

**The situation of women and girls with disabilities affected by the Russian war in Ukraine**

**EDF written input to the CEDAW Committee**

**European Disability Forum | September 2022**

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# Introduction

## The European Disability Forum

The European Disability Forum (EDF) is an umbrella organisation of persons with disabilities that advocates for the rights of over 100 million persons with disabilities in Europe.

EDF is an independent non-governmental organisation that brings together representative organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs/DPOs) from across Europe. EDF currently has 101 members, including European-wide organisations representing various disability groups, and national council of persons with disabilities. Taking into account our members’ memberships, EDF gathers over 3000 organisations.

EDF is run by persons with disabilities and their families. EDF is the strong united voice of persons with disabilities in Europe and we condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the protracted war.

## EDF Ukraine programme

The Ukraine war has reflected what is already known about the **disproportionate impact, discrimination, and lack of participation** faced by persons with disabilities in humanitarian situations. EDF, with the financial support of CBM, is working with members and partners, the majority of whom are organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), in eight countries including Ukraine to ensure disability inclusion. The EDF "Ukraine programme" has three objectives: service delivery, advocacy, and longer-term resilience and capacity building.

## Methodology and limitations

Research for this written input addressed to the CEDAW Committee was carried out in September 2022. Its aim is to provide a picture of the situation of women and girls with disabilities in Ukraine.

Information for the written input was gathered through desk research, field visits, monthly narrative and financial reports received by EDF members and partners involved in the ‘Ukraine programme’ (the National Assembly of Persons with Disabilities (NAPD), the League of the Strong, the Kharkiv Institute of Social Research), participation of side events of international conferences and meetings with EDF members and partners.

The main limitation of this written input is the lack of accurate data about women and girls with disabilities in any context, whether left at home, internally displaced, or seeking refuge in other countries. More details on this are given below.

# Summary

According to latest UN data[[1]](#footnote-2) on the Ukraine war, 15.7 million people are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance and protection. Official figures state that more than 2300 civilians have been killed, although the actual death though is 'likely to be much higher'. Nearly 13 million people have left home, with more than 7 million internally displaced and more than 5 million seeking refuge in other countries (**mostly women** and children).

Despite these huge numbers, there is very little accurate and official data from governments and humanitarian agencies regarding persons with disabilities, women and children in particular. This report, based on information from EDF partners and members in Ukraine, attempts to fill this gap, to provide more specific information as it is available, and give appropriate recommendations to improve the situation in the short and long-term.

What is clear from the information that has been gathered is that the Ukraine war has significantly exacerbated the barriers that women and girls with disabilities face in society on an ongoing basis. They face exclusion and discrimination in all contexts, whether left at home, abandoned in residential institutions or trying to flee the war either as part of the internally displaced population within Ukraine. This exclusion results in women and children with disabilities facing increased exposure to all risks, including, violence and abuse, and is particularly pertinent for women and girls with disabilities and others who are most commonly ignored, including (but not limited to) persons living in residential institutions, persons with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities, persons who are deafblind and those with invisible disabilities.

## EDF partners are also reporting from Ukraine that women with disabilities are faced with a new form of violence. When men pressure and harass women with disabilities to marry because in this case the man will have the opportunity to leave Ukraine as a “personal assistant” to a “wife”.

**General recommendations include the following**:

* Ensure **meaningful participation** of representative organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs/DPOs), in particular, women with disabilities, in **all decision-making processes at all steps of the humanitarian programme cycle**, including reconstruction and resilience building;
* All States and humanitarian agencies must be reminded of their obligation to ensure **safety and protection** of women with disabilities in **conflict situations**, and that **internationally endorsed guidelines** to shape policy on **disability-inclusive and gender based humanitarian action already exist**[[2]](#footnote-3);
* All population data must **disaggregated by gender, age, and disability**;
* All humanitarian response organisations, donors, contractors must commit to not investing funding in rebuilding, expanding, or renovating residential institutions, in Ukraine and in receiving countries;
* All women and girls with disabilities, **especially those who are most at risk**, including blind and deafblind women and girls, those with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities, , with high support needs, and/or confined to institutional settings, **must be accounted for, protected, and provided with immediate access to humanitarian aid**, considering their individual support requirements;

# Background and overview

In Ukraine, **the official number of persons with disabilities is 2.7 million[[3]](#footnote-4)**. Information on women and men with disabilities, functional impairments, age, social status, place of residence is not kept, and the recommendations of the Washington Group on the collection of statistics on disabilities are not applied.

