



Supporting and Resourcing Women Working for Peace and Security in Ukraine

The Australian Civil Society Coalition on Women, Peace and Security

Introduction

Ukraine's diverse and vibrant women's rights movement has been severely impacted by the Russian invasion. And yet, feminist and women's rights focused organisations are still managing to deliver their vital and life-saving efforts on behalf of Ukrainian women, girls and gender diverse people.

Even before the Russian invasion in 2022 and invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014, women's civil society in Ukraine was already operating in a challenging context and facing a range of complex issues, including a lack of funding, extremely high demand for support and services, and marginalisation from decision making processes. In addition, women's rights work always carries dangers, including online and in-person harassment, abuse, and threats of violence. The conflict has severely exacerbated these challenges and has further threatened to reverse hard-worn progress on women's rights.

Recognising these challenges, in June 2023 the Australian Civil Society Coalition on Women, Peace and Security held a convening to explore the work of women's civil society in contexts impacted by the invasion. This paper sets out the findings of that convening and learning shared by speakers working on peace and security efforts within women's movements and organisations in Ukraine and the wider region. It includes recommendations for how the Australian Government, in particular, can further support and resource their efforts.

Recognising the Leadership of Women's Civil Society

It is important to recognise the extensive and multifaceted work of women's civil society:

Women's organisations are building peace at the local, national, regional and international levels in ways that will make peace, recovery and reconstruction efforts more effective and more enduring. Despite the challenging context they are working in, women's civil society have led advocacy towards the development of an updated Ukrainian National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security; ensuring the Plan is current and adapted to the new challenges the country is facing. Women's rights organisations are also working on peacebuilding at the local level, and have been instrumental in the development of regional action plans; coordinating coalitions in 14 regions to unite local governments, civil society, the media and other stakeholders to rally around their implementation. Through their advocacy, Ukrainian women's rights organisations continue to push for the funding and implementation of these plans.

In addition, women's organisations have undertaken essential work mediating between populations, finding common ground, and working to secure and build peace and understanding between groups and individuals with differing perspectives on the conflict. Peace building efforts in Ukraine, and around the world, will only be effective if those efforts listen to and respond to the needs of women and girls, involve them in decision making, and centre their perspectives on, and participation in, recovery processes.

Women's organisations have stepped up to lead humanitarian efforts, both in Ukraine and the wider region, particularly supporting those most impacted by the invasion, including survivors and victims of conflict-related sexual violence, women veterans and ex-combatants, women and families being held in captivity, and refugees and Internally Displaced People (IDP's) with complex and specific needs related to their gender. Women's organisations in the wider region have also stepped up to meet new challenges, for example leading refugee welcoming and resettlement. As an example, in Romania, extensive resettlement work has taken place and new solutions that work for diverse women have been found, including the creation of a helpline offering support and information in five languages. Women's organisations and women human rights defenders are also working in local contexts and with populations that many INGO's can't reach, including in areas under occupation.

Beyond the conflict, women's organisations are continuing their efforts to build a more just, more equal, and so more peaceful world. Women's organisations are not only leading humanitarian and recovery efforts, their comprehensive approach is essential to building a better future for Ukrainian women and girls. Women's organisations are struggling to find the capacity and resources to return to the work they were doing before the war, such as advocacy on unpaid care and gender-based violence. Supporting this work is vital, as these issues will be central to building a safer and better future for everyone in Ukraine, in particular Ukrainian women, girls and gender diverse people.

Women's organisations are supporting each other and learning from each other. Women's civil society and women's organisations in Ukraine and the wider region are coordinating nationally and internationally, sharing learning and information to strengthen approaches and find new and lasting solutions.

New and Emerging Challenges Facing Women's Organisations

Women's Rights Organisations in Ukraine and the wider region are facing a range of new and emerging complex challenges. These include:

- The intense stress of working in a chronically insecure context and in which dangers such as airstrikes are a daily reality. These physical dangers are compounded by the personal emotional stress resulting from concern for friends and family who also face constant danger and those conscripted.
- At the same time, women's organisations are having to respond to increased demand for their support and services, for example in liberated territories where dramatic increases in conflict-related sexual violence are compounding the need for additional services to support victims and survivors of gender based violence. Women's organisations have responded quickly, diverting their efforts into immediate humanitarian response, and stretching their resources and capacity as best they can. This has had knock-on effects and has meant that their ability to deliver their pre-existing programmes and advocacy on issues of importance to women, girls and gender diverse people has suffered.
- Women's organisations have had to rapidly develop new solutions to address the complexities of the evolving contexts they now find themselves in. Examples include the development of programmes to meet the needs of people outside of the reach of Ukrainian government control, including people who

have had to leave the country and travel abroad, people abducted by Russia, and people living in occupied territories. Women's civil society has had to develop new approaches to ensure the needs of these people are met, and make intensely difficult decisions such as determining how to work and cooperate with occupiers to meet the needs of people in occupied areas.

