

How to Live as a Refugee?

Anchoring of the Ukrainian Female Refugees in the Labour Market through Activities of State Institutions and Non-formal Organisations in the Case Study of Krakow¹

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Abstract

Russia's aggression in Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022, has marked a new chapter in European history, generating masses of war refugees who sought refuge in many countries and in large numbers, including Poland. In this article, we analyse the assistance and support provided to Ukrainian women

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refugees in the city of Krakow, with focus on the labour market integration. The data consists of 19 expert interviews with the representatives of the organisations and institutions, as well as researchers in the migration field. We start with analysing the immediate state response at the national policy level, which created a legal framework allowing refugees, among others, fast entrance to the labour market and to set up businesses. Then, we examine how the responses of public institutions were accompanied by enormous grassroots mobilisation of support provided to Ukrainian refugees in Krakow. As we argue, integration into the labour market is critical for integration, but currently lack of evaluation of policy solutions and informalisation of the labour market may result in the reproduction of vulnerability of female refugees.

Keywords: Ukrainian refugees, vulnerability, labour market integration, humanitarian response, Poland

Introduction

Russia's aggression in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, has marked a new chapter in European history, generating masses of war refugees⁶ who sought refuge in many countries and in large numbers, including Poland. An estimated 7.6 million Ukrainians crossed the Polish borders, yet only approximately 1.5 million were recorded through the national protection scheme as for refugees in 2022 (UNHCR 2022a). In 2022, Poland hosted a total of 3.4 million Ukrainian nationals, of which 1.5 million were already in Poland before the war (UMP 2022). According to recent estimations, about 1 million of Ukrainian refugees remains in Poland with temporary protection status (Eurostat 2023⁷).

Undoubtedly, the massive inflow of refugees due to the war was a critical event in history, having an impact, among others, on the political and social situation in Poland, international relations, as well as relations with Ukraine, and also companies, institutions, organisations and individuals in both countries. We pose a question of whether and how the change in the scale of the influx and the increase in political and social acceptance (at least for this group of migrants) has led to changes in the social policy and support system of the different bodies and forces of society that support migrant women integration into the labour market. Based on the 19 expert interviews with the representatives of the organisations and institutions, we analyse the assistance and support provided to Ukrainian women refugees in the city of Kraków by various social actors representing, among others, labour market institutions and non-governmental organisations, including women's organizations.

We assume that the key role in "processing" or reworking and addressing the trauma of war, and arranging life in a foreign country requires relatively rapid entry

⁶ We decided to use the refugee term as it is used in all government and public communication. The word "uchodźca" (refugee) is connotated with the forced escape, from the country in war. Formally, they are given temporary protection in Poland. The introduction of the EU directive made it possible to regulate the status of those fleeing the war and avoid individual applications for refugee status.

⁷ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20231208-2> [Accessed 6.02.2024].

into the labour market (taking a job). Employment allows one to sustain one's basic needs whilst often also providing a solid anchor in the hosting country and the local community (Grzymala-Kazłowska 2016; Salikutluk, Menke 2021). The anchors can give a sense of stability in the situation of uncertainty, which undoubtedly is the situation of forced migration, with few possibilities to plan. Finding work was also considered by Ukrainian refugees as their most important need (Isański et al. 2022). However, there are complex problems highlighted by the literature on the subject (e.g. Kofman 2003, 2020; Kontos 2009). While in our article we perceive work as a primary means of anchoring and tool for integration, we are fully aware that in addition to the labour market, an extremely important role is played by the institutions of civil society, the education system, Ukrainian ethno-national communities, social networks of relatives and acquaintances living and working in Poland before the war, as well as the agency of the refugee women themselves. The agency is defined as the power and readiness to participate in the labour market, in the various forms of services offered, e.g. language learning, courses and vocational training, learning about access to social benefits or health, educational or care services for children. All the indicated elements interlock, creating a complex set of conditions that, on the one hand, may favor coping strategies, resilience and agency but, on the other hand, exacerbate the vulnerabilities of female refugees in Poland.

Most of those registered under the national protection system are women and children. Attention is therefore drawn to the problem of feminisation of refugeeism and looking at these issues from gender and feminist perspectives focusing on the experiences of trauma and injury, severed ties, loss of loved ones, destruction of life's achievements, but also on the ability to cope with the dramatic life situation through various activities undertaken, including taking up employment or helping fellow refugees. Once again in the history of world conflicts, the war in Ukraine illustrates significant challenges in meeting the complex needs of women and children refugees and, further, their integration into society (Phillips, Martsenyuk 2023; Stan, Nalin 2023; Andrews et al. 2023). The gender-sensitive perspectives allow us to get to the core of injustice, the dramatic fate of the refugees, dependence, but also ways to seek empowerment.

In our article, we start by presenting a review of the literature relating to the integration of migrants, and particularly migrant and refugee women into the labour market. We proceed with the description of the broader background of the influx of female refugees to Poland, and the legal changes resulting from the response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The following sections will present the methodology of our research and a presentation of the results of the research among representatives of state and local government institutions and the non-governmental organisations and initiatives supporting refugee women.

Literature review

The analysis of the participation of economic migrants in the labour market has been the subject of many studies which have adopted diverse theoretical concepts. Refugees, however, constitute a separate, specific category, and it is not possible to translate the findings concerning economic migrants to situation of refugees directly. On the contrary, refugees differ from the economic migrants in terms of their legal status, motivation for coming to the country (although it cannot be ignored that economic factors may have a considerable impact), the vulnerabilities to which they are exposed and their perspectives on the future (Kubiciel-Lodzińska et al. 2023; Brell et al. 2020; Falkenhain et al. 2021). Support programmes directed at individuals of a more general character e.g. targeting employers, can positively impact labour market integration of refugees. Even in such cases, however, the timeliness of such programmes, the risk of discontinuation and the uncertainty of the length of possible protection (Codell et al. 2011), as well as the form of employment (direct integration/entry into the labour market or so-called remedial employment, offered for humanitarian reasons) come out as an issue (Kubiciel-Lodzińska et al. 2023). Gender, age and having dependents in care (especially children) are important factors impacting migrant women's employment opportunities (esp. barriers related to the caring responsibilities.).

