

March 2022

Securing women's safety at the time of war

The invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation sets a tragic background for this year's International Women's Day. The war has resulted in the loss of human life as well as suffering and displacement of hundreds of thousands of individuals. By March 6th 2022 over 1,5 million people fled Ukraine to neighbouring countries, while Russian forces have indiscriminately targeted Ukrainian towns and cities and failed to establish safety corridors for the civilian population and for humanitarian support. There exists extensive evidence that military conflicts put women at particular risk. This is the case both at the site of direct military confrontation, as well as a consequence of vulnerabilities generated by the need to flee their home. While one is clearly most concerned about the most direct expressions of gender based violence, such as rape, sexual abuse or beating, we should also bear in mind that gender based violence often takes the form of non-physical mistreatment, psychological pressure, or limitations on individual freedoms. and displacement (Wirtz et al, 2014).

Indeed, the use of sexual violence during armed conflicts is by now broadly understood as a premeditated and deliberate technology of war, rather than the brutal expression of some base

instinct triggered by the stress of conflict situations (Skjelsbaek, 2001), and there is evidence that aggressors from societies that are more gender-unequal are more likely to use it (Taylor, 1999; Meger, 2016, Guarnieri and Tur-Prats, 2020). Also, after fleeing conflict zones the spectre of sexual and gender-based violence follows displaced populations: the risk for sexual violence is heightened in refugee camps (Araujo et al, 2019). Further, it has been shown that rates of intimate partner violence during complex emergencies are much higher than rates of wartime sexual violence perpetrated outside of homes (Stark and Ager, 2011), and that domestic violence may be exacerbated by conflict and displacement (Wirtz et al, 2014).

Thus the international community, the governments of countries which welcome families escaping the war, and the countless organised and improvised support groups, ought to pay particular attention to the risks to the welfare of women at this extraordinary time.

All agencies involved in assisting the Ukrainian population, both within and outside its borders, should be particularly aware of broad aspects of gender based violence which the international academic community has been stressing for

the last few decades. As the war continues the international community, the governments of the host countries, and the European Union ought to ensure that:

- Women and vulnerable groups that want or need to leave conflict zones are allowed to do so in a safe way.
- All perpetrators of violence, including sexual violence, are eventually brought to justice. For this, there should be no question of impunity. For this to be possible safe spaces, infrastructure and reporting practices need to be established and enforced.
- As per UN Security Council Resolution 1820 (first applied to the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2008) sexual violence ought to be used as part of the designation criteria in sanctions regimes. This implies that “targeted and graduated” measures can be imposed against warring factions who commit rape and other forms of violence against women and girls.
- Refugee women are involved in the design, management or leadership of gender-based violence protection measures in refugee camps, if such were to be established (UNHCR, 2011)
- Training programmes concerning gender-based violence, including sexual violence, and available legal mechanisms to prevent it are provided for volunteers, staff and refugees to minimize the risk for fleeing women (Spangaro et al 2013).
- In the medium and longer term, in case of an inability to return to their homes, host countries facilitate legal work among refugees to avoid a cycle of vulnerability that may lead displaced women to seek precarious means of earning income (Ray et al. 2009).

- Social support through individual or group therapy and skilled support groups is offered to reduce mental distress (Willman, 2013).

As we await the peaceful end of the invasion of Ukraine and the safe return of hundreds of thousands of families to their homes, may this year’s International Women’s Day be a day of reflection and resolution on appropriate means and strategies to prevent and combat sexual and gender based violence, both on the scene of the the armed conflict as well as against all women who find refuge from the war in foreign countries.

On March 7th 2022 the FREE Network was planning to host a conference on “Economic and social context of domestic violence” as part of the Forum for Research on Gender Economics (FROGEE). The conference has been postponed until representatives of all the FREE Network institutes can safely participate. The FROGEE project is supported by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).



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