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# Gender Considerations in the International Response to Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine

**Policy Brief** by Dr. Kseniya Oksamytna and Dr. Felicity Gray

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# Introduction

Since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion, international organizations that provide assistance in Ukraine have undergone rapid adaptation. This has affected their priorities, ways of working, and modes of delivery. Furthermore, the need to address gender in the provision of assistance has become more pressing for all international organizations. The gendered harms and risks of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine are numerous and varied. They include the heightened risk of sexual violence in the occupied territories<sup>1</sup>, family separations during displacement or due to mobilization into the armed forces<sup>2</sup>, increasing mental health issues and domestic violence in the families of veterans, and the deepening of pre-existing gender inequalities,<sup>3</sup> including in political participation.<sup>4</sup> Thus, international organizations have faced the dual challenge of sustaining their gender-focused programming from before February 2022 and responding to new challenges.

This brief examines how international organizations in Ukraine have integrated gender considerations into their work following the full-scale invasion.<sup>5</sup> The brief is based on international organizations' reports, press releases, recordings of relevant meetings (such as monthly videocalls of the gender-based violence sub-cluster), and three interviews with international aid workers who have worked in Ukraine at some point after February 2022. To protect the interviewees' anonymity, no interview dates are included here. The brief uses the concept of gender-sensitive assistance to refer to actions that advance the rights and address the vulnerabilities of women, girls, men, boys, queer persons, and survivors of gender-based and sexual violence. It considers how gender intersects with other sources of inequality, such as age, minority status, socioeconomic disparities, membership in the LGBTQ+ community, or disability.<sup>6</sup>

The brief identifies several challenges to the delivery of gender-sensitive international assistance, such as the difficulty of navigating a complex landscape of local partners that has included newly formed and informal civil society organizations; the balancing act of supporting local initiatives without displacing the burden onto overworked Ukrainian activists; the need to achieve a balance between male and female international aid workers at hardship duty stations across Ukraine; the dearth of international aid workers with knowledge of the Ukrainian language and context; and the challenge of raising sensitive questions about gender equality with the Ukrainian government while it withstands the Russian invasion.

The brief recommends that international actors: advocate for sustainable peace for the restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity to reduce the number of Ukrainians exposed to Russian occupation; engage with Ukrainian civil society as equal partners in determining priorities for international assistance; hold difficult conversation about human rights with

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the experiences of Ukrainians in the occupied territories, including gendered risks, see: Julia Friedrich, "They Came to 'Liberate' Us and Left Us With Nothing': Life Under Russian Occupation in Ukraine," Global Public Policy Institute, July 30, 2024, accessed August 22, 2024, [https://gppi.net/media/Friedrich\\_2024\\_Life-Under-Russian-Occupation.pdf](https://gppi.net/media/Friedrich_2024_Life-Under-Russian-Occupation.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR, "Lives on Hold: Intentions and Perspectives of Refugees, Refugee Returnees and IDPs from Ukraine," February 20, 2024, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/106738>.

<sup>3</sup> Marian Machlouzarides, Nadiia Novosolova, and Selin Uretici, "Ukraine Gender Snapshot: Findings from the reSCORE 2023," Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development (SeeD), November 5, 2023, accessed August 22, 2024, [https://api.scoreforpeace.org/storage/pdfs/Gender-report\\_01-36\\_3\\_web.pdf](https://api.scoreforpeace.org/storage/pdfs/Gender-report_01-36_3_web.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Niklas Balbon, "Political Participation in Kharkiv: Gendered Wartime Changes and Opportunities," Global Public Policy Institute, April 4, 2024, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://gppi.net/2024/04/04/political-participation-in-kharkiv-gendered-wartime-changes-and-opportunities>.

<sup>5</sup> We are grateful for funding from the UK Research and Innovation Policy Support Fund and excellent research assistance from Dr. Begum Zorlu.

<sup>6</sup> On the latter, see: Niklas Balbon, "How to Improve International Support for People with Disabilities in Ukraine," Global Public Policy Institute, August 7, 2024, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://gppi.net/2024/08/07/international-support-for-people-with-disabilities-in-ukraine>.

national partners even in times of war and beyond; and consider intersectionality when delivering gender-sensitive assistance.

