

The Hidden Front of Russia's War: Addressing Gender- Based Violence in Ukraine

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Executive Summary

One direct consequence of Russia's war against Ukraine has been an increase in gender-based violence (GBV). If left unaddressed, this trend has the potential to disrupt Ukrainian society for decades to come. The reasons for this increase range from sexual violence perpetrated by Russian troops to increased domestic violence among Ukrainians due to war-related stress and trauma. To counter the negative effects of this, Ukraine's international supporters should address GBV both through their short-term support and their long-term recovery planning. This policy brief presents recommendations for initiatives that international actors should implement in cooperation with Ukrainian NGOs and outlines how international actors should work with Ukrainian partners.

What To Do

- Awareness-raising campaigns to battle stigma around GBV and support survivors;
- National and international capacity-building activities to support professionals that are working to address GBV;
- Coalition-building between Ukrainian organizations and international CSOs that combat GBV;
- Economic empowerment for women to strengthen their agency and ability to leave violent partners.

How to Work

- Strategic, long-term approaches to projects;
- Clear and transparent feedback mechanisms;
- Partnerships built on trust and solidarity that highlight local expertise and agency;
- Burnout prevention among CSO staff;
- Joint development of comprehensive referral pathway systems that include state and civil society actors.

These recommendations emphasize long-term sustainability, highlighting the necessity of changing how international actors engage with Ukrainian partners. Without such changes, achieving a sustainable feminist transformation in Ukraine will remain a challenge. The impact of GBV extends far beyond immediate crises caused by the Russian war against Ukraine. Effective support mechanisms must be adaptable and enduring to address the evolving needs of survivors and communities. Therefore, fostering strategic partnerships between local and international actors is imperative for creating lasting positive change and resilience in Ukrainian society.

Introduction

The full-scale war launched by the Russian Federation against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, has caused suffering for the entire population of Ukraine. But the consequences of Russia's aggression against Ukraine are evidently gendered: the most affected groups include women, women with children, the elderly, and LGBTQ+ people. One of the consequences of the war has been a drastic increase in the rates of various forms of gender-based violence (GBV),¹ including, but not limited to, conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) and domestic violence. Despite the varying origins of different forms of GBV, I use GBV as an umbrella term. This is because the social consequences of different forms of GBV are often similar, thus necessitating a holistic approach to GBV counteraction. Regardless of its origin, GBV not only inflicts harm on individuals but also undermines the overall well-being of communities. As we have seen in other contexts such as Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), GBV during war can trigger a “spiral of violence and multipl[y] the psychological violence (i.e., stigmatization) and economic violence (i.e., dispossession and poverty) against women in the post-war context.”² Thus, addressing GBV in Ukraine and developing comprehensive and effective strategies to overcome it must be one of the top priorities for the international community.

This research explores how Russia's full-scale invasion has impacted GBV trends in Ukraine. Based on this analysis, I identify strategies to counteract and prevent GBV and to reduce its harmful effects on survivors and society as a whole. By highlighting the interconnectedness of short-term stabilization efforts and long-term recovery and development initiatives, this research seeks to provide practical recommendations tailored for international partners and donor organizations who support Ukrainian NGOs in their efforts to combat GBV. I am using two distinct methodologies for data collection: firstly, a content analysis of existing policy documents encompassing statistical data, media reports, and legal frameworks, among other sources; and secondly, I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews (n=6) with key informants. Interviewees³ were asked about existing challenges they are experiencing in their work, their responses to these challenges, as well as the ways in which the full-scale invasion has driven GBV in Ukraine.

This analysis reveals a variety of direct and indirect mechanisms through which Russia's war against Ukraine has led to increases in GBV – ranging from direct sexual violence committed by Russian troops to domestic violence in Ukrainian households that results from war-induced psychological stress and trauma. Based on these insights, I have developed recommendations tailored for international actors collaborating with Ukrainian NGOs.

¹ Gender-based violence is used here as an umbrella term for harmful actions or behaviors inflicted upon individuals due to their gender or perceived gender roles. It encompasses physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuses, including intimate partner violence, sexual harassment, rape, child marriage, female genital mutilation, honor killings, and conflict-related sexual violence. The term also includes non-physical forms of violence such as emotional abuse, coercion and control.

