“We barely have time to celebrate our wins … or to process what we’ve lost”

The Role of Ukrainian Women-led Organisations in Humanitarian Action in Ukraine and Poland in 2022-2024

UKRAÏŃSKI DOM

OPEN SPACE WORKS UKRAINE

HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG WARSAW Poland

Humanitarian Leadership Academy

Save the Children

REPORT

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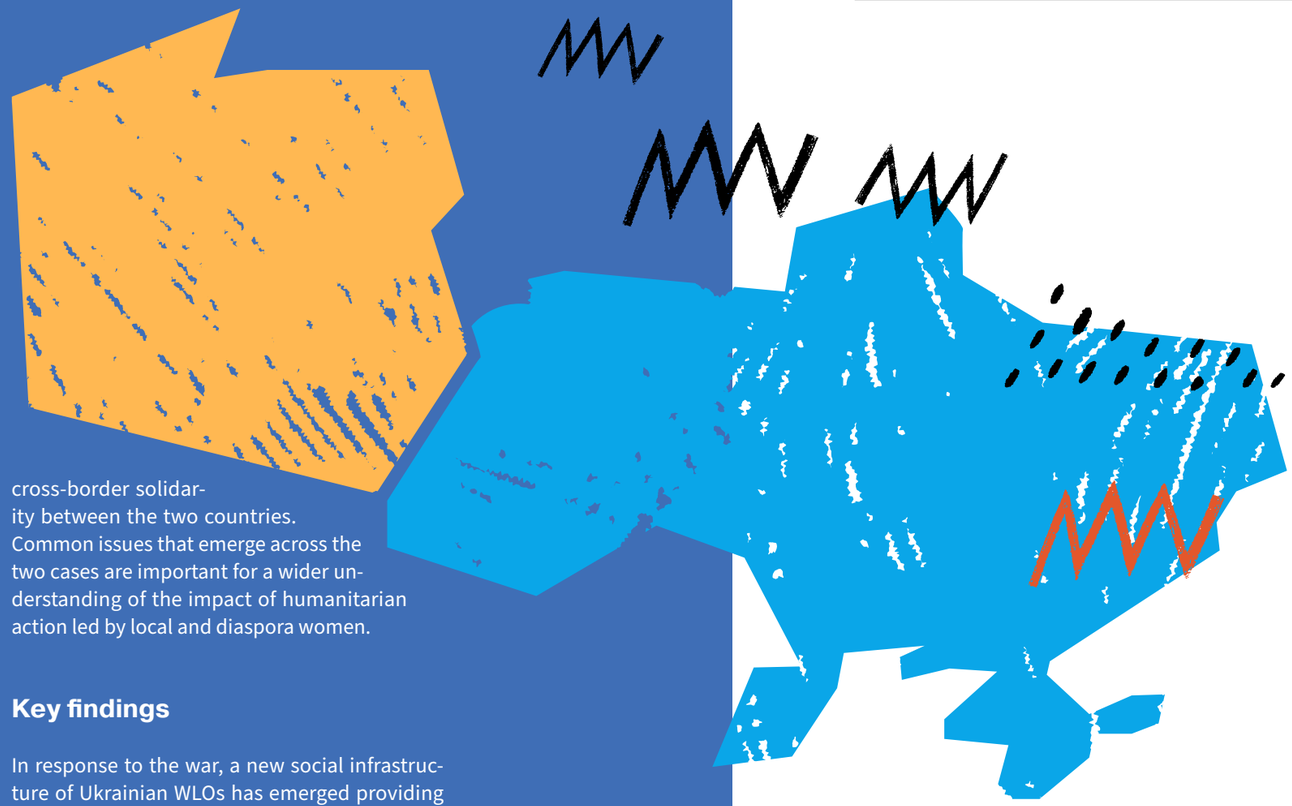
Abbreviations

CSOs	Civil society organisation
EU	European Union
FGD	Focus group discussion
GBV	Gender-based violence
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
HLA	Humanitarian Leadership Academy
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IDP	Internally displaced person
INGOs	International non-governmental organisations
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, and others
NGOs	Non-governmental organisations
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSWU	Open Space Works Ukraine
PLN	Polish Złoty
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
UAH	Ukrainian hryvnia
UH	Ukrainian House Foundation
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
WLOs	Women-led organisations

Executive summary



This study takes a bottom-up approach to humanitarian action by examining the experiences of Ukrainian women-led organisations (WLOs) in Ukraine and Poland in response to the crisis that followed the full-scale invasion launched by Russia against Ukraine on February 24, 2022. In the dramatic circumstances of the aftermath of the invasion, the experiences and resources of Ukrainian women proved vital in enabling a grassroots humanitarian response across the two countries. cross-border solidarity between the two countries. Common issues that emerge across the two cases are important for a wider understanding of the impact of humanitarian action led by local and diaspora women.

