

Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence (Ireland)

Hello, my name is Olena Stryzhak and I live in Ukraine. I am a Head of National Network of Women living with HIV – Positive Women, a national women's rights civil society organization.

Our Organization is a community-based organization representing the community of women living with HIV in Ukraine and has regional representatives in 24 regions of Ukraine and in Kyiv.

The goal of our organization is to create a space for the development and self-realization of women, especially vulnerable to HIV, uniting women's initiatives, support of leadership and promote a gender equality.

On February 24, with the beginning of the Russian military invasion in Ukraine, we were faced with issues about how to provide services, how to help women who were under the bombs and provide them with first aid.

The conflict in Ukraine is disproportionately affecting women and girls, especially women from marginalized groups. The gendered impact of the conflict in Ukraine is influenced by the unique demographic profile of the country, which includes large numbers of older women, women and girls with disabilities, internally displaced women and girls, women-headed households, stateless women and girls, and women living with HIV.

There were approximately 250,000 people living with HIV in Ukraine prior to the war, one of the world's highest HIV incidence rates. Nearly 1% of Ukraine's population lives with HIV, one of the largest epidemics in the region; nearly half of adults living with HIV are women, with sex workers, LGBTIQ+ individuals and women who inject drugs particularly vulnerable. Transgender women, who face obstacles in accessing healthcare and legal documentation, are marginalized based on their gender identity.

From the first days we continue to check in with our network members every day to respond to urgent needs. We have now reorganized our activities and moved from advocacy to providing direct services for women and girls, helping in crisis such as food, water, formula milk, hygienic products, medicine, antiretroviral therapy. In addition, women have access to legal and psychological services.

Women and girls living with ongoing medical conditions, such as HIV, have reported us about losing access to lifesaving services and antiretroviral therapy, which for the majority of individuals living with HIV in Ukraine, needs to be taken daily.

That's why sometimes our reps deliver the HIV-treatment inside the occupied territory with the support of drivers in bakery vans.

Support for our project was rapidly received through the United Nations Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund. This Emergency funding has helped us plan our activities and we are grateful for the urgent support.

We were able to launch and organize temporary shelters in four regions of Ukraine that are safer today than in the regions from which women and children were evacuated: Ivano-Frankivsk, Khmelnytsky, Cherkasy and Chernivtsi regions. This was an urgent need at the time and remains important today.

We were able to provide access to safe spaces and to cover basic needs for food, water, clothing, hygiene products, medicines and more for women living with HIV, women from key groups vulnerable to HIV - women who use drugs, sex workers, internally displaced persons and their children.

The Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund has provided financial support to reorganize women's organizations and community-based organizations that provide assistance to women in the war in Ukraine, and to provide services to meet those needs in a crisis situation. Replenishment of this fund is very important for further financing of civil society organizations. Helping women who have suffered from the war and are moving from the occupied territories, territories with active bombing in particular in the east and south of the country, is support for Ukraine as a whole!

Creating safe space for them and cover of vital needs will allow women and their children to stay in the country, not to go abroad. This is very important for our organization and for local women's organizations who are on the frontlines of the response.

Ukraine's victory over the evil that hangs over the whole world.

Thank you for your attention