



Six months on in Ukraine: Local and national women’s organizations are leading the response to the conflict but are side-lined by humanitarian actors

24 August 2022. Six-months after the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine, women and girls continue to face life-threatening protection risks. Meanwhile, women’s rights and women-led organizations are side-lined in the humanitarian response. Today, **we highlight the perspectives of some of CARE’s women-led partners in Ukraine, Poland and Romania on their participation in humanitarian coordination and decision-making.**

Women and children make up 90 percent of Ukrainian refugees,¹ and women and girls represent 65 percent of the internally displaced people in Ukraine². Women and girls are facing risks inside and outside their country, including gender-based violence, sexual exploitation and abuse and human trafficking.

Women are also among the frontline responders in the humanitarian crisis, leading efforts to deliver essential and lifesaving support to the millions of crisis-affected people in Ukraine and in neighbouring countries. Local and national women’s rights organizations (WROs) and women-led organizations (WLOs) know and understand the needs of affected people in their communities, are the first to reach them, and often have access to marginalized populations that international actors do not. They are also advocating for the rights of women and girls and are essential to increase the participation of those groups in processes and decisions that affect them now and will continue to impact them after the war.

Yet, local and national women’s organizations’ expertise, leadership and unique contributions to humanitarian action in Ukraine and neighbouring countries continue to be largely disregarded by humanitarian actors coordinating and managing the response.³

On the 6-month mark of the escalation of the Ukraine conflict, **CARE stands by women’s rights and women-led organizations, that have played, and continue to play, a critical role in delivering aid and support to their communities and beyond, showing the world the power of locally driven, women-led humanitarian action.**

CARE is partnering with 32 WLOs and WROs in Ukraine and neighbouring countries and is committed to amplifying their voices. Today, we highlight the perspectives of some of CARE’s women-led partners in Ukraine, Poland and Romania on their participation in humanitarian coordination and decision-making.

CARE calls on all actors coordinating and planning the response (and the recovery phase) to do more **to ensure that women’s organizations are centre-stage in decision-making and are provided with the support they need, and the recognition they deserve.**

This is what our partners told us:

¹ <https://reporting.unhcr.org/ukraine-situation> (accessed 23/08/2022)

² <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/iom-ukraine-internal-displacement-report-general-population-survey-round-6-23-june-2022-enuk>

³ <https://www.care-international.org/resources?type=All&topic=All&location=286>

1. WLOs/WROs are not adequately, consistently and meaningfully involved in humanitarian decision making and coordination processes and mechanisms at all levels.

Generally, women's organizations throughout the region largely feel side-lined by humanitarian actors who have made inadequate efforts to promote their leadership in coordination and decision-making fora. While some partners feel involved, lack of transparency about decisions made means that women's organizations are unclear as to whether their experiences and recommendations are being listened to. As a result, women's and girls' needs and priorities remain insufficiently addressed in the response, in particular their heightened risks to gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health.

- ***"We don't see women's CSOs involved in decision-making on any consistent basis. Local initiatives emerge to meet the dire needs and rely heavily on their own networks of friends and relatives to fund or provide for these needs, and they don't know about the state-organized efforts or supplies or funds provided by international organizations or donors. Informational donors' events on how humanitarian aid is organised and coordinated were heavy with lingo and slim on entry points for local initiatives and smaller and newer CSOs. We see little to no outreach work towards local initiatives and CSOs."*** (WRO, Ukraine)
- ***"Civil society organizations are poorly represented in decision-making, especially at the local level, namely in small towns and villages. This is because many CSOs do not know about the decision-making mechanism, and the local authorities do not inform them about the possibility of participating in decision-making. CSOs are predominantly approached to deliver humanitarian aid – to bring food, clothes or buy something for IDPs."*** (WRO, Ukraine)
- ***"Sexual and reproductive health rights need to be highly prioritized in the humanitarian response. As a leading expert SRHR organization in Poland who took over the burden of providing assistance to Ukrainian women and girls, we should be co-leading in the organization of the SRHR response."*** (SRHR NGO, Poland)
- ***"On the one hand, we do feel involved in the coordination process because we are invited to the coordination meetings and we are consulted on humanitarian aid documents. On the other hand, the process seems to be quite bureaucratic, and we are not always sure what the decisions and outcomes of our participation are, and above all, if we reach out enough with our pathway of SRHR support to those who need it."*** (SRHR NGO, Poland)

2. More cooperation, coordination and efforts to overcome lack of information, language barriers and unrealistic demands from humanitarian actors are key to increasing WLOs and WROs' participation and ability to influence decisions.