² İbrahim Kuran. 2023. “Gender-Based Violence in Bosnia From Conflict to The Post Conflict Setting.” *Avrasya Uluslararası Araştırmalar Dergisi*, 11 (35), 1064-1077, <https://doi.org/10.33692/avrsyad.1232961>.

³ The interviewees are experts who work in Ukrainian and international NGOs that provide support to GBV survivors as well as advocate and implement necessary changes to prevent GBV in Ukraine.

Gender-Based Violence in Wartime: The Ukrainian Case

While GBV was already a significant social issue before the war, Russia's full-scale attack has exacerbated the problem dramatically. As of September 2023, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) estimates that 3.6 million people need GBV prevention and response services in Ukraine.⁴ However, such calculations must be taken with a grain of salt as reliable data on the prevalence of GBV and its different sub-forms is extremely sparse. Even when looking only at one type of GBV, such as domestic violence, drastic differences in counting become visible. For instance, the National Police of Ukraine "registered 349,355 cases of domestic violence from January to May 2023, compared with 231,244 over the same period in 2022 and 190,277 in the first five months of 2021."⁵ Meanwhile, the Prosecutor General's Office reports that there were 3,622 domestic violence cases initiated in 2023, compared to 2,080 in 2022.⁶ The stark difference between the police and the general prosecutors' numbers stems from differences in counting methods (police action vs. legal prosecution), thus illustrating the problem of data availability.

Similarly, reliable data on CRSV is almost impossible to attain, as most cases occur in the occupied territories. Even in recently liberated areas, there is a high likelihood of severe undercounting of CRSV cases. This means that while we know that CRSV exists, we do not have reliable data on its prevalence. What can be said with more certainty, however, is that the majority of GBV survivors are women.⁷ Both in Ukraine and elsewhere, women's and girls' exposure to GBV is often intersectional: factors that can heighten a person's vulnerability include their age, a disability, their sexual orientation and gender identity, ethnicity, and where they reside (rural versus urban areas).

The reasons for increases in GBV in Ukraine are multifaceted. For instance, CRSV has been used by Russian soldiers as a weapon of war to humiliate and dehumanize their opponent across the occupied territories of Ukraine since 2014. After having heard "women testify about Russian soldiers equipped with Viagra," Pramila Patten, the UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, stated that "it's clearly a military strategy."⁸ Although people of all genders, ages and sexual orientations are subjected to CRSV by Russian soldiers, women and girls are among the most vulnerable groups.

Additionally, Ukrainian women refugees are experiencing GBV at border crossing points abroad and in refugee centers, and as a group they are at special risk of being exploited in

⁴ UNFPA, "Ukraine Emergency Situation Report #20," September 15, 2023, accessed January 20, 2024, <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/ukraine-emergency-situation-report-20-15-september-2023>.

⁵ Foroudi, "Rising domestic violence."

⁶ Denys Bulavin, "За останні роки в Україні побільшало справ про домашнє насильство" ["There is an increase of domestic violence cases in Ukraine in the last few years"], *Hromadske*, January 11, 2024, accessed January 28, 2024, <https://hromadske.ua/posts/za-ostanni-roki-v-ukrayini-pobilshalo-sprav-pro-domashnye-nasilstvo>; the interviewees attribute the decline in the first nine months of 2022 to the following factors: the shock of the invasion overshadowing the issue of domestic violence; victims' lack of knowledge about where to seek help (e.g., among IDPs); the absence of support services for survivors and trained police forces; and the lack of resources for data collection in temporarily occupied territories and at the front lines.

⁷ UNFPA, "Ukraine Emergency Situation Report #20."

⁸ Philip Wang, Tim Lister, Josh Pennington, and Heather Chen, "Russia using rape as 'military strategy' in Ukraine: UN envoy", *CNN*, October 15, 2022, accessed January 17, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/10/15/europe/russia-ukraine-rape-sexual-violence-military-intl-hnk/index.html>.

human trafficking and sex work.⁹ Moreover, the interviewed experts pointed out that the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has created new groups of women who are disproportionately exposed to GBV within Ukraine: IDPs and the members of families where a partner is engaged in military service. According to a Rapid Gender Analysis conducted by CARE Ukraine as of October 2023, cases of psychological, emotional and physical abuse have increased in families where husbands or partners served in the armed forces.¹⁰ Such a tendency can be explained by the post-traumatic stress they experience as well as by the limited duration of home stays, which makes it challenging to effectively transition from the psychological state induced by war to one appropriate for domestic settings. As a result, the combatants can experience nightmares and anger control issues, which consequently can be expressed as aggression against family members.

