

Ukraine programme

Building a joint, needs-based vision of peace



Since the beginning of our programme, and especially since Russia's war of aggression in 2022, we have been building trust with women affected by the war in Ukraine. Our meetings have fostered an environment where women can openly share experiences and talk about their visions for peace – whether they have gone into exile, remained in eastern Ukraine or were displaced to other parts of the country. Following the launch of the redesigned Ukraine programme in the autumn of 2024, we organised a train-the-trainer workshop in Krakow in February for women who play a leading role in their communities.

The 20 women participated in workshops and discussions to deepen their understanding of peace processes, peacebuilding tools and methods in order to claim their roles in building peace in their communities. Together they developed a joint vision of peace based on women's needs.

In this interview Olena Zinenko and Olga Larina, members of the programme's core group, talk about the differences they noticed in the discussions among the women over the past two years, about their current challenges and future hopes. Olena currently lives in Germany, Olga in the Czech Republic. In the picture above, Olena is on the left, seated next to Olga (in the black dress).

What differences did you notice at the meetings in Poland: in Przemyśl in August 2023, in Krakow in October 2024 and in February?

Olena Zinenko: In August 2023, the women were dealing with issues of adapting to the city of displacement. They tried to understand what had happened and shared memories of their displacement. In February, women started talking about what the future could be in these conditions of war. The planning horizon is, of course, short. We are talking about the near future. What remained from 2023 to 2025: the hope of returning home. Although there is less hope now, the desire to return remains.



Olga Larina: I noticed that stress and fatigue had accumulated during this time. Almost none of the participants at the meetings live in their original homes. In some places it is impossible because the territory is occupied, in others it is too dangerous. All the participants complained about a lack of sleep due to anxiety and the shelling. They were grateful for the meeting abroad because, for the first time in a long time, they felt safe and were able to sleep. The women shared their emotions sincerely, actively discussed the proposed topics and talked about their experiences of working in communities.

Women who went into exile, remained in eastern Ukraine or were internally displaced in other parts of the country came together at this meeting. Are divisions noticeable among these groups of women?

Olena: In the group we work with there is no critical division. The desire and intention to cooperate across borders and to share experiences is there. However, in Ukraine itself there is such a division because of the different contexts, even within the country. Some live on the front-line, some in a city that is constantly under fire, and some in safer regions.

Olga: About half of the participants were internally displaced twice. The first time in 2014, when they and their families left the partially occupied territories of Luhansk and Donetsk. The second time with the invasion in February 2022, when they moved to other parts of Ukraine or abroad. From my own experience, the second time is much more difficult. The internally displaced women in the group we are working with were interested in the experiences

of women in exile and vice versa. The women understand that it is difficult for everyone. Everyone was forced to leave their home because of the war. We, the organisers of the meeting, were glad to have the opportunity to invite Ukrainian women community leaders, to hear their opinions and experiences, regardless of where they are based now.

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What are some of the challenges the women face?

Olena: The first challenge is living away from home and in an unfamiliar environment where you know no one and nothing. The other challenges relate to personal safety, medical care, living conditions, and the loss of social capital – that is, the connections and the status that you had at home.

Olga: In small towns, women face a lack of job opportunities. Both small and large towns have no clear policies on integrating displaced people into the local municipalities. The women also have to deal with corruption, lack of support from local authorities and insufficient communication between authorities and the municipalities. In many places, shelling causes electricity and internet outages – affecting children who are educated online. The women who went abroad lack knowledge of the language and must deal with the European legislation, family separation, economic and psychological vulnerability.

What is most important for women in Ukraine now?

Olga: The war has been going on for eleven years, it is difficult to live in a state of uncertainty. So, what is most important is security, in any part of Ukraine.

Olena: Peace is returning home, meeting relatives who have returned from the war-affected areas, restoring life with education, culture, and the opportunity to plan for the future.

Networks are an important part of our peacebuilding work. What role do they play in Ukraine now, particularly for women and for peace activists?

