

The situation of women's rights in the context of the war in Ukraine PES Women briefing

State of play

- 80-90% of refugees coming to the EU from Ukraine are women and children
- Consequences of the war are different for women and men. Women face an increased risk of human trafficking, exploitation, gender-based violence, sexual violence and rape, and a huge deficit of opportunities to exercise their sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- The highest risks are currently:
 - Rape as a war crime of underaged girls and women of all ages (who also face SRHR barriers in countries such as Poland, where abortion is banned in most cases).
 - Kidnapping and children being lost, where there is a risk of death or trafficking of minors. Human trafficking of women who are fleeing is also a high risk and reports mount daily. Ukrainians were already highly targeted for trafficking before Putin's invasion. UNODC Global Database findings show that in 2018, Ukrainian victims were trafficked to 29 countries. Over half were identified in the Russian Federation and a quarter in Poland, which has received the highest number of refugees since the war began.
- Pregnant women are under extreme stress, malnutrition and at risk of death, which is causing premature births and miscarriages, entailing death of babies and a risk to the mothers' own lives as well. There is lack of infrastructure and emergency contraception (specifically for those women who have been raped)
- The Russian army is destroying evidence of war crimes such as rape, and execution. There is also a danger for witnesses to be forcibly displaced to Russia or to be executed, so they cannot report what they have seen and experienced.

Since the beginning of Russia's attack on Ukraine, over 4 million people have fled the country, out of whom up to 90% are women and children. Over 6.5 million other people are internally displaced. These figures are bound to increase as long as the war lasts.

The consequences of the war have been different for women and men. Whereas men¹ have to stay in Ukraine to fight², and therefore mainly face the consequences of armed conflict, women are facing a myriad of atrocities, from **an increased risk of human trafficking to gender-based violence, war rapes, and a huge deficit of opportunities to exercise their sexual and reproductive health and rights.**

The UNODC's section on human trafficking said that swift actions taken by many European countries to allow refugees to safely cross borders and receive visas have significantly

¹ Women make up around [15%](#) of Ukraine's army.

² According to Ukraine's martial law, men (18 to 60) are required to join the fight or face conscription. The United Nations has called for a ["compassionate and humane approach"](#) to martial laws.

reduced the need for those fleeing to resort to migrant smugglers³. However, for women and children fleeing the conflict, the risk of trafficking and exploitation is still very high. A network of national anti-trafficking coordinators in all EU member states was activated – as underlined by Commissioner Ylva Johansson⁴, even before the war, Ukrainians were in the top 5 of people trafficked in the EU. This means traffickers and criminal structures were already organized and have it now much easier. Reports of men (and women) praying in on women and girls with the aim to exploit and trade them sexually have emerged from Switzerland and Italy⁵ and Spain⁶. The IOM⁷ has warned of other risks, including organ trafficking, slave labour, and individual exploitation, such as has been reported already in Norway⁸. There was also a registered attempt of child abduction by a convicted pedophile.

These reports are sure to increase if governments do not step in and coordinate, and support NGOs who are working relentlessly but who lack the infrastructure and funds to check all volunteers, and follow-up to confirm refugees are safe. In this context, Commissioner Ylva Johansson announced a **10-point plan for stronger European coordination on welcoming people fleeing the war in Ukraine presented on 28 March**. Key points in this plan are EU-wide registration,⁹ guidelines for unaccompanied minors, and measures for delivering information to refugees and volunteers.

Another measures are a Europol taskforce against trafficking in human beings in coordination with local police authorities to ensure that safety is guaranteed. Frontex staff has also been deployed to ensure the well-functioning of the process. National police is informing refugees about the risk of trafficking.

The need for support is increasing as many refugees arriving now have few personal ties in the EU and fewer financial resources. There are particular risks, including psychological damage, for people who face a second displacement after having already fled other conflicts, in Afghanistan and elsewhere. NGOs have reported added difficulties in crossing borders for 3rd country nationals who lived in Ukraine and trans women. There is a lack of data in this regard. Refugees without biometric passports have also had more issues when crossing borders. Poverty, employment and risk of exploitation especially for women, language barriers, and so on, are short- and long-term issues to be addressed. Social inclusion will also require schooling and childcare services, but many children arriving do not have mandatory vaccines to access education in the EU.¹⁰

A phenomenon which has been pointed out by NGOs is that women are returning to Ukraine, especially when they feel they are not protected. Reports also show that there is a large number of people who wish to stay in Poland, given the language accessibility and proximity

³ [Euractiv](#), March 2022

⁴ [Reuters](#), March 2022

⁵ [BBC](#), March 2022

⁶ [Euroweekly](#), March 2022

⁷ [IOM](#)

⁸ [Noway today](#), March 2022

⁹ [Euractiv](#), March 2022

¹⁰ [EU Observer](#), April 2022

to Ukraine. This could not be sustainable in the long-term, which is why voluntary relocation is the way forward.

