

"Not a single safe place": The Ukrainian refugees at risk: violence, trafficking and exploitation

Findings from Poland and Ukraine

Introduction

Russia's war on Ukraine has rendered an unprecedented scale of forced displacement, primarily of women and children. Since 2014 over 1.5 million people from Eastern Ukraine and Crimea have fled to other regions of the country. With greater military presence in inhabited areas, the number of reported sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) incidents at the 'entry-exit crossing points' have increased.^{vii} Since 24th February 2022, it is estimated that seven million have fled Ukraine to neighbouring countries. Also, 6.5 million people have been displaced internally and 13 million are unable to leave.^{i, ii}

Although neighbouring nations welcomed fleeing Ukrainians, the scale of the feminised displacement emergency has not been met with the appropriate resources, capacity, political will, or governance. As of 1st November 2022, 7,274,050 border crossings were recorded from Ukraine to Poland, and 1,469,032 Ukrainians applied for the national protection scheme.ⁱⁱⁱ A large proportion of Ukrainians who entered Poland either continued journeying to another country, returned to Ukraine, or have not yet registered in Poland. An urgent and comprehensive protection response is needed from Poland and Ukraine to accommodate the specific needs of refugees and IDPs regardless of their background.

About the project

SEREDA CEE Project 'The Ukrainian refugees at risk: gender-based violence, trafficking and exploitation' examined the risks, experiences, and awareness of SGBV and trafficking in Poland and Ukraine to help develop adequate policy and safeguarding measures. The project was led by the University of Birmingham in collaboration with community-based researchers from Convictus, an NGO in Ukraine and Poland. Collected data comprises

32 interviews with refugee and internally displaced women (17 in Poland and 15 in Ukraine) and 14 interviews with national and local service providers in Poland. The study has been funded by the [Institute for Global Innovations and Institute for Advanced Studies](#) and the College of Social Sciences Impact Fund of the University of Birmingham. The study obtained ethical approval from the University of Birmingham Ethical Review Committee.

Continued experiences and risks of violence

All respondents were subjected to war violence. Some experienced GBV incidents pre-war; for others, different forms of violence continued from pre-displacement, through conflict, transit and refuge. Forms of violence shared by respondents include structural, physical, verbal, emotional and economic violence; sexual violence including conflict-related sexual violence; and stigmatization and discrimination of vulnerable groups. Risks of violence and exploitation across refugee journeys and settlement experiences in Poland were reported as very high. Many participants mentioned unfair pay and labour exploitation, and some of them faced verbal abuse and racism.

Gendered harms from war, during flight to refuge

Most respondents suffered from war-related trauma, including physical and psychological harm. Although many Ukrainian refugees could access protection and healthcare services in Poland, some still did not know they were entitled to support or faced healthcare exclusion due to language barriers and a lack of awareness of services.

Risk factors increasing vulnerability to violence and exploitation

War trauma and shock affected refugees' vulnerability to exploitation and their ability

to evaluate protection risks. The levels of GBV and trafficking awareness varied among respondents in Poland and Ukraine. Overall, the lack of knowledge of one's rights, lack of support networks, and language barriers exacerbated vulnerability to abuse. Most IDPs in Ukraine faced destitution and depended on friends, relatives and the third sector, with some lacking knowledge of how to apply for state benefits. Most did not receive information about the risks of GBV, nor how and where to seek support.

Barriers to reporting in Poland

While service providers noted low levels of gendered violence reporting, they foresaw that reporting rates would increase in the future. Shame and stigma deterred victims from seeking support and language barriers prevented contact with domestic violence hotlines and police. Despite extensive information resources targeting refugees in Poland, survivors often did not know about available support and services. Prevalence of gender stereotypes among statutory (public) services, victim-blaming culture and gender insensitivity posed barriers to GBV disclosure.

Protective factors strengthening resilience to violence and exploitation

Refugee women deployed a range of coping strategies to deal with trauma and the uncertainty of the future. Many relied on their personal strengths and qualities and those with social connections counted on support from family and friends. Some drew strength from their faith. For mothers, caring for children was an important coping strategy. Some respondents attended psychological support sessions in Poland and engaged in language classes. Acts of kindness toward fellow compatriots and self-reliance through accessing safe accommodation and work fostered coping capacities.

Grassroots response: solidarity lacking systemic solutions

Poland's civil society and private sector showed great solidarity with refugees at the outbreak of the invasion. A range of NGOs responded immediately to support refugees' basic needs and adapted their work in the

face of a missing government response. Longer-term needs, such as sustainable housing solutions, work and integration, required further support and involvement from the state. Practitioners appealed for stronger coordination and networking.

Interactions between violence, displacement, humanitarian, and migration systems

Six interactions between violence, displacement, humanitarian, and migration systems were identified in the study:

1. Limited safeguarding measures in the refugee journey

At the early stages of the emergency, volunteers and ad hoc grassroots organizations coordinated informal transportation arrangements to process the massive influx of refugees in Poland. Services were offered in a chaotic manner without systemic coordination and lacked safeguarding measures. Several women were raped and abused during informal transportation arrangements. A registration system, introduced later, to verify documents and criminal records of drivers transporting refugees lacked in the efficiency of safeguarding checks and monitoring of safe arrivals. Some drivers registered with false data and were found to be untraceable after abusing refugee women. Similarly, the registration of volunteers assisting at reception points did not involve screening.

2. Enforcing dependency and competition over resources in Poland

Some refugee women survivors of domestic violence rejoined their abusive partners, who had earlier migrated to Poland for work, and were re-victimised. In domestic violence situations, the application of 'blue card' procedures in Poland remained ambiguous concerning Ukrainian nationals. Due to delayed receipt of social benefits in Poland, some women became financially dependent on their former abusive partners who remained in Ukraine. Some women registered with the Social Insurance Institution (ZUS) with the help of men who had their phone number and could access their email account.