Olena: Networks build networks. Our connections help us recover, navigate a new city, form our social circle, defend our rights, find a psychologist, dentist, gynaecologist, get a job, look for housing, and realise ourselves by starting a business or through other activities where we can use our expertise. With networks, you can do anything.

Olga: Networks strengthen women's influence, provide an opportunity to share experiences and learn peacebuilding tools.

If one day peace talks take place, how confident are you that women will participate, that these community leaders will insist on being part of the talks?

Olga: It has been repeatedly said that peacebuilding in times of war is difficult. How can we find common ground between the parties during the military escalation?

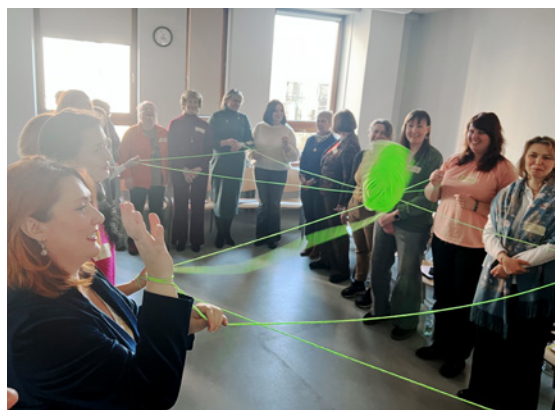
Olena: Women want to participate in the political discussion, in the decisions about reconstruction and in planning peace. Women's participation is a prerequisite for peace based on the principles of dignity, justice and freedom. The participants have repeatedly expressed their desire to be included in political processes. They shared their experiences of when they were included in decision-making and what results they achieved before the war. The group has requested more knowledge to be more effective in their communities.

What are your hopes for the programme?

Olga: At the meeting in February, the understanding of peacebuilding became clearer. It is also clear that we need to study the experiences of women in peace processes in the world and learn.

Olena: I am confident that the programme will strengthen women activists in communities in Ukraine. They are committed not only to personal development, but also to sharing the knowledge they have gained and bringing other women together to help them in building peace.

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“Peace means planning
for the future.”
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Pictures: Twenty women took part in a train-the-trainer workshop in Krakow in February to deepen their understanding of peacebuilding, build mutual trust and strengthen their role in peacebuilding.



Asia network meeting in Manila

“None of us works in isolation; our concerns are interconnected”

For two intensive days, 17 peace activists from 10 Asian countries explored the different roles that women play in peacebuilding. For the participants, the meeting in the Philippine capital Manila was a rare “time out” to reflect on their work, gain new perspectives and strengthen solidarity across borders. We also discussed what added value our Feminists Connecting for Peace network can offer in order to gain insights for further networking and advocacy activities.

Afghanistan, Cambodia, Guam, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal, the Philippines, South Korea, Timor-Leste: this first decentralised network meeting brought together long-standing partners of PeaceWomen Across the Globe and new network members from these countries. Together they demonstrated the diversity of feminist peace work through their experiences and positions. In interactive workshops and discussions, the diverse peace work in various phases of peace processes was discussed in depth and supplemented with presentations by women peace activists from Afghanistan, Myanmar and Timor-Leste. The discussions highlighted the similarities and differences, both in the approaches they use in their peace work and in their understanding of feminist peacebuilding.

Feminists in peace work

The term “feminist peacebuilding” in particular raised questions: Does everyone understand the same thing by it? Do they all identify as feminists in their peace work? The fact that two men took part in the meeting (as can be seen in the picture) was discussed, precisely because peace processes and networks are dominated by men. The participants noted that men like Hari Bahadur Dhimi (a long-time staff member of Nagarik Aawaz, our partner in Nepal) and Filipino activist Marc Batac, who clearly identify as feminists and bring a lot of experience to the table, are important allies in feminist peace work.

“A feminist network is an instrument for strengthening feminist peacebuilding. A network is only as effective as it is comprehensive,” says our colleague Liv Halperin. Together with Camille Bernheim and Larissa Mina Lee from our team, they designed and implemented the programme in Manila with our Philippine partner GZO Peace Institute. “The participants realised that we can learn a lot from Nagarik Aawaz when it comes to involving male allies,” explains Camille.



