

Women in Ukraine: What key issues are they facing?



BBC Media Action has conducted a large mixed method research study^a including a survey of over 1700 women and 500 men to understand the impact of the current war on women in Ukraine. This research provides a comprehensive understanding of how the war is affecting different groups of women, and how media and communication can help to meet their needs.

In a humanitarian crisis, people need to know what has happened, how to stay safe, and where to find food, clean water and shelter. This is important to help them make informed, life-saving decisions and to support their recovery. Crisis-affected people also need to be able to connect with others and feel reassured. Dedicated mass media and communication for crisis-affected populations, informed by audience research and an understanding of humanitarian needs, can help to save lives and alleviate suffering, especially when physical access to affected areas is limited.

Since the full scale invasion in 2022, the war in Ukraine has sparked huge population movement, forcing many Ukrainians to flee their homes, either internally or into neighbouring countries. Some 90% of the refugees are women and children.¹ While male conscription into the army has affected men's lives, and their families' lives, evidence shows that in other respects the current war disproportionately affects

^a This briefing is part of a series of three, see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/publications-and-resources/research/briefings/europe/ukraine/gender-perceptions/>

women. For example, women have been affected by gender-based violence, forced relocation and related socio-economic impacts, and increased care responsibilities.²

This briefing outlines the key concerns, issues and priorities of women in Ukraine. This knowledge is important because certain services for displaced people require gender-differentiated approaches. These include access to shelter, water, sanitation and hygiene, adequate food for pregnant and breastfeeding women, and access to reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health.³

Different groups of women across Ukraine have diverse needs, attitudes and experiences as a result of the invasion. This research has found that women living with disabilities, older women (aged 55+) and those living in non-government-controlled areas (NGCAs, see page 9) are especially vulnerable. However, it is important to recognise that women are not just a vulnerable group or victims of this war. The number of women in the Ukrainian military has doubled since 2014 and now make up one-fifth of the country's armed forces.⁴ In recent years there has been notable progress towards greater gender equality and rights in Ukraine.⁵ However, this full-scale war risks exacerbating pre-existing gender and intersectional inequalities and discrimination, and women are often missing from formal decision-making processes related to humanitarian efforts, peace-making, and other areas that directly impact their lives.⁶

Methodology

This briefing is based on the findings of multi-method BBC Media Action research conducted in Ukraine in late 2022 and early 2023. The Ukrainian research agency InfoSapiens carried out most of the quantitative and qualitative research fieldwork.

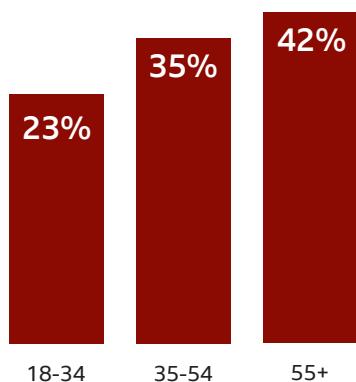
Table 1: Research methods, aims and samples

Method	Sample	Purpose
Quantitative telephone survey	A nationally representative survey of just over 1500 women living in Ukraine in territories controlled by the Ukrainian government. A similar survey was conducted with 500 men, though this smaller sample means the findings are not as representative.	To measure key impacts and actions taken because of the war, as well as media consumption habits, content preferences and attitudes towards misinformation and gender equality.
Quantitative online survey	A survey of over 200 women living in non-government controlled areas (NGCAs).	To measure the same questions as above, but using a different method to reach women in NGCAs as most Ukrainian mobile phone operators in Russian occupied areas have been cut off.
Online focus group discussions (FGDs)	8 FGDs with women: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 4 with internally displaced persons (IDPs)• 4 with non-IDPs 4 FGDs with men: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 2 with IDPs• 2 with non-IDPs	To examine: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How the impacts of war were being experienced on a day-to-day basis• Perceptions of media and communication, especially to gain a deeper understanding of how women and men felt about the changing role of women during the conflict, and how gender roles and attitudes may be changing. Visual stimuli showing women taking up different roles in the war were used to stimulate part of these discussions to unearth more ingrained attitudes around gender roles.
Online and face-to-face, in-depth interviews (IDIs)	9 IDIs with female respondents from relatively vulnerable groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 3 with women with disabilities• 3 with women from Roma communities• 3 with women who live near the conflict front lines or in NGCAs	To examine the same issues as the FGDs to gain a more individual narrative experience of how women have been affected by the war.
Key informant interviews (KIIs)	8 KIIs with women leaders working in the humanitarian, civic and media sectors.	To generate a broader perspective from experts on the impacts of the war on women, and what these changes might mean for gender equality in the future.