EU leaders used the Temporary Protection Directive to open up the job market, schools and access to health care for Ukrainians; refugees need to be informed of their rights to help avoid exploitation.

In Ukraine, **women are targeted when escaping** the conflict, and whilst sheltering in **maternity hospitals and bomb shelters**. Sexual and physical violence, isolation and lack of nutrition and healthcare remain threats. Reports of rape as a war crime are continuously growing.¹¹ It is important to monitor the gaps in Ukrainian legislation, because their definitions of rape or sexual abuse are not complete so women victims of these cannot always report them properly. It is important to collect evidence and stories of these war crimes to bring the perpetrators to the International Criminal Court.

Damage to health infrastructure particularly affects sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and risks driving up unwanted pregnancies as well as maternal and infant mortality. For the estimated **80,000 pregnant women** who will be giving birth in the next three months, including estimated 500 surrogate mothers, the situation is particularly perilous. Healthcare services, especially in EU neighbouring countries, need to reinforce the number of midwives, breastfeeding specialists, and prepare safe spaces for breastfeeding mothers – including those who continue to travel or do not have stable housing. These babies will need diapers, baby food, and a long list of basic products.

The situation of SRHR in countries receiving refugees must also be considered, as women's rights there should also be guaranteed. This is for example the case in Poland, where the PiS led government has banned access to abortion health care and systematically undermines the rights of the LGBTI community. Access to sanitary infrastructures, products and health care services is crucial for all women.

Mental health is also critical: investment in social services and psychology is an urgent need, which also entails breaking language barriers.

To sum up, **the EU needs specific proposals which address the gendered consequences of this war, and these must be implemented as soon as possible:**

- Implementing the UN Security Council Resolution 1325, the Istanbul Convention, CEDAW and EU Parliament resolutions from 2006, 2009 and 2010¹², which address these issues
- Negotiate and enable humanitarian corridors to flee from regions under constant shelling; provide humanitarian aid, such as instant food, long term storage food products, hygiene products, medicine
- Coordinating between governments at all levels – international, national governments, regional and local governments, as well as NGOs working on the ground, specifically women's organisation who can give best advice on the specific requirements

¹¹ [The Guardian](#), April 2022

¹² There will also be an **EU Parliament resolution** to be adopted in the plenary in May on the situation of Ukrainian women

- Set up interinstitutional task force to help to coordinate and monitor the latest events.
- Women need to be represented at these negotiation tables, especially as there are currently no female negotiators
- Implement the EC [10-point plan](#), including EU-wide registering (through EU registration system) of refugees arriving, volunteers and families hosting them, and follow up
- Implement EU-anti trafficking Directive, child protection package and Temporary Protection Directive with a strong gender perspective
- Refugees need to receive adequate and useful information in their language, including warnings and tips to not fall into traps of trafficking
- Establishing a coordinated platform to report crimes in Ukraine and bring cases to the International Criminal Court. We need to raise awareness on these war crimes and make sure all war criminals are brought to justice and held accountable. For this, evidence is key.
- Consulting with women's organisations in Ukraine and the EU, which need appropriate funds¹³
- Allocate financial means to reinforce support services dedicated to special needs of women and children in the host countries, including midwives, health staff, children support etc. Psychotherapy in Ukrainian to reduce risk of PTSD is very important – an online platform could be an idea to reach all those who need it.
- Enabling feminist foreign policy, as several PES members actively promote, including the Social Democratic Parties of Germany and Sweden
- On the ground, Ukrainians need humanitarian corridors so that people in cities under siege, who are starving to death, can leave safely. Medication, maternity ward material and professionals, vitamins and other for new mothers, baby products and women's hygiene products are essential. Modular housing can help both in Ukraine and in member states with high numbers of refugees or Ukrainians who lost their houses.
- Human rights activists and organisations must be protected.

¹³ Commissioner Helena Dalli hosted a roundtable with civil society working in Ukraine on 05 April