These more general findings need to be followed up by emphasising the heterogeneity of migrants and their diversity in terms of gender, age, class, ethnicity and socio-cultural status in their country of origin, alongside the intersectional nature of exclusion. Morris (2003) speaks in this context of the stratification of migrants' rights (system of stratified rights). Differentiated legal status, according to Morris, affects access to employment and leads to a stratified system of inclusion and exclusion. Building upon this mode of analysis, we can see that migrants are neither fully included nor excluded from the host society, but that their level of inclusion and the rights obtained can vary widely (Mayblin 2016). In this regard, as often implicitly assumed by their refugee status, refugees are not mere passive recipients of aid; on the contrary, some of them exercise a high level of agency despite the traumas they have experienced (Krause, Schmidt 2018). This contradicts, as Schwenken (2018) claims the 'rhetoric of vulnerability to injury', often affecting women and defining them as 'individuals with limited mobility, dependent on male family members' (p. 208). As such, not only the top-down actions of state, local authorities and other social actors need to be considered but also the practices of migrant women themselves (Hillmann, Toğral Koca 2021).

Research adopting a gender lens illustrates that, overall, female migrants often have a lower level of education (although this is not the case for every ethnic group) and face more difficulties during the migration process than their male counterparts (Hillmann, Wastl-Walter 2011). Existing literature confirms low labour market

participation rates, concentration in less attractive segments of the labour market, often in the so-called ‘second sector’ with a predominance of work without formal employment and social security, often part-time work and limited access to labour market integration measures (Kalkum et al. 2019, Worbs, Baraulina 2017; Pallmann et al. 2019). Considerable attention is now being paid to the role of intermediary social actors, especially at the local level: local government, public agencies, NGOs and academia. Research shows that they can affect access to the labour market and sometimes impact stratification parameters (Hillmann, Toğral Koca 2021). Such impact can vary from purely organisational support (data collection) through intermediation to the active inclusion of refugee women in the labour market. Less effective measures include the construction of programmes aimed entirely or mainly (even if ostensibly formulated as inclusive) at educated women with specific, often desirable qualifications (e.g. medical doctors, teachers). In the literature, this approach is referred to as “cherry-picking”, selecting only certain migrant women and thus stratifying this category of migrants further (Hillmann, Toğral Koca 2021). Resultantly, a significant body of scholarship emphasises the importance of support programmes, which offer the possibility of an individual approach tailored to the needs of the migrant woman (Morokvasic, Catarino 2008) or facilitating access to groups and networks that provide help, advice or psychological support to boost resilience and self-confidence (Anthias et al. 2008, Kontos, Sacaliuc 2008).

Among the strategies used by migrant women themselves, we can point to taking up volunteer work as a first step into the labour market, self-employment or strategic climbing up the ‘ladder’ of the labour market involving the temporary acceptance of under-qualified work (Morokvasic, Catarino 2008). Further possibilities are networking, accepting a job that requires low qualifications or remaining in the informal labour market, which is socially respected or seen as socially important and helps to keep one’s self-image coherent (Pajnik, Bajt 2007; Anthias et al. 2008, Cederberg, Anthias 2008). The final option may be to understand the situation of deskilling and precarity as typical of refugees/migrants, thus accepting it as unavoidable, adjusting one’s subjective hopes to objective opportunities (Trimikliniotis, Fulas-Souroulla 2008).

One of the significant concepts for building a theoretical framework for the analysis of migrant lives, including the experiences of migrant women and refugees in the labour market, is vulnerability. This concept, which has appeared in many studies and publications in recent years (cf. Gilodi et al. 2022), includes such dimensions as risk and dependency on the one hand and, capacity/agency and autonomy on the other. Risk refers to threats associated with the individual (biological or social in nature) and those associated with the social system and the barriers it generates (legal, economic, social). Similarly, we can refer to ‘capacity’ in two ways, understanding it either as the system’s capacity to adequately support individuals or as relating to individuals and their potential to avoid harm and risks. Finally, the autonomy-dependence dimension creates a kind of continuum of individual agency and social

discourse about groups such as women or migrants, for example. Conducting the analysis according to these dimensions, as argued by Gilodi and colleagues (2022), we can identify the following types of vulnerability: innate, situational and structural. The first type describes individuals or groups that are permanently at risk because of certain characteristics, most commonly gender, age, illness or disability. Migrants are sometimes included in this category, but they are more often covered by the other two categories. Situational vulnerability refers to people in a specific situation, e.g. war or who temporarily find themselves in a situation that subjects them to multiple threats. It is a category that is particularly relevant for refugees fleeing the war when a decision is taken suddenly, and, for example, documents are lost in the destroyed place of origin. Finally, the category of structural vulnerability encompasses persons or groups at risk due to systemic risk factors: laws, policies or a labour market structure. In the context of migration research, vulnerability is a very powerful theoretical tool as it helps us better understand the complex migration and integration processes at different levels of analysis. The International Organization for Migration's Glossary on Migration (IOM 2019) defines a vulnerable group as "depending on the context, any group or sector of society [...] that is more vulnerable to discriminatory practices; a group or sector of society [...] that is more exposed to discrimination, violence, social disadvantage or economic hardship than other groups in the country". Gilodi and colleagues (2022) combine these categories into a new conceptual model for analysing migration processes. Specifically, they link the three types of vulnerability together and examine both, its manifestations at the individual, micro, meso and macro levels, including social and institutional actors and their actions (e.g. labelling, disempowerment or exclusion at different levels) with the migrant women's perspective and the resistance strategies used. At the state level, this means aiming for a new "responsive state" governing "vulnerable bodies", as Fineman claims (2008, 2010), constructing policies responding to individual vulnerability as well as situational and structural factors. In a given macro context, it is in turn important to note how cities or municipalities use the policy space created for assistance and integration and how this relates to migrant women's strategies.