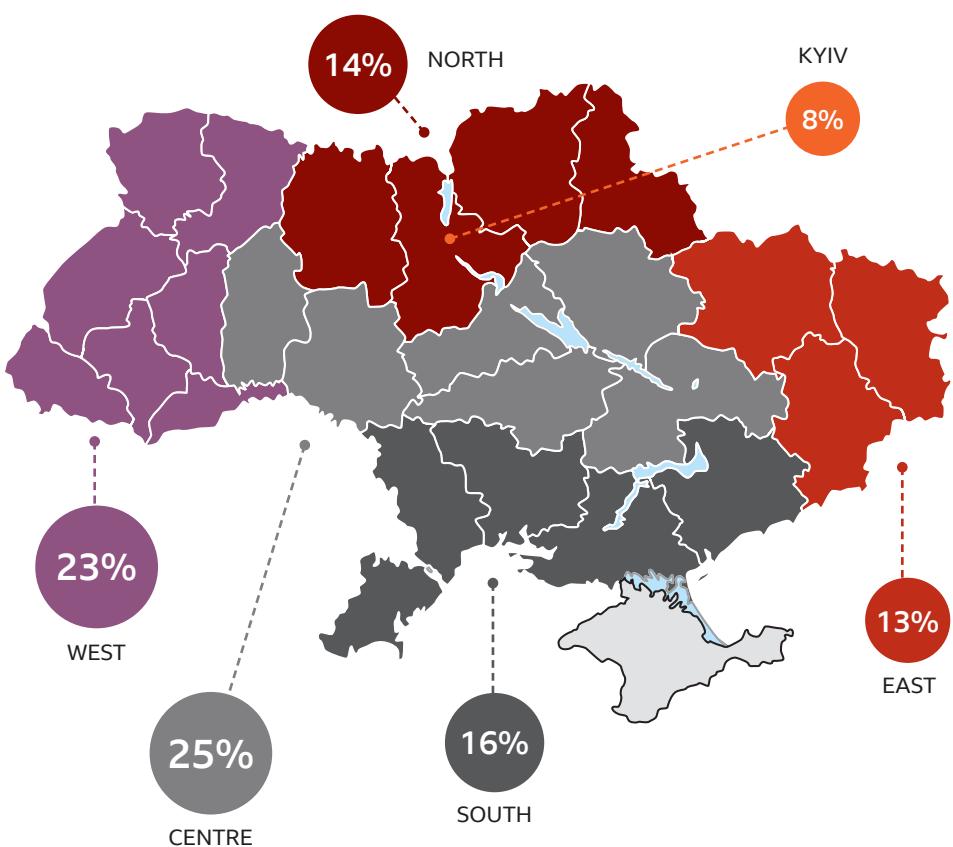
BREAKDOWN OF THE NATIONALLY REPRESENTATIVE TELEPHONE SURVEY OF WOMEN

1535 female respondents

AGE



REGION



HAVE CHILDREN UNDER 18



EDUCATION LEVEL



VOCATIONAL OR TECHNICAL



SECONDARY



BASIC SECONDARY



FIRST LANGUAGE



ARE INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS



Key audiences

■ Women IDPs

Women who are IDPs in Ukraine are more likely to be younger, have children under 18 and have moved to the South, East and Centre of Ukraine. The invasion has had a high impact on their mental and physical health and their employment opportunities.

