

## Crisis in Ukraine: the anti-trafficking response and learnings for the sector

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### Introduction

The onset of the war in Ukraine led to sudden mass displacement on the European continent. With the rapid large-scale movement of more than seven million refugees into neighboring countries, particularly Poland and Germany, the risk of trafficking and exploitation for women and children greatly increased.<sup>1</sup> The emergency response began with volunteers and community groups from neighboring states driving to border crossings around Ukraine, in order to assist with humanitarian aid and transportation to safe locations across Europe. However, in the initial weeks of the war, large international organizations were largely absent from the frontlines of the crisis.<sup>2</sup> This lack of coordinated and vetted humanitarian actors created situations of confusion and precariousness for refugees.<sup>3</sup>

The anti-trafficking sector across Europe quickly engaged with the humanitarian response in order to address vulnerabilities related to trafficking, as anecdotal stories of exploitation came in from border regions. Trafficking and the exploitation of Ukrainians existed before the start of the 2022 war – the UNODC reports that Ukrainian victims were exploited in Russia, Poland, Germany, Turkey and Israel, as well as the Middle East and South Asia<sup>4</sup>, and identified victims experienced commercial sexual exploitation or forced labour in the agriculture or construction industries.<sup>5</sup> Groups that were and continue to be particularly vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation in Ukraine are third country nationals and marginalized groups such as the disabled, LGBTQ+, Roma and the elderly.<sup>6</sup>

Many anti-trafficking organizations across Europe were therefore keenly aware of the vulnerabilities refugees face in light of this history and having previously worked with marginalized groups in cases of exploitation and

corruption, including those connected to organized crime, in Ukraine and the surrounding region.

### A snapshot of the anti-trafficking response – July to September 2022

At the start of the refugee crisis there was initial panic around trafficking and exploitation within the refugee population, and a hastily organized response. Now that this phase has ended, updated knowledge is needed from the field on the needs that arose and the effectiveness of the action taken. In particular, more voices from anti-trafficking organizations are required to understand lessons learned and to consider the nature of the response going forward. The primary aim of this snapshot research project is therefore to explore the ways in which European anti-trafficking organizations responded to the crisis and how these activities have impacted the services they provide for existing and emerging at-risk groups. As the refugee response was entering its fifth month at the time the research was undertaken, further exploration of these continuing activities is key when considering adequate protection of Ukrainian refugees and trafficking risks.

### Methodology

This research was conducted from July to September 2022 via a survey circulated throughout the European anti-trafficking sector, as well as key informant interviews with survey respondents. The situation in Ukraine at this time was more stable than during the initial phase of the conflict, however, continued fighting in the east as a result of the Russian occupation remained deadly.<sup>7</sup>

As the approach to autumn began, consideration of the effects of winter on vulnerable population groups was

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR (2022), Ukraine Refugee Situation: Operational Data Portal.

<sup>2</sup> Cullen Dunn, E. (2022), A wave of grassroots humanitarianism is supporting millions of Ukrainian refugees.

<sup>3</sup> Adler, K. (2022), How the sex trade preys on Ukraine's refugees.

<sup>4</sup> UNODC (2022), Conflict in Ukraine: Key Evidence on Risks of Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Migrants.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Hoff, S. and Volder, E. D. (2022) Preventing human trafficking of refugees from Ukraine.

<sup>7</sup> UNHCR (2022) Operational Data Portal.

beginning to become a priority across the humanitarian sector.<sup>8</sup>

There were limitations on data collection for this project which resulted in a low survey response rate. While more evaluation is needed, initial reasons could include the burnout experienced by many anti-trafficking organizations and the summer break that took place across Europe within the survey period. Additionally, the research was conducted in English, potentially limiting accessibility for non-English-speaking anti-trafficking organizations.