In addition, interviewees identified several other key factors behind the dramatic rise of GBV in the country during wartime:

- **Precarious living conditions of IDPs:** Often accommodated in buildings that were once dormitories, schools or kindergartens, IDPs share limited living space – sometimes just one room – which leads to a lack of privacy and frequent disputes. These can result in heightened levels of violence.
- **Economic instability and unemployment:** Both of these surged because of the full-scale war, contributing to heightened social and economic tensions. GBV arising from these circumstances is especially concerning, as these tensions are widespread and commonly disregarded as “not that important” against the backdrop on the full-scale invasion. In 2022, Ukraine’s GDP sank by 29.2 percent and poverty rates increased from 5.5 percent to 24.1 percent.¹¹ In that same year, the Global Gender Gap Report ranked Ukraine 81st out of 146 countries.¹² The country’s gender pay gap, although narrowed by 7.4 percent over the last seven years, stood at 18.6 percent in 2023.¹³ Such an unequal distribution of resources contributes to women’s financial dependence on their partners or husbands. As financial disparities persist and economic challenges endure, women may experience increased vulnerability within domestic spheres and additional barriers to leaving violent or abusive relationships, thereby increasing the risk of GBV. At the same time, GBV affects women’s ability to pursue their careers or education, thus further impacting their economic wellbeing.
- **Rigidification of gender roles:** Russia’s war against Ukraine has exacerbated a backlash in favor of so-called traditional values, meaning gender roles that confine women to caregiving and homemaking responsibilities and subordinate them to their male partners. As these norms prevent women from seeking help beyond the family unit, breaking the cycle of violence and seeking external assistance becomes even more challenging. Additionally, the stigma surrounding GBV survivors further discourages them from reaching out for support, making it even harder to escape abusive situations.

⁹ ReliefWeb, “Gender-Based Violence in Ukraine: Secondary Data Review,” April 27, 2022, accessed January 24, 2024, <https://gbvaor.net/sites/default/files/2022-05/Ukraine%20GBV%20SDR%20%2025%205%2022%20Final%20format%20amended.pdf>.

¹⁰ Care Ukraine, “Rapid Gender Analysis,” October 26, 2023, accessed February 5, 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/rapid-gender-analysis-ukraine-october-2023-enuk>.

¹¹ UN Women, “Ukraine,” accessed February 10, 2024, <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/where-we-are/ukraine>.

¹² World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2022, accessed January 27, 2024, https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2022.pdf.

¹³ Ministry of Economy of Ukraine, “Trend towards reducing the gender pay gap in Ukraine should become sustainable and irreversible, says Yuliia Svyrydenko,” May 12, 2023, accessed January 27, 2024, <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/news/tendentsiia-do-skorochnnia-rozryvu-v-oplati-pratsi-zhinok-ta-cholovikiv-v-ukraini-maie-staty-stiikoju-ta-nezvorotnoiu-iuliia-svyrydenko>.

- **Re-traumatization of survivors:** The interviewed experts stated that they are receiving a growing number of requests from survivors who had experienced different forms of GBV prior to the full-scale invasion and who are now facing re-traumatization due to the prevalence of the topic of GBV in war-time social discourse, the media and private discussions.

Recovery in Progress

While the Russian war against Ukraine is still in its active phase, the experts agreed that an effective strategy for combating and preventing GBV should be among the key priorities for Ukraine’s recovery because it will be crucial for establishing long-lasting social stability. By prioritizing action against GBV, Ukraine can foster what Johan Galtung called positive peace, which entails not only the absence of war but also the elimination of structural violence, which can undermine the long-term stability and security of the state.¹⁴