Methodology

In exploring these issues, we mapped Ukrainian WLOs (both formal and informal) engaged in the humanitarian response across Ukraine and Poland. We then held interviews and discussions with 65 organisation leaders engaged in different locations in the two countries. The research is based on the moving accounts that we heard and the vivid discussions we were involved in. In writing the report, our aim has been to describe the humanitarian response as seen from the perspective of Ukrainian WLOs.

The report recognises an asymmetry between the contexts in which Ukrainian WLOs function in Ukraine and Poland. Both those writing the report in Ukraine and the organisations they study have to confront the daily threat and effects of violent conflict. Ukrainian organisations in Poland deal with the challenges of displacement and fluctuating perceptions of Ukraine in Poland. The differences between these two contexts have a significant impact on the everyday functioning of Ukrainian WLOs.

However, in these circumstances parallel studies can play an important role in advancing the exchange of experiences and in building grassroots

Key findings

In response to the war, a new social infrastructure of Ukrainian WLOs has emerged providing vital services to those affected by war in cities, towns and villages across Ukraine and Poland. In Ukraine, WLOs provide vital support in frontline and de-occupied regions, as well as to those internally displaced. They apply detailed local knowledge to deliver urgent crisis support. They also develop the resilience of those affected by war, applying gender principles in developing community-oriented solutions. In Poland, Ukrainian women's led initiatives and organisations provide aid for Ukraine and act as points of first contact and holistic support for a wave of refugees itself largely composed of Ukrainian women. Ukrainian WLOs in Poland have thus bonded with refugees through a common experience of the dual challenges posed by displacement and gender.

In both countries, Ukrainian WLOs played a key role in the initial humanitarian response. WLOs in Ukraine used their community networks and their own resources to provide immediate assistance to conflict-affected areas. Ukrainian WLOs in Poland became central nodes in coordinating the assistance provided by local communities spontaneously and in reacting to the needs of those arriving. In both cases, Ukrainian WLOs were able to improvise and upscale solutions on the basis of the networks and knowledge they had built in the context of the post-Maidan growth of civic activism in Ukraine.

The organisations in both countries provide humanitarian support that is community-rooted and individually tailored. Ukrainian WLOs are able to design services based on an in-depth and gender-informed knowledge of the welfare needs of those affected by war. Services are provided as part of an intersectional approach, in which the meeting of basic needs is entwined with psychological, cultural, and vocational support. Ukrainian WLOs' interactions with those affected by war are thus not based on one-off support. **Ukrainian WLOs engage beneficiaries in long-term relationships whose aim is personal and community development.** These organisations therefore exhibit a broad understanding of humanitarian action.

Through their community of experience with those affected by war, **Ukrainian WLOs identify and react to blind-spots in the architecture of support**. In Ukraine, this involves delivering support to those in rural locations beyond the scope of other actors. In accompanying refugees in the process of rebuilding their lives in displacement, Ukrainian WLOs in Poland become experts in negotiating inconsistencies and obstacles in the Polish welfare system. Ukrainian WLOs thus act as pioneers as, in the wake of the humanitarian crisis, Poland abruptly faces the challenge of developing multicultural welfare support.

After three years of the full-scale war, Ukrainian WLOs in both Ukraine and Poland face a range of severe barriers. Given the ongoing intensity of the war, Ukrainian WLOs see an urgent need to maintain their services while facing a reduction of resources. This situation intensifies the psychological strain on Ukrainian WLOs, working with intense personal engagement in draining and risky conditions. WLOs in both countries suffer from a dearth of institutional funding. In Ukraine, WLOs complained of excessively short-term and bureaucratised funding structures, which are precluding the involvement of smaller, locally rooted organisations. In Poland, Ukrainian WLOs most frequently operate outside the direct support of international organisations. The precarious financial situation of WLOs is mirrored by the low earnings of refugee women in Poland, who are facing a rollback of state support.

