

Ukrainian internally displaced women at risk of sexual and gender-based violence

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Internal displacement in Ukraine brings with it increased risks of sexual and gender-based violence. Recent research findings offer recommendations to reduce risks in transit and to support internally displaced women with housing, access to work and mental health support.

Russia's war on Ukraine has given rise to mass population displacement, primarily of women and children (as few men between 18 and 60 are permitted to leave the country). Mass population displacement has continued since 2014 when over 1.5 million people from Eastern Ukraine and Crimea fled to other regions of the country. The new phase of aggression, initiated on 24th February 2022, has displaced over 5.4 million people internally.¹ Returnees from international displacement add to the IDP population, with over 4.7 million Ukrainians who had fled to Poland being recorded crossing the border back into Ukraine by August 2022.² Many are unable to return to their homes and are therefore internally displaced.

Displacement experience is gendered. Between 2014 and 2021 a greater military presence in some areas of Ukraine was associated with increased reports of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) incidents at checkpoints.³ While SGBV is widely defined as "any harmful act that is perpetrated against one person's will and that is based on socially ascribed (gender) differences between males and females",⁴ there are different types of SGBV, including sexual, physical and psychological violence.

This study, drawing on the SEREDA project⁵, conceptualises that SGBV manifests across a continuum from pre-displacement, conflict and transit, to places of refuge.⁶ The paper draws on research conducted by the University of Birmingham with a Ukrainian NGO (Convictus) and community-based researchers between May and June 2022. It included 15 semi-structured interviews with female IDPs in Western Ukraine and discussions with multiple stakeholders, in addition to 17 interviews with Ukrainian women in Poland, some of whom were previously displaced in

their homeland.⁷ Convictus is specialised in SGBV response and their daily experience of working with survivors in Ukraine is reflected in this article.

Violence in conflict and in transit

Extensive evidence indicates that internal displacement increases the risk of violence along forced displacement routes. Our study corroborates existing evidence and reveals how the risk of SGBV increases along internal transit routes in Ukraine and even upon arrival in places of refuge in Western Ukraine. This occurs for multiple reasons, from loss of resources and economic destitution to trauma and shock, which all affect IDPs' vulnerability to exploitation.

While some respondents revealed single incidents of violence or talked about their acquaintances' experiences of violence, others experienced different types of violence from pre-displacement through conflict, transit and refuge. All respondents were subjected to and witnessed armed violence and life-threatening events in their hometowns and during displacement. In several accounts, women did not want to leave their husbands behind as they valued them as their protectors. Living in and fleeing occupied territories was described as a terrifying experience. Many recalled being confined to basements and shelters for days and weeks during airstrikes.

Many women were afraid of becoming victims of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). Several respondents shared indirect information (which they heard from family, colleagues and social media) about the rape of Ukrainian women and children by the Russian army:

"We had girls from a neighbouring village who had been taken to the hospital as the

result of violence...I have a friend who works at the hospital, she was on duty for 42 days non-stop... she saw them all after the operation. One doctor said – I couldn't see where to sew up the wound. It was terrible." (Oksana⁸)

Gendered violence during transit was widespread, including sexual harassment and physical and emotional violence. In particular, women and transgender women and men on buses and trains were subjected to insulting comments and sexual harassment by drunk militia. Risks of trafficking were described as high, with some recounting stories of women and men who disappeared during their journeys by train and road.

Some women tried to appear less attractive by wearing loose clothes and cutting their hair. Some said that men at roadblocks harassed young women and did not let them pass, for example saying: "We are not going to let you leave. Pretty women mustn't leave Kherson."

SGBV in the labour market

Most IDPs in Ukraine faced destitution and depended on friends, relatives and civil society. Some did not know how to apply for state benefits (which were, in any case, insufficient to meet IDPs' basic needs). Some continued their jobs online. However, most became unemployed, which increased their vulnerability to exploitation in the informal labour market. For example, a 20-year-old female IDP in Western Ukraine worked in two chain restaurants for two weeks each on probation without payment. Many considered labour exploitation as discrimination against IDPs. Some IDPs explained that employers did not want to hire them due to their lack of permanent residency.

Women were also targeted through apparent job offers on social media. Some were offered sex work disguised under vacancies within the hospitality sector. For example, after advertising her cleaning services, a young female participant started receiving messages from men requesting the inclusion of sex services. Another young participant disclosed how, during an ordinary job interview, she and her partner were offered work in the pornography industry.

Few received any information about the risks of SGBV or how to seek support. The Ukrainian police were described as insensitive to emotional and economic violence among IDPs, with a tendency to blame victims.

SGBV in accommodation

Safe housing is essential for preventing SGBV and helping victims to cope with trauma. There was a shortage of available accommodation for IDPs in Ukraine, and landlords were easily able to manipulate rent costs, providing minimal living conditions for vastly inflated rents. Some locations lacked basic amenities and safety checks. Many IDPs lived in overcrowded accommodation with other people in distress, which reinforced their trauma. For example, one woman who lived in a hostel with eight people in one room said:

"This situation affects your mental condition when you come together with people like you... we are enclosed in the same room, people who share the same grief, who locked up their houses and left... This makes your worries three times worse." (Nyura)

Despite the kindness of many private hosts who offered IDPs accommodation without charge or with reduced rents, SGBV incidents occurred. For example, one woman received an accommodation offer from men targeting women of specific age groups, while another reported being offered accommodation in Lviv in exchange for sex.

