

# СЕКЦІЯ 1

## ТЕОРІЯ ТА ІСТОРІЯ СОЦІОЛОГІЇ

### THE STIGMATIZATION OF VETERANS IN CONTEMPORARY UKRAINIAN DISCOURSE: SOCIOCULTURAL MECHANISMS AND GENDER DIMENSIONS

### СТИГМАТИЗАЦІЯ ВЕТЕРАНІВ У СУЧАСНОМУ УКРАЇНСЬКОМУ ДИСКУРСІ: СОЦІОКУЛЬТУРНІ МЕХАНІЗМИ ТА ГЕНДЕРНІ СПЕЦИФІКИ

*In the context of full-scale war and the transformation of Ukrainian society, the issue of veterans' reintegration has become a critical topic of academic and public interest. One of the key obstacles in this process is the phenomenon of stigmatization, which complicates the return of former service members to civilian life and affect their well-being, status, and access to opportunities. This article offers a sociological overview of the stigmatization of male and female veterans in contemporary Ukrainian discourse, with a focus on the sociocultural mechanisms that contribute to the persistence of stigma in public perception, institutional practice, and interpersonal interaction. Special attention is paid to gender-based stigmatization experienced by female veterans, as well as to the challenges faced by veterans with disabilities. The study references relevant theoretical frameworks such as Erving Goffman's theory of stigma, intersectionality, and critical disability theory to deepen the analysis. The article explores manifestations of stigma through stereotypes (e.g., perceptions of aggression, emotional instability, or dependency), social exclusion, discriminatory practices, and media representations. It also examines the emotional responses toward veterans – from respect to fear or pity – and the risk of internalized stigma among veterans themselves. The discussion highlights the potentially harmful effects of excessive heroization, which can lead to unrealistic expectations and deepen the divide between veterans and civilians. This work critically interprets existing data and public narratives in order to highlight patterns of stigmatization and their broader implications. The article calls for more inclusive and gender-sensitive approaches in veteran policy, media communication, and public awareness, recognizing stigma as a barrier not only to individual reintegration but also to social cohesion and national resilience.*

**Key words:** stigma, stigmatization, veterans, gender, social reintegration, stereotypes, symbolic violence, Ukraine, public discourse.

*У контексті повномасштабної війни та трансформації українського суспільства питання реінтеграції ветеранів стало ключовою темою академічного й суспільного обговорення. Однією з головних перепон у цьому процесі є явище стигматизації, яке ускладнює повернення колишніх військовослужбовців до цивільного життя, впливає на їхні благополуччя, соціальний статус та доступ до можливостей успішної реінтеграції. У статті подано соціологічний огляд стигматизації ветеранів і ветеранок у сучасному українському дискурсі з акцентом на соціокультурні механізми, що сприяють закріпленню стигми у громадській свідомості, інституційній практиці та міжособистісним стосункам. Особливу увагу приділено гендерно зумовленим стигматизації жінок-ветеранок, а також викликам, з якими стикаються ветерани з обмеженими можливостями. Проаналізовано основні теоретичні підходи, зокрема теорію стигми Ервінга Гофмана, використано інтерсекційний підхід та критичну теорію обмеженості, що дають змогу глибше осмислити проблему. Розглянуто прояви стигматизації через стереотипи (наприклад, уявлення про агресивність, емоційну нестабільність або залежність), соціальне відчуження, дискримінаційні практики та медіареєнтрації. Аналізуються емоційні реакції суспільства на ветеранів – від поваги до страху чи жалю і ризик інтерналізації стигми самими ветеранами. Підкреслено потенційно негативні наслідки надмірної героїзації, яка схильна породжувати нереалістичні очікування та посилювати розрив між ветеранами та цивільними. Робота є критичним переосмисленням наявних даних і публічних наративів із метою виявлення типових моделей стигматизації та її ширших соціальних наслідків. Наголошено на необхідності впровадження інклюзивного та чутливого до гендерних особливостей підходу в державній ветеранській політиці, медіакомунікації та громадській просвіті, розглядаючи стигму як бар'єр не лише для особистої реінтеграції, а й для соціальної згуртованості та національної стійкості.*