In April 2022 **two million persons with disabilities were registered as displaced**[[4]](#footnote-5) and, by July 2022, **13% of families who fled Ukraine include persons with disabilities**.[[5]](#footnote-6)

Women and girls with disabilities face barriers and discrimination **in every context. These barriers include** inaccessible information, evacuation services, transit centres/shelter, transport, and difficulties in obtaining recognition of disability status (and support) for those who have fled the war. But there are also many cases where these barriers are immediately life-threatening, where women and girls with disabilities have been left without the most basic of essentials such as food, water, heating and medication, and where children and adults – already segregated from families and communities – have literally been abandoned in residential institutions in Ukraine.

In recent years, the Ukrainian state has chosen **barrier-free access as a priority**. The National Strategy for a Barrier-Free Environment includes the interests of people with disabilities. The position of Adviser to the President of Ukraine on accessibility was introduced instead of the position of Adviser to the President on issues of people with disabilities. The position of Advisor to the Cabinet of Ministers on Disabilities was also introduced and represented by women with disability. But both positions have consultative functions and do not have authoritative powers. In the structure of the Ukrainian office of the Ombudsman, there was no separate person who would take care of disability issues. Only the Monitoring and non-discrimination department dealt with these issues. The Ministry of Social Policy remains the only government body responsible for policy in the field of disability, which is the case in many countries in the EU and tends to limit the possibilities of mainstreaming disability in all policy fields.

Unfortunately, despite what had been experienced in the at the beginning of the war in the East of Ukraine in 2014, there was **no special evacuation plan that considered the needs of women and girls with disabilities** from the beginning of the growing threat of the war and immediately after it began. Humanitarian organisations and civil society (including OPDs) have taken the lead and gained considerable experience in the evacuation of women and girls with disabilities, and people with disabilities overall, including those with severe disabilities, and in the creation of accessible transit centres for persons with disabilities and older people.

Armed hostilities by the Russian Federation significantly affected women with disabilities, women raising children with disabilities who stayed in the territory of Ukraine, i.e. the lack access to humanitarian aid due to limited mobility; lack of appropriate information in accessible formats; lack of access to healthcare, medicines, and technical aids; cruelty and violence from Russian invaders.[[6]](#footnote-7)

Since the onset of the war, women (and men) with severe disabilities and older persons have not been able to benefit from the commonly offered evacuation opportunities, to find clear and accessible information, travel to the collection point independently, or obtain information on the border. Due to the absence of a legally defined evacuation process for people with disabilities, the levels of responsibility and authority of officials, the State failed to ensure the effective evacuation of women and girls with disabilities.

In the first days of the war, the chaotic nature of actions to evacuate women with disabilities, older women, women who accompanied children with disabilities, and the lack of accommodations at the border crossing points caused additional stress for women with disabilities, they developed illnesses and had to be hospitalized in the host countries. Significant support in evacuating people with disabilities has been provided by civil society and volunteering organizations, Ukrainian military, and by international OPDs.

Women have also been injured during the war, despite as many as 13.5 million women and children evacuating from the area quite early on, many, many women remained and have been injured during the course of the conflict. The story of Yuliia Serdiuk, 31, reported by The New York Times is demonstrative of the experience of many women. Yuliia was injured in a shelling whilst out with her son. Protecting him from an explosion with her body, resulted in her now being unable to walk and needing a wheelchair.[[7]](#footnote-8)

Practical activities of Ukrainian Organisation of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) since the first days of the war and surveys of women with disabilities demonstrated that the awareness of women with disabilities about different types of assistance is very low; cash transfers offered to internally displaced women do not cover expenses on necessary goods and services; and to some extent this group is isolated due to the loss of the job, housing and lack of access to required medicines in rural areas, lack of modern technical communication devices, inability to obtain information and register to be able to apply for assistance.

EDF and our partners from Ukraine are concerned about the situation related to the lack of a systemic approach to integrate the issues of women with disabilities, older women, women who raise children with disabilities into the provision of humanitarian aid and cash-based assistance; and to incorporate the issues of this group into the planning of recovery strategies and programmes for Ukraine.

# Thematic specifics and policy

## Motherhood and Children (CEDAW Article 5)

Before the war, Ukraine had a high rate of institutionalisation of children compared with other EU Member States. In the first few weeks of the war, ad hoc, piecemeal evacuation of at least 6,000 children from institutions took place (with at least 4,000 children evacuated abroad), before the government was able to put a legal framework in place to manage evacuations. Unfortunately, this data is not disaggregated, including by gender.

