

The role of media and information in supporting internally displaced women in Ukraine

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Providing accessible and practical advice through digital platforms could support female IDPs dealing with the economic, psychosocial and health impacts of the war.

BBC Media Action conducted a large-scale research study between December 2022 and January 2023 to understand female audiences in Ukraine. The aim was to generate a comprehensive understanding of issues related to women's information and communication needs within the current conflict, to support the work of media partners and NGOs.

The data collected consisted of a nationally representative telephone survey of 1,500 women (and 500 men), 200 online interviews with women living in non-government-controlled areas (NGCAs), and eight focus group discussions with women and four with men, from both host communities and internally displaced persons (IDPs). In-depth interviews were conducted with women from more

vulnerable groups (such as those with disabilities, Roma communities and those living on or near the front lines). This data was gathered by the Ukrainian research agency InfoSapiens. Key informant interviews were also conducted with female NGO leaders, these were carried out by a Ukrainian research consultant, commissioned by BBC Media Action.

As of May 2023, there were over 5 million IDPs across Ukraine.¹ In BBC Media Action's nationally representative sample of women across Ukraine 14% were IDPs. In comparison with the other women, they were more commonly living in the south and east of the country and a large proportion were young women (38% of female IDPs were 18-34 compared with 23% of the overall sample). More

of them had children under 18 (43% compared with 31%); they were also more likely to speak Russian (23% compared with 15%). In the sample of 200 women in NGCAs 32% of women were IDPs.

Key issues affecting internally displaced women's lives

The war, safety and security were the top concerns for 62% of women in their daily lives. The most reported negative impact of the war was on women's mental and physical health – 38% said the war had affected their mental and physical health. Female IDPs were significantly more likely to say they were impacted by mental and physical health issues compared with women who remained in their homes (48% compared with 36%).

In focus group discussions, internally displaced women expressed anxiety about the men they knew who were fighting. One woman reflected: "I have many acquaintances who went to the front, and we always talk about them in the family, and with friends." They also expressed concerns around their own safety and security, living with uncertainty and the inability to plan for the future, having to cope with sole responsibility for their children or dependents, and being away from family, friends and their own homes. They mentioned challenges settling into a new community and living in someone else's home (even if it was a member of their own family or a friend).

Women who lead NGOs also stressed the importance of supporting IDPs to cope with the psychological impacts of war and build mental resilience. Some IDPs may have been re-traumatised by the full-scale invasion after experiencing conflict already in the East since 2014 or may face specific challenges around violence in shelters where they are staying.

Over half the internally displaced women reported impacts on their income and employment compared with 31% of women who were not IDPs. In focus groups, female IDPs discussed challenges finding housing and jobs, and concerns about rising prices and the cost of rent, household items and new clothing. Older women with children voiced more concern about access to education services for their

children. Younger women were concerned about education for themselves; including challenges with their universities and distance learning.

Internally displaced women were significantly more likely to say they had difficulty accessing social and health services (20% compared with 14% of women who were not IDPs), sanitation (9% and 5%), and safety and security (36% and 22%). Women who were living in NGCAs were feeling the impacts of war much more acutely – especially if they were IDPs. For example, Female IDPs in NGCAs were significantly more likely to report impacts on their food and nutrition (55%) compared to women in NGCAs who were not IDPs (38%).

Women who had moved to new parts of Ukraine also discussed some of the challenges of integrating into a new community. They felt communities were taken aback by the influx of Russian speakers. They also felt there were different perceptions of male and female IDPs and their integration with local communities, with women and children sometimes more welcome. They felt male IDPs were sometimes judged negatively as their new communities would question why they were not fighting.

Use of media and communication

Women who were IDPs more commonly reported using the internet compared with those who were not IDPs in the nationally representative survey (89% compared with 81%) and also messenger services (86% v 71%) and social media (82% v 73%). In contrast, displaced women were much less likely to use TV (58% v 74%), print media (31% v 42%) and radio (25% v 39%) compared to women who were not IDPs. Female IDPs' use of media reflects how they have been a transient population with less access to traditional media and also that they are more likely to be young women – who are, in turn, more likely to use digital than traditional media platforms.

Among all women who used social media, Facebook and Telegram were used at almost equal levels but women were much more reliant on Telegram for news than Facebook. Younger women were significantly more likely to use Telegram for news – 68% of those aged 18-34 compared with 53% of those aged 35-54

and 32% of those 55 and over. IDPs were also significantly more likely to use Telegram for news (65%) compared with women who were not IDPs (49%). Across all news sources listed, Telegram was the most trusted by women (28% named it as their most trusted source of information). Women talked about Telegram as their key source of news and information online because news was provided in a concise way, and they could also get information from local Telegram groups. TikTok and Instagram were used more for entertainment rather than news and information.

Overall, women talked about engaging in much more content on news and current affairs since the onset of the full-scale invasion. They were interested in updates on how the war was affecting their local areas (and where they used to live), and information on blackouts, progress at the front and what support Ukraine was getting from foreign countries.

Sometimes, consuming lots of news and information about the war had a negative impact. Young female IDPs talked about how endless scrolling through social media affected them and how they managed this:

“Sensitive visual content in social media groups. Sad news from any part of Ukraine – not just the South but also the East because I have a lot of friends there... Eventually, I unfollowed most Telegram channels and left just the ones I go to every day. When the war started, you could scroll through all day long.” (Female IDP, aged 25-41)

“I now like Kharkiv Life [Telegram channel] because the information is reliable and very fast. And the summary for a day, too, is short but understandable.” (Female IDP)

Qualitative data also revealed that female IDPs wanted practical survival skills information such as how to pack and what to pack in an emergency, how to avoid missiles and hide safely and how to cope with impacts on their mental and physical health. Women also talked about needing practical information such as how to deal with blackouts and handle generators, and appreciated information presented as ‘life hacks’ – simple, clever techniques to deal with everyday issues – such as how to work effectively remotely or how to save energy.

Recommendations

Based on these insights, there are several opportunities for media partners and NGOs to more effectively serve female IDPs inside Ukraine, communicating with content that reflects their experiences and meets their needs.

Practical ‘life hacks’ content: Digital media is the most effective way to reach female IDPs. Therefore, media and communications content needs to cut through the noise and clutter of social media. Clearly branded content providing practical information in a helpful and engaging way could perform well with female audiences. Sharing stories of women’s resilience and action in everyday life can help other women deal with challenges.

Support related to economic impacts and mental and physical health: Media and communications should aim to support female IDPs around economic impacts and mental and physical health – for example, providing information on health issues, income generation/saving money, how best to support their children’s education and dealing with the psychosocial impacts of war.

Adapt communications to changing needs: It is important to monitor changing needs, especially for groups experiencing more barriers to information. Female IDPs’ needs and concerns will also continue to change as they contemplate moving back home.

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1. UNHCR (2023): bit.ly/unhcr-country-ukraine