Understanding the urgent need to address GBV, international organizations operating in Ukraine are already offering their services as well as support to the feminist and women’s NGOs working in the fields of GBV prevention and survivor rehabilitation. For example, UNFPA Ukraine has a program dedicated to preventing GBV. This program includes a project called “Cities and Communities Free from Domestic Violence,” which aims to develop municipal systems for preventing and combating GBV.¹⁵ During the full-scale invasion, UN Women Ukraine is offering gender-sensitive humanitarian aid to the people who stay in frontline and de-occupied territories. Additionally, the Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund, which has been operating in Ukraine since March 2022 and is administered by UN Women Ukraine, has provided support to 38 women’s and feminist NGOs. The European Union Advisory Mission in Ukraine (EUAM-Ukraine) has also conducted a spectrum of relevant activities, including training sessions for the National Police of Ukraine and other law enforcement bodies to address sexual harassment inside their organizations;¹⁶ advising on draft laws;¹⁷ addressing CRSV as part of investigations into war crimes committed by Russia;¹⁸ and supporting Ukrainian authorities in strengthening the implementation of the Istanbul Convention.¹⁹

The Ukrainian government has also shown its commitment to addressing the problem of GBV. The Government Platform for Gender Mainstreaming and Inclusion in Recovery

¹⁴ Johan Galtung. 1969. “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” *Journal of Peace Research* Vol. 6 (3), pp. 167-191, accessed January 19, 2024, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/422690>.

¹⁵ UNFPA Ukraine, “Cities and Communities Free From Domestic Violence,” accessed February 10, 2024, <https://ukraine.unfpa.org/en/cities-and-communities-free-domestic-violence>.

¹⁶ EUAM Ukraine, “Calling it a day for sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination in Ukraine,” December 1, 2023, accessed February 7, 2024, <https://www.euam-ukraine.eu/news/calling-it-a-day-for-sexual-harassment-and-gender-based-discrimination-in-ukraine/>.

¹⁷ EUAM Ukraine, “Highlights and Achievements in 2023,” December 29, 2023, accessed February 7, 2024, <https://www.euam-ukraine.eu/news/euam-ukraine-highlights-and-achievements-in-2023/>.

¹⁸ EUAM Ukraine, “Working towards the prosecution of International Crimes committed in Ukraine,” September 14, 2023, accessed February 7, 2024, <https://www.euam-ukraine.eu/news/working-towards-the-prosecution-of-international-crimes-committed-in-ukraine/>.

¹⁹ EUAM Ukraine, “Ratification of the Istanbul convention is an important step towards the EU accession,” May 24, 2023, accessed February 7, 2024, <https://www.euam-ukraine.eu/news/ratification-of-the-istanbul-convention-is-an-important-step-towards-the-eu-accession/>.

came into effect in September 2023.²⁰ The Platform aims to ensure coordinated cooperation among ministries, other central executive agencies, civil society, business representatives, and international organizations in integrating the principles of gender equality and inclusion into Ukraine’s recovery process. Ukraine’s WPS National Action Plan for 2021-2025 prioritizes the need to create conditions for systemic responses to GBV and CRSV (Strategic Goals 3 and 4).²¹ Still, Ukrainian legislation requires significant reform. For example, as noted by Maryna Lehenka, a lawyer and the vice president of the NGO La Strada Ukraine,²² with the start of the full-scale invasion, incidents of sexual harassment against women have been reported in locations where such occurrences were not previously documented, notably in bomb shelters. However, Lehenka also emphasized that there is currently a significant challenge in documenting and responding to such cases, as legal accountability is only established in instances of physical sexual harassment falling under Articles 153 (Sexual Violence) and 154 (Forcing to Enter into Sexual Intercourse) of the Criminal Code of Ukraine.²³ There is thus a pressing need to establish a clear provision in the legislation of Ukraine that would define sexual harassment as a distinct action and warrant specific legal accountability. Such a reform should be included in Ukraine’s general recovery strategy.

Challenges

Despite support from international organizations and the Ukrainian government’s recognition of the issue, GBV persist as a significant challenge within Ukrainian society. The interviewed experts have summarized the complex challenges they are currently encountering in their work.

Escalation of Violence Levels Across the Country

The full-scale war is a main factor that has contributed to the deteriorating situation. Constant exposure to trauma and stress combined with limited living space for IDPs lead to aggression, which is often vented toward families. The number of requests for help has increased dramatically among women who have never experienced GBV before the start of the full-scale war. Many women do not realize that what they experience counts as GBV in its various forms, and they continue to endure it without seeking help. The experts have additionally shared that the public image of GBV survivors has undergone a transformation, since now a sizable proportion of the beneficiaries of support services are children who have endured CRSV perpetrated by Russian military forces (the youngest beneficiary of the interviewed NGO is an 8-year-old girl).

