

A feminist response to Russia's war in Ukraine - Recommendations to the International Community (Policy Brief II).

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation works to promote women's rights in conflict affected areas and to ensure women's participation in peace building globally. We currently work and support local women's rights organisations in 20 conflict affected countries around the world including Ukraine.

It has been 10 months since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. According to OCHA¹'s 17.7 million people inside Ukraine have pressing humanitarian needs, whereof 6.2 million are IDPs. Almost 8 million Ukrainians have fled the country since the start of the invasion² and an estimated 90% of the refugees from Ukraine are women and children. This war has devastating effects on all parts of the Ukrainian population, but as always, the conflict affects different parts of the population in different ways. Therefore, it is essential that the international community applies a gendered and intersectional approach to their response. The international community must also promote all parts of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in its response and ensure that women's security and women's rights are upheld, and that women's voice and participation is ensured in the response and in all the work and decision-making process related to the recovery of the country and a future peace.

In this policy brief we outline specific recommendations to the international community in the areas of:

1. Protection needs and Gender Based Violence.
2. A gendered intersectional humanitarian response.
3. The locally driven response and women's voice and participation in the recovery of Ukraine.

1. Protection needs and Gender Based Violence:

Conflict related SGBV and other forms of GBV in Ukraine:

Ever since the beginning of the invasion we have received reports about how women and girls, but also men, have been subjected to sexual violence by Russian soldiers, which constitutes a war crime. Many of the cases recorded are acts which also amount to torture and cruel or inhumane treatment³. It is important that these crimes are investigated and that perpetrators are brought to justice. However, most importantly is that those who are subjected to these crimes receive the protection, help, and support they need and that measures are put into place which protects women and girls from further crimes.

¹ [Ukraine: Revised Flash Appeal 2022 | Global Focus \(unhcr.org\)](https://www.unhcr.org/global-focus/2022/01/ukraine-revised-flash-appeal-2022)

² <https://reporting.unhcr.org/ukraine-situation>

³ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/reports/a77533-independent-international-commission-inquiry-ukraine-note-secretary>

In addition to cases of sexual violence perpetrated by Russian soldiers many local women's rights organisations have also reported an increase in other types of GBV, including domestic violence, in different regions of Ukraine. This is due to multiple factors, such as increase of stress and trauma, including PTSD, decrease of economic opportunities, drinking as one of the coping mechanisms used by men, as well as decrease in services provided by the state and the police in response to GBV cases. It is essential that the international community support victims/survivors of GBV in Ukraine regardless of who the perpetrator may be.

Recommendations to the international community:

- Support specialised services, including shelters and hotlines to help victims/survivors of conflict related SGBV and ensure that both local shelters and international actors operating in Ukraine offers victims/survivors of conflict related SGBV medical support, including access to SRHR and abortions, psychological support, trauma counselling and legal aid.
- Continue to support the different efforts of the UN⁴ to record these crimes as well as the efforts of the Joint Investigation team set up by Eurojust and the ICC to bring the perpetrators to justice⁵.
- Support to local women's organisations in their efforts on documenting the conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence.
- Support the response to other forms of GBV, so that local shelters and specialised services have the capacity to aid victims/ survivors of GBV and domestic violence regardless of who the perpetrator is. This help must include safe accommodation and economic support.
- Ukraine ratified the Istanbul Convention this Spring. With the increase of GBV and domestic violence, it is important that the international community encourage Ukraine to implement the minimum standards of the Istanbul Convention and supports local women's rights organisations who are pushing for the minimum standards to be realised.

Protection needs and services for Ukrainian women outside of the country:

Almost 8 million people have fled Ukraine since Russia's full-scale invasion in February, out of these 90 percent are women and children. According to the UNHCR, one in five women refugees/IDPs are subjected to sexual violence globally and we know that many Ukrainian women and girls that have left the country have been subjected to or are at risk of being subjected to sexual violence and trafficking.

Recommendations to the international community:

- Ensure that Ukrainian refugees receive economic support and information on how to obtain economic support in host countries, to protect women from being exploited by human traffickers.
- Support information campaigns and hotlines where people can report suspected trafficking and information. Many people who have fled do not speak any other languages, which is

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <https://www.eurojust.europa.eu/eurojust-and-the-war-in-ukraine>

why it is important to spread information about support mechanisms in Ukrainian and Russian where victims of trafficking can seek support.

- Ensure appropriate medical and psychological support is provided to victims/survivors of sexual violence, including access to SRHR and safe abortion, in host countries that receive Ukrainian refugees.
- Ensure the availability of interpreters (including sign language interpretation) in healthcare settings, humanitarian centres and SGBV response in host countries across Europe – for victims/survivors of sexual violence who are accessing medical care, abortion and psychological support.
- Support women's and feminist initiatives in Europe that work with Ukrainian women-survivors of SGBV, foster bilateral and multilateral projects with Ukrainian organisations to ensure rapid response to emerging needs and exchange of experience.

Specific Protection needs of LGBTQI-persons:

LGBTQI-persons face specific risks of attacks both from Russian military and from within Ukrainian society, as discrimination of LGBTQI-person is still widespread. The risks of attacks on LGBTQI-persons are particularly high in occupied areas, where trans and gender non-confirming people are afraid to even leave the house due to not looking like they do in their passport photo.

LGBTQI-persons are also facing a lot of difficulties and risks when fleeing. One specific obstacle is that many LGBTQI-persons live in relationships and family constellations, including children of same-gender couples, that are not always formally recognised due to legislation, which makes it difficult for them to flee as a family. Trans, intersex and gender non-conforming people are also facing problems when leaving Ukraine for neighbouring countries due to the gender marker on their passport or ID documents not corresponding to their gender.

