SUMMARY

DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN AS A RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS AND AN ACCELERATOR FOR THE SUSTAINABLE RECOVERY OF UKRAINE

Group training on digital skills in National Library of Ukraine
named after Yaroslav Mudryi in Kyiv city

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic and large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine deepened pre-existing inequalities and exposed the vulnerabilities of women in the social, political and economic spheres. Rapid gender analyses of Ukraine[1] revealed that the crises caused by the pandemic and military actions have adversely affected women by exposing them to a higher risk of losing their livelihoods, becoming unemployed and getting involved in unprotected, informal sectors of the economy. They also face greater risks to their security and protection, and suffer from gender-based and conflict-related sexual violence. Along with the challenges in accessing essential services, women must also carry the burden of household and caregiving responsibilities as well as increased pressure to provide for their families in the absence of men who have joined the Armed Forces.

In the context of the crisis caused by the pandemic-related restriction measures and mass displacement of the population due to hostilities, digital skills and resources play a crucial role in the socioeconomic resilience of the affected populations. Ukraine has made rapid advances in digital technology in recent years. The Ministry of Digital Transformation continues to expand the "DIIA" platform[2] with online digital services and plans to ensure online availability of 100 per cent of public services and 95 per cent of Internet coverage by 2024. However, the ability to benefit from digital tools also depends on the issues of affordability, accessibility and digital literacy. In 2019, 53 per cent of the Ukrainian population possessed even lower than basic digital skills, and 20 per cent of the rural population did not have any digital skills at all, most of whom were 60–70 years old, did not have access to the Internet or were unemployed.[3] In 2021, the level of digital literacy increased by 5.2 per cent among the general population and by 4 per cent among older people.[4] Women of a particular age, health and economic status, education level and ethnicity face additional barriers regarding digital literacy and their access to digital solutions. Accordingly, they require targeted support to ensure that they are not left behind in the country's digital transformation.

The Ministry of Digital Transformation is working towards increasing the digital skills of 6 million Ukrainians via the national online platform "DIIA.Digital Education"[5] and through the transformation of 6,000 libraries into hubs of digital education. UN Women supported the Ministry in increasing the digital skills of women, especially the vulnerable, and strengthening their resilience amid the pandemic and war.

1   UN Women, Rapid Gender Assessment of the Situation and Needs of Women in the Context of COVID-19 in Ukraine (Kyiv, 2019). Available at https://eca.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/05/rapid-gender-assessment-of-the-situation-and-needs-of-women_europe; UN Women and CARE International, Rapid Gender Analysis of Ukraine, 4 May 2022. Available at https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/05/rapid-gender-analysis-of-ukraine.

2   Available at https://diia.gov.ua/.

3   Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine, Digital Literacy of Ukrainians (2019). Available at https://osvita.diia.gov.ua/uploads/0/585-cifrova_gramotnist_naselenna_ukraini_2019_compressed.pdf.

4   Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine, Digital Literacy of the Population of Ukraine: Report on the Results of the National Survey (2021). Available at https://osvita.diia.gov.ua/uploads/0/2623-research_eng_2021.pdf.

5   Available at https://osvita.diia.gov.ua/.

KEY BENEFICIARIES:
Internally displaced women, rural women, women with disabilities, women raising children with disabilities, older women

DURATION:
One year (December 2021–December 2022)

GEOGRAPHICAL SCOPE:
Thirteen communities in four regions (Chernivtsi, Kherson, Sumy, Volyn) and Kyiv city for Training of Trainers of digital community managers; four communities for public spaces providing Internet access for women

BUDGET AND DONOR:
USD 70,000 from Global Affairs Canada

TEAM:
Project Manager (part-time), Project Specialist/Coordinator and Project Associate; institutional contract with the Academy of Digital Development

PARTNERS AND STAKEHOLDERS:
Ministry of Digital Transformation and DIIA.Digital Education, Ukrainian Library Association, local self-governments in pilot communities, Google Ukraine.

Goal

Promote women's leadership in the digital space, and increase the capacity of women to cope with crisis situations by means of digital technology.

Objectives

- Support the enrolment of digital community managers in 13 pilot communities through Training of Trainers and specialized training programmes to train vulnerable women to cope with COVID-19-related limitations and socioeconomic consequences by using the digital platforms and tools.

- Provide training and ongoing consultations for vulnerable groups of women – women with disabilities, women aged 65+, single mothers, mothers of many children and other categories of vulnerable women – on the use of digital tools and services to search for information, make online purchases, find employment, launch income-generating activities and develop social contacts, among other benefits.

- Provide access to information and communications technology equipment and the Internet for vulnerable women through the establishment of community-based digital hubs with open access to the Internet located in libraries, village councils or other premises in four pilot communities.

