

UKRAINE CRISIS

RAPID GENDER AND CONFLICT ANALYSIS: POLTAVA OBLAST (AUGUST 2022)

INTRODUCTION & METHODOLOGY

The humanitarian situation in Ukraine remains dire with few signs of improvement as war continues in the eastern and southern regions of the country. Significant numbers of people continue to be displaced from the shifting front lines, with the total number of internally displaced individuals currently at 6.9 million as of end August 2022. Most of those newly displaced tend to seek refuge in nearby oblasts (administrative divisions) in eastern Ukraine rather than the west of the country where living costs are much higher.

To help guide humanitarian programming in Poltava Oblast, the Joint Emergency Response in Ukraine (JERU), a joint program between [Welthungerhilfe](#), [Concern Worldwide](#), and [CESVI](#), in partnership with Light of Hope, conducted ten focus groups in Machukhy and Novi Sanzhary villages to better understand gender and conflict dynamics of the humanitarian crisis in the surrounding districts. It provides additional primary evidence to build on previous analyses, including those from [CARE International](#) and [UN Women](#).

Focus groups were divided along the following gender, age, and displacement status:

1. Displaced women aged 25 – 60.
2. Displaced men aged 25 – 60.
3. Displaced young men and women aged 18-24
4. Displaced elderly men and women aged over 60.
5. Residents: male and female aged 18 and above.

These five groups were each held in Machukhy and Novi Sanzhary villages between 26th and 29th August (reaching a total of ten focus groups), with participants invited from a sample of those registered as receiving humanitarian support. This focus group breakdown and participants were selected to include a diversity of genders, ages, locations, and vulnerabilities, within the resource limitations for this analysis. Exclusively male focus groups were facilitated by male facilitators and exclusively women focus groups by women facilitators. All participants confirmed that they understand the purpose of the focus groups, the themes to be discussed, that depersonalised notes on the conversation would be taken, and that they were happy to participate.

Focus group participants were asked if and how gender and age roles, responsibilities, and relationships had shifted over the course of the war, the coping mechanisms they were applying and the positive and negative consequences of these, sources of connection or division within communities, and how they projected humanitarian needs would change over the upcoming months.

This report summarises the key findings of these focus groups and provides recommendation to humanitarian actors to better incorporate gender, age, and conflict sensitivity considerations in programming.



Loss of livelihoods a major cause of vulnerability for all; men pressured due to loss of breadwinner status.



Psychological distress mentioned by all groups, while need for psychosocial support mentioned specifically by women.



Displaced families report support by host communities, however stretched resources risk increasing tensions.



Coming winter causes high levels of concern for displaced and host families, given high costs and increasingly exhausted resources.



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ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

PAID WORK

All focus groups highlighted their financial situation has been one of the main areas of life affected by the war. The internally displaced (IDP) groups universally considered an inability to find paid work or work at an income close to what they had prior to being displaced as a major cause of vulnerability.

Many male IDPs of all ages highlighted being displaced from their urban based homes to rural locations made it difficult to find new work. Several men in the focus group did state they had managed to find some work, including, casual labour, making deliveries, working in a bakery, or gardening, but at a far lower income than they previously had. Many are currently retraining or seeking to retrain for work suited to rural areas in an effort to boost these incomes. They specifically stated the loss or diminishment of their breadwinner status has put substantial pressure on them, and that many men feel low to depressed moods as a result. Male residents had similar opinions and emphasized the opportunities for jobs in both locations were often limited even before the current war, and salaries in the area had dropped since the war began.

Women of all ages were similarly keen to undertake paid work given their deteriorating financial situation but were likewise affected by a lack of paid work on offer. They highlighted that although there is more work available in the city, transport links do not operate well, and the cost of travel would absorb any increase in income. Some women with young children noted the difficulty in finding childcare made it impossible to have the time available to undertake paid work. Despite these challenges one female participant whose husband was away with the armed forces noted she was now making all important decisions concerning both paid and unpaid work herself.

It was also noted that there were often cases of women leaving Ukraine, finding work abroad, and using the income to help support family. Male focus group members highlighted situations where men are reliant on the incomes of their women partners can sometimes be detrimental to relationships within the family unit.