In both cases, **Ukrainian WLOs struggle to retain personnel**. WLOs have had to deal with a super-acceleration of activities and growth of teams, now followed by a sharp decline in resources. In Ukraine, WLOs face the difficulty of retaining personnel, especially in frontline or rural areas. In Poland, Ukrainian WLOs struggle to retain the teams built around them, which are mostly composed of Ukrainian women. **The lack of childcare provision**, particularly in the context of online schooling in Ukraine, also constituted a barrier to women's full engagement in humanitarian work. Ukrainian WLOs in Poland face difficulties in dealing with the Polish administrative framework for civil society organisations and with political tensions between Poland and Ukraine.

As a result of their humanitarian engagement, Ukrainian women have emerged in new leadership roles. In the moment of crisis, on the basis of past experience and personal engagement, Ukrainian women improvised responses that have been key in enabling resilience to the effects of war. Ukrainian WLOs were able to harness resources and effectively distribute them to those in need. In the case of refugee women, this involved physical transposition of previously acquired skills into a context in which they encountered a temporary abundance of resources. In both countries, the crisis response of Ukrainian WLOs has caused a changing of attitudes to the leadership of Ukrainian women, with Ukrainian WLOs being newly included in political bodies at various levels.

However, in both Ukraine and Poland these achievements are highly precarious, albeit in somewhat different ways. Ukrainian WLOs lack financing for their representative and advocacy work and are often frustrated that, despite participating in consultative bodies, their voices are not heard. In Ukraine, Ukrainian WLOs are already identifying regressions to gains in women's leadership achieved at the moment of crisis, and argue that preparations must now be made to include women's organisations in the plans for reconstruction. In Poland, Ukrainian WLOs face numerous barriers to political representation at both national and local levels on the basis of both race and gender. They also struggle to be valued by the Ukrainian state for their work in the diaspora.

Recommendations

The recommendations presented in this report aim to strengthen the support systems for women-led organisations (WLOs) in both Ukraine and Poland, recognizing their critical contributions to humanitarian response and community resilience. These organisations have demonstrated their ability to address urgent needs and develop innovative, locally driven solutions during the crisis. Sustaining their efforts requires specific measures from donors, governments, and international humanitarian organisations.

Donors and INGOs should provide long-term, flexible funding that supports both operational costs and the ability to adapt to changing needs. Simplified administrative processes are essential to enable WLOs to focus on their core work rather than navigating bureaucratic hurdles. Genuine partnerships between INGOs and WLOs are critical, building on local expertise to design inclusive, community-focused projects. INGOs must also create spaces to develop women's leadership, offer psychological support to combat burnout, and provide tailored capacity-building programs for newer organisations. Furthermore, they should amplify WLOs' voices by supporting their advocacy work on national and international platforms.

Ukrainian Authorities must include WLOs in recovery planning as key stakeholders in policymaking and resource allocation. Women leaders' crisis management experience should translate into political opportunities, ensuring their participation in elections and decision-making processes. Local governments should collaborate with WLOs to co-develop recovery plans and strengthen ties with diaspora WLOs for cross-border cooperation.

Polish Authorities need to prioritise minimising refugee precarity. They should recognise and fund Ukrainian WLOs as an integral part of the Polish system of welfare support. Local governments should provide suitable premises for WLO activities, encourage partnerships with Polish institutions, and engage Ukrainian WLOs as assets in local development initiatives. Ukrainian WLOs should be incorporated into representative political bodies at national and local levels as a key component in addressing the challenges faced by refugees and in building social cohesion.

Ukrainian WLOs should strengthen networks within and across borders to share knowledge and resources. Partnerships with local institutions can enhance their impact, and diversifying funding sources will be crucial for sustainability. Advocacy efforts must continue to ensure the experiences of those affected by the war inform policies and recovery strategies.

A full list of recommendations is provided at the end of the report.

Introduction

While Russia has been waging war in Ukraine since 2014, the invasion launched in February 2022 constituted a significant escalation. The war has caused loss of life, the destruction and disruption of everyday infrastructure throughout Ukraine, and provoked a mass displacement of people both within Ukraine and beyond its borders. At the same time, in response to this crisis new actions and networks of support and solidarity have proliferated. The result is an emerging geography of violence and solidarity.

During this time of crisis, organisations led by Ukrainian women in both Ukraine and Poland have taken on crucial new roles in the provision of humanitarian support. In Ukraine, women stepped into lead roles in humanitarian response as men were mobilised to the army. In Poland, women constitute the majority of leaders of diaspora organisations providing support to a refugee wave, which itself was predominantly composed of women.

