



## Why we need to put equity at the heart of Ukraine's relief, recovery and reconstruction.

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One year has now passed since Vladimir Putin commanded Russian forces to launch a full - scale military invasion of Ukraine, and the war continues to take an incalculable toll on the lives of Ukrainian people. This year, to mark International Women's Day, Crown Agents' senior leadership and staff wish to highlight the distinct impact the war has had on Ukraine's women, as well as their role at the forefront of the fight for freedom and democracy.

Leading on the implementation of the Ukraine Support to Civil Society Organisations (SCSO) programme, generously funded by the UK Government through the CSSF Fund and delivered in consortium together with International Alert, we have experienced first-hand the impact the war has had on communities across Ukraine, and women in particular. The SCSO programme aims to support civil society organisations (CSOs) to respond to the immediate emergency needs of women and marginalised groups on the ground, through its emergency fund, as well as advocate for their longer-term human rights and inclusion. With Crown Agents having operated for over 25 years in Ukraine, Crown Agents International Development (CAID), Crown Agents' charitable arm, has also taken the lead in providing grants to CSOs via the Ukraine Civil Society Emergency Response Fund (USCERF) to continue to deliver essential services for local communities across Ukraine. To date, both the USCERF and SCSO programmes have awarded over 100 grants to CSOs across Ukraine.

In support of the 2023 IWD theme #EmbraceEquity, we are particularly keen to draw attention to the diverse experiences of women in the context of the current war. We also want to make the case for why we think it is vital to promote the participation and leadership of women in relief, recovery and reconstruction efforts.

History has shown us that in times of conflict and crisis, women are disproportionately impacted by risks such as poverty, exploitation, violence and abuse, as the conditions of war intensify the impacts of pre-existing gender inequalities. In many instances, gender also intersects with other factors such as age and disability status to intensify marginalisation and vulnerability to harm.

The gendered impacts of the current war in Ukraine are clear for all to see. Ukrainian men aged 18-60 have been required under martial law to stay behind and defend their country from attack. While many women have sought refuge in neighbouring countries, many more have either chosen or indeed been forced to stay behind. Some women have chosen to remain in Ukraine out of patriotic desire to defend their country and support the war effort, be this as politicians, civil society leaders or as combatants. It is important to recognise, however, that some women have simply been unable to flee for practical or emotional reasons. For example, older women and women and girls with disabilities (including those living in institutions) face multiple barriers should they wish to evacuate and seek sanctuary elsewhere, meaning they have no choice but to stay behind. Such situations frequently present their carers (who more often than not are women) with impossible moral dilemmas, as they have to choose between their own safety and that of their loved ones. Put simply, many women have refused to leave such relatives behind and instead risk their own safety to stay in solidarity with them and care for them.

Whether at home or seeking refuge abroad, Ukrainian women also face increasing pressure to financially provide for themselves and/or their families in extremely difficult situations. Single women are particularly vulnerable in these situations, as they often have no one but themselves to rely on. That said, married women are also facing significant challenges. The mass conscription of men has triggered a sharp rise in female-headed households, forcing many to assume sole responsibility for financially providing for children and other dependents, including the elderly and people with disabilities. However, income-generating and livelihood opportunities are extremely limited in Ukraine due to the active conflict and constant threat of aerial bombardment. Furthermore, the closure and destruction of nurseries and education facilities mean women must spend most of the time caring for children, limiting the opportunity to seek work. Alternatively, women have little choice but to pass on these caregiving duties, and more often than not, responsibility falls to adolescent girls. This risks disrupting their education and reinforcing gender norms around responsibilities of child rearing.

Women who have sought refuge in neighbouring countries in Eastern Europe are similarly vulnerable to poverty and under employment and unemployment, as legislation and policies prevent them from finding seeking work

and preference is often given to native members of the population. Income generating and livelihood opportunities for refugees are often in the informal sector, heightening their vulnerability to harm. There are growing reports that refugee Ukrainian women and girls are being targeted for human trafficking.