*Робота є критичним переосмисленням наявних даних і публічних наративів із метою виявлення типових моделей стигматизації та її ширших соціальних наслідків. Наголошено на необхідності впровадження інклюзивного та чутливого до гендерних особливостей підходу в державній ветеранській політиці, медіакомунікації та громадській просвіті, розглядаючи стигму як бар'єр не лише для особистої реінтеграції, а й для соціальної згуртованості та національної стійкості.*

**Ключові слова:** стигма, стигматизація, ветерани, гендер, соціальна реінтеграція, стереотипи, символічне насилья, Україна, публічний дискурс.

UDC 316.6:355.1-057.36(477)  
DOI <https://doi.org/10.32782/hbts.75.1.1>  
Стаття поширюється на умовах ліцензії CC BY 4.0

**Yeremenko O.V.**  
Postgraduate Student  
Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv

In the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, new challenges have emerged for both the state and civil society. One of the most pressing among these is the creation of an effective system for the reintegration of veterans and individuals directly involved in resisting the armed aggression of the Russian

Federation against Ukraine. A key indicator of the effectiveness of this system is the full integration of veterans into society. Therefore, studies that examine the phenomena potentially hindering the reintegration process of defenders after completing military service are of great importance. One such phenomenon

that poses a threat to veterans' successful return to civilian life is stigma, which can exacerbate the divide between society and this social group, alienating it and shaping negative attitudes toward its members. Stigma not only complicates integration but also reduces quality of life and contributes to the emergence of potential social conflicts.

This study aims to determine whether stigmatization of veterans exists in Ukrainian society, what its manifestations are, and what measures can be taken to prevent and overcome it. In order to identify stigma toward male and female veterans, it is necessary to define the concept, outline its components, and examine the mechanisms of its formation. The study of stigma as a sociological concept is widely considered to have been initiated by E. Goffman [1], who defined stigma as a process of discrediting an individual based on perceived deviations from the norm, resulting in social sanctions. Thus, stigmatization is essentially the process of "labeling" – forming negative attitudes toward individuals based on specific characteristics or status. In contrast, H. Becker [2] emphasized that stigma as a label is not a characteristic of the behavior or individual itself, but a product of its relationship to the social norms of a broader dominant group. This group, external to the micro-society in question, acts as an arbitrator and applies labels of deviance to behaviors it considers unacceptable. Therefore, stigma can be rightly regarded as a social construct whereby individuals marked by a certain label are socially devalued. It operates culturally and socially by marginalizing categories of people, both symbolically and practically [3].

Among domestic researchers, scholars such as I. Gurovych, M. Kabanov, T. Lypai, E. Novikov, A. Slobodyanyk, and others have explored the issue of stigma. However, studies on stigmatization often overlook its impact on the reproduction of social inequality and the escalation of inter-group conflict. As a result, the concept of stigma remains under development, with new dimensions constantly being added to its understanding [4].

For stigma to exist, the first necessary condition is the emphasis on differences between members of a social group. In the context of veteran reintegration, this emphasis most often appears after individuals receive official status as combatants or veterans. Another prerequisite is the presence of persistent stereotypes. The most common include beliefs about veterans being aggressive, mentally unstable, prone to addictions, weak, in need of constant support and benefits, or having served "for money" and thus enjoying an unjustifiably high standard of living. Also included are heroic stereotypes – images that are to promote societal ideals, respect, and gratitude, but that simultaneously create unrealistic portrayals and inflated expectations, and open the door to misuse of veteran status and further highlight difference.

A third factor is the conscious self-isolation of veterans, often a result of negative experiences interacting with civilians and feeling misunderstood.

This leads to limiting communication primarily to others with military experience. A similar tendency is observed among veterans' relatives, who also tend to engage more with people of similar status. While relative social homogeneity in one's immediate circle is not unusual, isolation or avoidance of those outside that circle reflects the separation of a stigmatized category.

