

Human trafficking in times of conflict: the case of Ukraine

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With many risk factors for trafficking present in the Ukraine conflict, why does there appear not to have been – as yet – a surge in cases of trafficking?

It has become generally accepted that displaced persons and refugees are at increased risk of trafficking and that conflict will introduce new risks of trafficking and/or exacerbate pre-existing risks. The crisis in Ukraine seemingly provided a high number of risk factors for a human trafficking crisis: pre-existing trafficking networks, massive population displacement, and large numbers of women and children travelling on their own. To date,

however, this expectation has not been realised: there is not yet any evidence of a spike in the numbers of trafficked persons identified or in the number of investigations and prosecutions of the crime.

This apparent gap between expectations and reality has prompted anti-trafficking practitioners to question the assumptions underlying the expectations that conflict and crisis will inevitably lead to trafficking in persons, and to

analyse what we know about human trafficking following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

As co-chair of the anti-trafficking task force in the regional refugee response, I have been working with task-force members and other anti-trafficking experts and practitioners to improve our understanding of this situation. In particular, we have been considering the hypothesised risk factors that increase individuals' vulnerability to trafficking generally, the risk factors that increase individuals' vulnerability to trafficking specifically in the context of crisis or conflict, and the extent to which these risk factors are present in the Ukraine crisis. We have also been considering the impact that responses to the crisis may have had on mitigating the potential risks of trafficking to date, and the potential for future increases in human trafficking within the context of the war.¹

Vulnerability and the risk of trafficking in crises and conflicts

Evidence collected over recent decades has clearly demonstrated that there is a range of intersecting factors that increase the risk of people being targeted by traffickers. These include poverty, marginalisation, financial

exclusion, irregular migration status, low educational background, disability, and dysfunctional family environments.²

Crisis and conflict are thought to increase vulnerabilities to trafficking for a number of reasons, whether directly when parties to the conflict traffic people to serve in armed groups, either as combatants or in ancillary services, or indirectly, such as when traffickers target victims who are in a vulnerable social and/or economic situation as a result of the conflict. Furthermore, crisis and conflict erode the rule of law and the capacities of State institutions, which can generate an environment in which traffickers can act with impunity.³

In our analysis of why this is the case, we have considered four key risk factors hypothesised to drive trafficking in conflict settings: 1) State collapse, deteriorating rule of law, and impunity; 2) forced displacement; 3) humanitarian need and socio-economic stress; and 4) social fragmentation and family breakdown. Importantly, we have found that many, but not all, of these conditions are in place in the Ukraine conflict.

With regard to the first – state collapse – the fact that the Ukrainian State has remained united and its institutions have not collapsed



School 6 in Uzhhorod, Ukraine, is one of many that have been repurposed as temporary shelters for displaced people. Credit: IOM / Gema Cortes 2022

and are instead supporting activities aimed at protecting the population – including specific actions against human trafficking – is almost certainly having a profoundly preventative impact.

In terms of displacement, not only has forced displacement occurred but it has occurred on a massive scale. Furthermore, much of this displacement is becoming protracted. Over eight million refugees have been recorded across Europe since 24 February 2022. As of 25 May 2023, IOM estimates that 5.1 million people remain displaced within Ukraine, and that 60% of all IDPs in the country report being displaced for one year or longer.⁴ Conditions for a safe and dignified return to Ukraine are not yet in place given the continued armed conflict. However, the majority of EU and surrounding countries have taken measures to facilitate safe and regular entry and stay for people fleeing Ukraine, and to facilitate their access to labour markets, education and social protection.

Humanitarian need and socio-economic stress are certainly present in this conflict. In addition to loss of life, injuries, mass movement and displacement, and severe destruction and damage to civilian infrastructure and housing, public services are under severe pressure, and access to health care is limited. Several million jobs have been lost inside Ukraine, and many households both inside and outside Ukraine are unemployed and/or are dependent on social assistance.⁵

Finally, one of the defining characteristics of this conflict is its profound impact on the social fabric – both public and private. Public life has been shattered and family separation has been widespread. In some instances, men were required to stay in Ukraine to contribute to national defence. Families had to make hard decisions about who would stay behind and who would flee. Many older persons and men between the ages of 18 and 65 stayed, while other family members fled to other parts of Ukraine or outside the country. Families who sought refuge abroad might have split again, some of them staying in the place of refuge and others returning to Ukraine, not always to the place of community of origin. Immediately after the invasion it was estimated that more

than 90% of those who fled Ukraine were women and children.