The network members came from Afghanistan, Cambodia, Guam, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal, the Philippines, South Korea and Timor-Leste to attend the meeting.

What peace activists need

We also wanted to know from the peace activists what support they need. At the top of the list were: recognition for local initiatives and local knowledge; access to global and regional advocacy platforms to give their concerns broader attention; resources for their work; learning opportunities. The participants agreed that solidarity is essential for their work – as long as it is constructive and takes place on equal terms.

“One member of the network emphasised that solidarity benefits everyone and is not a question of ‘charity’ towards the ‘needy’. Understanding this and finding common ground in the network are challenges that the participants are happy to take on,” says Larissa. A long-term strategy and the establishment of lasting relationships, both long before and after an immediate need for solidarity, are vital for feminist peace activists.

New insights and findings

At this meeting, PeaceWomen Across the Globe not only established new contacts and connections. It also gave us important new insights into countries and regions affected by armed conflict and provided us with findings for our work within the network. The open discussions also allowed us to feel the participants’ trust, which enabled a critical examination of our role as a “western organisation” and highlighted the forms of support that network members need from us as an organisation based in Switzerland.

Everyone agreed that they were returning home with a sense of connection, rich insights into different conflicts, and a wealth of valuable contacts. One participant said: “I have learned that we are all connected, that we all need to work together. None of us works in isolation; our concerns are interconnected.”

Visit from Colombia and Sudan

Backlash: Hate and violence against women activists

We invited the Sudanese peace activist and gender expert Rabab Baldo and the Colombian human rights lawyer Luz Marina Monzón Cifuentes to Bern for an event organised jointly with the Embassy of Canada. We also used their visit to arrange meetings with representatives from the Swiss government, politics, civil society and the media.

Social media offer a global platform for the work of activists and their messages. Particularly those women who prominently campaign for peace and justice and take up space quickly experience a backlash, a strong counter-reaction, both in virtual and physical spaces. At an event we organised with the Canadian Embassy in Bern on 1 April 2025, Rabab Baldo and Luz Marina Monzón Cifuentes spoke about their personal experiences with hate and attempts to silence them. They made the connection between the backlash in the digital world and the structures in the real world that enable and fuel misogyny.

The discussion, moderated by our director Deborah Schibler, took place after the Canadian documentary "Backlash, Misogyny in the Digital Age". The stories of the protagonists in the film show that hate on virtual platforms leads to violence against women in the physical world.

How Switzerland can provide support

The two women also met Swiss parliamentarians Fabian Molina (Social Democratic Party) and Christine Badertscher (Greens) and representatives of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. There, the women spoke about the challenges of peacebuilding in their countries and the roles that women play in building peace. Another topic of discussion was how Switzerland can support women in their peace efforts. The women called on Switzerland to use its diplomatic influence both in the Sudan conflict and in peacebuilding in Colombia.

The two peace activists also took part in a round table organised by the Swiss Platform for Peacebuilding KOFF, where they shared their comments and suggestions with representatives of Swiss civil society on the shrinking space for civil society action.

Their experiences and demands were also met with interest from the media: Rabab gave an interview to annabelle magazine and Luz Marina was interviewed by swissinfo.

You can find more information about the event and the media interviews on our website.

Get involved in peace work!

By becoming a member of PeaceWomen Across the Globe, you will gain a deeper insight into our projects and our future plans. We'll invite you to events with our project partners and to joint activities with the team.

You can find information about membership fees and register on the corresponding web page. Click on the "Become a member" button on our homepage.

Your regular contribution allows us and our partners both to plan our peace work for the long term and to organise it sustainably.



Rabab Baldo, peace activist from Sudan (centre) talks about her experiences with attempts to silence her. She and Colombian human rights lawyer Luz Marina Monzón Cifuentes (right) made the connection between online hate and the structures in the real world that enable misogyny. On the left, our director Deborah Schibler.

Imprint

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