The fourth factor is overt or latent discrimination against veterans. This manifests in lack of access to certain services, barriers to free movement due to non-inclusive public spaces, or employment rejection – often affecting former service members with disabilities. The final, yet equally important, factor is the persistence of gender stereotypes in Ukrainian society. These include biases against female veterans based on perceptions of their "weakness" or "lower authority" within the military sphere. This is evident in public distrust, such as when presenting a combatant ID for social benefits, particularly in public transport. The divide is further deepened by paternalistic attitudes from civilian men, who struggle to accept that a woman in uniform may not conform to traditional roles of mother or wife [7].

Academic literature identifies two types of stigma: external and internal. External stigmatization refers to the intolerant attitude of others toward a person who is perceived as different. These differences may be either visible or invisible, such as behavioral traits associated with a certain category of people or ascribed to them through stereotypes. In contrast to external stigmatization, internal stigma is the result of a stigmatized individual's internal experiences – feelings of inferiority or helplessness – and manifests as "self-labeling". Typically, external and internal stigma are interconnected and reinforce one another [8]. When society holds a negative or prejudiced attitude toward a particular category of people – external stigma – it establishes broadly accepted norms and expectations for how these individuals should behave, often in the form of stereotypes. Members of the stigmatized group internalize these behavioral expectations, adopting them as their own, which leads to internal stigma. When individuals exhibit behavior that aligns with these stereotypes, external stigma is reinforced and perpetuated.

When studying stigmatization, it is important to consider that it does not result from any single defined factor for a specific individual or even group. Rather, stigma is shaped by a complex interplay of power relations, societal norms, and cultural values. This is why it is essential to apply an intersectional approach to the analysis of stigma – one that takes into account the overlapping social positions and statuses that are likely to intensify the experience of stigma [9]. One such status that is frequently overlaid onto that of a veteran is the status of a person with a disability. This status is legally recognized through documentation of disability acquired as a result of war. However,

according to critical disability theory, disability should primarily be seen not as a medical condition but as a social construct – one that emphasizes differences between members of this category and the rest of society. As discussed earlier, this emphasis on difference is a fundamental mechanism of stigmatization.

The challenges faced by veterans with disabilities are further supported by quantitative data. For instance, the “National Sociological Study on the Perception of Persons with Disabilities in Ukraine” [11] shows that while nearly the entire population (98%) agrees that people with disabilities are full members of society with equal civil rights, signs of stigmatization remain. For example, the lack of inclusivity in public spaces limits mobility, access to services, and employment opportunities – clear indicators of status loss and discrimination. The study also reveals the public’s emotional response to this group, with Ukrainians mostly feeling pity (71%) and sadness (34%) toward people with disabilities. Stigmatization based on pity rather than dignity and agency diminishes veterans’ potential for full social participation. These perceptions often lead to social exclusion, employment barriers, and the need to conceal one’s status to avoid discrimination.

The spread of stereotypes about veterans – such as being aggressive, emotionally unstable, prone to violence or addiction, or weak and overly dependent on benefits – creates additional barriers to integration and fosters conditions for internal stigmatization. Some veterans avoid seeking psychological support specifically due to fear of judgment or misunderstanding by society. While the heroization of veterans helps promote ideals of service and sacrifice, it also tends to generate unrealistic expectations, dehumanize the actual experiences of service members, and, as a result, lead to disappointment or mistrust among civilians.

Media representations of veterans play a dual role: on the one hand, they raise awareness of veterans’ needs; on the other, they often reproduce clichéd or “heroized” portrayals that do not reflect reality. This dual media narrative helps construct an image of veterans as strong and courageous – fueling heroization with its mobilizing potential. Yet excessive romanticization of military service can draw attention away from real issues such as adaptation, employment, physical and psychological rehabilitation, and family conflict. Potential negative consequences of over-heroization also include the transfer of civic responsibility from the general public to the military, as well as, from the opposite direction, a certain degree of abuse of the privileged veteran status. Such media strategies often become part of state-driven narratives that aim to support a militarized image and boost recruitment, accompanied by the silencing of systemic challenges.

