

Russian Invasion Overshadows Domestic Violence in Ukraine

Experts fear that a fall in reported cases obscures a hidden epidemic.

Monday, 11 July, 2022

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As she crossed the Ukrainian border in spring, Halyna and her children left behind two conflicts: Russia's invasion of her country and the violence her husband inflicted on her for years.

"For the first time in many years, I understand what it's like to leave and not look back," said the 39-year-old.

Experts warn that Russia's full-scale invasion has increased the risk of domestic violence, while hampering service provision to its survivors. This means that, despite legislative improvements - on June 20, Ukraine ratified the Council of Europe's treaty on preventing and combating violence against women, more commonly known as the Istanbul Convention - the problem remains severe.

While domestic violence has faded from the public discourse, it has not disappeared, just become more difficult to counteract. Social services are struggling due to the military mobilisation and evacuation of civilians, while the lack of access to the occupied territories, the limited ability to help people in the war zone and infrastructure shortages add pressure.

"Mass aggression, occupation, evacuation, mobilisation and the departure of women with their children abroad clearly affected the relationships and the problems in the families. Domestic violence is tied to

problems in the family,” Kateryna Levchenko, government commissioner for gender equality policy, told IWPR.

In the first few months of the war, calls to domestic violence hotlines plummeted. From February 24 to May 31, the national hotline of La Strada - an international no-profit focusing on human trafficking and domestic violence - received far fewer calls than in the same period in 2021, said department director Alyona Kryvulyak. But that was not a good sign.

“The war has worsened access to aid resources,” she continued. “Any crisis period, like the beginning of the war in Donbas in 2014, the pandemic, the full-scale invasion, creates serious risk factors.”

Commenting on the lack of shelters for survivors of violence, Levchenko said, “It was only logical that local communities and military administrations use every opportunity to house people fleeing. It is a quick response to an extreme situation.”

“No one has a right to beat us, insult us, humiliate us.”

Nor are all women who sought refuge abroad necessarily safe, despite the restrictions on men leaving the country. Some abusers who were outside Ukraine for reasons like work, remained abroad and were joined by their families. In such situations, women do not know where to go and may not ask for help because of the language barrier or the unfounded fear that they will be deported.

Kryvulyak noted that renewed alcohol sales, which were banned in the wake of the invasion in February, had made matters worse.

“Many women remember that when men did not drink, the conflict situations were resolved peacefully. Once alcohol became available, the situation escalated again,” she said.

The increased circulation of weapons has also heightened the danger.

“Hotline operators say that they are receiving an increasing number of calls when the territorial defence representatives are trying to solve their private issues with the weapons,” Kryvulyak told IWPR.

Courts are less active in protecting victims, added Taisia Rubanyak, a member of the Jurfem association of women lawyers of Ukraine. Since February 24, the number of requests for restraining orders has decreased to a third of what it was last year, while the number of sentences has halved. Moreover, domestic violence appears to have become more brutal, the 31-year-old lawyer noted.

“Domestic violence can be expected to rise as the police are overburdened with catching saboteurs... shelters are filled with internally displaced persons, and general stress levels are on the rise,” added gender expert Maria Dmitrieva. She said that her research indicated that in some communities, the issue of combating domestic violence during the war was taken over by territorial defence representatives.

TROUBLED HISTORY

Olena (not her real name) hoped in vain that the threat of the war would stop her husband’s violence. The couple fled Kharkiv in March with their seven-year-old child. Once, in the school-turned-refuge where they were sheltering in Lviv, her husband dragged her to the schoolyard and beat her badly.

“I sat in the grove near the school and cried,” she told IWPR. She sought help on the internet and came across the Lviv-based Women's Perspectives, but categorically refused to write a statement to the police. Nonetheless, the psychological support infused her with new strength and in May she moved abroad.

Previously, in 2014-2015, the number of cases increased due to the outbreak of conflict in eastern Ukraine. Pressed for resources, the government cut funding on domestic violence institutions and only four shelters for victims remained in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

Activists urge victims of violence to seek help and not remain silent.

In 2016, reported cases spiked again, attributed largely due to the demobilisation of the military without adequate rehabilitation support for

returning soldiers. According to the UN, over 30 per cent of the women whose partner returned from the front suffered physical or sexual violence.

The forced lockdowns in response to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 caused another surge as families struggled with deteriorating mental health, economic difficulties, lack of living space and limited access to services. President Volodymyr Zelensky called it “the number two problem after the virus itself”, with the ministry of interior reporting nearly 210,000 complaints in 2020 and more than 325,000 in 2021.

Levchenko said that there were 710 specialised units supporting victims as of March 2022, including mobile teams, day centres and hotlines as well as almost 50 shelters and 31 crisis rooms where women and children could stay temporarily until a more stable measure could be found. Two shelters and a crisis room, as well as two mobile units in Kyiv region and one in the Lviv region, were subsequently lost due to hostilities.

REASONS FOR HOPE

Since 2017, Ukraine has strengthened mechanisms to counter gender-based violence, and Levchenko said that Ukrainian society had come a long way since then.

“The number of people who turned to law enforcement agencies, social services, and public organisations, grew,” she said. “This increase is an indicator not that the amount of violence is increasing, but that it is coming out of the shadows.”

In December 2017, Ukraine adopted legislation on combating domestic violence which introduced restraining orders and mechanisms, with greater involvement of the courts and law enforcement units.

In 2021, the Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine’s parliament, increased funding for new shelters and services to help victims at the local level. Further funds were pledged for 2022-23, but had to be diverted to the war effort.

The Istanbul Convention sets new procedures, including the prohibition of reconciliation measures, the requirement for the police to open a case

even without a statement from the victim and the collection of comprehensive statistical data to be used for targeted assistance.

“We always work with the consequences, once the violence has already occurred. But we need work on prevention,” Rubaniak explained.

Above all, activists urge victims of violence to seek help and not remain silent.

“War has not defeated domestic violence, it has just prevented it from being reported,” Rubaniak said. “No one has a right to beat us, insult us, humiliate us. Inevitably, the war has changed our priorities a bit, but the priorities of the law have not changed.”

This publication was prepared under the “Ukraine Voices Project” implemented with the financial support of the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO).