

“Stepping out of the shadows. The impact of (non) registration and (non) recognition by the Ukrainian authorities of facts of life in the non-government controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions on the everyday roles of men and women”.

Short summary of the gender aspect of the research

In the research, gender relations in Ukrainian society are being reviewed under the extreme conditions of war. The transformative character of these relations in the non-government controlled and frontline areas is contradictory in its nature. On the one hand, the normative images of the "male breadwinner", "male defender", "female house-keeper", "mother", "housewife" are being strengthened. On the other hand, family roles and functions are being re-distributed and gender relations are being reviewed due to abrupt changes in circumstances resulting from an armed conflict. Reactions to the transformative nature of gender relations, as expressed by respondents during the research, include surprise, disappointment over unmet expectations, and additional emphasis on the "right/proper/expected" behaviour of men and women.

Women often have a leading role in interactions with the state. This, however, does not result from increased female activity in society but on the contrary, demonstrates preservation of the old normative order, where women were socialized into a serving role which included addressing bureaucratic tasks on behalf of the whole family. In the new conditions, many women submit to a similar role and deal with uncomfortable bureaucratic processes. The men, who emerge “in the background” of these relations, play a role of “defender”. They are involved in relations with the state not as someone who *requests* certain services from the authorities, but as a “protector” of a woman, who finds herself in a critical situation.

The complicated procedure of receiving pensions for the population of the non-government controlled territories led to the formation of a stereotypical image of an elderly woman (“granny”). This image is partially influenced by a significant disproportion between men and women among the older generation, as well as the perceived “female” nature of bureaucratic (formal) relations with the state. Society accuses elderly women of “profiting” from double pensions, and collaboration or participation in staged democratic processes (e.g. 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 allows for manipulation with the social consciousness, setting certain groups of citizens up against one another. It makes it difficult to raise awareness in society about the right of the population in the non-government controlled areas to the provision of pensions by the Ukrainian state.

The shadow economy is one of the key factors impacting gender asymmetry. Ukrainian legislation does not protect employees on the black labour market. Men are perceived as a more predictable labour force (“he will not bear children”, “he will not go on the maternity leave”, “he will not ask for

sick leave to care for children”, etc.). As a consequence, women face unfair competition and ungrounded refusals of employment. Salaries in the shadow economy create a significant disbalance in the remuneration of labour, which is not registered by official statistics. The inequality described above is obvious, but “invisible” to the state and thus not targeted effectively. Such developments impact negatively the effectiveness of implementation process pertaining to legislation promoting gender equality and usefulness of such instruments like gender-budgeting.

The patriarchal nature of power structures in Ukraine promotes the “secondary/supplementary” role of women, also those who want to enter politics. It presents them as service providers, focused on activities related to administrative work. It impedes their professional growth and influence on actual political decisions. Women experience a whole range of reactions to their political and/or public activity from demonstrative ignoring, underrating, profanation, to ironic and misogynist judgments.

In general, awareness of gender dynamics in Ukraine is low. In essence, national legislation is progressive. De jure, it regulates the question of equality between men and women. At the same time, the legal framework is ahead of the socio-economic reality. Many legal solutions were brought in “from the outside”, and often exist separately from the reality of the frontline areas. The low level of awareness about gender based violence is an important example to illustrate 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, leaving “family matters” in the hands of family members. In such cases, the role of international organizations is paramount. They initiate public discussions about pertinent problems, but also legitimize, through their presence, the authority of local actors addressing the gender-specific challenges. As a result of the involvement of international organizations, (political) elites and (local) authorities are less likely to reject solutions that incorporate a gender-sensitive approach advocated by Ukrainian civil society.

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, deeper knowledge of the military and political spheres. The war is portrayed 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 role are defined in the context of informing the local punitive bodies or participation in military actions. Overall, the research confirmed that a better understanding of the described challenges will have a positive impact on the effectiveness of support activities for vulnerable groups affected by the armed conflict in Ukraine.