The stigmatization of veterans has far-reaching consequences – ranging from the loss of authority

and the imposition of social “labels” to increased social tension between civilian and military communities. Feelings of injustice, marginalization, and the erosion of intergroup trust can lead to self-isolation, internalized stigma, and even the loss of part of the productive population, ultimately threatening social cohesion and national security. At the same time, veterans with disabilities – although a rapidly growing demographic – continue to face prejudice and discrimination, particularly in employment, as highlighted in the analytical report “Lack of Employment Opportunities for Veterans with Disabilities” [5]. Quantitative surveys support this: according to the “Reintegration of Veterans in Ukraine” study [6] under the “Strengthening Community Resilience through Socio-Economic Support for Veterans” project, 53% of veterans with disabilities and 54% of those with injuries sustained during service in eastern Ukraine reported experiencing discrimination. Thus, while the status of being a person with a disability may lead to greater respect for a former service member, it simultaneously acts as a compounding factor of stigmatization.

Another important group to consider in the context of veteran stigmatization is women veterans. Their experience is particularly complex, as it involves discrimination both within the military and in civilian society. Often, prejudice against women veterans stems from the perceived mismatch between military service and traditional gender roles still prevalent in Ukrainian society. For example, a study by the Ukrainian Veteran Foundation, commissioned by the Independent Anti-Corruption Commission, which included data from the nationwide survey “Ukraine During the War: The Image of Veterans in Ukrainian Society” [10], revealed that 59% of the population either agreed or strongly agreed that a woman’s primary role is to bear children, and 24% believed that men are better leaders than women. However, the proportion of people holding such views has decreased compared to 2021 [5]. Prejudice against women complicates their integration into the military and hinders their career advancement, affecting their post-service experiences as well. These biases persist in civilian life, creating barriers in employment, social interaction, and access to support. Women who served often face distrust about their competence or are seen as deviating from traditional gender roles. This contributes to self-stigmatization, isolation, and reduced confidence in their social value. Therefore, the identity of a woman veteran is doubly stigmatized – both due to societal views on women and perceptions of military service.

The consequences of stigmatization must also be viewed in the context of mental health, as stigma remains a significant barrier to veterans seeking psychological help. This manifests both in societal perceptions and in veterans’ internal beliefs. Social stereotypes still portray psychological struggles as signs of weakness, vulnerability, or personal fail-

ure. For veterans – who are socially associated with strength, resilience, and heroism – this contradiction with the idealized “warrior” image creates immense pressure. Seeking help is not seen as a responsible act of self-care but rather as a loss of control, potentially leading to judgment from others or colleagues. As previously noted, stigma is often internalized – veterans may start to believe their psychological difficulties are “abnormal”, “shameful”, or unworthy of attention. This fosters guilt, shame, and fear of being misunderstood, seen as weak, or even dangerous. The problem is exacerbated when mental health support systems are underdeveloped, and when information about available services or confidentiality is lacking. In some cases, veterans avoid seeking help for fear of damaging their reputation, being excluded from professional roles, or being disqualified from service in the reserves or combat units. As a result, stigma creates a false perception that reaching out to a psychologist signals personal failure or endangers veteran status. Consequently, individuals are left alone with their trauma, leading to worsened psychological conditions, strained social ties, addiction, and in the worst cases – suicidal ideation and behavior.

Stigmatization of veterans affects not only individuals but also has a profound indirect impact on their families. Families of veterans often experience what is known as associative stigma, where the prejudiced or wary attitude toward the veteran extends to their closest circle – partners, children, or parents. This can manifest as distrust, social distancing, or stereotypical assumptions about psychological instability, aggressiveness, or emotional distress, which are believed to automatically apply to all family members. Such perceptions can lead to reduced social interaction, feelings of isolation, and the need to conceal one's connection to a veteran, especially in public or professional settings.