“ I think it’s easier for a man to be in the trenches without a woman for 9 months than a woman without a man. Sorry, but this is true. ”

Woman, IDP

■ Women who are not IDPs

Women who are not IDPs in Ukraine, reflect the majority of the nationally representative sample. They are also concerned about employment and mental and physical health but are also the group most likely to not report being impacted by the war. They have especially been volunteering and donating money in order to support the war effort.

“ Everyone – both men and women – are trying to contribute to the war effort. Both are on the front, both are volunteering, things have become equal in this sense. ”

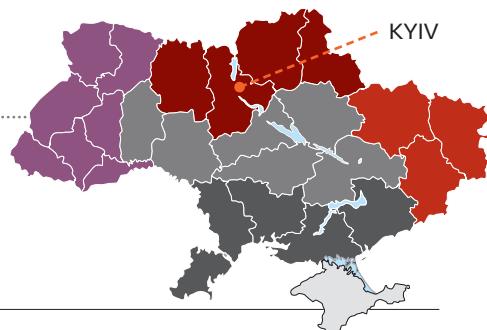
Woman, non-IDP

■ Women living in NGCAs

The vast majority of women living in NGCAs speak Russian as their first language. They experience the impacts of the war much more acutely – especially older women. They are taking practical, life saving actions to cope compared to women in the rest of Ukraine.

“ After February 24, every minute is like the last one. ”

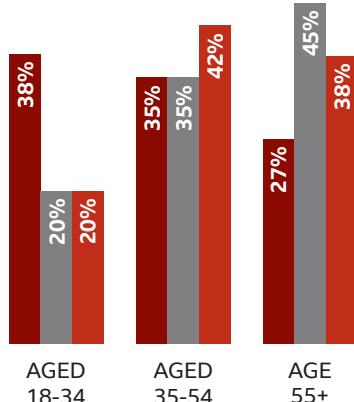
Woman living in NGCA/frontlines



KEY AUDIENCE PROFILE

■ WOMEN IDPs ■ WOMEN WHO ARE NOT IDPs ■ WOMEN LIVING IN NGCAs

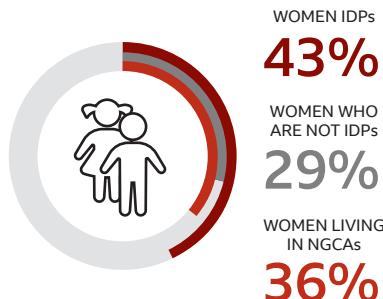
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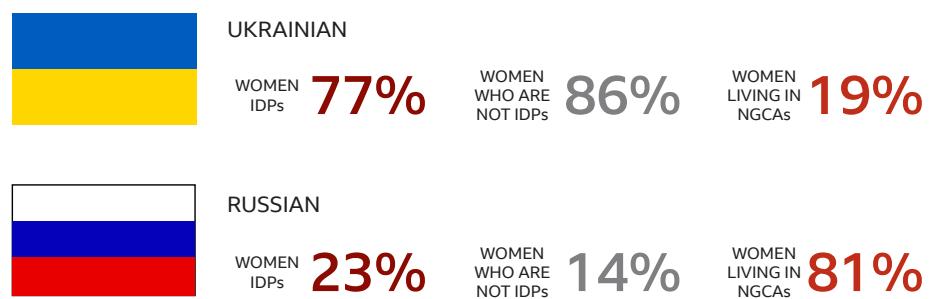
REGION

Region	Women IDPs	Women who are not IDPs	Women living in NGCAs
WEST	4%	27%	n/a
NORTH	12%	14%	n/a
CENTRE	8%	28%	n/a
EAST	38%	9%	69%
SOUTH	34%	13%	31%
KYIV	5%	8%	n/a