- Strengthen the capacities of local self-government bodies on using digital solutions to respond to the needs of vulnerable groups of women.

Results

Chernivtsi region
- Nedoboivska ATC
- Vyzhnytska ATC
- Novoselytska ATC

Kherson region
- Zelenopidska ATC
- Kostyantynivka ATC
- Bekhterska ATC
- Vynogradivska ATC

Sumy region
- Krasnopilska ATC
- Berezivska ATC
- Stepanivska ATC

Volyn region
- Lutska ATC
- Torchynska ATC
- Velymchenska ATC

Kyiv
- Kyiv
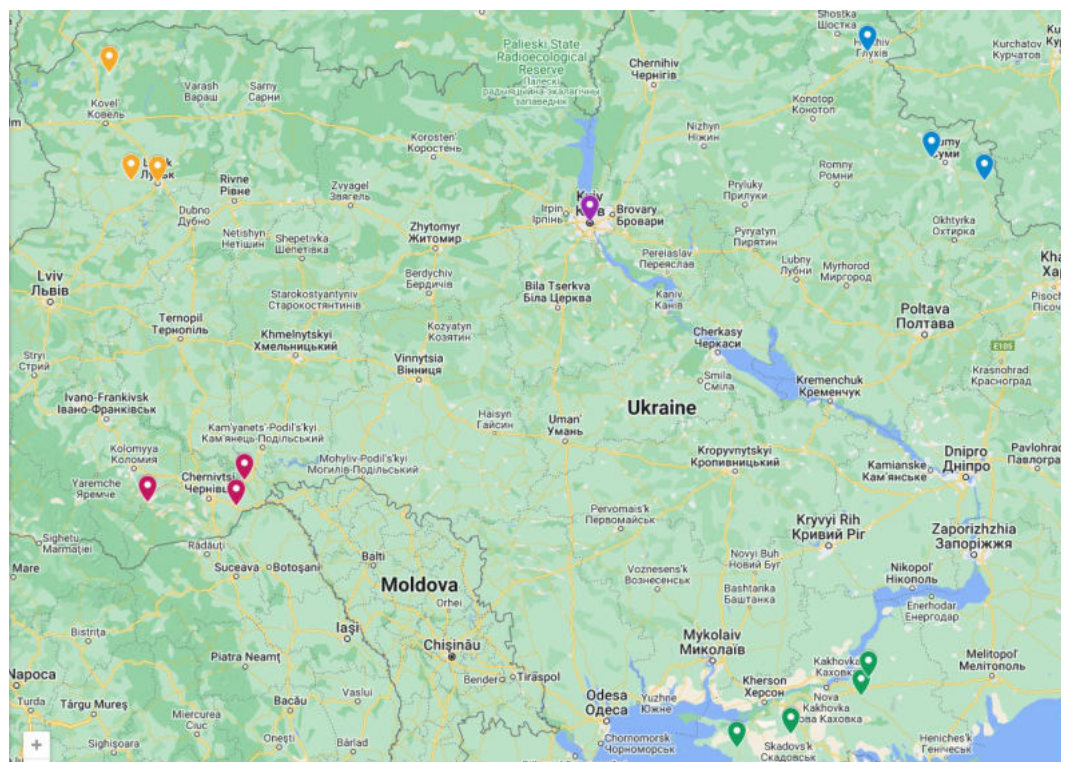
A total of 312,000 women benefited from information and support on digital solutions, 440 of whom received face-to-face, online training and consultations on digital tools and services.

A network of 70 digital community managers in four pilot regions and Kyiv city was established through the training of librarians to advise and support vulnerable women by providing access to digital services.

Four community-based digital hubs with open access to the Internet for vulnerable women were established.

Fifteen representatives of local self-government bodies strengthened their capacities on using digital solutions to respond to the needs of vulnerable groups of women.

Investment in the digital empowerment of vulnerable women in the context of war contributed to their increased resilience to the socioeconomic and security situation and, in the long run, to reduced inequalities and a diminished gender digital divide. Investment in equipping the digital hubs and increasing librarians' digital capacities allowed for the creation of a sustainable mechanism of practical support on digital solutions for a wide range of vulnerable women.

> " Thanks to the training on digital skills, I rapidly reacted to the crisis situation and, together with other librarians, came up with an idea for how to support women in our district. We created a group for mothers on social media and an online guide for parents to increase their resilience during the war.
>
> – Alla Pakhar, Digital Community Manager, Kyiv Library No. 120 in Obolon district

When the full-scale Russian invasion began, the libraries in many communities closed, but digital community managers continued to work remotely, including in the temporarily occupied territories. They continuously assessed the needs of women to provide them with support and information through digital solutions. The information platform #знаю_виживу (I know I'll survive)[6] and a blog sharing this information through the digital hubs[7] were created in response to the humanitarian and security crisis during the online digital trainings. Among other uses, these sites helped increase women's awareness about the actions they could take in the event of conflict-related sexual violence and domestic violence, including the services available for survivors. They also provide information about accessing public services, humanitarian aid, and cash-based and legal support for internally displaced persons and other war-affected populations.

