent on the pace of institutional adaptation. Addressing this gap represents a key challenge—and opportunity—for educators, policymakers, and development practitioners engaged in post-conflict reconstruction.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

6.1. Summary of Key Findings:

This study examined how wartime demographic disruption, particularly gender imbalance and youth outmigration, is reshaping business education and leadership formation in Ukraine.

Drawing on classroom observation, student narratives, and practitioner engagement across Ukrainian business programs, the research explored how these shifts influence educational experiences, leadership development, and the broader institutional environment in which future business leaders are being prepared.

One of the most visible findings is the significant demographic transformation occurring within Ukrainian business classrooms. Wartime conscription policies, safety concerns, and large-scale outmigration have removed many young men from traditional educational pathways. As a result, business programs in several institutions now consist predominantly of female students. This demographic shift alters classroom participation patterns, group dynamics, and leadership opportunities within educational settings that historically reflected more balanced gender participation.

A second key finding concerns the ways in which leadership behaviors emerge within these transformed classroom environments. Female-majority cohorts often display strong collaborative engagement, peer support, and responsibility for maintaining group cohesion. Students frequently assume leadership roles in project coordination, team facilitation, and problem-solving activities even when these responsibilities are not formally assigned. These dynamics demonstrate how leadership identity can develop through practice and participation rather than through formal designation alone.

At the same time, the study identified a recurring tension between leadership practice and

institutional recognition. Individuals often assume meaningful operational responsibilities within classroom and organizational contexts while formal authority structures evolve more slowly.

This study conceptualizes this pattern as a *Leadership Legitimacy Gap*, a transitional condition in which leadership responsibilities expand more rapidly than the institutional mechanisms used to legitimize authority. The gap reflects the uneven pace at which institutional structures adapt to new social and demographic realities.

The findings also highlight the role of educational institutions as transitional environments where emerging leadership norms are tested and negotiated. Universities function not only as sites of professional training but also as spaces where students interpret social expectations, experiment with leadership behaviors, and develop assumptions about authority and collaboration. In the context of wartime Ukraine, these dynamics are particularly visible as demographic disruption reshapes participation patterns and expands opportunities for leadership engagement among students.

An additional dimension influencing leadership development involves differential access to international professional opportunities during wartime. Female students are generally able to travel internationally for internships, academic conferences, and professional exchanges, providing exposure to global professional networks and leadership models. Male students of conscription age, however, often face travel restrictions that limit participation in similar opportunities. Over time, this asymmetry in international exposure may further shape leadership readiness, professional confidence, and global connectivity among emerging graduates entering Ukraine's post-conflict workforce.

Finally, the study highlights the broader institutional and societal context within which these educational dynamics occur. Post-conflict reconstruction requires institutional modernization,

expanded leadership capacity, and adaptation to evolving social conditions. At the same time, institutional change unfolds within historically embedded cultural frameworks shaped by social traditions, post-Soviet institutional legacies, and evolving national identity. As a result, leadership practices and expectations may evolve gradually through a process of negotiation between emerging norms and established institutional structures.

Taken together, these findings illustrate how wartime demographic disruption is influencing leadership formation at multiple levels within Ukrainian society. Classroom dynamics provide early insight into how leadership participation, authority, and professional identity may evolve as new cohorts enter the workforce. By examining leadership development within the everyday experiences of business students during wartime, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how post-conflict societies cultivate the human capital and institutional capacity necessary for long-term reconstruction and economic development.

6.2. Contributions to the Field:

This study contributes to ongoing scholarly and practical discussions surrounding post-conflict reconstruction, leadership development, and the role of higher education in societal transformation. While existing research has explored gender participation and workforce dynamics in post-conflict settings, relatively little attention has been devoted to how wartime demographic disruption shapes leadership formation within educational environments themselves. By examining leadership development through the everyday experiences of business students during an active conflict, this research offers several contributions to both scholarship and practice.

First, the study provides empirical insight into the educational consequences of wartime demographic change. Much of the literature on post-conflict reconstruction focuses on

institutional reform, governance structures, or labor market outcomes after hostilities have ended. This research instead examines how demographic disruption—specifically gender imbalance and youth outmigration—affects the formation of leadership capacity within higher education while conflict is still ongoing. In doing so, the study highlights how educational institutions serve as early arenas where social and professional transformations begin to take shape.