# Particularities of International Aid Delivery in Ukraine During the Full-Scale Invasion

A variety of local, national and international actors respond to crises caused by armed violence. In the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the response has also occurred at multiple scales. Ukrainian NGOs, semi-formalized collectives, and informal citizen networks quickly mobilized in February 2022 to fundraise for the defense forces and the needs of civilians, with efforts ranging from evacuations to assistance with rebuilding homes damaged during the hostilities.

At the national level, the Ukrainian government, mostly through the Ministry for Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine, assisted internally displaced Ukrainians and those living in frontline regions, among others. The Ukrainian government quickly amended its 1325 National Action Plan – a plan to implement the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security – in mid-summer 2022 to include new provisions on conflict-related sexual violence and human trafficking. Important reforms took place for women in the armed forces, such as the procurement of military uniforms and underwear specifically designed for female service members.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, there was a large-scale international response to the crisis created by Russia’s full-scale invasion from both multilateral and bilateral donors. Among the former, the UN raised \$3.9 billion in 2023 for the humanitarian response in Ukraine, reaching nearly 11 million people, 60 percent of whom were women and girls.<sup>8</sup> As for other international organizations, the EU also provided considerable aid, including humanitarian aid and macro-level financial assistance that helped Ukrainian public services cope with the invasion’s fallout.

**The international community sought to ensure the continuation of ongoing programs but also had to grapple with new challenges.**

There were several continuities and discontinuities in the provision of international assistance in Ukraine before and after February 2022. First of all, the intensity of the full-scale invasion necessitated a rapid re-orientation of many activities. The international community sought to ensure the continuation of ongoing programs but also had to grapple with new challenges. These included assistance to survivors of wartime sexual violence; the prevention of human trafficking among Ukrainians displaced abroad (more than 90 percent of whom are female); the mitigation of generalized dangers to the lives and health of Ukraine’s residents stemming from the hostilities, the intentional targeting of civilian centers, or the disruption to critical infrastructure and medical services; and minimizing the risks of kidnapping and torture of Ukrainians by Russian and affiliated forces. For example, organizations that used to focus on women’s empowerment through rights-focused and awareness-raising activities, such as UN Women, shifted to more operational work: “Suddenly it was not so much about the normative work: [women in frontline regions] ... needed more security-related support. They also needed economic opportunities, which I ... see as prevention [in order] not to be sexually abused or exposed to

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<sup>7</sup> Interview, spring/summer 2024.

<sup>8</sup> OCHA, “Ukraine: Humanitarian Response and Funding Snapshot,” January 30, 2024, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/ukraine-humanitarian-response-and-funding-snapshot-january-december-2023-enuk>.

human trafficking; if you have solid income-generating activities, I see it ... as prevention ... [and] women's economic empowerment in a conflict situation."<sup>9</sup>

Second, the humanitarian crisis resulting from Russia's full-scale invasion quickly affected neighboring countries, including through a large influx of (mostly) women and children fleeing the war. This required scaling up programming in those countries, including in Moldova, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia.<sup>10</sup> Providing assistance to Ukrainians with temporary protection status in each of those countries has presented unique challenges, ranging from restrictive reproductive health laws in Poland to the status of the state of Belarus as a co-aggressor in the war. Ukrainians in Europe, including women and girls, found themselves at risk of physical violence by Russian or pro-Russian individuals as well as those with anti-immigration views.<sup>11</sup>

Third, access to many regions of Ukraine where international actors provided assistance prior to February 2022 was severely curtailed. The territories occupied since 2014, such as Crimea and the so-called Luhansk and Donetsk "People's Republics," became largely inaccessible to local and international organizations, while the territory of both newly occupied and frontline regions in the south-east expanded. In frontline regions, Ukrainian authorities sought to evacuate the population. Many elderly and often lonely women were among those who stayed and had to rely on aid due to the disruption of livelihoods, supply chains and social support networks. Women's life expectancy in Ukraine exceeded men's by nine years and international organizations tried to adjust their engagement to this demographic, which is often underserved in humanitarian crises.<sup>12</sup>