Moreover, stigmatization increases the psychological burden on family members. Partners of veterans may struggle to balance the role of emotional support with their own needs, as stigmatized attitudes toward military-related issues in society create additional barriers to seeking help or even talking openly about problems within the family. Often, partners of veterans avoid reaching out for psychological assistance out of fear of judgment or a belief that society's lack of understanding will prevent them from being heard.

Another important thing to notice is that stigmatization also affects the upbringing environment of veterans' children. In schools or peer groups, these children may face alienation or caution from others due to perceptions of “trauma in the family” or a presumed risk of aggression. This creates conditions for bullying, reduced self-esteem, and the development of defensive behavior. In some cases, veterans or their partners may even limit their children's interac-

tion with social institutions to avoid discrimination or misunderstanding.

Stigma also has economic implications for the family. If a veteran faces employment difficulties due to injuries or psychological conditions – and employers are reluctant to hire individuals with military experience – this affects the financial stability of the entire household. A lack of resources and increased vulnerability, in turn, may lead to interpersonal conflict, heightened anxiety, and even family breakdown.

Thus, stigmatization of veterans exerts a systemic influence not only on the individuals themselves but also on their families, as the primary social environment. It disrupts the balance of family dynamics, increases social tension, and creates additional barriers to the full reintegration of both individuals and families into broader community life. Addressing this issue requires the implementation of comprehensive support policies for veterans' families, particularly in the spheres of education, mental health, and social services.

Thus, stigma generates not only external prejudice but also internal mechanisms of denial and shame, making mental health support less accessible and less effective – especially for those who need it most. Overcoming this barrier requires a transformation of societal attitudes toward mental health, normalization of help-seeking behavior, and building public trust in support systems.

In conclusion, the dangers of veteran stigmatization impact not only the individuals themselves but also the state as a whole. Civilian rejection leads to isolation, reduced motivation to participate in reintegration programs, family tension, unhealthy coping mechanisms, and suicide. These effects directly undermine economic performance and the state's capacity for national mobilization. Moreover, the stigmatization of veterans and women veterans fosters misunderstanding, escalates aggression at the societal level, incites social conflicts, and risks fracturing the nation. In contrast, veterans expect respect, equal treatment, support in developing their businesses, and effective measures to improve societal perceptions – particularly through the transformation of normative frameworks to reflect today's realities. These norms should be shaped by a culture of inclusion, respect, and by developing robust governmental and civil mechanisms for veteran support – especially through an intersectional approach that addresses the unique challenges faced by women veterans and those with war-related disabilities.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY:

1. Goffman E. Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity. Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1963. 256 p.
2. Becker H.S. Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance. New York, 1963. 198 p.
3. Tyler I., Slater T. Rethinking the sociology of stigma. The Sociological Review. 2018. 34 p.

4. Mahor B., Dovidio J. The Oxford Handbook of Stigma, Discrimination, and Health. Oxford, 2018. 672 p.
5. Ukrainian Veteran Foundation. Sociological Research: Lack of Employment Opportunities for Veterans with Disabilities. Kyiv, 2023. 48 p.
6. Ukrainian Veteran Foundation. Sociological Research: Stigmatization of Veterans in Ukraine and the Experience of the United States. Kyiv, 2025. 57 p.
7. Anderson M., Verga S. On the definition of stigma. Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice. 2022. Vol. 28. No. 4. 112 p.
8. Patin R., Verhaeghe M. Public stigma and self-stigma: Differential association with attitudes toward formal and informal help-seeking. American Psychiatric Association. 2014. 78 p.
9. Hankivskiy O. Intersectionality 101. Vancouver: The Institute for Intersectionality Research & Policy, Simon Fraser University, 2014. 20 p.
10. Seliianinova A., Chebanenko D., Kuzbida V. Sociological study "The image of veterans in Ukrainian society". Kyiv: Ukrainian Veteran Foundation of the Ministry for Veterans Affairs, 2024. 65 p.
11. The League Of Strong. First national sociological survey on the perception of persons with disabilities in Ukraine. Kyiv: National Assembly of People with Disabilities of Ukraine, 2021. 92 p.