Second, the research contributes conceptually to the study of leadership development during institutional transition. The concept of the *Leadership Legitimacy Gap*, introduced in this dissertation, provides a framework for understanding situations in which individuals assume leadership responsibilities before institutional structures fully recognize or legitimize their authority. This concept offers a lens through which scholars and practitioners may better understand leadership dynamics in environments characterized by rapid demographic change, institutional uncertainty, and evolving social expectations.

Third, the study contributes to applied discussions concerning the role of higher education in post-conflict reconstruction. Business schools play a significant role in preparing future managers, entrepreneurs, and policymakers who will shape economic recovery and institutional reform. By documenting how leadership behaviors emerge within wartime educational environments, the research highlights the importance of educational institutions as sites where emerging leadership norms and professional identities are formed before they become embedded within organizations and governance systems.

Finally, the findings contribute to broader conversations within International Political Economy regarding the relationship between institutional change, cultural norms, and developmental reform. Post-conflict reconstruction often requires institutional modernization while simultaneously maintaining social legitimacy and cultural continuity. The leadership dynamics

observed in Ukrainian business education illustrate how these processes unfold at the level of everyday institutional interaction, offering insight into how societal transformation may proceed through gradual adaptation rather than abrupt structural change.

Taken together, these contributions deepen understanding of how leadership capacity develops within societies undergoing conflict and reconstruction. By situating leadership formation within the lived experiences of business students navigating wartime disruption, this study highlights the critical role of education in shaping the human capital and institutional resilience necessary for long-term economic recovery.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research Directions:

While this study provides insight into leadership development and educational dynamics within wartime Ukrainian business education, several limitations should be acknowledged. Recognizing these limitations helps clarify the scope of the findings while also identifying opportunities for future research.

One limitation concerns the qualitative and context-specific nature of the research design. The study relies primarily on practitioner observation, classroom engagement, and student narratives within a defined set of business education environments. Although this approach allows for rich, contextualized insight into leadership formation during wartime conditions, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable across all Ukrainian universities or academic disciplines. Business education programs were selected because of their direct relevance to leadership development and economic reconstruction; however, experiences in fields such as engineering, public administration, or the social sciences may differ in important ways.

A second limitation relates to the unique temporal context in which the study was conducted. The research examines educational experiences during an active conflict, when demographic

shifts, mobility restrictions, and institutional uncertainty are still unfolding. As Ukraine transitions from wartime conditions to formal post-conflict reconstruction, patterns observed within classrooms may evolve as students return from displacement, male conscripts re-enter educational pathways, and institutional structures stabilize. Longitudinal research conducted after the cessation of hostilities may therefore reveal additional insights into how leadership participation and institutional expectations continue to develop over time.

A third limitation concerns the geographic and institutional focus of the research. Much of the empirical material draws from business programs located in urban academic environments such as the American University Kyiv and similar institutions. While these environments offer valuable insight into emerging leadership dynamics, educational experiences in regional universities or institutions operating under different resource conditions may vary. Future studies examining a broader range of universities across Ukraine could provide additional perspective on how wartime demographic disruption affects higher education nationwide.

These limitations point toward several promising directions for future research. Longitudinal studies following current student cohorts into their professional careers could help determine whether the leadership patterns observed in the classroom translate into sustained leadership participation within organizations and public institutions. Comparative studies examining post-conflict educational systems in other countries could also help clarify whether the leadership dynamics identified in this study are unique to Ukraine or reflect broader patterns of institutional transition in post-conflict societies.

Future research might also explore the reintegration of male students returning from military service or wartime displacement. Understanding how returning cohorts navigate educational and professional environments that have evolved during their absence may provide important insight

into workforce integration, leadership expectations, and gender dynamics in the post-war period. Finally, additional research examining the international mobility opportunities available to students during wartime—such as internships, academic exchanges, and professional conferences—could help assess how global exposure shapes leadership readiness and professional networks among emerging graduates. Such studies would contribute to a deeper understanding of how educational experiences intersect with global engagement to influence leadership development in societies undergoing reconstruction.

