

Changing **gender dynamics** through armed **conflict** in **Ukraine.**

Summary of field research findings

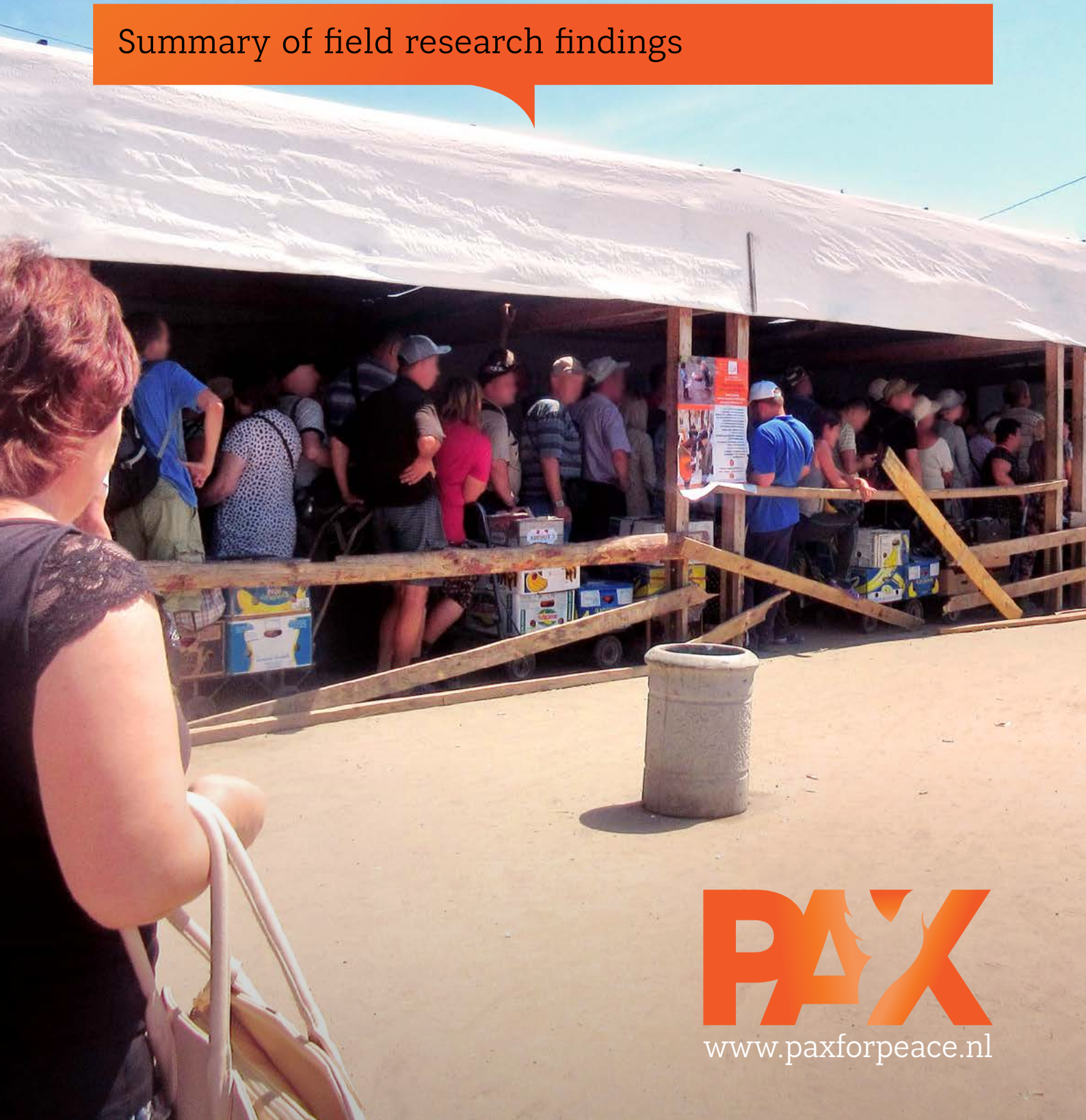


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Colophon

A publication by PAX

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PAX in Ukraine

From the beginning of 2014, PAX has been following closely as events unfolded in Ukraine. During two scoping missions (in May and in September), we spoke to over 60 interlocutors from civil society, local authorities and administrations, and churches. The network has expanded ever since and as of 2015 PAX officially started its Eastern Europe & Eurasia Program with a main focus on Ukraine. More information: <https://www.paxforpeace.nl/our-work/regions/ukraine>

1. Research sample

The fieldwork for the research discussed in this publication has been carried out in June 2018 by a team of local experts supervised by PAX. Research team used semi-structured interviews and focus groups to explore gender perspectives on life of people in the context of armed conflict on certain territories of Luhansk and Donetsk regions of Ukraine. Altogether the sample included 45 respondents representing three groups: residents of the territory of Luhansk region currently not controlled by Ukrainian authorities (16 respondents), Internally Displaced Persons (IDP's) in Donetsk and Luhansk regions (17 people) and experts (12 people). The latter group consisted of employees of Ukrainian organizations providing legal assistance, representatives of local authorities and activists. All three groups were representative in terms of gender and age, except the group of experts, where expertise was the key selection criterium. Geographical coverage included Stanytsia Luhanska (the only pedestrian crossing to the uncontrolled territory of Luhansk region), the cities of Shchastia, Severodonetsk, Sviatohirsk and Slovyansk. In November 2018, PAX carried out an additional feedback session in Sviatohirsk to discuss/validate preliminary findings and observations with CSOs and activists from the region. A number of external researchers and experts in Ukraine and abroad also provided their feedback after the first draft of report was prepared. The final comprehensive publication¹ has been presented during a conference in Kyiv in April 2019.

2. Methodology