HAVE CHILDREN UNDER 18



FIRST LANGUAGE



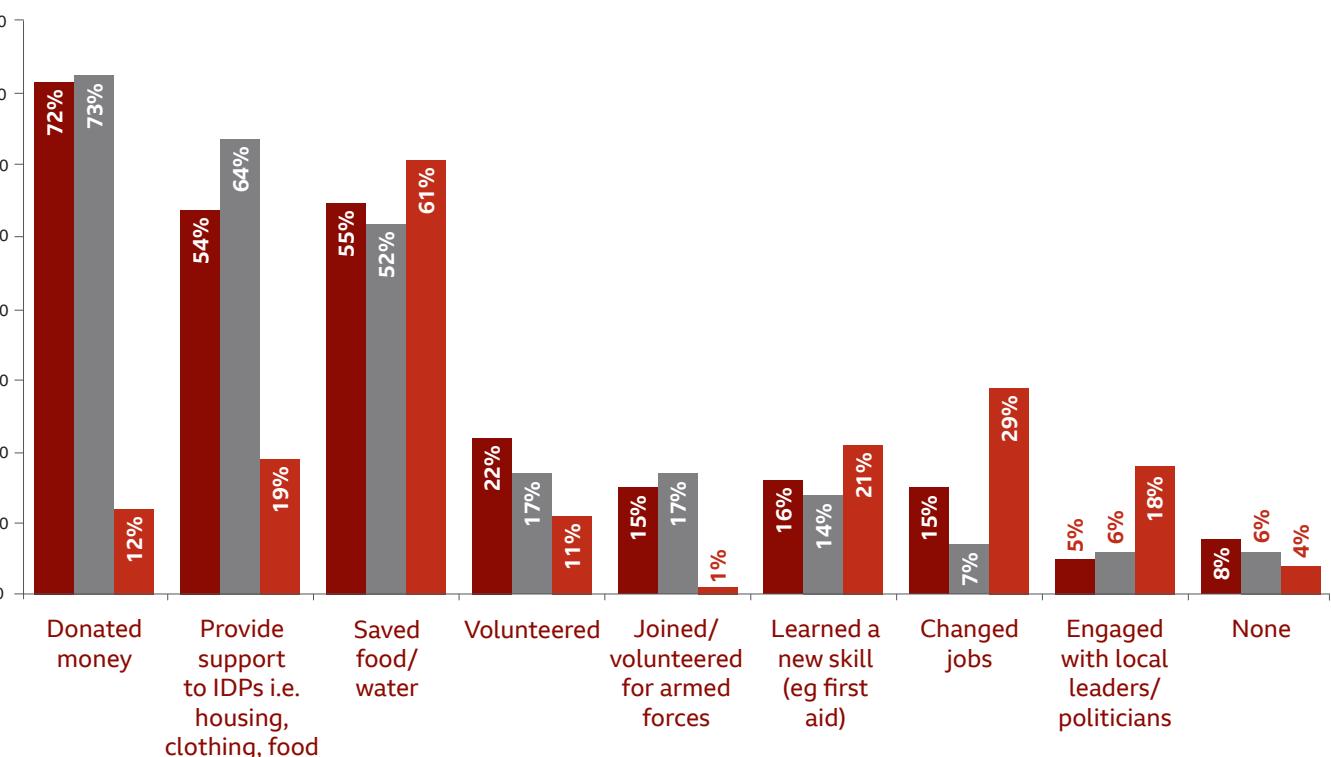
NEGATIVE IMPACTS FELT

Multiple response



ACTIONS TAKEN

Multiple response



Key findings

Safety and security are women's top concerns

War, safety and security were the top daily concerns for 62% of the women survey participants. They reported being anxious and concerned for their own safety and that of their families, especially male relatives and friends fighting in the military. Older women were particularly worried about the war, 70% of those aged 55+ years cited this as an everyday concern, compared with 59% of women aged 35–54 years and 50% of those aged 18–34.

“I have many acquaintances who went to the front, and we always talk about them in the family, and with friends, and we also worry about the future.”

