



OLDER WOMEN'S NETWORK, EUROPE

The lack of visibility of older people in humanitarian contexts

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Within the current Ukrainian context, it would appear that many older people have decided to stay in the country and may even be trapped in war zones. Older women may not wish to leave their partners or dependent relatives behind. Or they may not be able to leave due to health conditions, mobility problems or the traumatic effects of the conflict. A UN convention on the human rights of older persons must pay attention to the gender dimensions of old age/later life and also include much-needed acknowledgement of the higher risks of rights violations that older persons face in situations of natural disaster, pandemic health crises and conflict zones.

In the face of the Ukraine war, more than 6 million people are estimated to have fled Ukraine and many more are internally displaced within the country, including an estimated one million children. Some of those affected will move to stay in neighbouring countries, many more are likely to continue their journey(s) onwards to Western Europe and elsewhere.

The vast majority of displaced individuals are women, girls and boys. In addition to women and children, many of those more recently displaced are older people (mostly older women) and persons with disabilities, often from under-privileged socio-economic backgrounds. Some of these people have been recently reported as those who were reluctant to leave during previous phases of the crisis due to a lack of financial means to resettle elsewhere, or mobility impairments, as well as individuals who were/have been isolated or were unable to leave conflict areas for a time.

It is estimated that over 15% of the population of Ukraine are internally displaced people. Although comparatively there are fewer older persons who are refugees/IDPs within displaced populations (around 4-5% of refugees are aged over 60; some 6% of IDPs are older people), it is recognised that there is a lack of visibility of older people in humanitarian contexts. This may be due to problems in registration processes (lack of mobility and/or documentation, lack of literacy and language barriers), but it is also clear that in general terms it is predominantly (younger) women and children who are visible in humanitarian settings and aid efforts may be principally directed at these groups. This appears to be the current case in the context of Ukraine.

Leaving a country for economic reasons is of course very different to leaving because of a need to escape war/conflict, with a very real and apparent fear of death. And within such



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conflict settings there are likely to be high levels of violence, abuse and neglect at interpersonal (rather than institutional/societal) levels.

Additionally, within the current Ukrainian context, it would appear that many older people have decided to stay in the country and may even be trapped in war zones. Generally, men, including those who are older, are not able to leave the country as they are expected to fight and contribute to the war effort. Older women may not wish to leave their country of birth/or where they have spent a lifetime or to start anew in a different country or location or even to leave partners or dependent relatives. Further, however, they may not be able to leave easily due to health conditions, mobility problems or the traumatic effects of the conflict. But as in so many situations, older people are rendered invisible and rationing of resources, even those deemed essential and coming from aid organisations may mean that crucial needs for assistance are not met. Even within the context of the humanitarian crisis, violations of the rights of older persons are apparent and older women may face particular risks of sexual violence, abuse and neglect within zones of active conflict. In her 2019 report to the UN Human Rights Council the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, Kornfeld-Matte called the lack of timely data a barrier to inclusion of older persons in humanitarian action.

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis laid bare, and in many respects amplified, critical human rights protection gaps for older persons that have existed and been perpetuated for many decades. These include high levels of ageism and discrimination based on older age, lack of social protection and access to health services, lack of autonomy and participation in decision-making, and absence of freedom from violence, neglect and abuse.

In our considered view these egregious violations of human rights can only be remedied by the creation of a UN convention on the human rights of older persons. Such a convention must pay attention to the gender dimensions of old age/later life and also include much-needed acknowledgement of the higher risks of rights violations that older persons face in situations of natural disaster, pandemic health crises and conflict zones.