

How can we protect displaced women and girls from abuse and violence?

This was the topic of a recent digital conference organised by the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security and the Council of Europe.

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(Illustration: iStockphoto)

"Displaced Ukrainian women and girls must be protected from violence, abuse and exploitation," said Erik Sandsmark Idsøe, State Secretary of the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security.

The aim of [the conference on 30 March](#) was to discuss and share experiences with the refugee crisis currently unfolding on the borders of Ukraine and to build upon earlier experiences with refugee populations.

"This hell of a war launched by Putin's Russia has drastically changed my life and the peaceful lives of all the Ukrainian people," said Tetiana Antonchenko, project staff of the Combatting Violence against Women in Ukraine (COVAW) project at the Council of Europe Kyiv Office.

Antonchenko had currently fled from Ukraine to Strasbourg, France. She was given a wholehearted welcome when she gave her presentation about her experience as a war refugee and all the difficulties, suffering and dangers she faced as one of the millions of people displaced from Ukraine after 24 February.

"The Ukrainian refugee crisis has a *woman's face*"

"This attack is a serious violation of international law and endangers the lives of innocent people. We are deeply concerned about the particular impacts it is having on Ukrainian women and girls," said Idsøe when he opened the conference.

Welcome by Erik Sandsmark Idsøe, State Secretary the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security

Idsøe was followed up by Tone Cecilia Engdahl, Deputy Permanent Representative, Permanent Representation of Norway to the Council of Europe.

"The war is an attack on democracy and on common European values," said Engdahl and stepped back a few weeks in time to the starting point of the refugee crisis we see today and the Council of Europe's immediate response.

On 25 February, [The Council of Europe suspended Russia's rights of representation](#) in the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly with immediate effect as a result of the Russian Federation's armed attack on Ukraine. A few weeks later, on 16 March, the Committee of Ministers decided to exclude Russia from the organisation altogether.

"It was a united Council of Europe that took these unprecedented decisions, and it is a united Council of Europe that stands behind Ukraine today," said Engdahl.

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"Nearly 3,9 million people have fled since the war in Ukraine started, according to the UNHCR. Most of them to Poland, Romania, Moldova, Hungary, and Slovakia. Most of them are women and children," Engdahl informed before she paused and added, "Some children are even fleeing alone."

[The council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner](#) has conducted a number of visits to bordering countries of Ukraine.

"In all the countries visited, the risk of human trafficking of women and children was underscored. We can add to that the risk of sexual and other forms of exploitation," said Engdahl.

"90 per cent of the Ukrainian refugees are women and children, and we can wholeheartedly echo the statement that the face of the Ukrainian refugee crisis is a woman's face", said Lilja Gretarsdottir, Head of Co-operation Programmes Division, Implementation of Human Rights, Justice and Legal Co-operation Standards (DGI) at the Council of Europe.

She has worked on migration, refugees and internal displacement for several years and for the last eight years on Ukrainian refugees.

Vulnerability and resilience amongst refugees

The Ukrainian crisis has been characterised as the fastest-growing displacement and humanitarian crisis in our times since World War Two. In addition to the almost 4 million displaced people, there are more than 6,5 million people internally displaced in Ukraine.

Gretarsdottir addresses two themes with specific references to some of the Council of Europe's work over the last years on forced displacement within Ukraine itself: Vulnerability, strength and resilience of refugees. Vulnerability is about immediate needs such as shelter, food and clothing, like all refugee crises.

"There is a high risk of human trafficking, gender-based violence, exploitation and abuse, both within and outside Ukraine. We all know that crises of this nature

are known to increase pre-existing and give rise to more trafficking and abuse in transit."

She also adds the psychological and social strain on individuals, families and communities.

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Gretarsdottir stresses the fact that Ukraine has been dealing with a massive internal displacement crisis since 2014.

"There are not only immediate needs, there is need for both immediate and long-term measures," said Gretarsdottir.

The second theme Gretarsdottir highlights in her presentation is strength and resilience.

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The third theme Gretarsdottir stresses is the need to harness and share expertise across borders.

"Within Ukraine, a formidable business of expertise on displacement has been built, legal expertise, all sorts of capacity building, massive expertise and experience in terms of addressing psychological trauma, and international actors to train a huge network of social actors, and of course the stress on gender aspects such as gender mainstreaming," said Gretarsdottir.

"Crucial to protect Ukrainian Roma"

Roma are among the internally displaced people in Ukraine. Valerie Poppe, Project manager in the Roma and Traveller's Team at the Council of Europe, talked about the displaced Roma in Ukraine and the challenges that they are facing.

"Roma women can face further obstacles; they are women, they may not speak the (Ukrainian) language, they may be unfamiliar with administrative procedures, they can also be without identification papers and are sometimes stateless. The lack of ID documents or nationality increases the vulnerability of Roma women and children because they may not be able to leave Ukraine but also because they are at higher risk of human trafficking and exploitation."

"There are reports that Roma are excluded from food distribution, and volunteers saying that they are scared of Roma and that Roma should be assisted by other Roma," said Poppe."

"Among the Roma community and Roma NGOs, there has been massive mobilisation. For example, [the international Roma youth network](#) has established a digital noise board on the padlet application to keep people informed."

Poppe stresses that protecting the Roma women and children refugees is crucial, like all other refugees.

"A key recommendation is that European states should ensure that the lack of ID-documents or other documentation does not prevent stateless people and people at risk of statelessness from accessing international protection or other forms of protection under national law."

Poppe's second recommendation is to ensure equal treatment of all refugees at the reception centre and inform the refugees of their rights in a language they understand and provide psychological and material support.

"Coordination is the key"

"The Council of Europe has various relevant tools they can use, such as full-fledged conventions to recommendations, opinions, reports and monitoring mechanisms," said Engdahl, Representation of Norway to the Council of Europe.

"In providing a humanitarian response to the refugee crisis, coordination is key. Coordination between different levels of government, coordination between authorities and civil society, and coordination between countries. And coordination starts with the exchange of information and knowledge, said Engdahl.

The Istanbul Convention is one of the monitoring mechanisms (Article 60) that requires states to develop gender-sensitive reception procedures and support services for asylum seekers and gender guidelines and gender-sensitive asylum procedures, including refugee or international protection status determination.

Louise Hooper, Barrister at the Garden Court Chambers, UK, gave a presentation about Articles 60 and 61 of the Istanbul Convention and the checklist concerning women's safety in transit and reception facilities.

[See video from Hooper's presentation on Gender-based asylum claims and non-refoulement](#)

Read: [What can be done now to protect displaced women and girls from abuse, violence and exploitation?](#)

"To the members of the Synergy Network, I would simply like to say: You play an important role, and you can make a difference, together," Engdahl concluded in her closing remarks at the conference.

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