Internally displaced woman

In the qualitative research women explained how the war was affecting them. The war created a high level of uncertainty and meant they could not plan their future. They cited the challenge of having to work and care for their children alone when their husbands or partners were away fighting. And they discussed key concerns around the economic impact of war (e.g. unemployment and rising prices). For example, internally displaced women (IDPs) talked about the challenges in finding new jobs in their new locations. In rural areas, women farmers were impacted by the infrastructure damages, the increased cost of goods, and damaged and mined farmland.

“When it comes to the women who used to make and sell their produce, the wholesale price was so low this summer that they ended up facing huge losses. This is impoverishment, unprotectedness and robbery.”

Woman non-governmental organisation (NGO) leader

Mental and physical health is the key impact of the war

Mental and physical health has been a key impact of the war on both women and men. In recent research, 49% of women and 50% of men reported that their mental health was the area of their life most affected by the war.⁷ In 2023, the National Demographic Institute reported a deterioration in mental and physical health (64% and 50%, respectively) as key impacts of the war faced by people in Ukraine, and that women were more likely than men to report this.⁸

This trend echoes BBC Media Action survey findings. Overall, more than one-third (38%) of women in the nationally representative sample felt the top impact of the war was on their mental and physical health, followed by impact on their income and employment (cited by 34%). In contrast, men were less concerned about physical and mental health (27%) but much more concerned about the impact of the war on their income and employment (45%). Younger women were especially concerned about the impact of the war on their health. Almost half (46%) of those aged 18–34 said their mental and physical health was affected, compared with 36% of women aged 35–44 and 34% of women over 55.

Key informant interviews with women NGO leaders also echoed this concern on mental health, emphasising a need for practical information for women on mental resilience and how to cope with the psychological impacts of war. Health concerns that women discussed in the focus groups included access to doctors and key services such as maternity and sexual health services.

Some women are facing more acute experiences

IDP women feel the health and income impacts more acutely

As of January 2023, there were over 5.3 million IDPs across Ukraine, mostly in the East, Centre and West of the country.⁹ These IDPs were more likely to be female.¹⁰ In the telephone survey for this study, the nationally

A young woman with an infant calls from her smartphone moments after her arrival from war-torn Ukraine at the Medyka border crossing



SEAN GALLUP/GETTY IMAGES

representative sample of women from across Ukraine, female IDPs comprised 14% of the sample. These women were more likely to live in the South and East of Ukraine, be Russian speaking (23% versus 14% of women who were not IDPs) and were younger (38% were aged 18–34, compared with 20% of non-IDP women). They were also more likely to have children aged under 18 (43% of IDPs compared with 29% of women who were not IDPs).

While women IDPs reported experiencing the same impacts from the war as other women research participants, they were struggling more.^b For example, 48% of women IDPs mentioned their mental and physical health having been affected by the war, compared with 36% of women who had not been displaced.

Similarly, women IDPs reported a greater negative impact on their employment (52% reported this versus 31% of non-IDP women), safety and security (36% versus 22%), access to health/social services (20% versus 14%) and access to sanitation (9% versus 5%). Unsurprisingly, as they had moved as a result of the war, 15% of women IDPs reported changing jobs as a result of the war, compared with 7% of women who were not IDPs.

In qualitative research, IDP women talked about the challenges they had experienced in finding housing and jobs, the isolation of being away from their family, friends and homes, and challenges settling into a new community and living in someone else's home (even the home of a relative or friend). Women also mentioned various challenges they had faced around education. Younger IDP women found doing all their university classes online challenging. IDPs who are mothers were worried about their children having access to education after moving, and about having to make decisions without their partner or family nearby. Women IDPs were also concerned about being able to afford rent, and household items and clothing (many could not take much with them when they fled their home). Key informant interviews with women NGO leaders also stressed the need to provide mental health support to IDPs, some of whom may be retraumatised by the current war after previously experiencing conflict in the east of Ukraine since 2014, or who may experience violence in their current shelters.

^b Women who are IDPs were women who had moved, as a result of the war, to a different oblast or a different place but in the same oblast since the beginning of the war.