Fourth, the situation was especially challenging because Ukrainian civil society organizations had already been dealing with high workloads before February 2022. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, gender-based violence increased in Ukraine. Local civil society organizations had already been overwhelmed when they began to address the gendered consequences of the full-scale invasion, such as service members returning home with post-traumatic stress disorders,<sup>13</sup> which heighten the risk of violence toward intimate partners.<sup>14</sup> Experts have noted the need to prevent burnout among Ukrainian civil society activists as a priority.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, Ukrainian civil society organizations have demonstrated a capacity to manage large grants and, according to a recent study, have proven 15.5 percent more cost-efficient than international organizations, although only 0.07 percent of all humanitarian funding has gone directly to local actors in Ukraine.<sup>16</sup>

Fifth, the rapidly deteriorating security situation in many areas of Ukraine, including the capital region during the first months of the full-scale invasion, affected the willingness of many international organizations to continue providing assistance through an on-the-ground

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<sup>9</sup> Interview, spring-summer 2024.

<sup>10</sup> For an overview, see: UNFPA, "Regional Response to the Ukraine Crisis," February 2024, accessed August 22, 2024, [https://eeca.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/unfpa\\_2024\\_ukraine\\_regional\\_appeal\\_final\\_version\\_v2.pdf](https://eeca.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/unfpa_2024_ukraine_regional_appeal_final_version_v2.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> For an incident in Germany, see "Russians Are Hunting Down Ukrainian Refugees in Heart of NATO," *Newsweek*, March 20, 2024, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/russians-ukrainian-refugees-attack-germany-1881408>. For an overview of incidents in Czechia, see: Ondřej Plevák, "Incidents targeting Ukrainians rise in Czechia," *Euractiv*, August 25, 2023, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/incidents-targeting-ukrainians-rise-in-czechia>.

<sup>12</sup> AGE International, "100 Days on: Ukraine Is the World's Oldest Humanitarian Crisis – Yet Millions of Older People Lack Support," June 3 2022, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.ageinternational.org.uk/news-stories/news/2022/100-days-on-ukraine-is-the-worlds-oldest-humanitarian-crisis--yet-millions-of-older-people-lack-support>.

<sup>13</sup> Interview, spring/summer 2024.

<sup>14</sup> Amy D. Marshall, Jillian Panuzio, and Casey T. Taft, "Intimate Partner Violence Among Military Veterans and Active Duty Servicemen," *Clinical Psychology Review*, no. 25:7 (2005), pp. 862–876, DOI: 10.1016/j.cpr.2005.05.009.

<sup>15</sup> Galyna Kotliuk, "The Hidden Front of Russia's War: Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Ukraine," Global Public Policy Institute, June 26, 2024, accessed August 22, 2024, [https://gppi.net/media/Kotliuk\\_2024\\_Hidden-Front-of-Russias-War\\_ENG.pdf](https://gppi.net/media/Kotliuk_2024_Hidden-Front-of-Russias-War_ENG.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Courtenay Cabot Venton, Nicholas Noe, and Hardin Lang, "Passing The Buck: The Economics of Localizing Aid in Ukraine," Sharetrust, the Center for Disaster Philanthropy, and Refugees International, July 23, 2024, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/passing-the-buck-the-economics-of-localizing-aid-in-ukraine>.

presence throughout the country. Many international organizations opted to relocate their staff outside the country or to the relative safety of Western Ukraine, thus reducing their ability to respond in areas that are most impacted by the invasion. This relocation also contributed to Ukrainians' distrust of international organizations – already eroded by the perceived failure of the international system to prevent or effectively address the Russian aggression – as Ukrainians observed international officials gathering in upscale hotels in the Carpathian mountains. As one interviewee noted, many Ukrainians were “furious about all the big four-wheel drive cars ... [especially after] they checked the salary [of international organizations' employees].”<sup>17</sup> While such distrust is typical in emergency contexts, it was particularly notable in Ukraine when juxtaposed with locally led responses. In comparison to Ukrainian public services and NGOs, which mobilized rapidly and effectively – within their limited resources – to respond to humanitarian needs, people perceived international organizations as relatively slow and out of sync with the rapidly developing situation.<sup>18</sup>