Gender represents one of the many identity markers; it intersects with other identities, such as age, ethnicity, religion, and education. During field research, while analysing the context of people's daily activities PAX integrated a gender perspective in order to understand better the main challenges individuals face due to armed conflict, and whether these challenges result in gender-specific implications. At the beginning of the interview process the respondents were asked to elaborate in general on the issues² that are most relevant to them. Next, the interviewer asked follow-up questions to get a more in-depth understanding of the respondents' views. At the end of the interview process, respondents were asked to reflect on the challenges by going through a list of problems (in a table) identified by PAX prior to the start of the research. Respondents were asked to indicate their perception of the impact of the problem on a scale, and also noted whether they had personally experienced such a problem, and whether they knew about it from other sources of information or from other people (not from their close circle). This allowed PAX to identify the most relevant issues for the respondents, to develop a deeper understanding of each problem, as well as to differentiate between assessments based on respondents' own experience and their comments based on the information received from other sources. To further explore the changes in the social environment, respondents were asked to fill in a graphic representation (sociogram) of their social links (relationships with other people such as friends and family) before and after the start of the armed conflict.

¹ Project deliverables, including full report, can be accessed on <https://www.paxforpeace.nl/our-work/programmes/gender-pilot-ukraine-2018>

² A detailed analysis of these issues is presented in the full report from the research.

3. Key findings

Legislation regulating gender equality is ahead of the socio-economic reality

In general, awareness of gender dynamics in Ukraine is low. Historical developments (e.g. violent wars), Soviet ideology and pre-existing conservative values surrounding the roles of men and women, have resulted in strong traditional gender roles and perceptions. Although experts consider legislation regulating gender relations in Ukraine to be progressive, many legal solutions were brought in and promoted “from the outside” (donor support), and often exist separately from the reality of the frontline areas. The low level of awareness about gender-based violence illustrates the lack of in-depth understanding of the gender-specific challenges in the conflict regions of Ukraine. Consequently, either the victims do not recognize themselves as such, or the respective authorities do not have the knowledge and methods to solve the problems identified. For example, domestic violence is not recognised as a form of gender-based violence but rather as a “family matter”, and is thus in the hands of family members to solve.

