

A Feminist Response to the war in Ukraine – Recommendations to the International Community

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation works to promote women's rights in conflict affected areas and to ensure women's participation in peacebuilding globally. We were present in Ukraine a few years ago and have reached out to our contacts and old partners in order to revitalize our cooperation and support them through our Emergency Fund. We also have a longstanding presence in the Western Balkans and in South Caucasus and thus a good understanding of the situation for women's rights and the political context of the region.

As we have seen Russia's brutal war on Ukraine unfold in front of our eyes over the last few weeks, it has become increasingly clear that the relatively quick response from the international community in terms of diplomatic sanctions and international aid has been largely gender blind. For this reason, we see a great need for the EU, the OSCE, the UN, donors, and large INGOs to apply a gender perspective to all humanitarian aid provided, and to the support for displaced persons. We also urge the international community to adhere to the Women, Peace and Security agenda in the response to this conflict and the work towards a resolution of the conflict. We call on the international community to increase its support to women human rights defenders and women peace activists who are – and will continue to be – important actors and voices in the process of finding a resolution to the conflict and building peace.

In future peace negotiations and peace talks concerning the conflict, we remind the OSCE, the UN and the EU of the importance of adhering to the Women, Peace and Security Agenda when responding to the conflict and when working for sustainable peace.

We urge donors to ensure that the humanitarian assistance and the assistance to Ukrainian refugees and IDPs have clear gender perspectives and respond to gender specific protection needs. We call on donors to increase their support to women peace activists in the region and to ensure that women from Ukraine will be able to participate in future peacebuilding efforts. It will also be important with continued support to democratic voices within Russia and peace activists in the region at large, who will play an important role in early warning, conflict mitigation and maintaining stability in countries around Ukraine and Russia.

How can the international community work in line with the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in its response to Russia's war on Ukraine?

Protection needs of women and girls inside Ukraine and on the migration route:

We have already heard anecdotal reports of women being subjected to sexual violence as a result of the ongoing conflict, both sexual violence perpetrated by the Russian forces as well as sexual violence in bomb shelters. We also know from decades of working with women in conflict that gender-based and sexual violence always increases in times of conflict, and often is used as a weapon in war.

In addition to this we know that 90-95 percent of the civilians fleeing Ukraine are women, children and elderly and that many of the women and girls that are at the borders and on route right now are extremely vulnerable to sexual violence and trafficking, as one in five women refugees/IDPs are subjected to sexual violence globally, according to the UNHCR. In early March the International Organization for Migration (IOM) warned that the chaotic situation at the

Ukrainian border increases the risk for women and girls becoming victims of trafficking, and organizations at the border has already witnessed how people are trying to pick women and children up before they are able to get registered¹.

It is therefore of greatest importance that the international community does everything they can to protect women and girls from all forms of gender based and sexual violence in connection to this conflict. The international community must ensure that women are safe and have protection inside Ukraine, by the border and on the migration routes, and safeguards access to medical care, sexual and reproductive health care and services, as well as psychological support to those in need. The international community must also offer legal advice to victims of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and document all forms of SGBV in order to hold perpetrators accountable.

We also know that different groups such as LGBTQI-persons suffer additional forms of discrimination when fleeing. For example crossing borders can be difficult for trans people if their legal gender identity in passports or other identification documents does not correspond to their gender identity. Displaced LGBTQI people face specific risks and challenges. For example, same-sex relationships do not have legal recognition in Ukraine, making family migration to some countries difficult, and LGBTQI people may experience discrimination in countries they move to, including when finding accommodation and accessing vital services. We have seen reports of how people of colour have suffered racist attacks and in some cases been prevented from crossing the border to neighboring countries. This is very serious, and the international community must act very swiftly to ensure that all persons receive aid without discrimination and the protection they are entitled to.

A gendered humanitarian response:

The international community must apply a gender perspective to all humanitarian assistance and in the assistance of refugees and IDPs. The response must of course have an intersectional approach and ensure that all persons receive aid without discrimination. Access to sexual and reproductive health care including maternal health is always hampered in conflicts, leading to heightened risks for women and especially pregnant women. With the recent bombing of a maternity ward in Ukraine the security risk for pregnant women has increased even more. In order to respond to women's, girl's and LGBTQI-persons needs the following recommendations must be implemented by donors and organisations on the ground:

- Map out/analyse the gendered aspects of humanitarian aid and the immediate needs of women and their dependents including menstrual products, underwear, childcare and food items, women's hygiene items/kits, shelter with appropriate wash facilities, specific needs of pregnant women and women entering menopause, women with disabilities.
- Support the provision of medical care and services, including sexual and reproductive health care and services, and specific medicine and healthcare needed by women and LGBTQI people, including access to hormone therapy.
- Ensure that mechanisms for prevention and response to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) are integrated into humanitarian responses;

¹ Kvinna till Kvinna: <https://press.kvinnatillkvinna.se/pressreleases/kvinnor-paa-flykt-fraan-ukraina-riskerar-vaald-trafficking-och-utnyttjande-3167741>

- Ensure safe and appropriate shelter and accommodation for displaced women and LGBTQI persons.