## The Work of the UN Protection Cluster Following the Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine

In countries experiencing a humanitarian emergency, the UN system at the country level organizes its work following the so-called cluster approach, whereby one UN agency takes the lead in a particular area of responsibility (often in co-leadership with a non-UN NGO). The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) leads the Protection Cluster. They coordinate the activities of other UN agencies, such as the UN International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), as well as those of non-governmental organizations, both international and local. Within the Protection Cluster, the sub-cluster on gender-based violence (GBV) is co-led by UNFPA and the NGO Care.<sup>19</sup> The sub-cluster formed in 2015 and focused on Eastern Ukraine, expanding operations across the country following the full-scale invasion. By February 2022 the sub-cluster therefore had already acquired significant experience in coordinating responses to gender-based violence and supporting women's and queer persons' empowerment in the Ukrainian context.

After the full-scale invasion, the focus of the sub-cluster members included several areas of work. The first was direct support to survivors of gender-based violence and to displaced women, girls and queer persons. This support encompassed case management to support survivors in assessing their needs in terms of health, safety, rights, and livelihoods. It also supported them in accessing relevant governmental services, providing crisis accommodation such as shelters and safe spaces, distributing dignity kits containing personal hygiene and safety-enhancing products, providing cash and voucher assistance to displaced Ukrainian survivors in Moldova, and offering reproductive health assistance.

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<sup>17</sup> Interview, spring/summer 2024.

<sup>18</sup> Some international NGOs have also been implicated in controversies. The behavior of the leadership of Amnesty International led to the resignation of the director of the organization's Ukrainian branch. Oksana Pokalchuk, “What Amnesty Got Wrong in Ukraine and Why I Had to Resign,” *Washington Post*, August 13, 2022, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/08/13/amnesty-ukraine-civilians-at-risk-why-i-quit>. The behavior of some members of the Russian Red Cross Society led to an internal investigation and the establishment of an Oversight Board. Shaun Walker, “Red Cross Decides Against Suspending Russian Branch Despite Links To Kremlin War Machine,” *The Guardian*, April 29, 2024, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/29/red-cross-decides-against-suspending-russian-branch-despite-links-to-kremlin-war-machine>.

<sup>19</sup> For the organization of the sub-cluster, see [https://response.reliefweb.int/ukraine/gender-based-violence?check\\_logged\\_in=1#text\\_block-16454](https://response.reliefweb.int/ukraine/gender-based-violence?check_logged_in=1#text_block-16454).



The second area of the sub-cluster’s work entailed raising awareness about gender-based violence and protection risks, reporting and advocacy activities, and training. The sub-cluster organized training sessions for humanitarian organizations whose main focus was not gender-based violence.<sup>20</sup> Sub-cluster organizations also trained Ukrainian police and prosecutors in interview techniques based on survivor-centric approaches, including on how to use the Murad Code.<sup>21</sup> The full title of the Murad Code is the “Global Code of Conduct for Gathering and Using Information about Systematic and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence” – a document now available in the Ukrainian language.<sup>22</sup>

Awareness-raising sometimes took the form of arts or sports events, such as an exhibition of children’s paintings “Ukraine without Domestic Violence” in Kyiv in September 2023 and the “Acting for Survivors Run” in Irpin in November 2023. At other times, campaigns were part of worldwide advocacy events, such as “16 Days of Activism Against Violence Against Women”, which follows the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women on November 25. These activities were particularly important as some interviewees reported hearing that traditional gender stereotypes were on the rise during wartime, based on the association between masculinity and military service.<sup>23</sup> This was despite the fact that many

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Ukrainian women joined the armed forces. Nevertheless, cases of gender-based discrimination and harassment in the armed forces also rose in proportion with the rising number of serving women.<sup>24</sup> UN Women and the US Embassy in Ukraine partnered with a Ukrainian NGO, the Institute of Gender Programs, whose project “Invisible Battalion” focused on combatting sexual harassment in the Ukrainian armed forces.<sup>25</sup>

