

Vatican City, 8th March 2022

Today is International Women's Day. For that reason, I found myself at the Vatican at a symposium entitled "Church and Society: Women as Builders of Dialogue" the self-stated aim of which was to launch a dialogue process to promote the leadership, equality and participation of women...in pursuit of peaceful and resilient societies".

This could hardly have come at a more opportune moment. As I write, we are twelve days into the war in Ukraine, ostensibly on the verge of a fourth round of negotiations (in which, it would appear, no women have sat at the table). Whilst it is impossible to know how their presence would influence this particular process or outcome, the statistic quoted by British Ambassador to the Holy See, Christ Trott, during his remarks bears repeating: namely, that peace agreements are 64% less likely to fail if women are involved in the negotiation process.



The issue of gender seems sharper in this crisis than in many others, perhaps because all Ukrainian men aged between 18 and 60 must remain to defend their country. For families assessing whether or not to flee the relentless shelling, this additional factor must be weighed in the balance: to the inevitable trauma of flight will, in many cases, be added the shearing pain of being separated from those held most dear, a pain heightened by the knowledge that those left behind will be in mortal danger.

And, indeed, partners of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy (FCEI) working on the border with Ukraine tell us those arriving are deeply traumatized. When asked by us to set out priorities so that we might appropriately calibrate the kind of assistance we could harness from member churches and concerned Italians, our contacts were clear. The priority is shelter and psychological support. Clothes and other items are not in short supply; in contrast, funds to cover the cost of providing this direct assistance are.

This weekend a small team comprising staff from Mediterranean Hope (FCEI's refugee and migrant program) and the Diaconia Valdese (the diaconal arm of the Waldensian Church) will head to Poland. Their insights into the situation on the ground will be invaluable. The level of support offered to those fleeing is remarkable but, with flight, also comes risk. We hear of traffickers exploiting the chaos for their own ends; women who accept a lift to the border and then disappear; unaccompanied minors who are preyed upon. There are no depths, it would seem, to which some will sink.

Italian society has, of course, been moved to act: not only through donations in money and kind but also in opening hearts and homes to those who are fleeing. We hear of Ukrainian carers who, with the support of the families they work for in Italy, have gone to the border to bring back fleeing family members to safety

and shelter here. And, as was the case for those fleeing Afghanistan after 15th August, offers of accommodation are flooding in. FCEI is amongst the organisations stepping up to transfer and host those in need. Its sister organization, the Diaconia Valdese, will this weekend welcome twenty-one children (six of whom are under the age of three) who have been evacuated from a children's home in Kiev.

In this terrible darkness, exposing the brutal disregard of some for the lives of others, there are nonetheless sparks of light: a common resolve underpinned by compassion which can inspire us all to action.

For more information about FCEI's campaign for Ukraine see [Ukraine, FCEI: "No to weapons, open humanitarian protection channels. Ready to do our part." - Nev](#)