## Participants

The survey was completed by 21 unique participants including two respondents from one organization, resulting in 20 organizational respondents (hereinafter “respondents”). Respondents operate in 39 countries globally, with programs in 30 European countries. Three organizations have program activities in Ukraine and two have operations in Russia. Seventy-five per cent are NGOs and 15 per cent are religious organizations. The remaining respondents were a non-profit business connected to anti-trafficking work and a European faith-based anti-trafficking network. Eighteen respondents provide direct services to survivors of trafficking and related vulnerable populations. Ninety per cent indicated that they have pivoted to respond to the Ukraine refugee crisis. The two organizations which did not respond directly to the crisis were a global anti-trafficking network and a small not-for-profit business which employs survivors. The global anti-trafficking network indirectly supported survivors by sharing materials produced by European members and providing connections where possible.

Prior to the start of the war, the top three program activities carried out by survey participants were prevention and awareness-raising (85 per cent), training and capacity-building (70 per cent), and education services (65 per cent). The top six nationalities of those receiving support from participant organizations were Central and Eastern European and Nigerian, while six organizations mentioned their previous work with Ukrainians.

Five key informant interviews were held with four respondents for 30 minutes. This method provided more space in which to discuss the key experiences, challenges and perspectives shared in the survey. The fourth interview participant did not complete a survey, however, they provided an hour-long interview following the survey questions.

The following sections will explore participant experiences of pivoting their activities and programs to meet the needs of vulnerable Ukrainians, the impact and effects of responding to the crisis, and the ongoing questions of continuation within the wider narrative of a rapid influx of funding and its power and effect. This discussion will look at the intersecting challenges of sustaining long-term funding pathways and the need for greater collaboration

with other groups in the humanitarian sector in order to create sustainable programs. The report ends with a list of recommendations for ways in which the anti-trafficking sector can continue to support the needs of Ukrainian refugees.

## Making the pivot: organizations’ work prior to the refugee crisis

*“We started from day one.”*

– Interview Participant 2

The sense of immediacy seen in the Ukraine response has been well documented. Good Samaritans driving to the border, opening their homes to refugees, and sending truckloads of donations were key events in the early weeks of the war. The passionate and urgent response of study participants echoed this behavior. Two organizations represented in this research had offices in Ukraine (which had to be evacuated and relocated to Poland to ensure the safety of staff). As many organizations are well established in the region and had worked with Ukrainian women before, there was a familiarity with the population, and pre-existing relationships. One organization which had been working in the area for years described this further:

“We’ve been going to Czech border towns to check on the brothels for about 13 years. We always met Ukrainian women there and befriended some of them. More came during the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the war in the east of the country in 2014, which never stopped. In April 2022 there were new women there. By July, some had moved on and a couple of brothels now house refugees and are not brothels any more. The people work in normal jobs. There were some new women, but we could not figure out if they worked there because they needed money or were trafficked (Participant 19).”

Participants from organizations located in neighboring countries like Romania, to where 86,000 Ukrainian refugees fled, stated that more support was currently needed.<sup>9</sup>

Beyond goodwill, personal and professional motivation, and moral responsibility, a key factor that allowed organizations to pivot to anti-trafficking support for Ukrainians was the large amounts of unrestricted funding quickly made available to organizations. The anti-trafficking sector chronically struggles with underfunding or highly restrictive funding models.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, as there was global attention on this crisis, large donations were given for almost immediate use.

Participant 1 had yet to formally start its Ukraine response activities, but previous donors sent funds directly to their organization. She reflected that, “We were... obligated/

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<sup>8</sup> OCHA (2022) Ukraine: Winterization Plan - Winter Priority Procurement & Repair Plan 2022 – 2023.

<sup>9</sup> UNHCR (2022) A safe space for Ukraine’s refugees in Romania.

<sup>10</sup> Hoff, S. (2014) Where is the Funding for Anti-Trafficking Work? A look at donor funds, policies and practices in Europe

motivated to start getting involved.” Similarly, a faith-based network that does not work directly with survivors stated that “an incredible amount of money was donated through our networks for use in the Ukraine crisis. We partnered [with other groups] because we do not have the physical capacity to perform direct work.” The power of unrestricted funds to actualize participants’ desire and need to respond was clear in their reflections on the experience.