In this study, humanitarian action in the context of the war in Ukraine was examined through a broad lens. It includes not only traditional forms of assistance such as evacuation, food provision, access to housing and provision of information and legal advice, but also psychosocial initiatives that provide spaces for collective emotional and intellectual engagement. The study acknowledges the blurred lines between humanitarian action, social welfare, and recovery initiatives, particularly in Poland, where some organisations resist identifying as "humanitarian".[1]

The research highlights that these distinctions have become increasingly fluid as the war progresses. In both Ukraine and Poland, humanitarian action encompasses a wide range of actors, including grassroots initiatives, businesses, trade unions and state institutions. Through this study, we aimed to uncover how "humanitarian action" is understood and operationalized, proposing that this can best be defined through the practices and contexts of those involved. Differences in interpretation were noted between Ukraine, with its longer history of engagement with international humanitarian organisations, and Poland, where humanitarian response is a newer phenomenon.

1 Hargrave, K., Bryant, J., Jarosz, S., et al. (2024) *Narratives and the Ukraine response: implications for humanitarian action and principles*. HPG working paper. London: ODI Global.

The research explores the roles of WLOs in terms of locally led humanitarianism. While at the heart of the humanitarian response, the experiences of Ukrainian women led organisations do not fit comfortably into the frameworks of humanitarian action as set out by international organisations or nation states. Our research focuses on the experiences and opinions of local women led organisations in order to articulate what they see as important in the crisis response. Equally, we analyse how the humanitarian crisis has influenced the roles of Ukrainian women in Ukraine and Poland. How has the crisis generated new leadership roles for Ukrainian women, and what does this imply for the further development of Ukrainian women's leadership in the two countries?

The report draws parallels between the experiences of Ukrainian WLOs in the two countries to look at how women's leadership emerges from this humanitarian crisis. At the same time, it recognizes that the experiences of Ukrainian WLOs are significantly different in the two countries.

In the Ukrainian case, the focus of the report is on the roles of organisations and initiatives led by women in the humanitarian response. These organisations and initiatives include those established by volunteers in frontline communities, as well as those led by internally displaced women and women in their home communities that are located far from the frontlines. We spoke with leaders of new organisations and with women leading organisations that, prior to 2022 did not previously identify their work as humanitarian, but were focused on women's rights, advocacy, or service provision.

When referring to "Ukrainian women" in the Ukrainian case, the study takes an intentionally broad and inclusive approach. The term encompasses not only women of Ukrainian ethnic origin, but all women who are Ukrainian citizens, regardless of ethnic origins and cultural identifications. While collecting data for the Ukrainian case, we talked to women of different cultural, social, and geographical backgrounds, and different sexual orientations. This diversity of women who align themselves with the Ukrainian cause is a key feature of women's contributions to the humanitarian response in Ukraine.

In the Polish case, the report's focus is on a specific group of WLOs – those led by Ukrainian women. These groups and initiatives, animated both by migrants and refugees, include organisations founded prior to the full-scale invasion as well as those who started their activities in response to it. The organisations were all founded with the primary aim of supporting Ukraine and Ukrainians in Poland, but those working prior to 2022 did not previously frame their work as humanitarian action. In the Polish case, therefore, the experiences of Ukrainian WLOs are marked both by gender and by their displacement as Ukrainians in Poland.

Furthermore, the war is producing a fragmentation of the geographical context. The experience of living in occupied territory, or in front line settlements, or being internally displaced, is very different from being in a big city further from the front, which is different again from having crossed the national border into Poland. These differences are more profound than before the war escalation.

While marking these differences, we also assert that building bridges across these divides is an important practical and symbolic dimension of the humanitarian response. The work done by Ukrainian WLOs on both sides of the Ukraine–Poland border needs to be connected in order to enable a mutual exchange of lessons learned. In addition, bringing to light initiatives of Ukrainian women across both countries serves to build a sense of grassroot unity despite differences in proximity to live conflict.[2] In addition, the common themes that

2 The role of the diaspora as an undervalued element of the Polish humanitarian response is noted in Jarosz, S. and Klaus, W. (eds.) (2023) *Polska Szkoła Pomaganiu: Przyjęcie osób uchodźczych z Ukrainy w Polsce w 2022 roku.* Warszawa: Konsorcjum Migracyjne. Olena Fedyuk discusses a longer-term undervaluing of the contribution of the diaspora, Fedyuk O. (2019). The Digital Power of Ukrainians Abroad: Social Media Activism and Political Participation, in: O. Oleinikova, J. Bayeh (eds), *Democracy, Diaspora, Territory*, pp. 145–162. London: Routledge.

emerge across the two different national contexts have important implications for how the principles of women's empowerment and locality are implemented in humanitarian responses.