Sub-cluster member organizations cooperated with local, national, bilateral, and multilateral partners. One sub-cluster member, UNFPA, received EU funding for mobile clinics to provide healthcare and counselling in remote areas, with a focus on sexual, reproductive and maternal health. As of February 2024, UNFPA operated twenty-seven such mobile reproductive health units and one mobile maternity unit.<sup>26</sup> With support from the United Kingdom, Canada, Estonia, Sweden, the EU, and Ukraine’s Office for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration of Ukraine, UNFPA also launched an online platform to provide psychotherapeutic support to survivors of war-related violence, including sexual violence. One example of a continued pre-February 2022 activity is the functioning of “Vona” career hubs, formed by UNFPA in 2020 and co-financed by the Embassy of the UK and the USAID Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance, which continue to provide women with psychological and business development support.<sup>27</sup>

Another sub-cluster member organization, UN Women, provided funding and support to Ukrainian NGOs and local women’s self-help groups to address women’s needs through safe shelters and mental health support meetings, including for spouses of veterans, prisoners of war, or missing persons.<sup>28</sup> Numerous Ukrainian organizations, such as the NGO Girls, another

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<sup>20</sup> Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility, “GBV AoR Monthly Call – March 2024,” March 28, 2024, accessed August 22, 2024, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ernd\\_KotTJE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ernd_KotTJE).

<sup>21</sup> Interview, spring/summer 2024.

<sup>22</sup> Institute for International Criminal Investigations, Murad Code: The Global Code of Conduct for Gathering and Using Information about Systematic and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence, April 13, 2022, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.muradcode.com/murad-code>.

<sup>23</sup> Interview, spring/summer 2024. See also: Kotliuk, “The Hidden Front of Russia’s War;” and Yuliia Siedaia, “Adapting and Resocializing After Fighting for Ukraine’s Independence: Women Veterans’ Experience From 2014 to the Present,” Global Public Policy Institute, July 24, 2024, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://gppi.net/2024/07/24/ukrainian-women-veterans-experience-from-2014-to-the-present>.

<sup>24</sup> Interview, spring/summer 2024.

<sup>25</sup> Institute of Gender Program, “Invisible Battalion 3.0: Sexual Harassment In The Military Sphere In Ukraine,” 2024, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://invisiblebattalion.org/en/invisbat-2/#invisbat3-0>.

<sup>26</sup> UNFPA, “Ukraine Humanitarian Snapshot #30, 1 - 29 February 2024,” accessed August 22, 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/unfpa-ukraine-humanitarian-snapshot-30-1-29-february-2024>.

<sup>27</sup> UNFPA, “From Psychological Support To Business Development: How UNFPA Helps Women With Self-Realization During The War,” July 7, 2023, accessed August 22, 2024, [https://ukraine.unfpa.org/en/unfpa\\_helps\\_women\\_vona\\_hubs](https://ukraine.unfpa.org/en/unfpa_helps_women_vona_hubs).

<sup>28</sup> Interview, spring/summer 2024.

sub-cluster member, undertake a lot of operational work, including: running shelters for survivors of gender-based violence; providing legal assistance and psychological support for such survivors; and distributing humanitarian aid to women and children affected by the full-scale invasion.<sup>29</sup>

## The Challenges of Delivering Gender-Sensitive Assistance in Ukraine

Besides the scale, intensity, rapid onset, and protracted nature of the humanitarian crisis caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, several specific challenges have emerged. First, the full-scale invasion spurred significant mobilization of internal civil society resources in Ukraine. International organizations therefore attempted to support locally led initiatives without totally displacing the burden (and the associated security risks) of providing assistance onto Ukrainian partners.<sup>30</sup> This was sometimes a difficult balancing act: “It’s critical to get women’s civil society funding and then also ensure that the civil society is not burning out because we also see that that civil society is having such a heavy burden that they are sometimes almost about to collapse – and they don’t”.<sup>31</sup> The cluster system, which has consistently struggled with the engagement of national NGOs,<sup>32</sup> has faced similar challenges in Ukraine: many of the key local organizations that are active in the humanitarian response are absent from the coordination forums. In addition to catalyzing the efforts of established civil society actors, the fact that the full-scale invasion also mobilized new or informal assistance providers has added an extra layer of complexity. For international actors, navigating this fluid landscape has at times been challenging. Involving local organizations – whether established national NGOs or informal ones – in determining the priorities for the humanitarian response is not often understood as a first-order concern. As one interviewee observed, “the UN is traditionally not including civil society in anything that they do: they [only] want them as implementing partners”.<sup>33</sup>

