



Ukraine Crisis

Localization in Practice: Realities from Women's Rights and Women-Led Organizations in Poland

Overview

During the invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014, violence against women and girls, especially intimate partner violence and sexual violence, increased rapidly.¹ Since February 2022, the situation has deteriorated to alarming new levels. **Exacerbated and pervasive violence against Ukrainian women and girls** is a consequence of war, with women and girls continuing to be abused, exploited, and raped in Ukraine and while they flee to other countries. An increasing number of survivors are coming forward, buttressed by additional reports from women's rights activists, service providers, humanitarian organizations, and UN agencies.² As conflict in Ukraine pushes millions of women to seek refuge abroad, those leaving remain highly vulnerable to risks like trafficking, or may face sexual exploitation and abuse when seeking access to accommodation, transportation, or financial resources.³



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Women's organizations in Poland, particularly those providing services to survivors of violence and working on women's rights, are reporting more and more requests for assistance from sexual violence survivors inside Ukraine. Polish civil society has demonstrated their commitment and fitness to respond to the growing humanitarian needs, but the international community must step up with financial and technical support to ensure that a sustainable, localized approach can continue.

Women's Rights Work in Poland

Despite challenges, on-going hostility and backlash, women's activism and community-based service provision is vibrant in Poland. Women's organizations are unwavering in their mission to support women, girls, and LGBTI populations in advancing their full rights in society, including ensuring access to services and support for all people to live free from violence, discrimination, and oppression, and to make their own choices in determining their future.

¹ Amnesty (2020) *Ukraine: Not a private matter: domestic and sexual violence against women in Eastern Ukraine*, Amnesty, December 2022. Source: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur50/3255/2020/en/>

² The Guardian (2022) *Rape as a weapon: huge scale of sexual violence inflicted in Ukraine emerges*. The Guardian, 4 April, 2022. Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/03/all-wars-are-like-this-used-as-a-weapon-of-war-in-ukraine>; Amnesty International (2020) *Ukraine: Epidemic of violence against women in conflict-torn east*, Amnesty, 10 Nov, 2020. Source: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/11/ukraine-epidemic-of-violence-against-women-in-conflictorn-east/>

³ OHCHR (2022) *Ukraine: Millions of displaced traumatised and urgently need help, say experts*, OHCHR, 5 May 2022. Source: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/05/ukraine-millions-displaced-traumatised-and-urgently-need-help-say-experts>; Human Rights Watch (2022) *Poland: Trafficking, Exploitation Risks for Refugees - Security Measures, Systems to Address Gender-Based Violence Urgently Needed*, HRW, 22 April 2022. Source: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/29/poland-trafficking-exploitation-risks-refugees>

At the same time, the effects of the Ukraine conflict have considerably strained already overstretched, resource-limited teams. Organizations need funding to cover core costs, including personnel, service provision, and operational spaces to continue their work and expand support to new populations. Burnout and exhaustion are already present among civil society organizations, and organizations are taking on more than what their current resources can sustain.

Key Findings

From March 28–April 29, 2022, CARE had more than 15 in-depth conversations with 18 women from more than 11 women’s rights organizations and women-led organizations in Poland. Below is a summary of the needs and recommendations of women-led organizations working on gender-based violence (GBV) response, LGBTI and migrant rights, and sexual and reproductive health (SRH):

Women’s civil society organizations in Poland have long provided GBV and SRH services

Polish civil society and volunteers want to maintain existing services and activities

Polish women’s organizations will continue work long after the crises subsides

- **Women’s civil society organizations in Poland have long provided GBV and SRH services**, as the primary, frontline providers of this life saving support, alongside awareness raising and advocacy on behalf of women and girls.
- **Polish civil society and volunteers have stepped up to respond to the refugee crisis in Poland but must find a way to maintain their existing services and activities, too.** All the organizations that CARE spoke with are building upon existing services and activities to support women and girls fleeing Ukraine in addition to exploring ways to integrate and combine their work with refugee and host communities to maximize their reach and impact.
- **Polish women’s organizations will continue to work long after the humanitarian and refugee crises subside.** While many women’s organizations have utilized small grants from foreign organizations to support their work in the past, local/community-based fundraising and limited funding or donations from local municipalities and city councils has sustained their work until now.