Despite these limitations, the present study offers a timely perspective on leadership formation within higher education during an active conflict. By documenting how students and institutions navigate demographic disruption, evolving social expectations, and institutional uncertainty, the research contributes to a broader understanding of how educational systems help cultivate leadership capacity in post-conflict societies.

Closing Paragraph of the Dissertation

Ukraine's ongoing transformation illustrates how conflict reshapes societies not only through physical destruction but also through profound shifts in human capital, institutional expectations, and leadership development. The demographic realities created by war—particularly gender imbalance and youth outmigration—are already influencing how future leaders are educated, how authority is negotiated, and how professional identities are formed. Within this environment, universities serve as early arenas where emerging leadership practices take shape before they become embedded in organizations and institutions. The experiences of Ukrainian business students navigating wartime disruption therefore offer insight into how leadership capacity evolves during periods of national reconstruction. As Ukraine continues the long process of rebuilding its economy, institutions, and social fabric, the development of inclusive and adaptive leadership will remain central to the country's ability to translate resilience into sustained recovery and long-term prosperity.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Research Context and Professional Engagement

This study was conducted during a period in which the researcher maintained active professional and academic engagement in Ukraine. During the data collection phase, the researcher taught undergraduate and graduate business courses and interacted regularly with students, faculty members, and administrators within the university environment.

In addition to formal teaching responsibilities, the researcher participated in professional dialogues with faculty, administrators, and practitioners involved in international development and reconstruction initiatives. These engagements included informal exchanges with representatives of multilateral organizations and participation in academic–policy discussions related to education, labor markets, and leadership development in post-conflict settings.

These professional interactions were not treated as formal data sources for the study. However, they contributed to the researcher’s contextual awareness of the institutional, economic, and social conditions shaping Ukrainian higher education during wartime and early reconstruction.

Consistent with qualitative research practices emphasizing reflexivity, these experiences informed the researcher’s interpretive understanding of the broader environment within which the classroom observations and interview data were situated. This contextual awareness supported the analysis and interpretation of findings presented in Chapters 5 and 6.

Appendix B: Participant Demographics

The study included graduate and undergraduate business students from the American University Kyiv (AUK). Graduate participants were master's students in Business Management nearing program completion, while undergraduate participants were enrolled in programs including Marketing, Business Administration, and IT Management. Pseudonyms are used to protect participant identity.

Participant ID	Pseudonym	Academic Level	Program	Gender
P1	Tatiana	Master's Student	Business Management	Female
P2	Krystyna	Master's Student	Business Management	Female
P3	Volodymyr	Master's Student	Business Management	Male
P4	Olena	Master's Student	Business Management	Female
P5	Andrii	Master's Student	Business Management	Male
P6	Kateryna	Undergraduate	Marketing	Female
P7	Dmytro	Undergraduate	Business Administration	Male
P8	Iryna	Undergraduate	Marketing	Female
P9	Serhii	Undergraduate	IT Management	Male
P10	Alina	Undergraduate	Business Administration	Female
P11	Maksym	Undergraduate	IT Management	Male
P12	Sofiia	Undergraduate	Marketing	Female

The participant composition reflects the broader gender imbalance observed within Ukrainian higher education during the wartime period, where female students increasingly represent a larger proportion of business and management programs due to conscription policies and male outmigration.

Appendix C – Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Semi-Structured Interview Guide (with Assumptions) – September 2025

Introduction (to read at the start)

Thank you for taking part in this interview. I am conducting research on how gender imbalance and youth outmigration are affecting business education in Ukraine, and what this means for the country's future leadership and post-conflict reconstruction.

Before we begin, I want to share the working assumptions guiding this study. I will ask for your perspective on whether you agree, disagree, or would add nuance to these assumptions.

Key Assumptions

1. Women Leaders

- **Increased Representation:** Women who dominate current business school cohorts will naturally move into managerial, entrepreneurial, and policy roles, shaping post-war recovery.
- **Leadership Normalization:** The visibility of women in leadership during the conflict will normalize their presence in decision-making spaces.
- **Double Burden:** Women may still face challenges balancing leadership with family/caregiving responsibilities.
- **Sector Shifts:** Women are expected to lead especially in service industries, SMEs, and NGOs, while gradually entering male-dominated sectors (finance, construction, energy).

