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Wartime sexual violence: How Swiss NGOs are helping Ukraine survivors heal

By Liv Martin

Since the start of Russia's war against Ukraine in February, reports of sexual violence started circulating. Sexual violence as a war tactic is prohibited under international humanitarian law, but it is a horrific outcome that continues to happen rampantly during wartime.

By the most recent UN tally, over 120 accounts of sexual violence in Ukraine have been collected since February, although the true number could be much higher. The UN received reports of rape, gang rape, coercion, and people being forced to watch a a partner or a child being abused.

From afar and in the background, Switzerland-based humanitarian groups and civil society have been doing what they can to support survivors.

On the ground in Switzerland

Switzerland has accepted over 60,000 Ukrainian refugees and expects that number to double by the end of the year, reported SwissInfo. On the ground, the Swiss Red Cross has been providing resources and psycho-social support to Ukrainian refugees through a new digital platform and its cantonal locations.

For the first time, the Swiss Red Cross also created a brochure and accompanying posters directed towards women and children arriving in Switzerland. Its message is loud and clear: “protect yourself from threats, exploitation and violence”. Both are free to download online in Ukrainian, German, French and Russian, and have QR codes leading to organisations supporting migrant women, victims of trafficking or domestic violence, and medical resources. Both materials have been placed in reception centres for asylum-seekers around Switzerland and Swiss Red Cross locations.

“We already got some phone calls that they need more of the brochures,” Hildegard Hungerbühler, author of the brochures and posters, told Geneva Solutions.

The Swiss Red Cross mobilised as quickly as possible as the wave of Ukrainian refugees made its way to Switzerland. Since making a commitment in December 2019 to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) at the international level, the organisation has made an effort to address specific aid to survivors. The new brochures and posters are geared towards helping women who have suffered violence or exploitation, whether in Ukraine, during their journey fleeing from war, or in Switzerland.

“Sexual and gender-based violence is of course a very big problem… both in our work abroad and during or after big humanitarian catastrophies like war,” Hungerbühler said. “We recognise that women are exposed to a higher risk of sexual violence, and among refugee women, there are many who are survivors of SGBV.”

Opening old wounds

The current war is not the first time Ukrainians have dealt with unthinkable violence, although this time, the rest of the world has been more willing to provide aid. The world’s eyes have been on Ukraine during this invasion. But when Russia invaded the country’s eastern Donbas region in 2014, there was much less visibility.

A study released in June by the Geneva-based Global Survivors Fund (GSF) chronicles conflict-related sexual violence in Ukraine from 2014 to present. Founded in 2019 by Nobel Peace Prize laureates Dr. Denis Mukwege and Nadia Murad, a survivor herself, the fund takes a survivor-centric approach to making reparations accessible around the world.

At the study’s launch event, multiple Ukrainian survivors shared their stories.

“For me, the war started in 2014 in Donbas,” said Maryna Chuikova, a survivor and member of Survivors to End Wartime Sexual Violence (SEMA) Ukraine. Chuikova lended her help to the Ukrainian army and ended up detained, tortured, and later suffered sexual violence.

Another survivor, Iryna Dovgan, said: “It is painful for me to be a witness. We have talked but not many people heard us in 2014. It’s a huge wound for us, and it’s terrible that only by so much blood having to be spilled that now we are heard.”

A current GSF board member, Dovgan was similarly arrested and detained for supporting the Ukrainian army, and suffered subsequent abuse. In 2018, she became the national coordinator in the Global Network of Victims and Survivors to End Wartime Sexual Violence (SEMA) for Ukraine, and now leads the Ukrainian survivor network.

The study found that in conflict-torn areas, people feared reprisal if they spoke out about acts of sexual violence committed against them. Additionally, occupation by armed groups led to humanitarian services being unable to reach survivors in conflict zones. Detention centres, checkpoints and areas with a high military presence were frequent venues for sexual violence from 2014 to 2021.

The road to reparations

More visibility given to the 2022 conflict has already meant a larger push towards reparations. At the Ukraine Accountability Conference in July, focusing on reparations for survivors of sexual violence was a priority. “Reports from Ukraine have included credible accounts of sexual violence being used as a weapon of war on a large scale. Particular attention should be paid to effectively addressing such allegations, while ensuring that all survivors receive necessary support,” notes on the conference said.

The GSF survey of survivors said in the short-term, survivors needed medical assistance, psychological support, and social services the most. At the core of the fund’s work is the idea that survivors should also be able to decide for themselves what reparations mean. In Ukraine, survivors from 2014 to 2021 were asking for long-term reparations such as restitution, compensation, rehabilitation and guarantees of non-recurrence.

“We’re really trying to have a paradigm shift. Reparations tend to come as an afterthought. People wrongly assume that you need to wait for the end of the conflict or end of legal proceedings,” said Danaé van der Straten Ponthoz, head of advocacy and policy at GSF. “Reparations are urgent and you don’t need to wait for the end of the conflict to start providing reparations. Actually, you can avoid irreparable harm if you act quickly.”

GSF signed a memorandum of understanding with the Ukrainian government, and will serve as technical support while a country-wide interim reparations framework is created. Acting this rapidly to provide reparations for survivors of sexual violence has the potential to set a new global precedent.

“The Ukrainian government is very keen to start this process,” said Maya Shah, GSF’s director of operations. “We need to see it translate into concrete actions now.”

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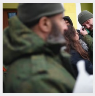

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