²⁰ Office of the Deputy Prime Minister of Ukraine, “Розпочала роботу “Платформа забезпечення гендерного мейнстрімінгу та інклюзії у відновленні”” [“Platform for ensuring gender mainstreaming and inclusion in recovery has started work”], September 19, 2023, accessed February 5, 2024, <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/news/rozpochala-robotu-platforma-zabezpechennia-hendernoho-meinstrymingu-ta-inkliuzii-u-vidnovlenni>.

²¹ Government of Ukraine, Order of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, “National Action Plan for the Implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security until 2025,” accessed February 4, 2024, <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/storage/app/sites/1/18%20-%20Department/18%20-%20PDF/2023/29.03.2023/updated-nap-1325-women-peace-and-security-until-2025.pdf>.

²² La Strada Ukraine, “Сексуальні домагання та встановлення відповідальності за їх вчинення” [“Sexual harassment and responsibility for its perpetration”], *Ukrinform*, accessed February 10, 2024, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-presshall/3812564-seksualni-domaganna-ta-vstanovlennia-vidpovidalnosti-za-ih-vcinenna.html>.

²³ La Strada Ukraine, “Сексуальні домагання.”

Lack of Qualified Experts

Many people have left the country since February 2022. This has contributed to a lack of professionals who are qualified to work with survivors of GBV, whose number is constantly growing. Ukrainian experts who stayed to work at the NGOs that support GBV survivors are facing elevated risks of emotional burnout. This creates an additional burden on those who work in the field and will eventually lead to changes in the professional sphere.

Social Stigma Around Gender-Based Violence

For survivors, the social stigma that is associated with GBV represents a significant hurdle to accessing support services. Accordingly, even where support services of the state and NGOs are available, many survivors do not make use of it. This means that increasing support capacity alone will not suffice to reach all survivors of GBV. Social norms that stigmatize GBV must be contested, too.

Short-Term Projects and Lack of Sustainable Support

Ukrainian NGOs often receive short-term support for their projects, which are typically limited to a duration of one year. One interviewee detailed why such an approach is unsustainable:

If we work in a hromada [a Ukrainian territorial community] and we have built trust within this year and have positive results, people are getting used to us and they apply for help. And then the donor organization tells us: "Sorry, we have no money." It's like we have just brought a person back to their feelings, they have started doing something – maybe even have got a job, but still might have regress and will need support; but if we have no financial support, we cannot provide any services to them anymore.

Some survivors require long-term support to recover from their trauma – such a recovery can take years. Another interviewee characterized the present situation as comprising “separate pieces of a puzzle, yet lacking a comprehensive, overarching image.”

Apart from failing to provide long-term sustainable support for beneficiaries, short-term projects also lack lasting support for team members. As mentioned above, there is a great shortage of qualified professionals to work with survivors. “Now we are growing a new generation of such experts,” one of the respondents shared, but “if in two years the project is over, I have to let them go,” which means that their acquired skills and unique expertise would be neglected and lost.

What is more, short-term projects and mini-grants come with a lot of bureaucratic requirements and tedious reporting procedures, which are time- and resource-consuming. The respondents have shared that they tend to avoid such stipulations where possible, since otherwise their limited resources would be directed toward managing bureaucratic requirements instead of running projects.

Rigid Rules of Financial Support

Typically, international donors enforce the stringent requirement that the entire budget allocated to an NGO be spent within the project's designated timeframe. While this approach may prove effective for implementing soft projects, initiatives focused on GBV prevention and supporting survivors necessitate a different strategy. The inflexibility associated with this requirement frequently results in an inefficient distribution of resources that fails to align with the genuine needs of the beneficiaries.

Colonial Attitudes

The respondents cited another recurring challenge in their engagement with international partner organizations: frequent instances of colonial attitudes. These attitudes can manifest in a total failure to understand the local context, which can be seen in attempts to squeeze Ukraine's complex experiences and unique social, cultural and political dynamics into protocols that were initially developed for other countries and societies. One of the respondents shared the following experience:

I was invited by one of the UN agencies as a co-facilitator for the training on sexual exploitation prevention; I got different scenarios of sexual exploitation cases and realized that all of them were developed for African countries and have absolutely no relation to the Ukrainian context.

