

Using the power of voice, compassion, and feminist principles in Ukraine

(10 mins) <https://www.novatore.eu/>

I am truly honored to be here today –heartfelt gratitude to the outstanding team at Novatore, and to all of you for your esteemed work and unyielding compassion.

I want to talk about transformation, about voice, about compassion, and about connection within the framework of the feminist non-profit organization Footage Foundation – of which I am a co-Founder and the Executive Director.

I co-founded Footage 14 years ago with 4 other women social scientists while studying for our PhDs at Cambridge. At Footage we design and implement evidence-based programs, focusing on wellbeing and compassion, in the areas of inequalities, gender-based violence, and forced displacement. We are unique in that we occupy the fertile space between social science research and on the ground humanitarian interventions.

We work with some of the world’s most forgotten young women including young women who have survived conflict in Syria, torture by ISIS, fleeing Afghanistan, horrors in camps in Libya, trafficking in Kazakhstan, LGBTQI+ communities in Russia, and intimate partner violence in the U.S., Ukraine, Russia, and Chile.

I have worked as a social scientist for close to 20 years helping to elevate voices of the most silenced and promote the power of compassion — which I understand as empathy plus action — and while I am an applied social scientist – I am, above all, a feminist researcher.

In fact, I co-founded Footage as a student when I saw firsthand how the social science methods I was using such as anthropological film and oral histories went far beyond generating data — indeed as people spoke with me, as they, for example, created and shared images, I saw how

feminist principles of voice, radical inclusion, compassion, and collaboration inspired real tangible social action.

This work is my calling and this work is how Footage was born – we are, without question, a feminist organization.

What does this mean? This means that our methods are participatory, that they break down hierarchies between researchers and those we serve, that they embody the phrase “nothing about us, without us” – that our focus is on generating data rich lived experiences we can use to catalyze change from the ground up. Our focus is also on the most forgotten, on justice and equity, and it means there is no “research for research sake” – that any research we co-create must bring about change and healing.

Footage is research AND programming, it is understanding AND it is action – there is no separating what we do into research, action, aid, or intervention; rather our every move is toward positive transformation.

I want to share with you how these principles constitute our work using the case study of our programs in Ukraine. We are profoundly connected to Ukraine, over the last 10 years, in particular, 8 of our 9 public diplomacy awards from the US Department of State have been implemented across the region – all of these grants focus on gender equality and ending gender-based violence.

Through these awards we have established and maintained deep roots in vulnerable communities in Ukraine. Two projects we are currently implementing including cash transfers – and sharing vital information exemplify feminist principles..

In Ukraine, on February 24th we began immediately providing unconditional cash transfers through our program called Compassionate Cash.

We know unconditional cash protects against risks like trafficking, but it is also a trauma-informed form of care as it instills power and agency, and supports the mental and physical health of people - something desperately and immediately needed in crisis. Our focus is on one soul at a time, humanizing the process. As one woman from Ukraine told me: our concern is like that of an older sister -- no situation is too small or big, no time is wasted, and no one is left behind.

I want to stress here that very few are able to get cash to the populations we serve as these populations are unlikely to be involved in formal aid networks. For example, elderly women with a roaming distance of several meters a day, or for instance, mothers confined to their homes with sick and/or disabled children who might have difficulty seeking out, and/or are not found by formal networks that provide aid.

How do we do this? We do this through the power of building and maintaining women's networks and leadership – indeed we can do what many cannot because our cash program is different in that it is feminist – it is at once research, a leadership intervention, and a participatory form of aid – our mechanism for delivery is unique in that we employ young women who were part of our earlier public diplomacy work in Kyiv in 2017.

Because we use these trusted networks, we are able to deliver aid to the hardest to reach, promoting inclusion, as well as security, safety, and dignity. We know these aspects are the first steps towards mental wellbeing, and we know mental wellbeing is directly connected to economic empowerment and vice versa.

What is more, promoting leadership skills among young women and providing opportunities to lead is so important because what these young women learn will often serve the needs of their communities in long-lasting ways that emergency cash cannot.

We work closely with our young women leaders inside Ukraine as they make decisions on where aid needs to go and how to get it there. Young women also lead the research, documenting the process including, for example, recording interviews with recipients on lived experiences with violence, and gathering quotes, stories, and images, including personal narratives.

What is more – our young women are agents of change – and life has purpose as they themselves support their own communities, as one young women leader wrote:

“It gives my life more sense.” and “For me being a leader of the compassionate cash program is an opportunity to survive internally. When I help another woman, I save myself.”

The second program I want to talk about is called FemSMS which we launched with partners in April. FemSMS is a one-way trauma-informed compassionate text messaging service that shares information and resources (for example, hotlines, articles, websites) with women, equipping them with trusted information and offering hope and social connection.

We built FemSMS to address information poverty in crisis settings by sharing resources around subjects like gender-based violence and mental health. We chose to use SMS, for many reasons, not least because it will reach women regardless of the type of mobile device they're using, and even if the internet is cut-off.

FemSMS includes three central feminist principles: first, it is trauma-informed taking into account people's needs and immediate trauma, messages allow the recipients to receive information in a constructive and understanding way not usually seen in a war zone. Many of the texts themselves are often delivered with trigger warnings so as not to isolate the recipient or ignite fear.

Connected to this, second, all of our messages are set within a yoke of connection and compassion. Rather than simply giving information on violence, we enter into the conversation, taking into account the shame around violence and share how difficult these subjects are to speak about, for all of us.

Using compassion and connection texts about violence, trafficking, and mental health, including information on how war impacts everyday life from menstruation and sleep patterns to water and food safety, are more likely to be heard and absorbed by those who need the information most.

Lastly, the third aspect is voice — significantly FemSMS is built through an iterative human centered design process with recipients themselves. By designing texts based on needs, sending them across the country, and modifying those texts based on phone and online surveys, Ukrainian women's voices sit at the heart of this work.

So far we have completed three research- intervention trials with a fourth in progress. We've sent over 6000 messages to almost 1000 women. From what I know so far, this is the first time in a war zone that an iterative design process has been used to build an information sharing system, and that this is the first compassion based trauma-informed system of its kind.

The magnitude of this cannot be overstated. Having women participate in research generates important data, and is in itself an intervention – again there is no research for research sake. Women not only receive life-saving messages, they know that they've volunteered to take part in helping others and in the rebuilding of their country. In fact, data suggest 75% of recipients surveyed relayed the messages to others.

We have an abundance of data coming from our surveys including quotes as you see here which include:

I realize I am not alone.

I felt supported.

That there is a sense of unity.

And others such as: “these text messages allowed me to remember myself in moments of silence, about my need to regain my strength.”

FemSMS is expanding across the region and starting last month we are getting ready to launch globally including in the US and Afghanistan. The need is inexhaustible and the demand high (for example, we have women signing up every day in Ukraine). We resolve to provide this service everywhere it is needed.

In fact, in this challenging landscape with the escalation of global violence, deepening inequities, information poverty, and silencing of so many, as a feminist organization our resolve to leave no one behind, to center the narratives of those we serve, to move our world toward justice, toward equity and toward peace, grows stronger and stronger.

I am truly indebted to you all, for all you do with and for women, everywhere. Thank you for listening and for all of your support. I am deeply grateful.

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