## Immediate responses and questions of sustainability

When comparing participant organizations’ activities and programs prior to March 2022 with activities undertaken as part of their Ukraine response there is a clear correlation. Organizations appear to have harnessed existing competencies and expanded or repurposed the use of their organizational assets to meet the needs with which they were presented. The top four activities carried out by participants in response to the Ukrainian crisis were: creating/distributing anti-trafficking awareness materials (94 per cent of organizations); providing anti-trafficking training (67 per cent); sourcing humanitarian aid (61 per cent), and running social media campaigns (56 per cent). A participant organization which had previously run social media campaigns on the risks of human trafficking in situations of conflict and mass displacement was able to quickly develop a Ukraine-focused awareness program by “reallocating 25 per cent of staff (10 individuals) to form a core response group to avoid hiring delays” (Participant 10). Multiple organizations partnered with global social media companies to promote and advertise targeted awareness materials.

The ability for organizations to quickly create printable and shareable materials along with other campaign resources, and at relatively low costs, was one of reasons why this type of activity became a primary focus. This was largely made possible because tech and media companies waived the fees associated with running campaign ads on social media platforms. NGOs innovated and utilized their existing knowledge and capacity, which for many was limited and underfunded before the start of the war. While there was certainly a need for prevention and awareness materials for refugees, many anti-trafficking organizations had no other program options with which to form their response due to their previously limited financial and human resource capacity.

## The need and struggle for localization and collaboration with the humanitarian sector

With funding in hand, organizations faced the secondary challenge of finding connections and initiating collaboration outside the anti-trafficking sector, although some initial pathways were made through the provision of anti-trafficking trainings. Multiple organizations said they provided such trainings throughout bordering countries, and online, for refugee centers, international refugee and humanitarian NGOs, foreign army delegations, medical professionals, and international volunteers. Organizations also provided training on related topics such as trauma,

psychosocial support and conflict-related sexual violence. The demand for anti-trafficking trainings appeared to stem from the long-standing separation of the anti-trafficking and humanitarian aid sectors; while the inclusion of trafficking as a key vulnerability in complex emergencies is still ongoing, the Ukraine crisis has brought it to the attention of international organizations as never before.

Additionally, as there was little coordinated response from international humanitarian organizations, anti-trafficking groups felt compelled to provide information due to the precarious situation faced by refugees. Multiple respondents described the need to raise awareness and create safety materials as there was very little on-the-ground oversight in the early weeks of the war from police or border officials. However, Interview Participant 3, who worked for a humanitarian organization, commented on the reality of the use of these materials in refugee centers on the Ukrainian/Polish border:

“In [the refuge center] where I spent a good solid three months working 12 to 16 hour days, I never saw anyone read any printed material, ever. Not one person walked up to a wall – and the thing was littered... it was an icky place... because the pamphlets and posters were everywhere... it wasn’t a pleasant place to be... it was a chaotic place to be. There was stuff on the wall everywhere. I never saw anyone read anything.”

The participant continued to explain that, while she created printed materials to assist refugees as they moved into Poland, “everyone just came up to the table and wanted to talk with somebody”. This experience also highlighted the need for support to be made available through Ukrainian speakers, and for stronger localized connections.

A small number of survey respondents (13 per cent) stated the need for increased localization in their response. While international organizations coming into the region without much local knowledge have met localization challenges, the organizations which participated in this research have had a long-term presence in the area and have formed collaborative relationships with other groups. However, further networking and greater connection with local anti-trafficking NGOs in Ukraine are needed, particularly for the provision of ongoing care for survivors of trafficking. Respondent 6 shared that outreach teams are supporting an increasing number of Ukrainian women and their organization is now considering how best to move forward:

“I’ve been really curious about what grassroots entities on the ground in Ukraine are doing to help mitigate this issue, as well as any efforts locally along the lines of resettlement for those who were trafficked abroad and wish to return to Ukraine. Obviously it’s tricky as there’s still an ongoing war.”

The desire for collaboration and an understanding of its necessity appeared to be already deeply embedded in the research participants. The struggles of crossing into new sectors, collaboratively or geographically, pose challenges – but these are not insurmountable. The following section will continue to explore this theme while considering how

collaboration can help mitigate some of the most demanding elements of rapid growth.