Attempts by Ukrainian experts to explain why such an approach is not efficient and only perpetuates the colonial policies of donor organizations are mainly ignored and dismissed in a paternalistic manner.

In addition, the interviewees shared that they often feel that international donor organizations act not as their partners, but as "customers" of their services, who use local expertise, knowledge and human resources in order to pursue their own program goals. This perception not only results in the exploitation of Ukrainian experts but also contributes to the inefficient allocation of budget funds.

Recommendations

As discussed above, the levels of GBV are growing in Ukrainian society. Russia's war against Ukraine is the primary contributing factor to this distressing trend, which will only grow more acute as Russia's military aggression continues. Knowing what other (post-)war contexts teach us about the detrimental effects of GBV on peace and prosperity after wars end, addressing GBV becomes integral to fostering the safe and secure environment that will be essential for the rehabilitation and rebuilding of Ukrainian society. International actors and partners, who wield significant resources and funds, are well-positioned to tackle Ukraine's recovery effectively and ensure that the needs of all population groups are taken into account.

I am focusing my recommendations on Ukrainian NGOs that work in the field of GBV prevention and survivor support, because they are often more deeply connected to local communities and can effectively deliver targeted support and advocacy initiatives tailored

to the specific needs of survivors. To efficiently address the needs of such organizations, international stakeholders should implement a set of activities (“What To Do”) and adhere to a number of best practices (“How to Work”).

What To Do

Support initiatives focused on dismantling the stigma that surrounds survivors of GBV.

As described in the analysis, social stigma around GBV disincentivizes survivors to access GBV response services. By investing in long-term projects aimed at addressing this stigma, international actors can contribute to empowering survivors to seek justice, access essential services and rebuild their lives, ultimately leading to a safer and more equitable society. An essential pillar of this work is public awareness campaigns, which are already being implemented by Ukrainian NGOs such as NGO Girls²⁴ or Gender in Detail.²⁵ However, they do not yet reach a broad-enough audience, due to limitations in scale and the types of media used. International actors should provide funding to Ukrainian NGOs that perform multimedia (i.e., social media, TV, poster, radio, podcast, etc.) awareness campaigns on GBV. Including different types of media will be imperative, as the survivors of GBV are a diverse group in terms of gender, age, education, and location, meaning that various types of media are necessary to reach them.

Support expertise and capacity development.

As outlined in the analysis, there is great demand for expertise development (e.g., training on trauma-informed care, legal assistance, psychosocial support, and developing effective referral systems). This is partially covered by local trainings and workshops but still requires more resources and international support. For example, interviewees voiced that for NGOs that offer psychological support to GBV survivors, there is a demand among their staff for long-term study visits (for at least 1.5 months) abroad. For instance, exchange with trauma experts in Europe and the US could help Ukrainian psychologists learn from the experience of others and implement the acquired knowledge upon returning to Ukraine. While international exchange is crucial, capacity-building opportunities also exist within Ukraine. For instance, there are programs such as the certificate training program “Gender Analytics”²⁶ at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, which can enhance knowledge on gender issues and acquisition of additional professional competencies in applying gender analysis.

Support international networks.

Expanding existing GBV-response networks and establishing new ones to connect Ukrainian GBV experts with colleagues from other countries is needed to promote the exchange of expertise and capacity development. A positive example of such networking opportunities was organized by Kvinna till Kvinna in 2023 and brought together experts from BiH and Ukraine. However, international actors should make such exchanges more

²⁴ NGO Girls, “Gender based violence. Booklet,” accessed March 25, 2024,

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/15k9wKUSTNEeuhzyTPy3gulRUYBPBPxG/view>.

²⁵ Gender in Detail, “16 Days against gender based violence,” accessed March 25, 2024,

<https://www.instagram.com/p/COECaoMoUc5/>.