Women, who left their spouses in Ukraine and became the head of household with numerous dependents, remained vulnerable to 'transactional and survival sex'.

3. Trauma-insensitive uncoordinated refugee responses and procedures

The lack of a coordinated and state-led response to mass-scale refugee displacement forced refugees to trust volunteers and strangers immediately after experiencing armed violence. Excessive information was shared with refugees in their distressed and disoriented state. Also, information campaigns about human trafficking and exploitation were often presented in ways that did not effectively communicate their message to refugees.

4. Labour exploitation and discrimination in Ukraine

Most research participants became unemployed, as indicated in our interviews which were conducted between one to three months after their flight. Exploitation was common. Some considered labour exploitation as discrimination against IDPs. Sex work was reported, too. Job offers misled participants, turning out to be requests for sex services.

5. Lack of privacy in accommodation and safeguarding risks with private hosts

The lack of centralised coordination and insufficient background checks of private hosts and housing increased refugees' anxiety about potential harm. Some respondents could not cover housing fees without jobs or by working part-time. Women with several children and elderly dependents often struggled to find adequate housing and continued living in reception centres. Some refugee women were verbally and physically attacked in overcrowded reception centres and private homes by other refugee women residents due to conflict over resources. Others reported incidents of physical and emotional violence by hosts. IDPs in Ukraine faced extreme increases in rental costs and lack of shelters. Some locations were difficult to live in without basic amenities and safety checks.

6. Limited protection sensitivities and capacities of multiple stakeholders

Services to address the specialist needs of refugee women were scarce, and mainstream and sexual violence services lacked the expertise to work with refugees. The lack of reproductive health solutions for victims of violence led, in some cases, to the loss of life. Mental health support funded by the National Health Fund in Poland was difficult to access and low quality. Migrant organisations lacked funding to increase outreach to potential survivors. Unaccompanied minors in Poland were subjected to obligatory guardianship procedures described as risky due to speedy guardian verification procedures. Some minors were approached by older and unknown persons.

Key recommendations

Despite the kindness and solidarity offered by Polish citizens to Ukrainians, the scale of the feminised displacement emergency requires further systemic solutions to strengthen the protection of displaced people. Therefore, SEREDA CEE Project advocates mainstreaming protection with refugee, gender and trauma-sensitivity in the humanitarian, immigration, and asylum systems through better coordination across different levels and sectors to mitigate violence against refugees.

The central government, regional and city authorities should develop systemic solutions to mainstream the protection of refugees from violence and exploitation regardless of nationality or residency:

- Establish an adequate, safe, and user-friendly registration of drivers and volunteers, verification, and monitoring system to strengthen the protection of refugees nationally and internationally
- Develop longer-term solutions for accommodation, regulate rental fees and subsidise rental costs
- Centralise coordination of private hosts offering accommodations to refugees and IDPs, and introduce safeguarding measures to mitigate violence and exploitation

- Build capacities of workers at crisis intervention centres and sensitise reception points to support refugee survivors of violence and exploitation.

Justice system should:

- Ensure the criminal code enables all victims, irrespective of nationality, to access justice and effective prosecution
- Provide anti-GBV and anti-trafficking training for the legal and justice system (including police)
- Provide legal advice free of charge to refugee and IDP victims in languages they use.

Employers and private sector should:

- Help refugees and IDPs, regardless of nationality, access employment, including skills development programmes and internships to support their self-reliance and integration.

National Health Fund (NFZ), hospitals and health services should:

- Support all refugees of different ages to access health services and long-term mental health support in urban and rural areas
- Ensure reproductive health information and services are available to refugees
- Sensitise staff on mental health and GBV experiences of refugees and IDPs.

Multi-sectoral capacities should be strengthened to prevent and respond to violence and exploitation:

- Develop a comprehensive counter-trafficking response in partnership with the authorities, international organisations, and specialist NGOs
- Ensure central, regional, and city authorities, NGOs, specialist organisations and the private sector strengthen collaboration for effective aid distribution to reach the most vulnerable
- ‘Violence against women’ sector to provide training for staff of social assistance centres, social insurance institutions, police, and border services on risks of violence and relevant procedures
- Provide funding for flexible services for mobile and newly arrived populations and

support the development of protection programmes and infrastructure to cater to the specific needs of refugees.

NGOs should:

- Develop links with specialist organisations and establish referral procedures
- Support refugees to register and legalise their stay in Poland and access support services
- Support volunteers, workers at reception points, and social workers by providing training on how to support refugee and IDP populations who experienced violence
- Offer psychological support to all support staff and volunteers to prevent and recover from burnout.

Faith-based organizations should:

- Develop institutional solutions for refugees and support their psychosocial and spiritual needs, regardless of their faith. Avoid risks of proselytisation.

Campaign and advocacy needs:

- Develop a national campaign for refugee protection in Poland, to raise awareness of the risks of violence, crime, and exploitation, and to signpost where to seek support in languages used
- Counter disinformation initiatives which misrepresent refugees and incite conflict between host and refugee communities
- Build international advocacy and utilise diplomatic pathways for the Polish government to develop systemic refugee solutions.

Link to the full report:

<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/iris/2022/sereda-cee.pdf>

Briefing in Polish:

<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/iris/2022/sereda-cee-polish-briefing.pdf>

Briefing in Ukrainian:

<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/iris/2022/sereda-cee-ukrainian-briefing.pdf>

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