While considering institutional regimes, the experience of discrimination and the level of individual practices, Anthias (1998) also includes the symbolic dimension, of social discourse, perceptions of migrants and their presence in the country, pro-integration attitudes or the opposite. Finally, Fraser (2003, p. 57) gives a good summary of this approach, pointing out the multiplicity of axes of subordination and privilege. Vulnerability and risk at one level do not necessarily mean the same at other levels, hence the need for a multidimensional analysis. Once again, recalling Fineman, our approach is to work towards uncovering hidden and latent relationships and critically explore societal and political institutions (Fineman, 2010; Peroni & Timmer, 2013). The model proposed in the following section takes into account the entanglement of aid interventions with factors at all levels of social analysis.

Changes in the labour market after 24 February 2022: legal framework and social assistance

As emphasized in the beginning, from 24 February 2022 there is an ongoing influx of refugees from Ukraine, and Poland is opening up to receive them and offer assistance. One of the key areas of help is the support in regards to the integration to the labour market (Stelmakh et al 2023). According to the Act on Support to citizens of Ukraine in connection with the military conflict on the territory of Ukraine (dated as of 12 March 2022) nationals of Ukraine, who were given international protection in Poland, had the right to be employed and the employer was obliged to notify the district labour office within 14 days (Kancelaria Sejmu 2020: 42). In particular, the employer was responsible for providing information on the PESEL of the employee (identification number that must be obtained before being employed), which was an important factor in the legalisation of residence of these migrants. Importantly, Ukrainians who resided in Poland before 24 February 2022 could not access social assistance schemes in the same way as Ukrainians who benefited from special status. Similarly, the persons of other nationalities with permanent residence in Ukraine that were fleeing Ukraine were granted only 15 days of residence (Bukowski, Duszczek 2022: 90).

One should understand that the profile of Ukrainians arriving after 24 February 2022 differs from before the war. The population of refugees is feminised, more than 89% of the registered refugees were women of working age and children (aged 3–14). Pre-war, Ukrainian men were vastly represented in the construction and transport sectors, while with the beginning of the war many left to fight in the army (Міністерство внутрішніх справ 2022). Nonetheless, the inflow resulted in a 2% increase in the working population in Poland (Bukowski, Duszczek 2022: 21). After the implementation of the Act on Support to citizens of Ukraine, 75% of those employed in Poland were women (Bukowski, Duszczek 2022: 21).

The Law created a needed set of instruments to secure fast-track entry into the labour market – two months since the implementation of the Act, 160,000 Ukrainian citizens were legally employed; half of the newly employed personnel undertook simple work, while 15% were engaged in industry and crafts and 10% in the service sector, with a share being employed as middle staff, including office workers, specialists, technicians (Bukowski, Duszczek 2022: 34).

Ukrainian refugees represent a vast potential: in the long run, they could relieve the burden on the Polish pension system and fill the gaps in deficit occupations. According to the survey research among Ukrainians who arrived in Poland after the war, 56% have a university or incomplete university education, and one in three have a vocational degree. The language barrier remained a significant obstacle in finding a job (UNHCR 2022b: 2–3). One in three speaks Polish well or very well, but one in two would like easier access to language courses. They are rather of productive

age, (only 4% were of post-working age) and actively working, but often below their qualifications. The above-mentioned report also stressed that they mainly look for work on their own, through friends and on social media.

As a result of the in-flow of Ukrainians post-war, Ukrainians looking for jobs were provided with a special tag ('Job for Ukrainians') on most of the well-known websites like pracuj.pl. It is important to mention that the number of jobs offers for Ukrainians increased and constituted 15–20% of all employment advertised. Around 2% of job offers registered in the Central Job Offer Database during March–May 2022 were published in Ukrainian, Russian or Belarusian (Bukowski, Duszczuk 2022: 36).

It also needs to be noted that apart from Ukrainians under international protection looking for employment, Poland experienced a boom of entrepreneurship led by Ukrainian citizens. Due to the war in Ukraine, many companies decided to move their businesses to Poland, as they were unable to conduct such activity in Ukraine. Between February and September 2022, 14.000 companies headed by Ukrainians or with partial Ukrainian capital were established in Poland (Polski Instytut Ekonomiczny 2022:8–10).

The number of companies with Ukrainian capital reached 24.000, which amounts to 25% of all companies with foreign capital in Poland. 41% of the owners of newly established companies were women, which reflects that not only the war refugees decided to establish a company, but also those, who already stayed in Poland. The companies were established in the sectors of services (31%), information and communication (11%) and online trade (11%), whilst the service sector was mainly represented by hairdressers and beauticians (Polski Instytut Ekonomiczny 2022:8–30). 75% of the interviewed entrepreneurs mentioned that the main motive behind opening a business in Poland was the need to find financial sources for themselves and their families (Polski Instytut Ekonomiczny 2022: 20). Half of those who opened the business in Poland after the war already had business experience in Ukraine.