Priority Needs and Concerns

With more than 3 million refugees entering Poland in recent weeks⁴, most of whom are women and children, there is a risk that women’s organizations will not be able to continue their work while also providing emergency response and life-saving services to the refugee crisis. Women’s organizations expressed concerns about their ability to continue working at the current pace, particularly:

⁴ UNHCR (2022) Ukraine Data. Source: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>

- ***Lack of flexible approaches and agreements with local civil society organizations:*** As the main providers of specialized domestic, sexual violence and SRH services in the country, women's rights organizations have pivoted from focusing solely on Polish women and girls including refugee, migrant, and minority communities already in Poland, to also serving women and girls from Ukraine in recent weeks. However, growing needs, changing realities, and new challenges in Poland require quick decisions and for organizations to be able to pivot in focus or approach, as needed.
- ***Inadequate contingency planning for a long-term protracted crisis:*** A long-term, protracted crisis will have additional implications for refugees in Poland and Polish host communities. Women's organizations have already identified emerging needs arising in both Ukrainian and Polish communities that require attention.
- ***Insufficient prioritization of core resources and operational support:*** In addition to existing services, programs, and activities, organizations are requesting support to develop their internal policies and organizational structures to be able to sustain services over the long-term. Organizations require assistance to respond, but also some want to "professionalize," such as by developing databases for secure and systematic record-keeping, requiring investments over-time.
- ***Limited focus on collective response(s) alongside individual efforts:*** Women's organizations know each other and have informal referral mechanisms and networks. They often call on one another and share information to maximize resources or jointly provide assistance. While this has worked to date, support for more formal collaboration around strategic planning, preparedness, and increasing access to a holistic range of vital services and support is required.

CARE's Women's Protection Response in Poland

CARE's priority is to support Ukrainian women and girls in Poland impacted by the crisis and to directly support women's rights and women-led organisations in their work. This localization and partnership approach is intended to:

- Provide holistic services and support to women, through local partnerships and front-line work.
- Offer technical and advocacy support, as well as coordination, to partners who want support to who face the significant challenges responding to lifesaving humanitarian priorities, including provision of essential services.
- Support networking, solidarity building, experience sharing, mutual learning and collective strategizing between women's organizations within and across countries, partners, and streams of work.
- Amplify outreach to ensure services and information are accessible to women and girls, particularly outside of city centers and hubs.
- Assist local civil society organizations in a way that centers and prioritizes their needs, wishes, and long-term vision as well as values their contributions to the response. This includes joint advocacy at regional and global levels.

Recommendations for Humanitarian Action

As humanitarian organizations conduct the emergency response, they should make efforts to support all women and girls, whether Polish, Ukrainian refugees in Poland, or from other countries. An “and/or” or “them-versus-us” approach does not benefit women and girls in the long-run, and women’s organizations are pushing for more holistic and comprehensive support to mutually enhance and reinforce an important and broadened service provision model for years to come. The following recommendations build off the important principals enshrined in the Grand Bargain and follow similar recommendations from the 2014 Ukraine war.



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In order to ensure equitable, localized action, it is critical that the international community mobilize – putting into action its commitment and match rhetoric, in making strides towards localization in the following ways:

1. **International humanitarian organizations should support, fund, and prioritize existing service providers and local programs, including volunteer networks:** International organizations and donors should value local approaches and ways of working including listening to the needs, priorities, and recommendations of women’s organizations and by extension women and girls with consultation prioritized at every stage. Local leadership and service provision has proved effective in Poland and provides a foundation for emergency response programming that can be strengthened and built upon.
2. **Partnerships and local agreements should minimize any new demands and requirements for local organizations:** Contractual requirements should be simplified or adapted, where possible. Capacity-building efforts for women’s organizations should reflect the true needs and requests of local leadership teams. In addition, technical support and training activities should occur when local organizations, volunteers, and staff are available, as well as consider their pre-existing priorities and commitments.
3. **Support to Polish civil society organizations should account for ongoing work streams and priorities:** Conversations and contracts with local groups should address service provision needs, while also considering organizational development gaps, and their long-term vision for society. Women’s organizations must be able to scale-up their humanitarian work with Ukrainian women and children, while not compromising services to Polish women and girls, and ultimately serve all women and children in Poland under one umbrella.
4. **Donors, coordination groups, and advocates must invest in holistic, wraparound services for Ukrainian women and girls in Poland:** Many of the risks and needs of women and girls have been highlighted and well-covered in assessments and media reports. At this stage in the refugee response, an intensified focus is needed on sexual and domestic violence case management/response, SRH services in line with the Minimum Initial Service Package (MISP), violence prevention and risk reduction programming, as well as solidarity and advocacy work.