Displaced elderly men and women stated that the pension was not enough to cover expenses before the war, and consequently nearly all of them had been engaged in work to secure additional income. These activities were no longer available in their new locations, and a number of them were forced to leave assets for income generation in their original homes when they evacuated, including animals like pigs and cows.

UNPAID WORK

Unpaid care, domestic, and volunteer work has increased considerably for all groups, but especially for adult women, male and female youth and the elderly. Nearly all participants in these focus groups often felt that the number of care and domestic responsibilities they needed to track and carry out had increased considerably. Common statements included “now everyone needs me”, “I have to support everyone”, and “my responsibilities have doubled”. Women with children reported that looking after their children fulltime without other support left them without time to undertake any other pressing issues, like finding appropriate accommodation.

“There is twice the load of responsibilities and I need to keep track of everything even more.”

Woman, Group of 18-24 year olds



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Volunteer work was seen by all focus group members as an important coping strategy to maintain psychological wellbeing, foster mutual support, and assist with community cohesion during a time of crisis. This was true for both those undertaking some level of paid work, as well as those who had lost their source of income as a result of the war. Some men also stated they had been at different times assisting the Armed Forces or Territorial Defence Forces of Ukraine – they did not distinguish between volunteering to provide support to civilians or providing support to military forces in this instance. The issue of conscription and mobilisation was raised by a few participants, with one male resident stating a strongly negative opinion of those who moved to safer areas to avoid such work, and one youth who felt that although many men were concerned about being mobilised “if you are a man – you must go”.

COPING MECHANISMS

PHYSICAL INSECURITY

For focus group members previously living in areas under attack seeking safety through displacement to their current locations was the main strategy employed. Such decisions to move however were often not unanimous across individual family units or extended families. IDP focus group members often highlighted that some of their relatives refused to leave their homes and felt that family members who chose to leave were abandoning them. Elderly household members were often reported as being more reluctant to move – one participant was aware of an elderly person in their home neighbourhood dying by suicide rather than being displaced. Within individual households focus group participants reported men as more often being inclined to stay as compared to their female partners, causing arguments and sometimes even a split in the household as a response – with one partner staying and one going.

“The family is divided into two camps - those who want to go and those who want to be closer to home. Mutual understanding in the family on this is a big problem.”

Woman, Group of 25-60 year olds

FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES

Men and women of all ages reported looking for alternative employment and sources of income as a common coping mechanism. This includes youth or children looking for work, particularly when their education plans have been disrupted or put on hold. Those able to find work highlighted employment, even at a diminished income, helped provide a sense of purpose with their lives and take their mind off the current crisis.

Those eligible for social protection or pension payments from the state also considered them important mechanisms but inadequate without other forms of support. Elderly focus group participants or those caring for people with disabilities were particularly concerned that these payments were not remotely enough to access medical support needed, especially if specialist care from city hospitals was required.

Both men and women have engaged in vegetable gardening to grow fresh food that would otherwise have to be purchased. Those engaging in such a strategy highlighted that humanitarian support typically does not include such perishable items. Residents in focus groups also highlighted this activity as something that gave them a positive impression of IDPs’ resilience.



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Moving to safer areas in Ukraine or abroad with better employment prospects was also considered to be a common strategy but one that also potentially could increase tensions within households should not all family members agree. If a household splits in order to cope with financial difficulties, then it is more often the women who move, while the male partner stays behind (most men aged between 18-60 are required to remain within Ukraine under martial law). Focus groups had mixed views on this as a coping strategy: some men cited examples of it working well considering the situation, whereas other men saw it as an extremely poor outcome that typically precipitated families “falling apart”. Some male and female youth also cited examples of their parents being in different locations as detrimental, or even losing contact with loved ones completely for months at a time.

MENTAL HEALTH AND OVERALL WELL-BEING

All participants reported that the war had a considerable detrimental impact on their mental health and overall well-being and cited a wide array of different coping strategies they employed as a result. All groups highlighted volunteering and physical labour undertaken as part of that played a central element. Those displaced highlighted meeting with other displaced people, particularly from their home region helped to deal with anxiety, with youth focus groups specifically citing the internet as essential for them to stay in touch with friends as it was not always easy for them to make new social connections where they had been displaced to. Some mentioned church services and participation in other community events as important strategies. Many displaced people with pets specifically mentioned those as being extremely helpful for mental health if they managed to evacuate with them.