Study methodology

The research was conducted as part of the mentioned project "Gender, mobilities and migration during and post COVID-19 pandemic..." (GENMIGRA). While the research was initially of a different scope – scrutinising the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrant women, the sudden Russian attack on Ukraine redirected the efforts of institutions and organisations to provide immediate and direct support to the war refugees. Our research team conducted 19 expert interviews with 21 representatives of public institutions or organisations offering assistance to refugees from Ukraine, as well as with researchers in migration studies.

The research was conducted mainly in Krakow – a city located in Małopolska Voivodeship in southern Poland, which is located about a 3–4-hour train ride from

Przemyśl, close to the Ukrainian border. Krakow has an important hub for the relocation of Ukrainian refugees to other countries and cities, therefore for many it was the first city where they came to and potentially tried to access transport to other locations. Pre-war Ukrainians were the largest group of foreigners in Krakow, and there had been organisations of the Ukrainian diaspora existing already before the war, that have become very active in providing support to refugees. Krakow remained also a good place for those who wanted to maintain close relationships with their country or had planned to return quickly if war ceased (this position was characteristic for the first few months of the war). As estimated, in May 2022, Krakow hosted around 180,000 Ukrainians, who constituted about 1/5 of its population (UMP 2022).

The interviews were conducted in person or online by the authors and lasted between 1–2 hours, and the interview guide consisted of such topics as: Information on the institution/organisation (profile, cooperation and engagement in migrant support); Collection of data and research on migrants and refugees' situation, in particular if they collect data on employment and unemployment among migrants and refugees; Support activities: timing, forms of support, relation to the state assistance policy, activities/ programs launched for refugees, market sectors, cooperation with employers; Risks and dangers, deskilling of women in the labour market, special support to women and children; Challenges for the future.

Most of the interviews related to the situation of refugees from Ukraine and were conducted with organisations and institutions directly involved in the provision of support, but there were interviews which related to more general perspectives on migration or involved representatives of other migrant groups, such as from Belarus or Chechenia. To provide perspectives from different sectors, 4 interviewees represented academic institutions and foundations, 8 – public institutions and 9 – non-governmental organisations, predominantly with feminist roots. As for the gender, 16 respondents were women and 5 were men.

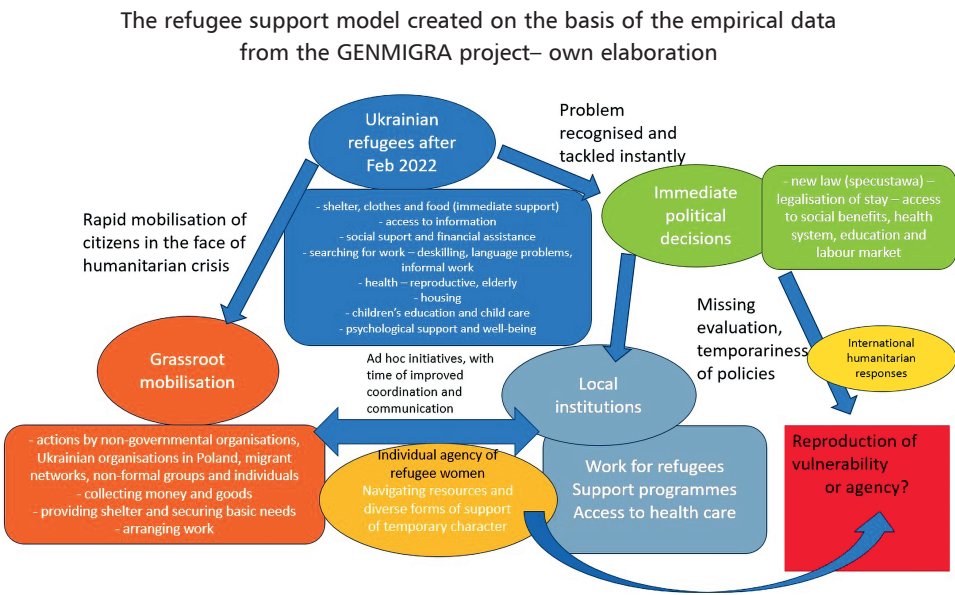
The interviews provide local policy perspectives as institutional and organisational representatives come in large share from Krakow. While there were many efforts to contact state-level institutional representatives, they either did not reply to our invitations, or they did not agree to participate in the research. The interviewed researchers come from more diverse locations giving a more general perspective on migration policies at the state and local levels. Among the interviewees, there were representatives of local institutions related to the labour market, unemployment services, city council department responsible for refugee support activities upon arrival to the city of Krakow, information point for foreigners, as well as social assistance. The recruited organisations concentrated on supporting refugees in securing basic needs of food and shelter, legal advice, social integration, violence, reproductive health, as well as labour market rights, such as organizations supporting domestic workers or Ukrainian businesses.

Study results

Contextualising the unprecedented mobilisation to refugee assistance in Poland

In the analysis, we concentrate on labour market integration and questions concerning the evaluation of the effects of helping to avoid reproducing vulnerability. To contextualise our analysis, we propose a model that illustrates the situation of the Ukrainian refugees arriving in Poland after the war outburst. In Figure 1, we indicate the main actors of aid policy, the scope of their activities, and the timing of support. In the center of the figure are the women refugees that face diverse challenges, including those relating to immediate support (shelter, clothing, food), access to information, social support and financial assistance, work, health, education and psychological help. Those amounting challenges call for an immediate response, both on the level of political institutions and legislation, but also through local support – including grassroots mobilisation and local institutions.

Figure 1.



