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Ukrainian NGO Efforts to Prevent and Combat Gender-Based Violence During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the problem of gender-based violence in Ukraine, as it has in every other country of the world. This problem has been widely recognized at the national level by state authorities in Ukraine,¹ who reported a twofold increase in the number of criminal cases of domestic violence in 2020, compared with 2019. This tendency was confirmed by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)² in the country, who underlined not only an increase in cases of gender-based violence (GBV), including domestic violence, in Ukraine during the

COVID-19 pandemic but also deficiencies in the reaction by the state, especially during strict lockdowns.

WHAT CHANGED: THE PERSPECTIVE OF A UKRAINIAN NGO WORKING WITH SURVIVORS OF GBV

The civil society organization (CSO) La Strada-Ukraine³ has been working in the field of preventing and com-

About the Series

Gender-based violence (GBV) affects one in three women worldwide, making it an urgent and important policy challenge. Many countries around the world have passed laws intended to protect women from violence, yet violence persists. Over the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has raised awareness of the perils women face from gender-based violence—what has come to be known as the “shadow pandemic”—but it has also aggravated risk factors while increasing barriers to protection, support, and justice.

This publication aims to focus on the intersection of gender-based violence and the rule of law by examining how legal frameworks, judicial system responses, and public policy contribute to the ways in which gender-based violence is—and is not—addressed around the world. Each piece addresses the complicated challenge of gender-based violence and the successes and failures of various public policy responses globally, and offers recommendations for a path forward.

batting gender-based violence and gender discrimination in Ukraine for more than 20 years. It runs the National Hotline for the Prevention of Domestic Violence, Human Trafficking, and Gender Discrimination,⁴ which operates 24/7 and provides free psychological, legal, and informational consultations to survivors of domestic violence and other forms of GBV.

In the months following the introduction of a nationwide lockdown in Ukraine on March 12, 2020, there was an increase of up to 150 percent in calls to the hotline.⁵ When the lockdown was lifted in June 2020, the number of calls dropped slightly. Still, it has not returned to its pre-pandemic level. There has also been a trend of substantial increases in calls during periods when the epidemiological situation in the country was worsening. Thus, during November and December 2020 and March 2021, when COVID-19 cases in Ukraine reached their peak, the number of calls to the hotline rose by 200 percent, compared with the pre-COVID period, even though there were no lockdowns as strict as the initial one in March 2020.

Strict quarantine measures in Ukraine have negatively affected the work of all institutions and services that provide support to survivors of GBV. There were reports of decreased efficiency in terms of police responses, as well as difficulties with access to courts, which were either closed or inaccessible due to stoppages to public transportation. Other victim-support services (including free legal-aid centers and centers for social services) were converted to working online. Some shelters were either closed or did not admit new survivors; others required a negative PCR test, which many survivors could not afford. In some cases, survivors could not get to shelters because public transportation was stopped.

The National Hotline for the Prevention of Domestic Violence, Human Trafficking, and Gender Discrimination also experienced difficulties during lockdowns.

Nevertheless, it managed to adjust its work to the new conditions. For example, many survivors complained that because they were living with an abuser during lockdown, they could not call for help by phone, since the abuser was listening. Thus, the hotline diversified its electronic channels of communication, allowing survivors to receive a consultation by sending a message to the hotline through social media platforms such as Messenger, Telegram, and Instagram.

Adjustments also had to be made with regard to the work of the hotline consultants. In particular, during strict lockdowns, their shifts increased in duration and their transportation to work was arranged by taxi when public transportation was stopped. The consultants also received online training and supervision, in particular with regard to the specific nature of their work under the new conditions of the pandemic. Thermometers, sanitizers, gloves, and masks were provided in the hotline's office.

“There were many cases in which survivors reported that even though their partners had never used violence in the past, there was a first episode of violence during the lockdown.”