Recommendations to the international community:

- Ensure that actors operating in the country carry out assessments of specific needs and risks of the LGBTQI-community, to provide them with appropriate support inside the country and when fleeing the country.
- Support local LGBTQI-organisations and international LGBTQI-networks who are crucial in giving support to LGBTQI-persons at risk, including support to survivors of SGBV, and safe shelters and housing.
- Join local civil society in advocating equal rights for LGBTQI persons, including marriage equality and/or civil partnership. Support local LGBTQI community in making visible their different roles in response – from humanitarian, advocacy to joining the military.

2. A gendered intersectional 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 have an intersectional approach, be LGBTQI-sensitive and ensure that all persons receive aid without discrimination. Groups of women vulnerable against intersecting identities are very important to highlight right now, as

they are being affected in multiple ways. Women with disabilities are one of the groups most at risk for lack of access to safe shelters, lack of infrastructure and state services for them in war time. To respond to the needs of all women and girls the following recommendations must be implemented by donors and organisations on the ground.

Recommendations to the international community:

- Ensure that actors operating in the country map out and 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; specific needs of pregnant women, women with disabilities, and LGBTQI-persons.
- Ensure that the provision of medical care and services are accessible for persons with disabilities and includes services that are of specific need for women, girls and LGBTQI-persons, including SRHR and abortion, specific medicine, such as contraceptives, hormonal therapy and HIV-medicines.
- Ensure that mechanisms for prevention and response to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) are integrated into humanitarian responses.
- Ensure that shelters are accessible for women with disabilities, equipped with WASH needs, electricity/running water, as women will remain the ones burdened with domestic duties (cooking, washing, basic healthcare), even in displacement.
- Insist that needs assessments carried out by international organisations and INGOs are informed by the local population and local organisations. International organisations and INGOs must also coordinate better with local actors and value their knowledge and expertise.
- Ensure that the receiving communities are consulted in the humanitarian response. Only by consulting and listening to the voices and needs of beneficiaries can we build communities capable of recovery and ownership when the crisis is over. Such beneficiary inclusive approach corresponds to the language of the Convention on the Right of Persons with Disabilities (CRDP), which all UN organizations are supposed to respect and follow.
- Channel financial support towards subsidizing utility bills, medical, food expenses, rent costs, as women who are heads of households may struggle financially to cover these costs, using flexible funding mechanisms (including through the application of flexible funding).

3. The locally driven response and women's voice and participation in the recovery of Ukraine:

The locally driven response:

Local women's initiatives and organisations have been at the forefront of the response to the war. According to UN Women Rapid Civil Society Assessment (April 2022) at least 64% of civil society organisations in Ukraine have continued to provide services and interventions after Russia's invasion. In most part CSOs have had to make significant adjustments to their programmes and operations in response to the crisis to provide services and interventions that they have not worked on before. Apart from existing registered groups, many new grassroots initiatives emerged in response to the war. These local organisations and initiatives have

played and continues to play a pivotal role as first responders as they might be in places which international organisations cannot reach and as they have a good understanding of the needs in their neighbourhoods.

Recommendations to the international community:

- Consider Ukrainian Women's Rights organisations and grassroots initiatives as equal and capable partners in humanitarian, development and peacebuilding work. Involve them in a meaningful way in planning, distribution and management of resources, as well as in monitoring and evaluation of international projects. Include decent salaries in budgets for partner organisations.
- Support Ukrainian Women's Rights organisations through short- and long-term sustainable funding, including core funding. These funding schemes, instruments, and modalities should be accessible, inclusive, and innovative, as well as entail a degree of flexibility to enable maximum results.
- Ensure funding for local women's rights organisations makes room for integrated security (physical, psychological, digital) to ensure holistic security for women's rights activists, which is crucial for their sustainability and resilience in times of immense hardship.

Women's voice and participation in the recovery of Ukraine:

Local women's rights organisations are also essential for maintaining the resilience within communities and are ultimately the ones who will remain and work towards the recovery of the country long after international actors have disappeared. Despite this, women's rights organisations feel excluded from many local and national level decisions made about the resource management, planning and policy during war time and about post-war recovery. As women's rights organisations have had to go into crises response few organisations have had the time and capacity for advocacy, reflection and strategizing around the future. To ensure women's participation in key-decisions in the coming period it is essential that the international community fund local women's rights organisations to do advocacy work, and for the international community to insist on women's participation in key-processes related to Ukraine's future.

Recommendations to the international community:

- Ensure secure and safe spaces for women's rights activists for networking, communication, and experience exchange.
- Insist on promotion of gender equality and women's rights in the Ukraine Recovery Plan and in the Ukraine EU-accession process, as well as the meaningful participation of women's rights organisations in these processes.
- Support women's rights organisations to do advocacy work on key-processes that are of importance for the future of Ukraine, including but not limited to – the Ukraine Recovery Plan, the EU accession process, and the implementation of the Istanbul Convention.
- Engage with members of Ukrainian civil society in cities across the EU, who have been active in Ukraine as civil society, and who continue to engage with communities of Ukrainians abroad. This group of migrants from Ukraine, while being displaced by war, are also agents of change and mediators on behalf of communities of Ukrainians. They must

been seen as equal partners in developing support and integration services in host countries.

- Support the work of women mediators, who can respond to local outbursts of conflict, the integration of IDPs in host-communities and the reintegration of previously occupied areas.
- Support peacebuilding efforts to prepare the ground in government-controlled areas for the upcoming peace, focusing on strengthening intra-Ukrainian societal resilience and social cohesion during the war.
- When the time comes – insist that all peacebuilding efforts and transitional justice processes are based on an inclusive approach, with meaningful participation, inclusive consultations and dialogue processes engaging women’s rights organisations.