Indeed, as illustrated by Figure 1, in response to the humanitarian crisis after 24 February 2022, on the one hand, we witnessed the unprecedented assistance of Polish citizens in receiving refugees and securing their basic needs, which shows the beautiful face of civil society, and on the other hand, there have been rapid actions of the Polish state in systemic assistance to refugees. On March 12, 2022, just a few weeks after the war outbreak, Poland already had a law on assistance to citizens of

Ukraine in connection with the armed conflict on the territory of that country, which was later amended. As never before, the assistance policies and joint actions of various social actors are not postponed for later implementation; they are implemented essentially “here and now”, giving refugees a chance to make a life for themselves in the country of influx.

As Figure 1 shows, the assistance is implemented at all levels of the social structure of the world – macrostructural (the state and its government institutions), mesostructural (educational, religious, labour market, assistance institutions), microstructural (local communities, migrant networks, local institutions and NGOs, families) and individual. Nonetheless, the agency of refugee women is necessary to navigate the ad-hoc initiatives of the multiple actors. While with time this support became more coordinated, still, matching with the temporariness of policies, the refugee women often remained very vulnerable. The opportunity to decide one’s fate was unique in wartime. However, one should always refer to broader situational and structural conditions, which can also contribute to risks and setbacks in life.

Immediate political action

The “Specustawa” introduced already in March 2022, establishes special rules for legalising the stay of citizens of Ukraine who came to the territory of the Republic of Poland directly from the territory of Ukraine in connection with the hostilities conducted on the territory of that country, as well as citizens of Ukraine holding the Card of the Pole who, together with their immediate family, came to the territory of the Republic of Poland because of those hostilities. The law also specifies 1) specific rules for entrusting work to citizens of Ukraine legally residing in the territory of the Republic of Poland; 2) assistance provided by governors, local government units and other entities to citizens of Ukraine; 3) the creation of an Assistance Fund to finance or subsidise the implementation of tasks to assist citizens. In the case of refugees, the “Special law on assistance for Ukrainian citizens” (Ustawa z dnia 12 marca 2022 r., Dz.U. 2022 poz. 583) stipulated that if a Ukrainian citizen arrived legally in the territory of the Republic of Poland in the period starting from February 24, 2022, and declares their intention to stay in the territory of the Republic of Poland, their stay in that territory was considered legal until March 4, 2024. Recently, UE countries agreed to extend the temporary protection until 4 March 2025⁸.

By far, the crucial element for facilitating integration during wartime chaos, of the “Special law on assistance for Ukrainian citizens”, beyond the legalisation of stay, was the introduction of the possibility of legalising employment, through simple mean of so-called notifications of assignment of work. This mechanism makes it easier for

⁸ <https://www.gov.pl/web/ochrona/przedluzenie-obowiazywania-zaswiadczen-o-objeciu-ochrony-czasowa-do-4-marca-2025-r>

Ukrainian citizens to take up employment in Poland, bypassing the obligation to have an appropriate work permit or to enter the statement on entrustment of work in the register of statements. Employment of such a foreigner is legal only if the company notifies the appropriate (for its headquarters or place of residence) labour office of the person's work. It must do so within 14 days via the portal praca.gov.pl.

Local level action: Grassroots mobilisation and local institutions

There is no place on the map of Poland that has not undertaken assistance activities, including entry into the labour market and employment of refugee women. An example of the formation of so-called coalitions is the city of Krakow, where, after a critical period, the activities of city institutions and organisations merged with those of NGOs and on many levels emerged a common logistics of action. It is thus argued that we could have observed spontaneous co-productive responses to the early phase of forced migration of Ukrainians to Poland after the Russian aggression. These were visible in the rapid grassroots mobilisation of citizens and migrants (those already settled in Poland pre-war but also refugees themselves), professionals (e.g. doctors, pharmacists, teachers, psychologists, lawyers), activists, and NGOs after the start of the humanitarian crisis (Czerska-Shaw et al. 2022). These groups were the first that helped with securing refugees' basic needs (food, water, shelter, medication and clothing), offering psychological support and medical help, providing legal information and collecting money. The support from the Ukrainian organisations that existed before the war and from the wider Ukrainian community was crucial, in regard to various issues such as housing, job search, but also access to rights and services. Also, the pre-war migrants gave support in regard to translation. It should be highlighted that many Ukrainian women have been at the forefront of NGOs and citizen groups supporting refugees – utilising their language competence and professional skills, which were in this context recognised, valued and seen as legitimate by the state and society.

Such an instant and effective mobilisation in the time of refugee crisis, facilitated by social media and other communicative technologies, resulted in unprecedented generative processes, new values (solidarity, 'doing help') and social relations – citizens, migrants, NGOs and local authorities working side by side to 'tame the chaos', contain fear and trauma and ensure the safety of those fleeing the war (Czerska-Shaw et al. 2022). What is more, coordination of the massive, localised responses to the continuous influx of refugees was initially also in the hands of NGOs, activists and local authorities, as according to the interviewees, a public institution responsible for crisis management at national, regional level (Centrum Zarządzania Kryzysowego – Crisis Management Center) was ineffective in managing the crisis. Key problems experienced at this point were related to communication between the key stakeholders, as well as a lack of trustworthy information and key procedures for managing

i.e. transport and relocation of refugees, leaving them particularly vulnerable to human trafficking, violence, and exploitation. As stated by the interviewed representatives of NGOs and local authorities, central state institutions were unprepared for the need for fast decision-making and thus unable to oversee localised collective responses to refugees' influx. Nevertheless, with time, state institutions have joined the local actors in managing the crisis. Many international humanitarian organisations have also entered the field of help, providing material and non-material support to refugees and the host country. As one expert explains:

So, we're talking about coordinating activities, from relocation to the implementation of various types of projects and activities together with other entities and institutions. For example, within the Open Krakow coalition, which currently brings together about 70 entities, various types of entities, because these are both informal groups and NGOs and institutions, including the Office of the City of Krakow, which work on behalf of refugees from Ukraine... talking about cooperation, well it is worth emphasising that both the Open Krakow program, implemented since 2016, as well as those activities of last year, were mostly implemented on the basis of cooperation with NGOs, both local Krakow ones, as well as institutions, organisations with which we have established cooperation, and which operate at the international level, not only nationally, but also internationally, or globally in the case of some of the largest ones. (employee of the public administration)

The unification of various forces and social bodies in achieving assistance goals leads to a new policy, and the process might be referred to as co-production, with input being gathered from various actors. We will now discuss the actions of local offices of public administration and non-governmental organisations.

Actions of public administration

Nonetheless, the important tasks related to the labour market are carried out by local government institutions like Municipal Labor Office in Krakow, Municipal Social Assistance Center, Department of Social Policy and Health of the Krakow City Council or Voivodship Labour Office. The important solution that multiple offices found, was to create central information points for refugees, where all diverse information could be acquired in one place: on employment, social assistance or accommodation. Gathering public services, and local and international organisations would make it easier for persons seeking support to navigate the multiple sources of assistance:

Here, we certainly also actively cooperated with foundations that operated in Krakow, which helped refugees from Ukraine. Well, Krakow organized itself very well, in my opinion, because it concentrated all these forms of assistance in one place. It was the Tauron Arena, where there was the possibility of PESEL registration, there was our help desk

there, in terms of looking for a job, well, the Municipal Social Assistance Center, (...) there is a center... Information Point for Foreigners. We also had our office employees there. (representative of the city employment services)

As soon as in March 2022, the city office for employment services rapidly implemented initiatives in regard to job search. The activities of the office were diversified and concerned with the acquisition of jobs, contacts with employers, creation of job databases and translation of information into Ukrainian. Soon, also Ukrainian-language speakers were hired to facilitate communication with refugees:

Already, you could say, on the first day of the outbreak of the war, which of course we also had to shake off a bit, there was created..., since we are supporting obtaining job offers, here, on the initiative of the director, a kind of separate base was created. We were looking for employers who wanted to hire Ukrainians, precisely, refugees, so this base of vacancies worked in parallel: for Poles and for refugees. And you can already say, in the initial March period we already had 1556 places, and this base kept growing. It is known that the language barrier showed up, so all these offers were translated into Ukrainian so that it would be easier for these people to take advantage of them. We printed flyers with these job offers, distributed at the Tauron Arena, among other places, in Ukrainian. We hired [...] in the first phase, people who know Ukrainian, or rather, you could say refugees in order to better communicate with these people. We launched a hotline here, an official one, which was also translated into Ukrainian. (employee of the public administration)

Special attention has been paid to the training of its employees in order to work as effectively as possible with refugees who potentially went through difficult or even traumatic experiences, to understand them well and direct them to the appropriate support institutions. Also, the Polish language course was a common initiative to support refugees:

We also organized a meeting here and training for our employees, prepared by psychologists who are employed at the office, because we also found it hard to deal with the situation here. So, we had this training of what trauma is and what psychological trauma is, so that we could be even better able to help these people. Then we launched Polish language training for refugees and here almost 200... more than 200 people were trained in the Polish language for refugees. (employee of the public administration)

Activities on employment assistance are illustrated by the activity of the Municipal Labor Office in Krakow, which launches information, consultation points, hotline, reorientation to the employment of women, assistance due to issues of language skills (e.g. translation, language courses), recognition of qualifications, inclusion in simple work and deskilling problems. It was extending a formal helping hand in finding work with an ultimate aim of supporting refugees in exiting shelters and starting an independent life.

(...) in general, they take jobs of simple character. But it's not because of a lack of qualifications, it's because of the inability to prove formally those qualifications. There are great difficulties in confirming qualifications; these people fled quickly, so they don't have documents, they don't have confirmed diplomas, so it's hard... They don't know the Polish language, so it's also hard to accept a nurse or doctor here who doesn't communicate in our language, so there are other barriers here. On the other hand, well, further we actually see that this is such casual work, that is, trade, catering, mainly production and services. But, after the introduction of this law, which helped or helps Ukraine, well, we also noticed among these notifications (...) there were teacher aids, there were such notifications. (...) (representative of the city employment services)

Another public administration institution is the Provincial/Voivodship Labor Office, which has been developing assistance tasks under the so-called Labor Market Package in the Małopolska Humanitarian Shield. The services offered were used weekly by several thousand people, although it was not checked whether the offers were actually used. Thus, self-government institutions did not further monitor the process of employment, job placement and job retention.

Yes, from a formal point of view, the Director of the voivodship labour office coordinates tasks within the so-called Labor Market Package in the Małopolska Humanitarian Shield. The Humanitarian Shield is such an instrument set up by the Board of the Voivodeship, there are, there were different packages, transport, NGOs, social affairs and the labour market, among others. And within the framework of this labour market package, we launched these information points, we also have statistics from these points, well actually now the interest is less, while in the previous months, in the previous months of the previous year, there were actually many customers. Yes, [...] from the services of the information points until let's say last week because that's how I have statistics, more than 7600 people benefited. (representative of the regional employment services)

NGOs' labour market activities for refugee women

According to experts from women's and Ukrainian organisations, activities were carried out in a number of areas. Many of the refugee women relatively quickly decided to work and earn money. Material resources were necessary not only to secure their own needs but also the needs of children and to send money to elderly parents who had not left Ukraine. Tasks were related to legal aspects of employment, counteracting the exploitation of women, conducting training at employment offices and translation services.