WHAT SURVIVORS HAVE TO SAY

Being in a unique position of direct contact with survivors from all over Ukraine via the channels of the National Hotline for the Prevention of Domestic Violence, Human Trafficking, and Gender Discrimination, the CSO La Strada-Ukraine published a report⁶ based on the results of a survey of survivors of domestic violence. The survey aimed to assess how their situation changed during the pandemic and how efficient the response of state authorities

was. Overall, 303 respondents participated in the survey. Most of them claimed that the situation became worse, as episodes of violence became more frequent and cruel, and the abusers became more aggressive, having lost their jobs and/or become more addicted to drugs and alcohol. There were many cases in which survivors reported that even though their partners had never used violence in the past, there was a first episode of violence during the lockdown—or other more serious forms of violence happened for the first time. Very often children were affected as well, since they were transferred to online learning and spent whole days at home, witnessing violence between parents or becoming direct victims themselves.

Another part of the survey concerned the response of the state institutions that were responsible for preventing and combatting domestic violence in Ukraine. Overall, there were no changes introduced at the legislative level aimed at adjusting the state response to GBV in Ukraine during the unprecedented conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, the problems reported by survivors were in many cases directly connected to the pandemic and the related restrictions that had been imposed.

The respondents had different experiences when applying to courts for restraining orders during lockdown. In some cases, they did not report any substantial problems. However, a few survivors claimed that their hearings were postponed (beyond 72 hours, which is the limit for hearings in such cases under Ukrainian law), or they had difficulties getting to court due to stoppages of public transportation.

As for the work of the police, many respondents complained that their cases were not treated seriously enough—that the police often sided with an offender or failed to conduct a proper risk assessment and subsequently refused to issue an emergency barring order. Sometimes the survivors themselves preferred not to report the incidents of violence to the police, as they were worried that the

offender would have nowhere to go during lockdown. In some cases, the police refused to issue an emergency barring order, claiming that they could not evict an abuser during quarantine.

“Most of the survivors reported that they did not seek treatment at medical facilities for injuries due to domestic violence.”

There were problems with the work of social services as well. In some regions, these services were closed; in others, the work was transferred online. Some respondents complained that the quality of social services was diminished when they were moved online, especially in the case of psychological counseling, where face-to-face communication provides a much better experience. Most of the survivors reported that they did not seek treatment at medical facilities for injuries due to domestic violence. Although most of the respondents claimed that they did not need medical assistance, some of them reported that they did not apply because they were either afraid of getting infected with COVID-19 while waiting at the hospital or because during lockdown it was recommended that people only go to hospitals in an emergency and they did not consider their case of violence that important. In this regard, it should also be noted that some of respondents admitted serious long-lasting effects of domestic violence on their psychological and physical health (such as neuroses, benign tumors, etc.), especially in the case of children.

WHAT IS NEXT

Based on the problems identified in the survey, a number of recommendations⁷ to state authorities were formulated about how to act in a crisis situa-

tion like the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to protect the victims and those at risk of domestic violence, especially women and children. Special times require special measures, and hopefully the problems elicited by the COVID-19 pandemic will teach state authorities in the Ukraine and around the world this lesson.

NOTES

1. Interfax-Ukraine, "Level of domestic violence increases in Ukraine due to COVID-19 pandemic," Kyiv Post, November 26, 2020, <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/level-of-domestic-violence-increases-in-ukraine-due-to-covid-19-pandemic.html>.
2. *Impact of COVID-19 on Women's Rights in Ukraine* (report), Ukrainian Woman Lawyers Association "JurFem" (2020), https://www.ua.undp.org/content/ukraine/en/home/library/democratic_governance/covid-impact-on-women-rights-in-ukraine.html.
3. La Strada-Ukraine, <https://la-strada.org.ua>.
4. National Hotline for the Prevention of Domestic Violence, Human Trafficking, and Gender Discrimination, <https://www.facebook.com/lastradaukraine>.
5. The detailed statistics of calls to the National Hotline for the Prevention of Domestic Violence, Human Trafficking, and Gender Discrimination are available at <https://la-strada.org.ua/garyachi-liniyi>.
6. *State authorities' response to the cases of domestic violence during crisis situations (in particular, COVID-19) and recommendations for improvement* (analytical report), CSO La Strada-Ukraine (2021), https://la-strada.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/2-zvit_a4_eng-obl-1.pdf.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 40.



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