Women's organizations reported gaps and challenges in coordination, communication, and information. The limited adequate and targeted support to WROs and WLOs from those mandated to coordinate the response is a significant challenge. They provided practical recommendations to improve the quality of information sharing, without increasing the quantity of over-burdensome meetings, and thereby enhance their role in decision-making fora.

- ***"International donors and organizations should step up their outreach game and bring together local authorities, hosting communities, vulnerable groups, IDPs, and local CSOs -- with a separate attention to women's CSOs and women's peacebuilding activists even through joined retreats."*** (WRO, Ukraine)
- ***"[We need] better communication between authorities and civil society and a real dialogue and consultation, not just information about the decisions taken."*** (WLO, Romania)
- ***"The humanitarian response needs to be communicated to local partners in more direct and accessible ways. The language used in communication with local NGOs could be simpler. Local actors should not be pressured to learn UN expert jargon to be able to meaningfully participate in the decision-making process on the humanitarian response."*** (SRHR NGO, Poland)

- ***“From the very beginning of the war in Ukraine, we have faced information chaos. There is a lack of a single trusted/verified site with up-to-date information on where and what aid is being provided. This place should be easily accessible, updated as often as possible. Information should be available in Polish. It makes it very difficult to use materials prepared by humanitarian organizations only in English. We are overwhelmed by the multitude of meetings, trainings, etc. As a small team we can't handle it. As a result, we are probably unable to attend important events and meetings.”*** (WRO, Poland)

3. WLO/WRO need quality funding, capacity-based technical training, greater engagement of donors, and increased information sharing and lesson exchange.

More volume and quality (more flexible, longer term, not or softly earmarked) funding, combined with relevant and targeted training that cater to the stretched capacity of local and national organisations are some priority areas identified by partners. In addition, long-term support from agencies with a mandate to promote gender equality and empowerment of women and girls, are critical for WRO/WLOs to better deliver gender-responsive aid to women and girls in Ukraine and neighbouring countries.

- ***“Local communities have few human and financial resources for working with internally displaced persons and creating social services. Civil society organisations can solve these issues and take on many other issues, but they need financial support to maintain staff, create and implement services.”*** (WRO, Ukraine)
- ***“We need more flexibility from donors and awareness that the situation is very dynamic, and we need to adapt operations, goals, budgets and so on.”*** (WLO, Romania)
- ***“We need long-term support and cooperation with donors who are focused on human rights/women's rights/LGBTQI+ rights, gender equality and the feminist agenda. Long-term cooperation is essential for effective system change in these areas. We need long-term support to restore and strengthen equal participation of Ukrainian women in peacebuilding after the war. We need informational, educational and financial support to implement the agenda of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 “Women. Peace. Security” at the local level.”*** (WRO, Ukraine)
- ***“[We need] information and education about human trafficking and sexual violence among teenagers.”*** (WLO, Romania)
- ***“We want to learn more about particularities of humanitarian response, international standards as regards GBV/SRHR applied in humanitarian settings.”*** (WRO, Poland)
- ***“We need resources to provide internally displaced persons with services they need [including] gender-sensitive protection services, GBV services and other protection measures.”*** (WRO, Ukraine)

Those mandated to respond to this humanitarian crisis, especially the international community, donors, UN agencies and INGOs have - in most cases - already committed to localisation and equitable partnerships, to meaningful participation and leadership of local and national actors, and to quality funding. They must now urgently deliver on their commitments in Ukraine and neighbouring countries.

International actors should set partnership objectives and targets that include specific commitments for supporting and funding WROs/WLOs in Ukraine and neighbouring countries and hold themselves accountable to these objectives. Without such deliberate and specific commitments, we will not only continue to side-line women’s organizations, but we will continue to fail women and girls who already suffer disproportionately from the conflict.