Second, considering the rapid deterioration of the security situation, in determining the security of its offices the UN reclassified all locations in Ukraine as non-family duty stations. As of July 2024, Dnipro, Kharkiv and Mykolaiv have been classified as “E” hardship level, the most severe level, while all the other Ukrainian cities were classified as “D” hardship level, the second most severe. At hardship duty stations, the gender composition of aid workers is often skewed toward an over-representation of men, which shapes the ways that gender concerns are (or are not) identified, advocated for, and addressed. One interviewee observed representatives of an international organization providing financing to a local partner to build a shelter for internally displaced persons in Western Ukraine, which lacked any facilities for families with children, such as a playground.<sup>34</sup> This was echoed by another interviewee who felt that during the planning for recovery, “women’s needs are not incorporated”: “If you just build houses but then don’t have health clinics, schools, kindergartens, nobody wants to move to these houses if you don’t have these soft components and services.”<sup>35</sup> This was, in the

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<sup>29</sup> For more details, see: <https://divchata.org/en/projects/campaign-against-gbv.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Felicity Gray, Tatiana Gaviuk, and Kristina Preiksaityte, “We Were Ready” – Learning from Ukraine’s Locally Led Response,” *Nonviolent Peaceforce*, June 15, 2022, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/opinion-we-were-ready-learning-from-ukraines-locally-led-response>.

<sup>31</sup> Interview, spring/summer 2024.

<sup>32</sup> Matthew Serventy, “National NGOs and the Cluster Approach: The ‘Authority of Format’,” *Humanitarian Exchange Magazine*, January 11, 2013, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://odihpn.org/publication/national-ngos-and-the-cluster-approach-the-%C2%91authority-of-format>.

<sup>33</sup> Interview, spring/summer 2024.

<sup>34</sup> Interview, spring/summer 2024.

<sup>35</sup> Interview, spring/summer 2024.

interviewee’s opinion, due to the predominance of men among international aid workers, who might not see the needs of women with children as a priority. The lack of an explicit gender perspective also led to situations in which male and female displaced persons shared shelter accommodation, and there were reports of sexual assaults in such settings.<sup>36</sup>

Third, a persistent barrier to the effective engagement of international actors with local partners and communities was the lack of language skills on the part of international aid workers.<sup>37</sup> This issue became particularly sensitive in Ukraine following Russia’s full-scale invasion. Before February 2022, many international aid workers in Ukraine spoke Russian rather than Ukrainian, a reflection of a Russo-centric view of the region. In the aftermath of the full-scale invasion, many new international staff arrived who did not speak Ukrainian or

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Russian and so struggled to communicate with local counterparts and communities, or to understand the context with sufficient clarity. For those with Russian skills alone, speaking the language presented a risk of re-traumatizing survivors or alienating civil society partners (although many showed pragmatism in this regard). While some international aid workers began learning Ukrainian, a lack of even basic fluency persists among most international staff. One interviewee admitted that “it’s really difficult to find experts first of all for the current situation ... Even when you have money, you don’t find the experts because it should be somebody who speaks Ukrainian.”<sup>38</sup> Compounding the issue, in a manner typical for emergencies, large international organizations tended to poach talent from local civil society organizations, especially as international organizations’ operations expanded rapidly after February 2022. For example, in terms of experts on gender-based

violence, “anybody who was available ... was basically recruited by UNFPA ... [T]he UN actually steals people because of the salaries, so that means that there’s even more of a need in Kyiv and at local levels to replenish [Ukrainian civil society organizations’ talent pool].”<sup>39</sup> This talent pool had already shrunk because many female civil society leaders had left Ukraine for the safety of countries abroad. Ukrainian civil society organizations and also public sector bodies struggled to pay the salaries that large international organizations could afford, with implications for the former’s ability to attract or retain the best specialists.