Men highlighted that work in general played a central role, or the action of retraining to undertake new work, whereas women were more likely to mention hobbies, cooking, or reading. Male and female youth cited listening to music and sports.

Limiting media consumption on the war was cited by all focus groups as an important strategy, however some participants in the youth groups felt that increasing their media consumption gave them a better sense of understanding and control. Those youth participants nonetheless stressed that people who are not tech savvy and able to filter such information can have their fears exacerbated.

Goodwill and support from family members was often cited as a source of strength, however some displaced focus group members highlighted that having many family members unused to living with one another crammed into a small space often increased tensions and proved detrimental to mental health. Overall, the social sphere of most participants had shrunk.

Some female participants also mentioned using sedative drugs or alcohol as a means of coping with stress.

COMMUNITY COHESION AND TENSIONS

Both displaced and resident focus groups were overall quite positive about the community’s sense of connectedness and mutual support. Many participants cited positive examples of residents providing assistance and support to the new arrivals and displaced people volunteering to improve the community they had moved to in return – including planting gardens or creating sports fields. Many reported feeling a strong sense of unity and an appreciation for the friendly and hospitable way people treated each other during this time of crisis. A number of participants spoke of joint community events, such as a concert by a local band, as being great community bonding experiences, but that information about such events was not necessarily easily available.



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Participants in displaced focus groups also however cited examples where they felt the antisocial behaviour of some displaced people reflected poorly on IDPs as a whole and acted as a source of tension within the community. Likewise, a few participants in resident focus groups at times openly spoke of their negative perceptions of those displaced. Some displaced participants had examples of where initially supportive relationships between themselves, and some residents frayed as the crisis continued.

Language was cited as both a connecting and dividing factor. It was often acknowledged as a barrier, but some IDP participants felt this barrier was fading over time and noted residents deeply appreciated efforts from displaced people to communicate in Ukrainian (many of those displaced are from areas where Russian is more prevalent) . One female participant however did note that her efforts to avoid speaking Russian made her uncomfortable “because this is the language in which I think”.

Discussion of politics was highlighted both a connecting and potentially dividing factor among communities and within families. Agreement brings people together however it was cited as highly divisive if political discussions start and perspectives on the war diverge. This was considered to be a particular risk in shared accommodation where many people who would not normally live together have to operate in close proximity – already a source of potential tension.

In some cases, humanitarian organizations or charities are exacerbating divisions. One focus group cited the example of a charity distributing only 70 packages of assistance where 120 vulnerable families were expecting support, increasing tensions given the lack of resources. This highlights the need for effective and transparent targeting processes.

PROJECTED NEEDS

WINTERISATION SUPPORT

All focus groups strongly stated their concerns about making it through the autumn and winter months. Many noted the accommodation they currently have lacks insulation and heating or are simply not designed to be lived in outside the summer months.

Many displaced participants noted they thought they would only be moving for a couple of months, and so did not prioritise taking the necessary warm clothes and shoes with them.

Rising costs combined with a fear that payments from the state are likely to diminish mean that many worry they will not have the funds available to stay adequately warm and healthy.

“We will survive September. But what next? The coming winter and its costs are extremely worrying.”

Man, Group of 60+ year olds

INCREASED SUPPORT TO MEET BASIC NEEDS

There was a broad concern that the costs of essential items to meet food and basic needs are rising, along with transportation costs needed to access these. Elderly participants in focus groups were particularly concerned with these developments, especially as it relates to the costs of medicine, hygiene products, and medical care, but these fears were echoed across all groups. Women participants with children were concerned with the additional costs needed to purchase school equipment such as notebooks for children. There was a strong emphasis that these price rises are coming at a time when many families are starting to exhaust their savings and resources, with elderly participants in particular noting the consequential decline in their physical health. Several participants stated they initially did not accept humanitarian aid, however their deteriorating situation now means they need to increasingly rely on it.