IDPs and host community relations inside Ukraine

In recent United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) research, key issues facing male and female IDPs included a lack of employment and sources of income (cited by 25% of respondents), a lack of adequate and stable housing in the area of displacement (cited by 10%), and a lack of community support (cited by 10%).¹¹

While community relations between IDP women and host communities in Ukraine was not a main concern discussed in the qualitative research for this study, some IDP women did comment on the impact of living in a new community and having experienced challenges integrating into that community. For example, one grandmother said her grand-daughter (an IDP who moved to western Ukraine) had been bullied in school for speaking Russian. Some non-IDP women felt that people in some areas of eastern Ukraine were not sufficiently supportive of the Ukrainian defence, and that pro-Russian sentiments in the South and East of Ukraine had been exploited by Russia to justify its invasion.

There were also differences in perceptions of female IDPs compared with male IDPs. Qualitative research participants thought that male and female IDPs were treated differently by host communities – women and children were sometimes more welcome than male IDPs as local communities were more sympathetic to them. In contrast, male IDPs said they had experienced attitudes ranging from being welcomed to being judged for fleeing rather than fighting. Male IDPs felt that host communities resented their presence, especially if local men were away fighting. They also reported local communities' perceptions that they had somehow provoked the war. Female IDPs also reported occasional tensions between host and IDP communities, especially if male IDPs are seen engaging in any type of behaviour that could be perceived negatively, such as partying or getting drunk.

Women in NGCAs feel the impact of war more acutely

This study managed to hear from women in NGCAs in parts of the South and East of the country via 225 online self-completion surveys. While this sample is not directly comparable to the nationally representative survey sample owing to differences in methodology and sampling, the women in NGCAs differed significantly from the main sample.^c The vast majority of women in NGCAs spoke Russian as their first language (81%), compared with just 15% of women in the nationally representative sample in the rest of Ukraine. Nearly one-third (32%) of women in NGCAs were IDPs, versus 14% in the rest of Ukraine.

Women in NGCAs reported feeling the impacts of war acutely, especially in terms of access to information, and health and social services. Older women (aged 55+) in NGCAs were significantly more likely to report being affected by a lack of access to health and social services compared with younger women in the same areas (69%, compared to 35% of those aged 18–34). Similarly, older women living in NGCAs more commonly cited struggling to access effective sanitation (42% versus 23% among young women), food and nutrition (60% compared with 34%), and access to information (63% versus 39%). In the qualitative research, women living in NGCAs mentioned the challenges of having been shelled, and the damage to homes and buildings. They also referenced the everyday difficulties of living under Russian occupation, such as currency changes and problems accessing their pay and pensions.

“After February 24, every minute is like the last one.”

Woman in-depth interview participant living in a NGCA

“From time to time, there is no connection, no Internet; they [Russian troops] shut off mobile connection when they need to perform redeployment of their troops.”

Woman, in-depth interview living in a NGCA

^c The nationally representative survey of women across Ukraine was conducted via telephone and via a random digital dialling method. The online survey of women in NGCAs was not designed to be random and was conducted via an online questionnaire, so any comparisons are indicative rather than directly comparable.

Women in NGCAs take more practical actions

Overall, women survey respondents reported having taken various actions to cope with the impact of war or contribute to the war effort. Donating money was the most common action they had taken (cited by 73%), followed by supporting others with food, housing, etc (cited by 62%), and saving food or storing water (53%). Younger women were significantly more likely to have taken action than older women or women with disabilities.

Women living in NGCAs were much more focused on practical actions such as saving or storing food and water (61% reported having done this), learning new skills such as first aid (cited by 26%) and changing jobs (21%). These findings reflect the more acute impacts of war faced by women living in NGCAs compared with other women in Ukraine. In contrast, overall in the nationally representative sample, 53% of women reported storing or saving water or food, 14% had learned a new skill and 8% had changed jobs.