Women are treated as service providers not as decision-makers

Women often have a leading role in interactions with the state. This, however, does not stem from women’s active participation in society and politics but, on the contrary, demonstrates preservation of the old, Soviet-derived normative order where women were socialized into a serving role which included addressing bureaucratic tasks on behalf of the whole family (often, in addition to taking care of the household). In the new conditions, many women submit to a similar role and deal with uncomfortable bureaucratic processes. They are treated as service providers, focused on activities related to administrative work and are also expected to be in control of the family matters. It impedes their professional growth in general and limits their influence on the diplomatic/political dimension of peace process in particular. Women experience a whole range of reactions to their political and/or public activity from demonstrative ignoring, underrating, profanation, to ironic and misogynist judgments. The men, who emerge “in the background” of these relations, play the role of the “defender”. They are involved in relations with the state, not as someone who “requests” certain services from the authorities, but as someone who “protects” a woman when or if she finds herself in a critical situation.

The shadow economy is one of the key factors impacting gender inequality. Ukrainian legislation does not protect employees on the black labour market. Men are perceived as a more predictable labour force. As a consequence, women face unfair competition and ungrounded refusals of employment and career growth. Salaries in the shadow economy create a significant disbalance in the remuneration of labour, which is not registered by official statistics. The inequality remains “invisible” to the state and thus is not targeted effectively. Such developments negatively impact the effectiveness of implementation processes pertaining to, for example, legislation promoting gender equality or gender-budgeting.

Gender relations in the non-government controlled and frontline areas are often contradictory in nature and thus require a complex approach

On the one hand, the normative images of the “male breadwinner” and “defender”, and of the “female house-keeper”, “mother”, and “housewife” remain strong. On the other hand, female soldiers, members of administrations, activists, volunteers and medical workers through their visible presence and active role in the armed conflict contribute to a change in gender perceptions. Due to an ongoing conflict, family roles and functions are slowly being re-distributed and gender relations have started to shift. Reactions to the transformative nature of gender relations are not always positive. They also include surprise and sometimes even disappointment over unmet expectations pertaining to traditional roles of a woman, who is not supposed to be involved actively in the matters of war and politics and a man, whose duty is to take care of his family’s well-being and defend his homeland. Both have not fully embraced their new roles. Women often insist on fulfilling the role of “a keeper”, while in fact their role has long been transformed into “a protector” and “a fighter”. Men, who fail to meet expectations over their role as “a defender”, have been described as not being able to handle the situation psychologically, breaking down emotionally, possibly due to social pressure. An abrupt shift of circumstances due to a situation of an armed conflict may partially explain respondent’s unpreparedness to deal with a new reality. An emphasis on the “right/proper/expected” behaviour of men and women was a reoccurring issue throughout the research.

Although a shift in gender relations has started to occur, gender roles in the non-government controlled areas reflect a patriarchal power structure

Passive and sacrificial characteristics are dominating in the descriptions of the role of women. Excessive emotionality is also mentioned as an attribute. Men are described in association with obligation, and deeper knowledge of the military and political spheres. The war is viewed as “men’s business”. A man who refuses to go to war is subject to public condemnation. The patriarchal nature of the gender structures is expressed in a specific way in situations of (political) resistance, where comments and actions by women are treated gently and not taken seriously. Resistance from the side of men is often met with physical violence. Nevertheless, a certain shift in the distribution of gender roles is noticeable, also in the non-government controlled territories. In the situation of intense internal conflict in society, women are starting to be considered as a source of danger comparable to men. Their roles are defined in the context of informing the local punitive bodies or participation in military actions.