Fourth, assistance to groups within Ukrainian society that traditionally lacked visibility continued to face obstacles. One such group is male survivors of sexual violence,<sup>40</sup> considering the taboo nature of this topic in many societies including Ukraine. The UNFPA has specific guidance on how to address male survivors in light of the fact that many male soldiers (as well as civilians) have experienced sexual violence while held captive by Russian forces.<sup>41</sup> The challenges of providing assistance to this group include the lack of dedicated spaces for male survivors, compared to the relatively well-developed network of spaces for female survivors, as well as the limited number of male social workers trained to provide support.<sup>42</sup> Another group that has often struggled to access services in Ukraine is the Roma population, and providing them with gender-sensitive assistance has remained a challenge for the international community.<sup>43</sup> The challenges faced by the Ukrainian LGBTQ+ community have

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<sup>36</sup> Interview, spring/summer 2024.

<sup>37</sup> Interview, spring/summer 2024.

<sup>38</sup> Interview, spring/summer 2024.

<sup>39</sup> Interview, spring/summer 2024.

<sup>40</sup> On the Russian forces’ systematic use of sexual violence against Ukrainians, including men, see: Ivana Kottasová and Olga Voitovych, “Survivors Say Russia Is Waging a War of Sexual Violence in Occupied Areas of Ukraine. Men Are Often the Victims,” *CNN*, May 30, 2024, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/05/30/europe/russia-sexual-violence-occupied-ukraine-intl-cmd/index.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Interview, spring/summer 2024.

<sup>42</sup> Protection Cluster, “GBV AoR Working Group: Addressing the Needs of Male Survivors of Sexual Violence: 29 February 2024 Meeting Minutes,” March 15, 2024, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/gbv-aor-working-group-addressing-needs-male-survivors-sexual-violence-29-february-2024-meeting-minutes-enuk>.

<sup>43</sup> Protection Cluster, “GBV AoR Coordination Meeting Notes: 25 April 2024 Meeting Minutes,” May 9, 2024, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/ukraine-gbv-aor-coordination-meeting-notes-25-april-2024-1100-1230-meeting-minutes-enuk>.

also been compounded by the Russian invasion, with those in the temporary occupied regions facing grave danger.<sup>44</sup>

Fifth, one of the most important roles of actors providing international assistance is advocacy for gender-sensitive policies with national authorities. In Ukraine, such advocacy can be difficult because “security aspects ... can cloud other important issues.”<sup>45</sup> Important work on gender equality, protection from gender-based and sexual violence, and anti-discrimination regarding the LGBTQ+ community was ongoing but remains incomplete. Ukrainian civil society organizations lobbied to sustain momentum toward necessary reforms; for example, the LGBTQ+ community has campaigned against the waning of attention to their cause with the slogan “It’s always the right time for human rights,” meaning even during the full-scale war. International partners have noted that the Ukrainian government and public sector employ many women but not always in leadership positions, while the few in high positions appeared “quite alone in these masculine institutions.”<sup>46</sup> At times, the inclusion of women has seemed like a tokenistic gesture to project a certain image to international partners, while the extent of those women’s access to decision-making was hard to verify.<sup>47</sup>

International experts have also noted serious remaining gaps in the efforts by Ukrainian law enforcement and social services agencies to protect individuals from sexual violence and to support survivors of sexual violence, but donors and partner countries have been cautious about “criticizing a country that is under siege by Russia.”<sup>48</sup> The perceptions of international partners and self-perceptions of Ukrainians have combined to produce a reluctance to admit that in some areas, progress was needed: “Ukraine was seen as a modern advanced country ready for the EU and NATO membership, and it has a very good functioning infrastructure, the education level is high, so it is normal that people are proud of their country ... I think it was hard for Ukrainian leaders, mainly men and some women, to admit that their country has to [do much more] when it comes to the care for vulnerable people.”<sup>49</sup> Among international partners, similar attitudes were prevalent. Some of them thought: “We are in Europe so we don’t need to do gender. They’ve reached gender equality.”<sup>50</sup>

At the working level, however, many Ukrainians professionals have welcomed international partners’ advice on gender-sensitive interventions. One interviewee reported being “really happy about ... the police and law enforcement entities really openly saying that we need help; we don’t know how to address [conflict-related sexual violence]; we need new interview techniques.”<sup>51</sup> However, while some members of the Ukrainian government have used the issue of sexual violence to rally international support for their cause, not all have done so in a sensitive and survivor-centric manner,<sup>52</sup> and ensuring follow-up in terms of tangible support has remained a challenge. Maintaining the momentum for reforms would require honest conversations between international actors and national authorities in Ukraine.