The foundation deals with informational support, legal support, together with the state inspectorate, labour inspectorate against various negative phenomena. For example, in the labour market, but also legal support in terms of residence, because we train our consultants

together with the provincial office, the labour office, so that they know, as it were, the whole range. (representative of a Ukrainian help organisation supporting refugees)

I do not hide the fact that there is always a queue to the State Labour Inspection (...) quite a lot of people who came already went to work, even if they were not prepared for it (...) they have this awareness that they must somehow survive, they must have an income. At the beginning, you could see the uncertainty of where they should start (...) then six months, what's going to happen now (...) people don't have anything to go back to (...) [now] they found employment and have some problems in these jobs. Either they have something wrong with the contracts, or they are cheated, or they can't come to an agreement on various issues with the employer. But it's not always that the employer is to blame. There is always a language barrier. (...) Problems in communicating with employers, we can confidently talk about the language barrier and cultural barriers and the predisposition of the person. (representative of a Ukrainian help organisation supporting refugees)

The vulnerable condition of refugees may result in exploitation. Some refugees provided work in exchange for shelter, but this work burden was incompatible with the offer; owners also received the state support of 40PLN per day for hosting a refugee. Cases of forced long hours of labour (working in agriculture) in exchange for shelter were widely reported, as a quote below demonstrates:

That is, for example, there is information about people who found shelter in the villages and worked on the farm, so for eight, ten hours a day, and this person collects benefits for them, so... These were such difficult situations, various, but this.... Well, it wasn't our main area of work, whereas in terms of what she was facing, it was this. That is, that people were living with someone for... in exchange for work. (representative of a Ukrainian organisation supporting refugees)

Moreover, refugees often did not receive a contract in the language they understand, even though this was their right:

We have noticed such an aspect that there is further lack of information, for example, that when renting an apartment or signing a contract for work, they have the right to receive a contract in a language they understand. (...) so they don't take advantage of this. (representative of a feminist organisation)

In connection with the numerous abuses and exploitation of women at work, Ukrainian organisations have proposed to create a list of the best and worst employers and report problems to the State Labor Inspection:

...we pronounced if there would be any possibility to make a so-called whitelist and blacklist, here find those companies who really help and look for, and those who abuse, well, but legally there is no such possibility, while abuses, however, there are a lot. (representative of workers' initiative)

All activists stressed that it was rather easy to find work quickly, but the main problem was related to deskilling (Kubiciel-Lodzińska et al. 2023; Morokvasic, Catarino 2008). Well-educated women took up simple jobs (e.g. a veterinarian worked in a laundry, an actress or a nurse cleaned houses). Recognition of qualifications and nostrification of diplomas is a remaining problem, especially in health services. Respondents stressed that such professional degradation arouses opposition, dissatisfaction and affects decisions to return or further relocation.

And especially that this results in someone who does not find himself here precisely, work, because it is easy for someone to accept that she works below her qualifications, but not for everyone. Also, the difficulty in general for such groups as artists, creative workers, who find it difficult to get a job, and to accept that... Even today we talked about this doctor, but he is an assistant and actually does paperwork. That is, a neurologist doctor who says, well, but I have 17 years of seniority, and here they are offering me to work as a family doctor, well I know well, but well, that's not my job. (representative of a Ukrainian organisation supporting refugees)

Activists assisting in the facilitation of employment emphasise that the main problem for the refugees was their temporariness, which was accompanied by great uncertainty about tomorrow and the continued support of themselves and their families (Salikutluk, Menke 2021). The situation in the labour market showed the enormity of the multiple vulnerabilities caused by the depreciation of professional capital in the labour market, precarization and lack of ontological security in general.

Still in the process, nevertheless, a lot of corporations, for example, especially in the beginning, took people for temporary jobs, for short periods; this is also a pain because people are not sure how long they will be here. On the other hand, companies are interested in long-term employees, not two or three months. And this is also a sore point; even today we were talking, among doctors, that they have, for example, a contract for three months; how can you plan for the long term, if you have it for three months, and maybe you will have for another three, and maybe not, well, because everything and this kind of short-termism is one of the biggest problems now. (representative of workers' initiative)

Almost all the activists participating in our study acted as guides to various offices, for example, when becoming unemployed. For the refugees, going through the formal procedures was a real minefield, so the activists eagerly volunteered to help, using information available on websites in Ukrainian, Russian and Polish. After some time, there was a national and transnational network of links in the area of access to important information. In Krakow, the information point for foreigners has played a key role in supporting refugees in information provision – there was a huge need for information – one day the queue amounted to more than 4000 persons. Again, cooperation between public administration and organisational actions was observed and soon, in the premises of the information center, the public administration offices

started to hold regular office hours (in relation to health, social care, social security or employment services). The office also has provided psychological and legal support, support to victims of violence or discrimination.

Self-employment – life on your own

Our respondents often emphasised women's resourcefulness and agency in job search, ability to report job offers, creating their own network of support in the search for work and its performance. The phenomenon of informalisation of the labour market, so common in the early phases of the inflow of Ukrainian women to Poland – has been replicated; it perpetuates and multiplies, bringing with it many of the dangers, insecurity, temporarily life in exile, as indicated earlier (Chen 2009).