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PSYCHO-SOCIAL SUPPORT

Participants in women's IDP focus groups spoke specifically of the need for psycho-social support groups or "self-support" groups to better help foster supportive social relationships and reduce feelings of isolation. All focus groups however, including men, noted the high degree of anxiety across the community and, at times for some participants, feel low to depressed moods. Many participants across all groups expressed that the focus groups themselves acted as a helpful outlet, noting the opportunity to talk about the issues affecting them were limited to non-existent.

LIVELIHOODS AND EDUCATION SUPPORT

Men's focus groups strongly pushed the need for support in finding alternative livelihoods as the war and the crises it has created continue as a means to reduce their reliance on humanitarian assistance. This included the need for training courses and support in obtaining any needed equipment or resources required to start a new enterprise. Adult men and male and female youth participants also highlighted the need for improved and reliable internet services to undertake training or educational courses or complete ones underway prior to their displacement.

WATER, SANITATION, AND HYGIENE

In Machuky both women IDPs and residents raised needs regarding water, sanitation, and hygiene, which they expected to grow. Women IDPs highlighted many of the houses where they currently live lack functioning toilets and bathrooms. Residents had growing concerns that water was getting harder to access in old wells as new ones continue to be drilled. Those without the financial means to drill new wells now risk losing access to water altogether in the absence of a shared approach to managing this resource.

RECOMMENDATIONS

WINTERISATION ASSISTANCE

All groups expressed a high degree of anxiety about the coming winter, and their lack of resources to weather it. Humanitarian agencies should therefore place a high priority on ensuring both displaced and vulnerable residents have ready access to assistance to help them over the next months, through a combination of cash, shelter, and non-food items such as blankets and warm clothes to support them as appropriate. A special emphasis should be placed on reaching particularly vulnerable and often hard to reach groups, including the elderly, households with single parents (particularly female heads of households), and persons with disabilities.

MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

Mental health and psychosocial support services are limited in the target locations and should be expanded. The fact that women specified such support whereas men did not, despite talking about the low or depressed states they often feel, may indicate potential stigma about the value of such support. Therefore, appropriate communication strategies need to be developed alongside the expansion of such services to better reach all members of the community.



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LIVELIHOODS

Provide access to vocational training and new livelihood opportunities for displaced men and women and consider opportunities to include unemployed residents with such support. Displaced people are looking to adapt to their new situation of underemployment or unemployment, and vulnerable residents may also benefit from such support. Humanitarian agencies should be aware that the shift in location (from urban to rural environments) and changing gender roles mean women and men are seeking new income opportunities they may have not considered in the past.

“I cannot just sit still. I want to work, but there is no one to leave my child with.”

Women, Group of 18-24 year olds

The lack of childcare is often preventing women in particular from taking up such opportunities, so humanitarian agencies should consider the provision of childcare and flexible working modalities wherever possible as part of providing such livelihood support.

BUILDING ON POSITIVE COPING STRATEGIES

Humanitarian agencies should seek to build on effective coping strategies that IDPs and vulnerable households are already utilising, in a way that does not hinder or diminish local efforts. In the target areas for example, vegetable gardening was highlighted as one activity that displaced people were using to grow fresh food to improve their food security and mental wellbeing. The positive perception residents had of such activities highlight that this is potentially an activity worth expanding, and one that could also potentially act as a social connector between residents and those displaced. In other instances, both IDPs and residents noted that they were not often not aware of local community initiatives taking place until after the fact, highlighting the importance of good communication approaches to inform older persons, persons with disabilities, female headed households, and others more likely to be isolated from regular communication channels.

“There was a charity that gave 70 packages of aid, but there was 120 families that needed it. People were indignant about why they didn't receive it, creating tension in the community.”

Women, Group of 60+ year olds

APPROPRIATE AND TRANSPARENT TARGETING

Agencies must apply a clear and transparent targeting process when providing assistance in order to ensure those most in need receive assistance and to secure community trust and acceptance of the approach taken. The lack of such a process risks, among other things, exacerbating tensions both within communities and against humanitarian agencies more broadly.

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