Having personal space contributes to survival and healing from SGBV. Though often impossible to create separate rooms, some measures were put in place in shelters to mitigate loud noises and possible conflicts. For instance, a shelter in Chernivtsi introduced measures such as prohibiting alcohol indoors. In shelters, female IDPs used various active coping tactics including sharing cleaning, cooking and childcare to help manage stress.

Responses to SGBV in internal displacement

In Ukraine, multiple international and local organisations work on SGBV-related issues but domestic violence (DV) and exploitation of IDPs in the labour market remain overlooked. The number of conflict-affected people in

need exceeded the capacities of staff from civil society organisations and local institutions whose staff were themselves often having to cope with personal displacement and loss. The shelter in Chernivtsi designed for 30 women who had experienced SGBV was hosting over 300 people. The state welfare system in Ukraine was unprepared for the massive scale of internal displacement and the welfare payments system was initially chaotic and could not reach everyone in need. Risk of exploitation and human trafficking of IDPs increased as people were desperately looking for work in unfamiliar locations and under stress.

Some organisations working on SGBV had to relocate to safer areas and some lost a significant number of volunteers and staff because of displacement. Financially, the first half of 2022 was extremely challenging as some donors left or suspended funding while new donors conducted time-consuming needs assessments. However, some donors that were funding Ukrainian NGOs before 2022 allowed the NGOs to redirect funds towards humanitarian needs, expanding their eligibility criteria to include distributing material aid to victims of violence and evacuating existing SGBV shelters out of conflict zones.

From late 2022 to early 2023, many donors started focusing specifically on helping victims of SGBV. While this has been a great opportunity to help the State address what had previously been an underfunded and deprioritised sector, a rapidly increased pool of SGBV providers can negatively impact the effectiveness of services offered. Firstly, new initiatives can duplicate services, which can lead to competition over clients. Secondly, most donors have low or non-existent requirements governing SGBV service provision. Poor quality services can be particularly harmful to DV victims and can undermine their safety. For example, unqualified personnel with poor skills and processes relating to confidentiality and information management can put survivors at risk and generate distrust in service providers. Some highly distressed victims mentioned that a psychologist recommended they drink chamomile tea while offering no sustained support. Thirdly, while CRSV receives attention, DV is often sidelined; DV must be

recognised as it often intersects with displacement, post-traumatic stress and broader war impacts.

Way forward: SGBV prevention and response

Inter-sectoral capacities and coordination need to be strengthened to mainstream the protection of IDPs from SGBV. Our recommendations are based on discussions with IDPs and stakeholders in Ukraine and on analysis of current policies and practices.

Training for service providers: Service providers (including social welfare, health care and police) need to be trained to embed gender- and trauma-sensitive approaches in their daily practices. They need to screen their clients for specific protection concerns and medical needs that result from SGBV, and develop referral pathways. A certification system for professionals offering mental health and SGBV support should be developed and the quality of existing SGBV services should be assessed.

Mitigating SGBV risks in transit: Verification of private drivers and tracking of the journeys and safe arrivals of IDPs should be put in place to mitigate SGBV risks in transit.

Raising awareness among IDPs: Raising awareness among IDPs about SGBV in general and rape in war as a war crime is important to help survivors access their rights. Continued work on DV prevention should draw on the Istanbul Convention (on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence), and new SGBV service providers should ensure that their work supports the implementation of the Convention and the inclusion of much needed DV services.

Reducing SGBV risks in accommodation: Longer-term, sex-segregated accommodation facilities and centralised coordination of private hosts would ensure that women are not housed with unfamiliar male private hosts. The rental market should be regulated, rental costs subsidised for the most vulnerable groups and private landlords encouraged to rent to women

with children who are on minimal pay. Such regulations would enable women to rent privately and avoid dependency on private hosts with the accompanying risks of exploitation.

Creating economic independence: Childcare arrangements are key to allowing parents to make a living. Female-headed IDP households should be supported to register children in pre-school childcare to enable them to work outside the home.

Mental health support: Mental health impacts can increase SGBV vulnerability. Free voluntary mental health screening should be provided, with referrals to mental health professionals trained to work with SGBV survivors and war trauma.

Coordinated funding: Funders should consider supporting flexible services for mobile, newly arrived and returning populations, and develop protection programmes and infrastructure to cater for the specific needs of IDPs and returnees. New SGBV funding streams should be implemented in a coordinated fashion, avoiding duplication of services while ensuring equitable geographical distribution across Ukraine.

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The study was funded the University of Birmingham's Institute for Global Innovation, discussions with stakeholders in Ukraine were funded by the AHRC IAA award.