The respondent, who is professionally involved in supporting the entrepreneurship of Ukrainians, convicts that there is a gentrification of migration capital (Curran et al. 2005). It is expressed not in black market work but in the establishment of small and large businesses, which became easier with the new law that did not demand permanent residence from migrants. Ukrainians can take advantage of loans offered by the Polish Investment and Trade Agency to facilitate the establishment and development of businesses. It is not an easy or straightforward venture, but legal routes are now open to migrants. Ukrainian women open restaurants, cafes, set up nurseries, kindergartens, schools, establish hairdressing and beauty salons, deal in trade and real estate. While about half of the businesses are opened by men, there are also many women who took the initiative in setting up their companies as they often had experience in running similar companies in Ukraine:

As for women's entrepreneurship, this is, respectively, the new wave of new migrants who came to Poland because of the war, and this is my personal experience. I saw a lot of interest in this kind of gastronomic business. These are mostly candy shops, coffee shops, or even catering. [...] There are also individual services such as hairdressers and beauticians. There are various such establishments, plus there are also medical facilities because a large group of doctors also left [Ukraine]. Here, accordingly, doctors are employed in their specialities in the relevant medical institutions, and dentists are used to running their business individually, their business in Ukraine. (representative of a state-level institution supporting entrepreneurship)

Companies have also been established that support other Ukrainians in various formalities and legal issues, e.g. in connection with setting up a company. The key issue here is the language barrier, and as indicated in the quote – a large population of migrants creates an entire network of services run by Ukrainians for Ukrainians:

And some entrepreneurs also dealt with administrative issues related to staying, accommodation, legal mediation, translations, and various other formal issues, because Ukrainian

women also faced the fact that this was a different country for them, that this is a different country for them, they don't speak the language, they don't know the rules, they don't know how to live here, and here we have actually developed this large migration network, although it already had this whole structure, let's say, intermediary, and it has also developed. (representative of a state-level institution supporting entrepreneurship)

Conclusions

In conclusion, we would like to draw attention to, first, the central role of work for refugees' settlement and integration, but also to the risk of the reproduction of vulnerability (Gilodi et al. 2022, Fineman 2010; Peroni, Timmer 2013). We have shown that with the exile of women, there are many phenomena and processes in various spheres of life, including the labour market area that generate risks, less autonomy and dependence – this is illustrated in Figure 1. As pointed out, intertwined situational, structural and individual factors affect the fate of refugee women.

The immediate intention of the actions of the Polish society, the coalition of migration actors, NGOs, as well as of assistance offered by the state and local institutions was to provide refugees with humanitarian protection and a safe life. The support from a coalition of various bodies and actors on all levels has had many positive effects, as demonstrated by the willingness of refugees to stay in Poland; one of the spheres of such support was labour market integration. This phase of humanitarian phase at first concentrated at supporting basic needs, but with the prolongation of the war it recentered its attention in supporting refugees in integration into host society, including labour market integration. Organisations and initiatives also started to move from the phase of assuring basic needs, to support in finding work, also redirecting to proper institutions, often using informal social networks for job search, which resulted also in work in informal sector of the labour market.

Performing work even below qualifications in the early stages of refugee trajectory is a source of securing the basic needs of refugee women and children and families in Ukraine; it is an indicator of responsibility for oneself and loved ones, showing the desire to live and weakening the trauma of war (Salikutluk, Menke 2021). Work allows for maintaining relationships with others, forging contacts, gaining language skills and going beyond the world of rented housing, hotels or group residence centers. Doing even simple work leads to independence and living on one's own; it is a step towards stabilising life in Poland.

However, our research, as many other studies (Gilodi et al.2022), indicate conditions that contribute to the reproduction of vulnerability. Refugees often experience deskilling, despite their good education, which leads them to seek a new job, return to their country of origin, or to relocate further. Positioning in a gendered labour market system generates low wages and breeds feelings of injustice and exploitation.

While work performed legally is controlled by the State Labor Inspectorate, there is no such possibility to intervene in case of those jobs carried out informally. The only solution is to report cases to Ukrainian and Polish organisations that specialise in legal assistance for refugees. Also, suddenly changing regulations on the duration of temporary protection scheme, the use of social benefits, housing support, various services subsidies, and control of the flow of migration introduced by the government and its agencies tend to reproduce vulnerability. The article also indicates a key role of access to information – reliable, direct and in language one understands. The support providers also need to pay attention to the psychological dimension and necessary help for victims of violence or trauma.

Numerous studies, publications and reports show what Ukrainian society abroad looks like, how jobs are created using gendered human and social capital, how it is (un)utilized in the given conditions of the host country, and how the social, economic and cultural, political space for Polish-Ukrainian cooperation is constructed. This is another valuable lesson for practice – how to construct policies in the time of emergency and how to draw on the strengths of various social forces and bodies to integrate those whose lives have been devastated by the war. In addition, factors such as cultural affinity and geographic proximity are clear situational and structural enabler of finding and anchoring oneself in Poland (Grzymała-Kazłowska 2016; 2018) and, as the respondents declare, in large part, their service users are not ready to return to Ukraine.

The routes to establishing self-sufficiency of refugees are being debated. The government points out that refugees should be motivated to co-pay for housing, e.g. in group residence centers, or certain services – and that this would contribute to their independence in the long run. It is not considered though that some do not have the language skills nor agency to act in the labour market and that such a decision may result in a rise in homelessness. The representatives of organisations supporting refugees claim that the fee rates for group accommodation are overstated, and their standard is low. Housing rental rates are very high, which excludes many women and children from decent housing. It is argued that humanitarian aid should be free to refugees.

All actions and policies introduced by the state and other agencies/organisations should be evaluated, and it should be made transparent which actions and co-produced policies help refugees, and which reproduce vulnerability. Such evaluations are extremely expensive, but they are necessary to assess the effectiveness of the actions undertaken so far. They would also contribute to solving the problems of refugee women and children and show how life is lived in exile.

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