²⁶ Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, “Сертифікаційна програма підвищення кваліфікації «Гендерна

Аналітика“ [“Certificate training program ‘Gender Analytics’”], accessed April 4, 2024,

<http://www.ipe.knu.ua/sertyfikatna-programa-pidvyshhennya-kvalifikatsiyi-genderna-analityka.html>.

permanent, for instance, by pressuring their existing partners and networks to more often include Ukrainian CSOs and provide funding to professionalize networks where needed. Such networks should encompass a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including activists, CSOs, academia and analytical centers, and government representatives. While ad-hoc exchanges between Ukrainian experts and their international counterparts are underway, it is necessary to maintain a consistent and regular nature for these interactions, which requires establishing structured communication channels, scheduling regular meetings or workshops, and fostering ongoing collaboration agreements. Such exchanges should be conducted on equal terms, free from paternalistic or colonial undertones, to promote a collaborative and mutually beneficial environment.

Support partner projects that are focused on empowering women economically.

This will not only enhance their wellbeing but also address underlying factors that perpetuate GBV. As detailed in the analysis, financial dependence is one of the central reasons why women cannot leave violent partners. As such, economic empowerment should be seen as an integral part of any long-term strategy against GBV. Measures to achieve this include financial support for women-led enterprises and businesses – both for those that already exist as well as for start-ups – as well as support to retrain women. Good examples of such practices are projects supported by EU Neighbours East²⁷ and the Western NIS Enterprise Fund²⁸.

How To Work

Take a strategic approach to projects.

One of the greatest challenges faced by local NGOs in Ukraine is a short-term approach to project support. Instead of this, it is better to develop long-term modes of cooperation that would allow for more flexible budget management (e.g., by permitting budget funds to carry over into the next year). The consequences of Russia's war against Ukraine, too, will be devastating and long-term. Thus, it is essential to build long-lasting strategic partnerships between Ukrainian and international actors.

Offer clear and transparent feedback mechanisms.

These mechanisms should be mutual, involving not only project audits conducted by international actors but also granting Ukrainian NGOs the right to provide feedback on the work of international donors. This two-way communication ensures a comprehensive and balanced evaluation process, which promotes transparency and accountability.

Pursue partnerships based on trust.

Many interviewees mentioned that the core value in their cooperation with international actors is trust and solidarity – two foundational pillars of effective partnerships. It is crucial for international actors not to impose their vision of project implementation; instead, they should trust the unique expertise of local professionals. This approach

²⁷ EU Neighbours East, "Building resilience of Ukrainian women IDPs and refugees and increasing female workforce in tech-driven industry," accessed April 26, 2024, <https://euneighbourseast.eu/projects/eu-project-page/?id=2018>.

²⁸ Ministry of Economy of Ukraine, accessed April 26, 2024, <https://vlasnaspravagrant.com.ua/create/>.

fosters more inclusive and respectful partnerships, acknowledging the value of local knowledge and ensuring that initiatives align with the specific needs and contexts of the affected communities.

Prevent burnout.

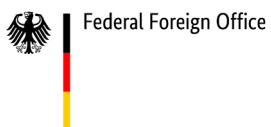
This should be a strategic goal for international actors who support Ukrainian NGOs that work to address GBV. Very often, Ukrainian NGOs are the first responders to GBV, and experts who work there are constantly exposed to high workloads, challenging environments, and emotionally exhausting situations, which can eventually lead to vicarious trauma and emotional burnout. Thus, it is essential to incorporate recovery activities for specialists to ensure their wellbeing and maintain their resilience and commitment over the long term. These activities may encompass both offline and online sessions for psychological support, providing a comprehensive approach to address the mental and emotional needs of those working in challenging environments.

Develop referral pathway systems.

A structured framework for identifying, assisting and referring survivors to appropriate services and support will help ensure that they receive comprehensive care and assistance tailored to their needs. This involves collaboration among various stakeholders to facilitate uninterrupted access to medical, legal, counseling, and social support services that are not covered by NGOs, and to secure a long-term strategic approach for supporting GBV survivors in Ukraine.

Conclusion

These recommendations emphasize long-term sustainability, highlighting the necessity of changing how international actors engage with Ukrainian partners. Without such changes, achieving a sustainable feminist transformation in Ukraine will remain a challenge. The impact of GBV extends far beyond immediate crises caused by the Russian war against Ukraine. Effective support mechanisms must be adaptable and enduring to address the evolving needs of survivors and communities. Therefore, fostering strategic partnerships between local and international actors is imperative for creating lasting positive change and resilience in Ukrainian society.



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