

## Conflict in Ukraine: Protecting the Health and Rights of Women and Girls

As the invasion of Ukraine continues, an entire nation is in the midst of disruption to their lives and livelihoods, with hospitals unable to perform the daily tasks of treating patients and saving lives. Health care professionals cannot provide the care expected of them because they are unable to travel, their families are threatened, or hospitals are under siege or destroyed.

In times of conflict, women are indiscriminately targeted and extremely vulnerable. They face barriers to access and provision of basic services like maternity care; reproductive health services such as treatment of genital infections, contraception and abortion; and are at higher risk of mental, sexual and physical abuse. Violence against women and girls is a persistent human rights violation that threatens their safety, security, and physical and mental wellbeing.

More than 650,000 people have already been displaced by the invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces, and estimates suggest this number could increase to 4 million. UNFPA estimates that around 80,000 women in Ukraine will give birth in the next three months. Obstetrician gynaecologists recognise the innate risks of childbirth to mother and infant at all times. These risks are exacerbated when planning and giving birth while under siege, in war or displaced, significantly increasing the possibility of maternal and infant death or injury.

### FIGO position on the issue

Health is a human right, and all women deserve the highest possible standards of physical, mental, reproductive and sexual health and wellbeing throughout their lives. This right must hold true wherever they live – and wherever they choose or are forced to go. There is a need to ensure that adherence to the sphere of minimum standards is inclusive of all sexual and reproductive health services to alleviate suffering and save lives during this humanitarian crisis.

The enduring and unassailable recognition, promotion and protection of the human rights of women and girls is critical, both globally and at country level. This is no less true during times of war. Sexual violence as a method of warfare represents a violation of our shared humanity that must not be accepted as an unpreventable part of armed conflict. It is a wholly unacceptable tactic that has no place in modern warfare. It is comparable to starvation and pillaging.

Sexual violence as a method of warfare destroys family ties, communities and social norms, and inflicts harm over generations – for example through HIV transmission, the rejection of children born of rape, and collective psychological trauma. It robs victims and their families of their life potential and disrupts schooling and livelihoods.

Article 27 of the Geneva Convention states, “women shall be especially protected against any attack on their honour, in particular against rape, enforced prostitution, or any form of indecent assault.” Part II, Article 4e of the Protocol Addition (1977) prohibits “outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment, rape” against non-combatants.

FIGO joins leaders around the world in calling for an immediate end to all hostilities, returning the people of Ukraine to their homes, and allowing peace to reign.

FIGO asks that all efforts be made to provide for the safety of all civilians, hospitals, schools, food, and water and sanitation facilities – including the provision that no weapons be used – and that women and girls be assured access to the full spectrum of health and care services. This must be an international effort within and beyond Ukraine's borders.

## FIGO recommendations

FIGO recommends that women are involved in decision-making processes to ensure that the response to a humanitarian crisis respects the specific needs of women and children.

FIGO recommends that sexual violence, including rape, be categorised as war crimes.

FIGO recommends that a robust, enforceable framework for states be enacted to prevent and to repair, and that all in violation of this framework be held accountable. FIGO supports a framework that holds governments at all levels accountable when the rights and wellbeing of women and girls are ignored.

## FIGO commitments

FIGO commits to an international convention that will define and create an explicit prohibition on sexual violence as a method of warfare, while strengthening the prohibition on sexual violence in conflict. While conflict-related sexual violence is prohibited in different legal frameworks, those instruments do not take account of the realities of sexual violence being used as a method of warfare.

## About FIGO

FIGO is a professional membership organisation that brings together more than 130 obstetrical and gynaecological associations from all over the world. FIGO's vision is that women of the world achieve the highest possible standards of physical, mental, reproductive and sexual health and wellbeing throughout their lives. Our work to achieve this vision is built on four pillars: education, research implementation, advocacy and capacity building.

FIGO leads on global programme activities, with a particular focus on sub-Saharan Africa and South East Asia. We advocate on a global stage, especially in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) pertaining to reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health and wellbeing, and non-communicable diseases (SDG3). We also work to raise the status of women and enable their active participation in achieving their reproductive and sexual rights, including through addressing female-genital mutilation (FGM) and gender-based violence (SDG5).

We also provide education and training for our Member Societies and build capacities of those in low-resource countries through strengthening leadership, translating and disseminating good practice and promoting policy dialogues.

FIGO is in official relations with the World Health Organization and a consultative status with the United Nations.

## About the language we use

Within our documents, we often use the terms 'woman', 'girl' and 'women and girls'. We recognise that not all people who require access to gynaecological and obstetric services identify as a woman or girl. All individuals, regardless of gender identity, must be provided with access to appropriate, inclusive and sensitive services and care.

We also use the term 'family'. When we do, we are referring to a recognised group (perhaps joined by blood, marriage, partnership, cohabitation or adoption) that forms an emotional connection and serves as a unit of society.

FIGO acknowledges that some of the language we use is not naturally inclusive. We are undertaking a thorough review of the words and phrases we use to describe people, health, wellbeing and rights, to demonstrate our commitment to developing and delivering inclusive policies, programmes and services.

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