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Ukraine Women Prove Resilient in the Face of War



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The war in Ukraine is having growing negative effects on women and girl's health and well-being. They encompass not only gender-based violence, but include all aspects of women's and girl's lives. Access to basic services and life-saving sexual and reproductive health care have been drastically disrupted.

Since the 2013 Maidan revolution, also known as “dignity revolution,” Ukrainian women have been increasingly engaged in the political, social, and economic affairs of the country. This engagement has led to an increase in women's political participation, manifested by gains in parliamentary seats and in village and regional councils. As a result, Ukraine has ratified or joined most international agreements on gender equality.

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In spite of these advances, however, gender inequalities persist, bolstered by traditional norms that promote systemic discrimination and biases against women and girls. These inequities have been aggravated by the war conducted by Russia in eastern Ukraine since 2014. The years of conflict since then have increased and deepened pre-existing gender inequalities and created new ones such as arbitrary killings, rape and trafficking.

The war has particularly affected marginalized and disadvantaged groups such as female-headed households, internally displaced persons, Roma people, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ people. As a result, women facing multiple forms of discrimination are in need of special assistance.

Today, millions of people have fled Ukraine and million's more –nearly two-thirds of them women and children—have been internally displaced and, as a consequence, do not have access to essential services such as health care, employment, and housing. Poverty and dependency on social assistance has increased and has pushed many women into the unprotected informal sectors of the economy.

The COVID-19 pandemic, that began in Ukraine on March 3, 2020, threatened the gains that had been made on women's rights, economic empowerment and access to health care. Prolonged restrictions on mobility, particularly for women and young people, have increased despair and isolation, and have increased its negative effect on people with mental health challenges. Young people and children are forced to sacrifice their future so they can survive in the present.

Even in times of peace, women tend to be more food insecure than men, but the war in Ukraine has exacerbated the number of women experiencing hunger, energy insecurity and economic instability. The Russian aggression on Ukraine has provoked a redistribution of family roles, adding to the already heavy burden of women who, in addition to traditional home responsibilities are now obliged to look for additional sources of income.

Women who are caring for children face extreme shortages of essential medicines, healthcare and funds to obtain basic items, including baby food and formula. Many women face the challenge to accommodate and feed internally displaced people. This increases their unpaid care and domestic work responsibilities, often at the expense of their physical and mental health and wellbeing.

The martial order issued by the Ukraine State Border Guard Service at the beginning of the Russian invasion that led to tens of thousands of civilians fleeing to other countries decreed that those between 18 and 40 years old should stay in the country. It is estimated

that 95 percent of single-parent households are headed by single mothers, who now face increased pressure to provide for their families while male family members are more directly involved in defense activities.

Despite the heavy burdens imposed by the war, Ukrainian women have shown considerable resilience and have contributed greatly to defense efforts. It is estimated that women make up 25 percent of Ukrainian armed forces. This is an almost 10 percent increase from the beginning of the Russian invasion. Women have integrated fully in the armed forces, performing duties as soldiers and holding positions of command.

The Russian military leaders didn't expect such a strong resistance from the Ukrainian soldiers, and even less from a Ukrainian army strengthened by the participation of women, something that needs to be acknowledged and honored as a critical factor in the defense of their country.

Dr. Cesar Chelala is a co-winner of the 1979 Overseas Press Club of America award for the article "Missing or Disappeared in Argentina: The Desperate Search for Thousands of Abducted Victims."

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