The steep rise in poverty and the pressure to provide financially for families and other dependents greatly heightens women and adolescent girls' vulnerability to multiple forms of gender-based violence, including sexual exploitation, as alluded to above. In such situations, women and adolescent girls are highly susceptible to engaging in harmful coping mechanisms, such as exchanging sexual activity for food, clothing, shelter, cash and other goods and services. Women may quickly find themselves trapped in exploitative relationships marred by acts of intimate partner violence.

Women and adolescent girls are also vulnerable to acts of gender-based violence perpetrated by armed forces and groups. For example, reports have emerged alleging that Russian soldiers are using rape as a weapon of war and a tactic to terrorise and displace the civilian population. Women and adolescent girls are also vulnerable to sexual harassment and sexual assault in crowded internally displaced people (IDP) and refugee settlements, which offer little to no privacy, security, and protection. In such tense situations, where resources are constrained, lesbian, bisexual and trans women are also vulnerable to being singled out and discriminated against and attacked due to their perceived failure to conform to gender norms and expectations.

To compound matters, the mass destruction of health facilities in Ukraine poses severe risks to women's health. In the current context, women and adolescent girls struggle to access sexual and reproductive health services, heightening the likelihood of experiencing adverse health outcomes, including HIV and AIDs, unwanted pregnancy, and birth complications, including obstetric fistula and even maternal mortality.

Despite these immense challenges, however, we have been amazed by the many women who have taken up the task to run, or continue to run, small civil society organisations, supporting other women on the ground in these difficult circumstances. One of these women is M. P., the founder of a CSO that provides legal aid and mental health services to Internally Displaced Women (IDPs). The organisation also supports the development of women's organizations and recovery of infrastructure, and furthermore assists with evacuations. So far, M.P. managed to evacuate almost 5,000 people thus far, supported by funding the organisation received through Crown Agents International Development, Crown Agents charitable arm. M.P describes her experience:

*“The city turned into a medieval castle under siege, with no heating, no electricity and no water, under never-ending shelling and with blood stains on the snow... People kept dying not only because of shells but also due to cold, thirst and starvation...*

*Only later, we were able to get out, when we grabbed everyone we could and left with a big caravan using our cars. We were travelling through the occupied territories literally “stuffed to the brim” with women, kids, elderly people and pets. When we were leaving cities behind, we saw dead people and ruined houses by the road.”*

Whilst women's groups and CSOs have reacted quickly to attend to communities following the invasion, they face many challenges as they deal with the influx of internally displaced people and those affected by trauma and loss. In the light of the circumstances, however, many of them are doing an incredible work: A CSO in Western Ukraine we work with, for example, supported by the FCDO's SCSO Programme, assists women who have been displaced by the conflict to help them manage the psychological impacts of the war, bringing them together to talk about their experiences, connect with one another, and realise they are not alone. By bringing women together, the CSO is helping to sow the seeds of a vibrant women's movement in Ukraine.

The programme also supports a charitable foundation which provides psychological support and humanitarian aid for wives of veterans. Their work is designed to help women feel supported and supported by others, to introduce them to stabilization and self-help techniques to be able to withstand the pressures of today. To date, 3 support groups of 12 wives each have been organized, with a total of 36 participants.

Though the war with Russia rages on, international attention is increasingly pivoting from immediate relief efforts to longer-term recovery and reconstruction planning. In June 21-22, 2023, the United Kingdom will host a Ukraine Recovery Conference, with the aim of mobilising international support for Ukraine's economic and social stabilisation and recovery from the effects of war. It is of the utmost importance that every effort is made to facilitate the participation and leadership of diverse women-led organisations, movements and groups in these

processes and discussions. This is critical to ensuring Ukraine builds back better from this conflict, creating a more inclusive, democratic and transparent society.

Crown Agents remains committed to standing shoulder to shoulder with the people of Ukraine during this challenging period. Through all our programmes, we will continue to ensure we support CSOs serving women in all their diversity and facilitate the participation and leadership of diverse women-led organisations, movements and groups in these processes and discussions. This is critical to ensuring Ukraine builds back better from this conflict, creating a more inclusive, democratic and transparent society.

To find out more about the SCSO programme: <https://www.facebook.com/UASupportCSO>

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