2. Returning Men

- **Reintegration Challenges:** Returning conscripts may struggle to re-enter academic/professional spaces where women have advanced.
- **Competition for Roles:** Men may compete for leadership positions, creating tensions in mixed-gender environments.
- **Identity and Cultural Adjustment:** Some men may expect to reclaim pre-war hierarchies, while others adapt to shared leadership.
- **Accelerated Retraining:** Rapid upskilling programs may be needed to help men catch up academically and professionally.

3. Demographic Shifts in Business Leadership

- **Female Majority Pipeline:** For at least one generation, a disproportionate number of women will graduate from business schools, reshaping the leadership pipeline.
- **Generational Transformation:** Younger cohorts will embrace more inclusive and egalitarian leadership styles.
- **Diaspora Influence:** Outmigration means some future leaders will return from abroad with new skills, networks, and capital.
- **Regional Variation:** Urban centers (Kyiv, Lviv) may adapt to gender-balanced leadership faster than rural regions.

4. Broader Institutional and Societal Effects

- Policy Shifts: Government and NGOs may prioritize gender-sensitive policies (funding, mentorship, quotas, inclusive curricula).
- Workplace Culture: Organizations may value flexibility, collaboration, and inclusivity as standard practice.
- Resistance and Backlash: Some institutions/individuals may resist change, framing women's leadership as temporary.
- Role Models and Mentorship: Prominent women leaders may inspire multiplier effects across sectors.

Section 1. Core Framework Questions (for all groups)

1. How has the gender imbalance caused by conscription and outmigration affected the educational experiences of business students in Ukraine?
2. What challenges and opportunities do female-majority student cohorts face in learning, collaboration, and leadership development?
3. Are current business education structures (curricula, faculty, support systems) responsive to these shifts?
4. How do students and graduates perceive their future roles in Ukraine's post-war economic reconstruction? Are they being adequately prepared to lead?
5. What tensions may arise as returning male conscripts reintegrate into a business environment shaped by women leaders?

Section 2. Stakeholder-Specific Probes

A. Business Community

- How do you anticipate women graduates shaping Ukraine's private sector leadership in the next decade?
- What challenges or opportunities do you see in integrating returning male professionals?
- What skills or competencies will be most critical for the next generation of business leaders?

B. NGOs / International Non-Profits

- Which support programs for women leaders and entrepreneurs are most effective today?
- Where are the gaps in leadership or mentoring for women?
- What lessons from other post-conflict countries could be applied in Ukraine?

C. State and National Government Officials

- How is policy adapting to gender imbalance in education and the workforce?
- Are there plans for reintegrating male returnees into universities and employment?
- What role should business schools play in Ukraine's reconstruction strategy?

D. Business School Leaders

- How has the shift to female-majority cohorts changed classroom collaboration and leadership development?

- What curriculum or pedagogy changes are needed to reflect this demographic shift?
- How are you preparing both women and men for shared leadership in a transformed economy?

E. General Ukrainian Professionals

- How do you perceive women's rising role in business and leadership?
 - What barriers remain for women advancing to senior roles in your sector?
 - How do you think male returnees will adjust to workplaces where women are established leaders?
 - What advice would you give current students, especially women, preparing to contribute to Ukraine's recovery?
-

Section 3. Closing

- Do you agree with or challenge any of the assumptions I shared at the beginning?
- What key factors do you believe will determine whether Ukraine builds a more inclusive leadership culture after the war?
- Who else should I speak with to deepen this research?

Appendix C – Semi-Structured Interview Guide

QUESTIONS TO STUDENTS (Informal classroom setting) – October 3, 2025

Was leaving and studying overseas an option for you?

Do you or your family have the means to support you if you chose to study or live outside of Ukraine?

Why did you choose to stay?

Why did you choose this program at AUK?

Do you think there are differences in the way male and female students learn and interact from each other?

What differences do you think male students and female students have in the business school setting?

With the classroom shifting to mostly-female cohorts, do you feel that the richness of the discussion and discourse is affected by the lack of diversity?

How has the war affected your role in society, if at all? With many of the men at war or overseas, does that change your outlook in what your role is (or going to be)?

In general, do you feel supported: at home? In school? In society?

Do you think female students have the same opportunities than male students? How about prior to the invasion?

Appendix D – American University Admissions Data

Admission Data 2022 -2025



AUK%20Student%20Admissions%20Data