Why does it appear that trafficking has not increased?

In sum, the initial expectation that trafficking would increase was well founded, given the presence of a number of serious risk factors. Why then, has there not been a surge in confirmed cases of trafficking in persons? There are a range of possible answers to be considered.

Absence of State collapse: There is the possibility that theoretical models that predict vulnerability to trafficking in times of conflict are based on situations in which all the key risk factors – State collapse, displacement, humanitarian need, socio-economic stress, social fragmentation and family breakdown – are present. Additional work and research are needed to better understand the weighting and interaction of these factors, and if the absence of some – such as the absence of State collapse in this case – are sufficient to override other risk factors.

Large, effective and coordinated response: Safe and regular access to territory was granted to most (though not all) people fleeing Ukraine. Efforts were made to ensure people's safety as they were fleeing the conflict – for example, the humanitarian corridor through Moldova which facilitated movement of refugees to EU countries. The Government of Ukraine has spearheaded evacuations of civilians to safety inside the country, coordinating between ministerial and local authorities to prepare humanitarian aid for the arrivals. Social security payments and cash distributions are being made within Ukraine, and Ukrainian refugees reaching surrounding and EU countries are entitled to social assistance. Law enforcement actors had a relatively high baseline capacity and awareness of human trafficking issues, and there were anti-trafficking programmes in place that were re-purposed for awareness raising and outreach, for example through awareness raising at transport hubs and at border crossing points, and protection

monitoring and response through mobile outreach teams.

Risks may increase over time: As the war continues people's savings are depleted and the coping capacities of displaced persons, refugees and those hosting them are being stretched. As people take stock of their options, there are longer-term issues to be considered, such as how to educate their children and how to earn an adequate income.

Despite a relatively high skill set, many Ukrainians lack the language skills to gain access to higher-paid and skill-appropriate employment. Many women may need to balance childcare against employment, and are under pressure to earn and remit cash to support those who stayed behind in Ukraine. Some may not earn enough to be able to afford quality childcare; this creates risks both for the women and their children, as women may accept poorer or riskier working conditions in order to generate more income, and children may be in poor quality, unsafe and/or unregulated child-care settings.

Many Ukrainians have returned or are considering return to Ukraine; given the conditions and uncertainty in Ukraine, this is a clear indicator that they are facing constrained circumstances in their host countries. All this, together with research findings that indicate that demand for sexual services and exploitative labour from Ukrainian refugees exists, means there is clearly a pool of people with remaining vulnerability.

Some trafficking cases may be going undetected or unreported: Detection of human trafficking and identification of trafficked persons is a well-documented obstacle in anti-trafficking responses around the world, regardless of setting. According to UNODC global data, the most common way in which victims of trafficking are identified is self-referral, demonstrating that anti-trafficking responses are falling short.⁶ In the Ukraine crisis, it is likely that numerous cases of trafficking in persons are going undetected or unreported. Media monitoring has picked up on many instances of trafficking in persons, sexual violence and labour exploitation.⁷

Research efforts focused on gathering information on the actual experiences of women and girl refugees indicate significant exposure to risks of sexual exploitation. Many risk factors – including widespread displacement, family separation, socio-economic vulnerability and social disruption – remain in place. The response to the crisis has almost certainly reduced vulnerability to trafficking but it is unlikely to have completely eliminated the risk. Given this, it is reasonable to conclude that trafficking is occurring but is not being detected, and to recommend improvements to proactive identification measures.

Conclusion

There needs to be continued robust research into the intersection of vulnerabilities and their impact on vulnerability to trafficking in displacement contexts. We see promising practices emerge: responses that address these risk factors do seem to be effective in preventing trafficking, and what has worked in this conflict should be implemented in other conflicts, but we need to remain vigilant. Vulnerability factors, coping strategies and mobility patterns will shift over time and require flexible responses. People's coping capacities will continue to be stretched. When they reach breaking point, protections must still be in place in order to prevent the predicted trafficking crisis.

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1. With thanks to Kristina Touzenis and Chissey Mueller for their collaboration in the preparation of this article.
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