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<sup>44</sup> On how Ukrainian LGBTQ+ persons have experienced the full-scale invasion, see: Maryna Shevtsova, “Queering Displacement: The State of the Ukrainian LGBTQ+ Community During the Russian Full-Scale Invasion,” Global Public Policy Institute, April 4, 2024, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://gppi.net/2024/04/04/queering-displacement-ukrainian-lgbtq-community>.

<sup>45</sup> Interview, spring/summer 2024.

<sup>46</sup> Interview, spring/summer 2024.

<sup>47</sup> Interview, spring/summer 2024.

<sup>48</sup> Interview, spring/summer 2024.

<sup>49</sup> Interview, spring/summer 2024.

<sup>50</sup> Interview, spring/summer 2024.

<sup>51</sup> Interview, spring/summer 2024.

<sup>52</sup> In May 2022, the Ukrainian parliament dismissed the ombudsperson, Lyudmila Denisova, including for “describing sexually motivated crimes in gratuitous detail.” See: “Why Ukraine’s Human Rights Chief Lyudmila Denisova Was Fired,” *Deutsche Welle*, March 3, 2022, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/why-ukraines-human-rights-chief-lyudmyla-denisova-was-dismissed/a-62017920>.

# Recommendations

In order to enhance the gender focus of international assistance to Ukraine, the international community should undertake the following steps:

## Advocate for sustainable peace through the restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is at the root of many violations of the rights of women, men, girls, boys, and queer persons, including through conflict-related sexual violence or forced displacement. Reducing the number of Ukrainians exposed to the Russian occupation as well as reclaiming and reintegrating territories occupied by Russia since 2014 and 2022 will increase the number of Ukrainians able to benefit from human rights protections and access to assistance offered by the Ukrainian government in collaboration with international partners.

## Engage Ukrainian civil society as an equal partner in determining priorities for international assistance.

While the involvement of civil society organizations as implementing partners in Ukraine has been a longstanding and successful practice, ensuring that assistance is driven by the needs and preferences of Ukrainians rather than international donors would increase the responsiveness, coherence and sustainability of aid projects. This means, for example: ensuring that Ukrainian organizations have a leading voice in aid coordination; further enabling Ukrainian organizations' access to major funding such as the Ukrainian Humanitarian Fund through partnerships, capacity-strengthening efforts, and reduced administrative burdens; and ensuring that security risks are not simply passed on to Ukrainian sub-grantees but mitigated and managed more equitably and effectively.<sup>53</sup> At the same time, international partners should keep in mind the fact that Ukrainian civil society actors are experiencing war trauma, high workloads, and in some cases disappointment in international organizations, so trust should be nurtured and not assumed, while the burden of providing assistance and associated risks should not be displaced upon Ukrainian civil society actors.

## Advocate for human rights with national partners even in times of war.

Ukraine's international partners should not shy away from difficult conversations about equality and the protection of vulnerable populations with Ukrainian ministries, local and municipal governments, and representatives of the security forces, such as the police and the army, even while the country withstands Russian aggression. The influx of international aid provides a window of opportunity to push for significant changes, while the decreasing tolerance of corruption, discrimination and public sector incompetence among Ukrainians can help spur citizens' engagement in and the monitoring of reforms.

## Ensure that intersectionality is considered when delivering gender-sensitive assistance.

Taking into account the rights and vulnerabilities of recipients of assistance that stem not only from their gender but also age, minority status, socioeconomic situation, disability, or membership in the LGBTQ+ community is necessary to ensure that traditionally marginalized groups, such as Roma, queer persons, or male survivors of sexual violence, benefit from human rights protections, increased visibility, and greater societal inclusion.

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<sup>53</sup> Nonviolent Peaceforce, "Responsible Partnerships? Risk, Protection, and Local Actors in the Ukraine Humanitarian Response," May 3, 2023, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Responsible-Partnerships-2.pdf>.



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