



Short communication

Integrating sexual and reproductive health in higher education and healthcare services in Ukraine: A sustainable initiative for empowering war-affected youth



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ABSTRACT

Integrating Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) into educational programs and healthcare services supports the EU Eastern Partnership and the UN's Agenda 2030. A Swedish Institute (SI)-funded project empowers undergraduate students in medicine, psychology, and social work to support SRHR among youth and young adults in wartime and post-war Ukraine by incorporating the subject into university curricula. In August 2024, a study tour to Sweden was conducted by managers and faculty from Ukrainian universities, during which the visitors to Sweden identified the need to establish Youth Clinics at Ukrainian universities to address the SRHR needs of the war-affected youth population.

Introduction

The Swedish Institute (SI) [1], a public agency dedicated to promoting global interest and trust in Sweden, has allocated funding through the "SI Baltic Sea Neighborhood Programme" [1] to support a collaborative project between Dalarna University (DU) and three universities in Ukraine: Odessa National Medical University, Ivan Franko National University Lviv, and Lviv Polytechnic National University. The project, titled "Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of Youth in Wartime and the Post-War Future: Education and Promotion of Online Youth and Young Adult Consultations," addresses the urgent need for professional support in sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in war-torn Ukraine [2].

The initiative is crucial because war significantly disrupts healthcare systems, leaving youth vulnerable to sexual violence, unintended

pregnancies, and untreated sexual transmitted diseases, often compounded by post-traumatic stress. Lessons from other conflicts underscore the importance of accessible, tailored SRHR services [3]. The overall aim of the project is to enhance education in medicine, psychology, sociology, and social work, enabling healthcare professionals, after graduation, to provide essential SRH services to patients and clients [2]. Integrating SRHR into vocational training is critical, given the heightened need for such services in the context of ongoing conflict and its aftermath. The project team seeks to improve sustainable access to SRH services.

Methods

Steering group

A series of steering group meetings was crucial for planning project

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activities, monitoring progress, and clarifying partner roles and responsibilities. These meetings also helped organize the 2024 course, study visit and workshop [2]. The steering group, which includes the authors of this publication, played a key role in these efforts.

A course in SRHR

The 7.5 cp course on SRHR of Adolescents and Young Adults in Ukraine equips students in medicine, psychology, sociology, and social work to support patients and clients in consultations. From April to November 2024, 40 students and 10 faculty from three prominent Ukrainian universities attended online seminars and lectures led by DU lecturers. Information and advocacy material has been developed for online use and onsite use in Ukraine during 2025 [2].

A 5-day Study Visit to Sweden

The Ukrainian faculty, who educate doctors, psychologists, sociologists, and social workers, visited several key institutions in Sweden. They toured the Red Cross Treatment Center for War Wounded and Torture Victims, the National Center for Knowledge on Men's Violence Against Women, The Swedish Association of Sexual Education (RFSU) and the MIKA Clinic, which focuses on SRH care for vulnerable groups. Additional visits included the emergency department for rape victims at Södersjukhuset and Youth Clinics in Stockholm. The study visits aimed to help participants reflect on SRHR norms and equip them to support Ukrainian youth and young adults affected by the war [2,4].

A 4-hour Workshop

In preparation for integrating SRHR into Ukrainian university programmes by 2025, a workshop on "Promotion of Online Youth and Young Adult Consultations" was held aimed to reach 400 students in education across the three universities. The aim of the workshop was to equip faculty to address the needs of war-affected adolescents and young adults. The workshop focused on structuring sessions, ensuring feasibility, usability, and cultural relevance to meet students' needs and sustain the initiative [2].

In 2025 mentorship: The plan from DU, is to mentor Ukrainian university faculty as they introduce SRHR in the programmes for doctors, psychologists, sociologists, and social workers as part of the project and reach out to 400 students across the three universities [2].

Results

We can highlight promising results of the:

Close cooperation of gynecologists, psychologists, sociologists and social workers in activities in the 7.5 cp online course encouraging reflection on societal norms and preconceived ideas about SRHR, promoting a more inclusive, progressive approach to healthcare education and services.

Importance of studying the experiences of SRHR services in Stockholm, Sweden. This visit helped identify specific programmes that can contribute to the effectiveness of supporting youth and young adults in Ukraine in war and after. Furthermore, the study visit challenged traditional views and advocated for the rights and well-being of youth, especially in the context of war and post-war recovery.

Promotion of transforming university educational programs modifying the curricula and adapting pedagogical educational approaches to meet the emerging needs for professional consultations on SRHR for youth and adults affected by the war. It included arrangement with group interactions and peer learning among students, which is vital for developing a comprehensive understanding and deepening expertise in their respective fields.

Identification of the need to expand access to Youth Clinic services in Ukraine. By addressing the specific needs of adolescents and young adults affected by the war, Youth Clinics was identified as a service where the vulnerable young population could receive essential support. Post-war rebuilding efforts in Ukraine should according to the participants, incorporate Youth Clinics to tackle both immediate and long-term healthcare challenges.

Discussion

War significantly disrupts healthcare systems, limiting access to contraceptives, maternal care, and sexual transmitted diseases' prevention services, leaving youth and young adults particularly vulnerable. Studies from conflict-affected regions highlight increased sexual violence, unintended pregnancies, and untreated sexual transmitted diseases among displaced populations, compounded by psychological stress including post-traumatic stress [3]. In response, the EU Eastern Partnership [5] focuses on fostering cooperation between European Union (EU) countries, of which Sweden is one, and those seeking to strengthen their relationship with the EU. Ukraine is one such country. Our project contributes to this effort of the EU Partnership, by promoting collaboration between Ukraine and Sweden on shared health challenges, in this project particularly in the realm of SRHR. This initiative funded by SI [1,2] aligns with the UN's Agenda 2030 goal 3–5, 16–17 [6]. Our project directly supports the Agenda 2030 goals by addressing the educational needs of programme students, equipping them during their university education, with the consultation skills necessary for working with war-affected youth and adults after graduation. The initiative promotes gender equality through SRHR advocacy and contributes to peaceful, inclusive societies via cross-border cooperation. By collaborating with partners from DU in Sweden, the Ukraine partner universities are being supported to integrate the SRHR subject into educational programmes at the respective universities. This integration of the SRHR in education programmes fosters fairness and inclusiveness in professional consultations with youth and young adults affected by war.

Advocating for Youth Clinic services that are multi-professional, also including midwives, will address the needs of youth and young adults, thereby building resilience through the sustainable provision of SRHR consultations during and after the war. The services at Youth Clinics, that can preferably be set up at the universities, will empower young people post-war to live healthier, more productive lives. Furthermore, this approach of introducing Youth Clinics fosters inclusivity by ensuring equal access to SRHR services within the EU Eastern Partnership [5], promoting gender equality and supporting vulnerable populations. Youth Clinics in any country in Europe, where war-affected youth migrate, can specifically address the SRHR needs of these individuals.

Author contributions

All authors have contributed to the writing of this short communication and approved the final manuscript before submission.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.srhc.2024.101060>.

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