> " When I was heading back home after Kyiv region was fully deoccupied, I learned that I am entitled to financial support for pensioners. It turned out that the library where I usually go to check out books now supports vulnerable groups of people in using services through mobile phones. I addressed my question to the librarian who now has the modern title of 'digital community manager', and she helped me apply for the financial assistance provided by international organizations. In fact, I received not only financial support but also emotional support, which is so important during these difficult times. I am so grateful for the consultation, which was very clear and straightforward – in particular, how to receive support for those vulnerable people who most need it.
>
> – Natalia Mykhailenko, pensioner, Kivshovata village in Bilotserkivskyi district

The libraries that remained open had to adapt their work to the context of war. Digital hubs became 'safe' places for internally displaced women and children, where they got access to the Internet and to devices to search for jobs, take online lessons and receive in-person consultations on various services. These services included applying for assistance for internally displaced persons, registering in online queues for services, registering a private business through the DIIA platform and reporting, transferring money.

> For women pensioners in the temporarily occupied communities of Kherson, the library was one of the very few places they were not afraid to go. They trusted the librarians to advise them on vital digital skills in the context of war, in particular for withdrawing their pensions from their accounts by using their mobile devices.

The project results are discussed in an article on the online magazine Wonder Ukraine.[8]

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6   Available at https://sites.google.com/view/i-will-survive/.

7   Available at https://sdlunw.blogspot.com.

8   «У бібліотеці має бути цікаво й іноді шумно». Бібліотекарки, які стали тренерками з цифрової освіти. Available in Ukrainian at https://www.wonderzine.com.ua/wonderzine/culture/culture/13223-u-bibliotetsi-mae-buti-tsikavo-y-inodi-shumno-bibliotekarki-yaki-stali-trenerkami-z-tsifrovoyi-osviti.

Visitor of the Library No.5 in Lutsk, Volyn region, receives consultation on online payment of utilities

Inputs

Seventy librarians from 13 pilot communities and Kyiv city increased their digital and training skills through:

- In-person three-day Training of Trainers in each of the four pilot regions based on the DIIA.Digital Education platform
- Online specialized training, as a result of which they created 18 online digital hubs and short instructional videos on various digital solutions (based on DIIA educational videos)
- Online specialized training on digital skills to support gender-responsive humanitarian support, including how to conduct needs assessments
- Online and in-person supervisory support and on-the-job coaching
- Cash-based support with mobile Internet access and professional psychological consultations during the first three months of the war.

Women who belong to vulnerable groups increased their capacities to cope with the socioeconomic challenges and psychological pressure caused by humanitarian and security crises by means of:

- In-person training on digital literacy
- In-person and online consultations by digital community managers
- Physical and online digital hubs
- Online marathon on the digital empowerment of women.

Lessons learned

- Digital mastery serves as a leadership and empowerment accelerator for vulnerable women.
- Women tend to trust librarians, which is especially important in the context of war. Therefore, libraries often become one of the very few places where women feel safe to ask for consultations or information.
- By having digital equipment, Internet access and digital community managers in place, libraries can support vulnerable women in their communities with many digital solutions and public services, which they would otherwise not have access to – either because of a lack of Internet access, digital skills or simply unawareness about the existence of such services.
- Librarians need additional motivation, ideally financial, to perform the functions of digital community managers, as these responsibilities are often performed by librarians in addition to their main tasks.

Opportunities and recommendations

- Policy work and national-wide programmatic interventions can help scale up the achievements on women's digital empowerment and decrease the gender digital divide.
- National and local actors and stakeholders on digital transformation should recognize and address the specific issues that vulnerable groups of women face regarding access to digital services and using digital solutions, especially by developing programmes focused on women to support them.
- There is a need to collect data on digital capacity in Ukraine that are disaggregated by sex, age and resident status in order to monitor progress on reducing the gender digital divide.
- In cooperation with the Ukrainian Library Association, the Ministry of Digital Transformation and local authorities, it is important to provide formal recognition of the additional tasks performed by digital community managers in the job description and remuneration.
- To ensure the inclusion of women with disabilities, digital hubs should be accessible and equipped with specially adapted software for people with visual and hearing impairments. Additional training for digital community managers is needed on working with these groups using specialized software.

Contacts

- UN Women Ukraine – https://ukraine.unwomen.org/uk
- Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine – https://thedigital.gov.ua/
- Academy of Digital Development – https://www.digital-academy.in.ua/
- Ukrainian Library Association – https://ula.org.ua/
- Digital hubs – https://sites.google.com/view/sdlua