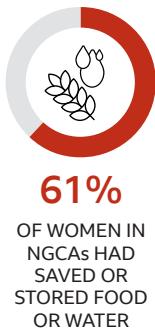
Recommendations for media and communication initiatives

In a humanitarian crisis, media and communication content that can build people's knowledge, connect people, provide psychosocial support, build people's confidence and inspire action can be vital. It is clear from the findings of this study that some women in Ukraine have experienced (and are experiencing) more prolonged and severe negative impacts from the current war, notably IDPs and those living in NGCAs.

To help women in Ukraine in their everyday lives, media and communication initiatives should aim to reach and engage key target audiences in Ukraine with information and communication that meets their needs.

The following recommendations, based on the findings of BBC Media Action research, aim to help media and communication practitioners achieve that.

- **Media and humanitarian organisations should work in partnership to reach key audiences with content that is informative, relevant, engaging and supports access to information and support that addresses their priority needs.** For example, IDP women need more access to support around income, employment, and physical and mental health services, mostly in the Ukrainian language. This could include content on income generation or saving money, how best to support their children's education and how to deal with the psychosocial impacts of war.
- **Women in NGCAs require access to high-quality content in Russian.** They especially need information on how to deal with practical issues such as access to health and social services. Older women living in NGCAs particularly require support in relation to health, sanitation services, access to food and nutrition, and better access to information generally.
- **The research gave some indications that IDP and host community relations have the potential to become fractured.** Media and communication content that aims to bring these communities together and build mutual understanding could be helpful. For example, this might include content that covers IDP issues and the challenges IDPs face, which could support host communities to better understand and empathise with IDPs.
- **To serve women in Ukraine more effectively, humanitarian partners and media practitioners need a way to regularly reach audiences in order to understand their key needs.** This could be achieved by collaborating on research studies, putting specific questions out on pre-existing surveys, making extensive use of social media data or sending short quick surveys to generate high response rates, e.g. Telegram-based surveys.



Endnotes

¹ UNHCR Ukraine Situation – <https://reporting.unhcr.org/ukraine-situation> [Accessed May 2022]

² UNHCR Ukraine Situation – <https://reporting.unhcr.org/ukraine-situation> [Accessed May 2022]

³ UN Women and Care International (2022) Rapid Gender Analysis of Ukraine 4 May 2022, Available from: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Rapid-Gender-Analysis-of-Ukraine-en.pdf>

⁴ Chatham House (2023) Ukraine needs women to win the war – and the peace, Available from: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2023-02/ukraine-needs-women-win-war-and-peace>

⁵ Observer Research Foundation (2022) Special Report No.199 War's Gendered Costs: The Story of Ukraine's Women Available from: https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/ORF_SpecialReport_199_Ukraine-Women.pdf

⁶ UN Women and Care International (2022) Rapid Gender Analysis of Ukraine 4 May 2022, Available from: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Rapid-Gender-Analysis-of-Ukraine-en.pdf>

⁷ UN Women and Care International (2022) Rapid Gender Analysis of Ukraine 4 May 2022, Available from: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Rapid-Gender-Analysis-of-Ukraine-en.pdf>

⁸ NDI (2023) NDI January 2023 Poll: Opportunities and Challenges Facing Ukraine's Democratic Transition Available from: <https://www.ndi.org/publications/ndi-january-2023-poll-opportunities-and-challenges-facing-ukraines-democratic>

⁹ UNHCR (2023) Operational Data Portal (<https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/ukr/751?secret=unhcrrestricted>) Accessed: January 2023

¹⁰ UN Women and Care International (2022) Rapid Gender Analysis of Ukraine 4 May 2022, Available from: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Rapid-Gender-Analysis-of-Ukraine-en.pdf>

¹¹ UNHCR (2023) Lives on Hold: Intentions and Perspectives of Internally Displaced Persons Available from: https://www.unhcr.org/ua/wp-content/uploads/sites/38/2023/02/ukraine_intention_report3.pdf

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(Chris McGrath/Getty Images)

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