- Unsurprisingly, there are significant issues with burnout and the pressures women's organisations are working under have had a significant impact on the physical and mental health of staff and volunteers. The invasion followed hard on the heels of the Covid-19 pandemic, which had already increased the burden carried by, and burn-out in, women's organisations.
- International governments, INGO's and donors have become focused on immediate humanitarian need, which threatens to divert funding from already under-resourced, longer-term, Women, Peace and Security processes and efforts. This is layered over a context of chronic lack of funding for local and regional Women, Peace and Security National Action Plans as well as a lack of broader funding for efforts to realise women's rights.
- The national and international peace and security architecture doesn't effectively support the participation of women's rights organisations or women's civil society from conflict affected areas. Women's organisations are having to fight for a seat at the table as new processes are created, and are struggling to have a voice in peace, recovery and reconstruction efforts. Without their input, there is a significant risk that these new processes will not deliver in ways that work for the majority of Ukraine's population.

Recommendations for the Australian Government

Given the importance of the work of women's organisations, it is essential that the Australian Government increase the support and resources it provides to women's organisations in Ukraine and the wider region, including:

1. **Providing and advocating for increased and unrestricted funding for women's organisations and movements.** Participants in the convening praised the way that the Australian Embassy in Kyiv reached out to women's organisations in the earliest days of the 2022 invasion, providing funds that have helped those organisations be more strategic and influential. This proactive approach should be built on, through increased outreach aimed at bringing funding directly to organisations with strong track records and those well-situated to deliver, and streamlining time-consuming and complex application processes. The Australian Government is also well-placed to demonstrate, and disseminate learning on, best practice in funding peace and security work, as well as funding for broader women's rights efforts; encouraging other like-minded Governments and donors to also provide increased and unrestricted funding and streamline application processes.
2. **Supporting the mental health and wellbeing of women human rights defenders.** Ensuring the funding provided enables organisations to support staff and volunteers with their mental and physical health and

burnout, and developing new and innovative mechanisms to support the wellbeing and resilience of women human rights defenders working in conflict affected contexts around the world.

3. **Advocating for a regional fund to support collaboration across conflict-affected contexts.** Leading calls for the creation of, and providing funding for, a regional fund for Women, Peace and Security, that can provide funding for women's organisations supporting women, girls and gender diverse people affected by the conflict. This should include funding collaboration between women's organisations in multiple countries and contexts, help to connect them to the international community of women's organisations and movements working on Women, Peace and Security issues, and the provision of opportunities to share learning, solidarity and support.
4. **Raising the priorities of women's organisations in discussions with the Ukrainian Government,** including the need for greater coordination between the Ukrainian Government and women's civil society at all levels, and particularly the local and regional level, to facilitate the implementation of national and regional National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security, as well as the need for funding for plans at both the national and regional levels.
5. **Securing space for women's organisations in decision making processes concerning peace, recovery and reconstruction.** This should include the creation of context-appropriate structures for consultation with women's civil society organisations, activated before substantive negotiations begin, enabling women's civil society to channel input directly into formal peace talks for consideration by parties, mediators and facilitators. Specific funding should also be allocated, aimed at increasing women's participation in parties' delegations and providing incentives for greater representation of women in negotiating teams, for example by offering to pay for an extra seat for all negotiating parties on the condition that it is filled by a woman.
6. **Using diplomatic and other channels to advocate for the inclusion of women's organisations and women human rights defenders in decision making at all levels.** This should include securing their seat at the table in peace processes and negotiations, but also go further, ensuring a voice in all discussions of relevance to women and girls, for example on economic development and the provision of public services. This will help prevent backsliding on, and reverse the erosion of, hard-won gains on women's rights, while ensuring a safer and better future for Ukrainian women, girls and gender diverse people.
7. **Provide funding for and advocate for investment in social infrastructure,** given its importance in rebuilding communities and creating conditions for economic security, but also recognising that the devastation of such infrastructure primarily affects women, who are called on to fill gaps in provision with unpaid labour. This impacts their wellbeing and prevents them freeing their time for political and economic empowerment, including participation in peace and reconstruction efforts.
8. **Creating new spaces for discussion of gender inclusive recovery.** Support and host platforms, events and initiatives aimed at exploration and discussion of gender inclusive recovery in Ukraine. Ensure these are designed in coordination with, and centre the voices of, women human rights defenders and women's organisations from areas affected by the conflict.

9. **Supporting displaced women human rights defenders and refugees in Australia.** Support Ukrainian women, girls and gender diverse people who have been forced to leave Ukraine by providing visas that are reliable, dependable and enable them to plan for their futures. Recognise that the devastation in some areas is so great that many will have nowhere to return to, and enable more refugees that want them to find permanent homes in Australia. Ensure women building peace in the diaspora have space and opportunity to continue their invaluable work.
10. **Offering additional capacity building and training.** Develop mechanisms to offer increased capacity building and training in mediation and negotiation to women's civil society and women human rights defenders.
11. **Reconfirming Australia's commitment to the Women, Peace and Security agenda.** Review Australia's commitment to, and support for, Women, Peace and Security, peacebuilding and demilitarisation efforts around the world. This should include increasing efforts to promote the Women, Peace and Security agenda in areas at risk of conflict and that don't already have a vibrant community working on Women, Peace and Security issues. This includes providing additional support to engage civil society in countries in the wider region at risk of possible future violence.
12. **Ensuring joined-up policy making.** Review Australia's domestic and foreign policy to ensure that all policy and practice positively contribute to global stability and the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

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