

# Russia's war on Ukraine: A gender-sensitive humanitarian response

Even – or especially – in complex, emergency situations, a gender perspective is vital in order to take into account the specific needs of women and men and the different risks to which they are exposed. Humanitarian actors are calling for a gender-sensitive response to the Ukraine crisis, to help tackle barriers to accessing vital services, address increased risks of gender-based violence and facilitate the reception and integration of refugees.

## The scale of humanitarian need

After eight years of armed conflict in eastern Ukraine, humanitarian needs were already [high](#). Before Russia launched its full-scale invasion on 24 February, the United Nations (UN) had already projected that 2.9 million Ukrainians – 54 % of whom were women and children – would need humanitarian assistance in 2022. The war has now caused an [escalating humanitarian crisis](#). [Shelling and air strikes](#) on residential areas are resulting in increasing [civilian deaths](#) and severe damage to homes, [hospitals](#), schools, and water and power supplies. The humanitarian situation is [particularly desperate](#) in areas besieged by Russian forces, with dwindling access to food and medicines and no or few safe avenues for aid to get in or people to get out. Two weeks into the conflict, an estimated [12.65 million people](#) were stranded in affected areas, or unable or unwilling to leave due to military action. Around 1.85 million people were already internally displaced within Ukraine, a figure that could rise to [6.7 million](#). In the space of only three weeks, [3 million people](#) have fled to neighbouring states (Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Moldova, Belarus and Russia) and over 360 000 have moved on to other European countries. This complex and fast-moving situation requires a vast humanitarian response, spanning action to meet the immediate needs of those under fire and on the move, through to support for refugees settling in host communities. The UN also [warns](#) that a prolonged conflict could have a ripple effect way beyond Ukraine, including a risk of food insecurity in some countries that are heavily reliant on its wheat exports.

## Why a gender-sensitive response matters

Since conflicts and humanitarian crises can affect women, men, girls and boys [very differently](#), adopting a [gender perspective](#) from the outset ensures that their specific needs and the risks and vulnerabilities they are exposed to are taken into account, and that they are equally able to shape decisions about the support they need. Initial [rapid gender analysis](#) and monitoring can serve to identify some of the issues already emerging in relation to the conflict in Ukraine and urgent areas for action:

- **Access to critical services and humanitarian support:** Sex-disaggregated and intersectional data are vital to identify specific protection needs and ensure that humanitarian assistance is effective. [Monitoring](#) of humanitarian needs across Ukraine shows that there is a lack of shelter spaces for families and single sex spaces for women. It also identifies children, women, persons with disabilities and/or serious medical conditions, [older people](#) and minorities as the groups facing the greatest obstacles to accessing transport, food, medicine and [emergency health care](#).
- **Maintaining sexual and reproductive health services and maternity care:** In times of [war](#) and forced displacement, interruptions to care can put women and girls at greater risk of unintended pregnancy, untreated [infections](#) and unsafe delivery. The [UN Population Fund](#) reports that at the start of the current crisis, there were around 265 000 pregnant women in Ukraine, some 80 000 of whom were expected to deliver over the next three months. Women are giving birth in [risky conditions](#) and at least one [maternity hospital](#) has been struck. [Safeguarding access](#) to these services is therefore a matter of urgency.
- **Addressing sexual violence:** Armed conflict [increases the risk](#) of sexual violence, including rape, sexual slavery and forced prostitution, while also reducing access to specialised support

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for survivors and potentially creating a climate of impunity. The conflict in eastern Ukraine highlights the particular risks faced by [displaced women and girls](#) and the [unmet need](#) for support and redress. In the current context, there are [calls](#) for the European Union to push for rape to be judged as a war crime and to establish mechanisms to monitor women's fundamental rights during and after the conflict.

- **Protection from sexual exploitation and trafficking:** Women and children make up the overwhelming majority of those fleeing Ukraine. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) [stresses](#) that some children are unaccompanied and that many women have been separated from partners and support networks and are in a situation of financial insecurity. This puts both groups at risk of sexual exploitation and trafficking, and there are [reports](#) that this is already happening. Therefore, while welcoming the outpouring of support from private individuals offering transport and accommodation, associations working on the ground are [calling for](#) coordinated action to inform, register and accompany women and girls and vet potential hosts. [Poorer men](#) not wishing to be conscripted may also be vulnerable to migrant smugglers.

Since it is mainly women and girls who are seeking refuge, countries hosting refugees from Ukraine will need to pay particular attention to their [specific reception and integration needs](#). Humanitarian actors and stakeholders are also stressing the need for [safe and regular pathways](#) to safety for all women and girls, [irrespective](#) of their nationality, ethnicity and religion, including for [stateless persons](#) and Roma with no documentation to prove their residence status. There are [calls](#) for women's organisations to be involved in shaping the humanitarian response and for [meaningful participation](#) of women in peace negotiations, in line with UN Resolution 1325 on [women, peace and security](#), to ensure that their specific situations and needs are taken into account and to achieve [more sustainable](#) outcomes.

## EU commitments and action

The EU [recognises](#) that crises are not gender neutral, and that [EU humanitarian assistance](#) must be sensitive to gender and age if it is to be effective and reach those most in need. It has [committed](#) to including a gender dimension in all its humanitarian aid, by [tracking](#) how each action integrates gender and age and ensuring that humanitarian responses include strategies for protecting against sexual and gender-based violence, ensuring access to reproductive and sexual healthcare services and promoting women's participation.

The EU is [coordinating](#) deliveries of [material assistance](#) to Ukraine and neighbouring countries. Other measures [adopted](#) so far to help those fleeing Russian aggression include guidelines on simplifying border controls for vulnerable groups and immediate [temporary protection](#) in the EU, giving rights to a residence permit, the possibility to work, housing, and access to social welfare, medical assistance and education. The availability of this legal option to enter and stay in EU countries removes some of the documented [risks](#) facing women and girls seeking asylum. However, the Commission has [raised concerns](#) about trafficking, particularly for arrivals with no relatives or contacts in the EU. The European Commission's [communication](#) on solidarity with refugees and those fleeing war in Ukraine also recognises that, since women, unaccompanied minors and other children make up the majority of arrivals, the immediate priorities will include ensuring appropriate information and accommodation, preventing gender-based exploitation, supporting childcare, and ensuring swift access to education. Member States will be able to use [EU cohesion funding](#) to help refugees access childcare and education, find jobs and get psychological support.

## European Parliament position

In a December 2021 resolution, Parliament [stressed](#) the need to focus on the situation of women and vulnerable groups at the Ukrainian border and in Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine. Another resolution, adopted the same month, [called for](#) more tangible elements of gender mainstreaming, such as gender analyses, to be implemented in EU humanitarian action. At its plenary session in March 2022, Parliament [debated](#) the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Ukraine, highlighting the need for proper assistance for women and children. It also adopted a [resolution](#) stressing the need to fight gender-based violence in war and calling for more women to be involved in peace and security.

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