It is also important to recognise that women are already acting as first responders in their communities and might be in places which international organisations cannot reach. Women in the community often have a good understanding of the needs of their neighbourhood and can in many cases act more quickly than international organisations. For that reason, it is also important for donors support these actors who are already there by:

- Recognition and utilisation of women's leadership in planning and carrying out humanitarian support;
- Ensure rapid response from donors funding women's organisations to greenlight requests to reallocate existing funding for programming in Ukraine towards pressing humanitarian needs to support rightsholders, bypassing lengthy and bureaucratic procedures;
- Coverage of logistics, accommodation and/or transportation costs for women who jointly work to provide humanitarian aid and other types of support to displaced women, elderly and children;
- Channel financial support towards subsidizing utility bills, medical, food expenses, rent costs, as women left without 'breadwinners' may struggle financially to cover these costs, using flexible funding mechanisms (including through the application of flexible funding);

Ukrainian women's voice and participation:

We have seen how Ukrainian women human rights activists and peace activists have taken an important role as first responders in this conflict by aiding persons to safety, collecting food and medicine and assisting fragile persons of the population. We have also seen how many Ukrainian women's rights activists are using their voice to report from the war and from the migration route. Many of these women have already been active in working for human rights and democracy for many years and these women can, if given the right support, become very valuable voices and actors in the process of reaching and building peace.

Unfortunately, we also know that in crisis and conflict, traditional gender roles are reinforced, making it harder for women to get their voices heard. We have gotten reports that feminist actors who are calling out sexist and patriarchal structures reinforced by the war are met with hate.

So far, we have not seen any women in the formal talks and negotiations surrounding the conflict. This must be rectified, and the international community must ensure that women are represented in the work towards peace. In order to achieve this, we call on the international community to already now assist women's rights organisations and women peace activists so that they can prepare themselves to engage in conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. Our recommendations to the international community are:

- Recognition of Women Human Rights Defenders' (WHRDs) narratives as representatives of their constituencies, often most affected by conflict, to actively help transform the war narratives; as well as recognition of WHRDs' roles and leadership during active war and conflict;

- Activation of the role of women's peace and mediation networks as a proactive measure to serve as a conduit for gender-specific needs and priorities for official processes and/or policies;
- Recognise the unique and gendered risks and threats faced by WHRDs in conflict, and invest in programmes dedicated to their security, both financial grants and resources dedicated to rapid, emergency responses. All programme budgets should include a contingency line to respond to emerging and on-going security threats.

Depending on how the war develops and when we can see a ceasefire, peace negotiations, a more stable situation, the following actions should also be supported by the international community:

- Resourcing of the women's peace movements across the country, also with regional outreach and support, and creating a women-led thematic platform with technical expertise (for example, in areas such as ceasefire monitoring, gender-responsive early warning, analysis, etc.);
- Supporting the development of gender responsive early warning systems (GREWS) on the ground in order to timely and effectively address any future tensions or escalations;
- Support to local women's organisations in efforts on documentation, especially related to sexual and gender-based violence;
- Establishment and support of channels to ensure the voicing and documentation of the needs and priorities of WHRDs and their target communities on the ground, as well as their transformation into policy and advocacy messages that respond to these needs and priorities;
- Secure and safe spaces for WHRDs for networking, communication, and experience exchange;
- Integration of the gender perspective into safety and security mechanisms. Donors should support the organising and work of local protection and emergency organisations and networks, and mechanisms such as networks of safe houses.
- Provision of short- and long-term sustainable funding, including core funding, for women's organisations and WHRDs. These funding schemes, instruments, and modalities should be accessible, inclusive, and innovative, as well as entail a degree of flexibility to enable maximum results to support WHRDs meet the challenges of shrinking space and militarist, anti-gender rhetoric;
- Access to internet and secure digital platforms; ensuring that internet is affordable, safe, and accessible for WHRDs, including those living in rural areas and in poverty, for example by financing equipment and training in digital security, but also considering gendered issues, such as control over such resources by male family members and children, especially during online schooling induced by the pandemic or conflict;
- Integrated security (physical, psychological, digital) to ensure holistic security for activists and WHRDs and directly working with the affected areas; both in the form of

workshops for WHRDs/WROs, as well as trainings to enable them to work in communities;

- Mental health and psychosocial support to WHRDs and activists;

Finally, the international community must also support similar actions to support the women's rights movement, women peace activists and actors for democracy throughout the region. We are witnessing how tension is increasing in South Caucasus and we fear that Russia's war on Ukraine will lead to greater instability also in these countries. Here it is of outmost importance that the international community do everything in its power to prevent such a development.

We also see a great need for the international community to support the brave women's rights activists, human rights activists and peace activists inside Russia who are standing up to the Russian regime. The international community must support these voices.