For the population of the non-government controlled territories, the procedure of receiving pensions is especially complicated and difficult. There is a disproportionately higher number of women than men in the older generation and this, in addition to the abovementioned assumption that women address bureaucratic relations with the state, means that elderly women are mostly the ones to engage in the pension process. This has led to a proliferation of a stereotypical image of an elderly woman (“babushka/granny”); accused of “profiting” from double pensions, and collaborating or participating in staged democratic processes (such as referenda in the non-government controlled areas). Older women in particular experience arrogant attitudes at checkpoints and unfriendly comments in situations with heightened stress levels such as queues. This stigmatization

of a large group of people is manipulating the social consciousness, and setting certain groups of citizens up against one another. Therefore, some members of the society are not well informed about the right of the population in the non-government controlled areas to the provision of pensions by the Ukrainian state.

4. Recommendations

Donors and international NGOs working in Ukraine

As a result of the involvement of international organizations, (political) elites and (local) authorities are less likely to undermine solutions that incorporate a gender-sensitive approach advocated by Ukrainian civil society. Instead of emerging from a bottom-up society-driven initiative, Ukraine's progressive legal framework was developed as part of a process that required meeting criteria necessary to progress in terms of integration with the EU. As a result, members of the international donor community should proactively:

- ◆ Narrow the gap between theory and practice in gender mainstreaming (progressive legislation vs socio-economic reality) by providing tailored expert support in the form of trainings, workshops, consultations and financial assistance to civil society and authorities.
- ◆ Promote and facilitate (when needed) public discussions about pertinent gender-related problems and legitimize, through their presence and participation, the role of local actors in addressing gender-specific challenges.
- ◆ Through delivery of expertise and best practises, assist civil society and authorities in creating an enabling environment for women to advance in power structures.

Research and expert community in Ukraine and abroad

The role of experts/researchers in understanding the conflict in Ukraine and its impact on gender relations is significant. Often due to a language barrier and/or the inability to deconstruct some of the hidden cultural cues, experts from abroad face difficulties in distinguishing propaganda statements from actual thoughts and opinions of respondents. As a result, their research findings may present a distorted view of reality, lead to proliferation of the Soviet (currently Russian) propaganda messages, and hinder the provision of assistance to those who are in actual need. In response, Ukrainian and Western academic circles and experts should:

- ◆ Actively work with/involve local researchers in order to initiate an in-depth reflection process pertaining to contextual understanding (language of war) of the armed conflict in Ukraine.
- ◆ While working on a participatory and inclusive research methodology, jointly elaborate on a vocabulary that can be used to frame, analyse, translate and present developments in Ukraine to the audience in the country and abroad.

President of Ukraine, Members of Ukrainian Parliament, Cabinet of Ministers and local authorities

The deeply-rooted patriarchal notions in Ukraine are gradually being transformed by both new life realities (armed conflict) and external support (international assistance to NGO's, trainings, round tables etc). A gender-sensitive approach to peace and justice is important because it takes into account how men, women and gender non-binary people could have different needs, play different roles and face different constraints (such as obstacles to participation in decision-making and access to resources) in the context of armed conflict, peacebuilding processes and human security. Therefore, Ukrainian authorities should:

- ◆ Incorporate gender-sensitivity as an integral feature of policy-making processes, with an additional emphasis on support measures targeted at individuals affected by the armed conflict.
- ◆ Challenge harmful gender norms and pursue peace and security processes that are empowering and inclusive through public discourse, adopted legislation and implementing acts.
- ◆ Encourage and support the discussion on gender-related challenges by providing room for reflection and reconstruction of the set notions in the form of open consultations, financial assistance, information campaigns, long-term cooperation with civil society and adoption of legislation corresponding to the European and international standards.
- ◆ Ensure factual and meaningful participation of women in governance processes and peacebuilding. In addition to making public declarations, ensuring formal representation and quotas, steps must be taken to guarantee that women's actual interests and needs are understood and reflected in peace process and as part of the recovery efforts after the armed conflict.



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