## The impact and effect of pivoting in response to the Ukraine crisis

As the research was conducted five months after the start of the conflict, organizations had limited time in which to consider the effects and impacts of their Ukraine response. More than half the respondents indicated that their staff and key support offices were experiencing burnout and exhaustion. Finance and administrative teams were specifically mentioned as being under pressure to respond to the increased donations and subsequent disbursement of funds. For smaller organizations, the time spent responding to the Ukraine crisis diverted from their regular program and administrative duties, even if those activities were similar. In both the survey responses and in the interviews, the tiredness was apparent, yet a continued passion and motivation for an ongoing response remained. A larger global organization (Participant 3) stated that, "Everyone is working hard, but we already had sustainable rhythms in place for our team members [as far] as this was possible." Participant 16 expressed that while "it did put a strain on staff as we delivered our largest program of work... it also boosted morale to have our largest project team working together to achieve our largest delivery of prevention programs".

As many of the respondents experienced rapid growth, 67 per cent of respondents identified core mission support as their primary need moving forward. The challenges in funding the core activities of anti-trafficking organizations are not new to the sector, particularly around securing funding for staffing. More programmatic activities and increased funding also led to the hiring of new staff to drive regional projects focused on transnational referral mechanisms, pathways of continual care, and increased coordination with local/regional law enforcement, as many suspected trafficking cases were transnational. Organizations operating on a regional level expressed the tentative hope that the strong push to collaborate regionally, together with increased funding, will bolster the European anti-trafficking response. Deep, long-term collaboration will be required to sustain the specific Ukraine anti-trafficking response as well as the whole movement.

Localization, collaboration and sustainable funding streams for long-term programs are essential for the longevity of the sector. However, funding streams are tightening again while inflation, living costs and the overall cost of running an organization are skyrocketing. Organizations question whether donors will maintain the current level of funding and interest in the response: "We are expecting a large surge of refugees this fall and winter, so it is imperative that donors, governments and organizations around the world do not lose interest in the conflict, and that they maintain the same levels of investment as they did this spring when the war first began" (Participant 20). As there have been relatively few identified cases of human trafficking within the refugee population to date, there is concern among organizations that, as time goes on, cases will begin to emerge: "In our

experience, most [victims] undergo six months of exploitation before reporting" (Participant 20). Participants remain deeply concerned about how and when victims will be identified and how they will be supported post exploitation.

## Conclusion

The war in Ukraine is shifting constantly and the future is largely unknown – but even if active conflict ends in the coming months, the implications and post-war effects will be felt for years, both in Ukraine and across the region. The anti-trafficking organizations participating in this snapshot research appear to be deeply committed to a continued response, albeit one that is dependent on funding. For some organizations this could result in broader European operations which could support deeper collaboration for all anti-trafficking work; while participant organizations are keen to respond to the ongoing needs of Ukrainians, there is continued commitment to serving all communities in need of support.

As the needs of all populations at risk of exploitation and trafficking across Europe shift and are affected by the war, further research and evaluation of anti-trafficking work is needed. The current unprecedented focus on human trafficking and anti-trafficking support during this war and the situation of mass displacement it has created provides a wealth of learning opportunities for both the humanitarian and anti-trafficking sectors.

## Recommendations for the ongoing anti-trafficking response to the Ukraine crisis

- The anti-trafficking community and the humanitarian response community should continue to build working relationships that synergize existing safeguarding and protection frameworks.
- Further collaboration and funding are needed to strengthen transnational referral pathways for supporting survivors.
- The European anti-trafficking community needs to build partnerships and strengthen collaboration with anti-trafficking organizations of all sizes and with other actors in Ukraine.
- Refugee centers and/or places of shelter and safety need Ukrainian-speaking support staff who are trained in anti-trafficking prevention and awareness.
- Unrestricted core mission support is needed in order for anti-trafficking NGOs to continue their Ukraine response activities and meet the needs arising from ongoing instabilities.
- Additional funding to support the wellbeing of staff, and to bring relief to burnt-out and overworked NGO employees, is also needed.