The government is keen to ensure no children go missing and, as a result, has enacted regulations that: ban international adoption during the period of martial law, and insist children from institutions evacuated abroad must remain together in their groups – thereby insisting they continue to be institutionalised when they reach the destination country.

The restrictions on international adoption are wholly appropriate, given the fact that the majority of children have living parents, the risk of trafficking and the agreed international rules that children who are displaced by war should not be adopted. In addition, there is evidence that proponents of international adoption, particularly in the USA, are lobbying intensively to remove this restriction.[[8]](#footnote-9)

According to the CRC and CRPD, children have a right to know and, as far as possible, be raised by their birth families. Where this is not possible, family care is the best alternative. Moreover, definitive global evidence demonstrates the harm institutionalisation causes children and the better outcomes of family care. However, the regulation insisting on continued institutionalisation is a violation of the rights of girls with disabilities under both the CRPD and the CRC.

### Recommendations

* Girls with disabilities, in particular those with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities, must have access to support services;
* Improved data collection is required regarding children evacuating within Ukraine and abroad, which is disaggregated by gender and disability.
* The Ukrainian government should be supported to keep its robust restrictions on international adoption in place;
* The Ukrainian government regulation regarding the continued institutionalisation of children evacuated from Ukrainian residential institutions does not allow for children to be placed in family settings which are in the best interest of the child. This should be immediately revised.
* The Ukrainian government, with support from the international community, should prioritise rapid individual assessments of children in institutions evacuated inside Ukraine, prioritising girls with disabilities and high support needs, who are at the greatest risk of harm due to unplanned evacuation and institutionalisation;

## Trafficking in people (CEDAW Articles 6)

Women and girls with disabilities, are at increased risk of exploitation, violence and abuse. This happens in all contexts, for example: where day-to-day family and community protection systems have broken down; where women and girls with disabilities are on the move and unable to find accessible and secure accommodation; and where water and sanitation facilities are inaccessible and or poorly lit with low security. Women and girls with disabilities are also at greatly increased risk of gender-based violence and human trafficking - this is especially at border crossing points but exists in all situations where they have been forced to leave the relative ‘pre-war security’ of their homes and communities.

## EDF partners are also reporting from Ukraine that women with disabilities are faced with a new form of violence. When men pressure and harass women with disabilities to marry because in this case the man will have the opportunity to leave Ukraine as a “personal assistant” to a “wife”.

## Women and girls are not just at risk within Ukraine, as reports of predators in host countries offering homes to women fleeing Ukraine became public knowledge in the first days and weeks of the war.[[9]](#footnote-10) The ways in which women have been affected during this war, as with all wars, is complex, multi-faceted and profound. Few of these problems are new and are in ways just exacerbations of existing violence and discriminations against women.

### Recommendations

* The safety and protection of persons with disabilities, in particular women and girls with disabilities, must be fully included in protection plans of government
* Particular attention must be paid to areas where vulnerability is increased (evacuation routes, transit centres, border crossings)
* All Protection incident reporting mechanisms must be fully accessible to all women and girls with disabilities, including the information about these mechanisms

# Document credits

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1. <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/ukraine-flash-appeal-march-august-2022-enruuk> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-task-team-inclusion-persons-disabilities-humanitarian-action/documents/iasc-guidelines> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. <https://www.msp.gov.ua/timeline/invalidnist.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/news/ponad-2-miljoniv-lyudej-zareyestruvalis-yak-vnutrishno-peremishcheni-osobi-pislya-vprovadzhennya-voyennogo-stanu> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/94176> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Official information is missing regarding the numbers of women and girls withdisabilities who were subject to violence from Russian military. Information is missing about women in institutional care settings that were temporarily occupied. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. War Brings Ukraine’s Women New Roles and New Dangers. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/27/world/europe/ukraine-war-women.html#:~:text=Women%20are%20increasingly%20joining%20the,of%20wide%2Dscale%20logistics%20efforts. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/09/1085306040/the-war-in-ukraine-has-derailed-one-american-familys-adoption-plan;> <https://www.kcrg.com/2022/03/02/cedar-rapids-couple-fighting-ukrainian-orphans/> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Homes for Ukraine: Don't match female refugees with single men, UN says https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-61099131  [↑](#footnote-ref-10)