

“Not a single safe place”: The Ukrainian refugees at risk: violence, trafficking and exploitation. Findings from Poland and Ukraine

Russia's war on Ukraine has rendered an unprecedented scale of forced displacement, primarily of women and children. Since 24th February 2022, it is estimated that seven million have fled Ukraine to neighbouring countries. 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 As of October 2022, there were 6.5 million internally displaced people in Ukraine.ⁱ An urgent and comprehensive protection response is needed from Poland and Ukraine to accommodate the specific needs of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) as they settle into new contexts. The SEREDA CEE Project examined the risks, experiences and awareness of SGBV and trafficking in Poland and Ukraine to help develop adequate policy and safeguarding measures. Data was gathered from 14 interviews with national and local service providers in Poland and 32 interviews with refugee and IDPs in Poland and Ukraine.

Continued experiences and risks of violence:

All respondents were subjected to war violence and, for some, different forms of violence continued from pre-displacement, through conflict, transit and refuge. Most respondents suffered from war-related trauma, including physical and psychological harm.

Risk and protective factors: Lack of knowledge of one's rights, lack of support networks, and language barriers exacerbated vulnerability to abuse. Support for survivors of violence was provided by civil society in the face of a missing government response. Key facilitators of resilience were self-reliance in the country of refuge through accessing safe and secure accommodation and being able to work and access welfare.

Interactions between violence, displacement, humanitarian and migration systems:

1. Limited safeguarding measures in the refugee journey:

Services were offered without systemic coordination and lacked safeguarding measures. The registration system to verify drivers lacked in efficiency of safeguarding checks and monitoring of safe arrivals. Several women were raped and abused during informal transportation arrangements.

2. Enforced dependency and competition over resources in Poland:

Domestic violence procedures concerning Ukrainian nationals remained ambiguous. Due to delayed payments of social benefits, women depended financially on former abusive partners who stayed in Ukraine. Women who became the head of household, with several dependents, remained vulnerable to 'transactional and survival sex'.

3. Trauma-insensitive uncoordinated refugee responses:

Poorly coordinated refugee responses did not account for the impact of war trauma on refugees' vulnerability to violence and exploitation. Excessive information was shared with refugees in their distressed and disoriented state.

4. Labour exploitation and discrimination of IDPs in Ukraine:

Most research participants became unemployed, and exploitation was common. Some considered labour exploitation as discrimination against IDPs.

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

Women with several children and elderly dependents often struggled to find adequate housing and continued living in reception centres or refugee camp. Some refugee women were verbally and physically attacked in overcrowded reception centres and private homes; others reported incidents of physical and emotional violence by hosts.

6. Limited protection sensitivities and capacities of multiple stakeholders:

Services to address the specialist needs of refugee women were scarce and public sexual violence services lacked the expertise to work with refugees. Mental health support funded by the National Health Fund in Poland was difficult to access and low quality. Unaccompanied minors in Poland were subjected to obligatory guardianship procedures described as risky due to speedy guardian verification procedures.

Key recommendations: SEREDA CEE Project advocates for mainstreaming protection with refugee, gender and trauma-sensitivity in the humanitarian, immigration, and asylum systems through better coordination across different levels and sectors to help mitigate violence towards and exploitation of refugees. Key recommendations include: development of longer-term solutions for accommodation and employment; ensuring access to health services and long-term mental health support; establishing referral procedures; and strengthening cross-sectoral collaboration to prevent and respond to violence and exploitation of refugees.

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:

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