The full-scale war is about to enter its fourth year, and its course remains highly threatening and unstable. As a result, the humanitarian needs of Ukrainians are changing, but not diminishing. In this context, we argue that the new activities that Ukrainian WLOs have undertaken have a rich potential for building community resilience in the two countries. However, in both Ukraine and in Poland the resources available to those affected and displaced by war, and for organisations working to support them are drastically decreasing . In this context, we argue that it is important to document what Ukrainian WLOs have achieved, and to build recommendations for their further support.

Research methodology

This parallel study was undertaken by two partner organisations: Open Space Works Ukraine, a women's led research organisation based in Ukraine, and the Ukrainian House Foundation, a Ukrainian women's led non-governmental organisation in Poland.

Research objectives

This study sought to explore the roles and contributions of women-led initiatives in providing support to war-affected individuals in Ukraine and Poland. By focusing on these initiatives, the research examined how they have shaped civil society and the humanitarian sector while addressing barriers and enablers to their work.

The research also investigated the specific challenges faced by Ukrainian WLOs in both formal (registered NGOs) and informal (unregistered grassroots) contexts. It documented how these organisations adapted their work in response to the full-scale invasion and explored the intersection of women's leadership with broader humanitarian frameworks. A further objective was to provide insights into how international humanitarian actors could better support women-led initiatives through gender-sensitive and inclusive strategies.

Research questions

The following research questions guide the research:

- *What roles have Ukrainian women-led initiatives and organisations in Ukraine and Poland taken on in support of war-affected people?*
- *How have Ukrainian WLOs changed/what new initiatives emerged post 2022?*
- *What are the enablers and barriers to the work of these organisations?*
- *How have these experiences impacted on Ukrainian's women's leadership in the two cases?*
- *What support would Ukrainian WLOs require to sustain their role/work in communities?*

In Ukraine, key country specific questions were:

- *What are specific enablers and barriers to the work of WLO organisations in different parts of Ukraine: in liberated communities, in host communities, communities close to the frontline?*
- *How can WLOs utilise the experience in humanitarian action for further recovery and development processes in Ukraine?*

In Poland, key country specific questions were:

- *How have the roles of Ukrainian WLOs in Poland changed post-2022?*
- *What barriers and possibilities do these changes present for Ukrainian women's leadership in Poland?*

Desk research

The desk research conducted as part of this study focused on defining and mapping the boundaries of humanitarian action in the context of the Ukrainian war. It explored the evolution of initiatives that predated 2022 and those that emerged in response to the escalation of the war.

The research highlighted the intersections between humanitarian action, social welfare, and recovery efforts, which often overlap in practice. Through a review of secondary sources, the study contextualized the activities of women-led initiatives within broader humanitarian and social frameworks. This desk research provided the foundation for understanding the complex environment in which these initiatives operate.

Qualitative research

The study employed a qualitative methodology to capture the lived experiences of women leaders and the dynamics of their organisations. This included:

- *Mapping initiatives: An aim of the Polish part of the project was to explore the field of Ukrainian WLOs active in the country in the wake of the full-scale invasion. We used the networks in which the Ukrainian House is involved, along with internet and telephone research, to discover initiatives led by Ukrainian women in Poland, both migrants and refugees. Through this process we mapped 70 organisations and initiatives led by Ukrainian women in cities and towns across Poland. In Ukraine, the mapping focused on identifying organisations operating across diverse contexts, including frontline areas, liberated territories, and safer zones. Unlike the Polish case, the aim was not to map as many organisations as possible. This was due to the sheer number of women-led organisations actively engaged in humanitarian action, making exhaustive mapping impractical.*
- *In-depth interviews: 41 in-depth interviews were conducted with women leaders – 21 in Ukraine and 20 in Poland – providing detailed insights into their roles, challenges, and contributions.*
- *Focus group discussions (FGDs): Five FGDs were held, bringing together 22 organisations to explore themes such as localised humanitarian efforts, informal initiatives, and cross-border collaboration.*

In Ukraine, the engagement of organisations focused on identifying key organisations by consulting national and regional humanitarian actors who collaborate directly with WLOs in local communities. Within this study we targeted respondents representing a diverse range of women-led organisations operating across different contexts, including frontline areas, liberated territories, and safer regions. We engaged with organisations of varying sizes and scopes, from advanced to small organisations, and informal local initiatives. These included groups working on distributing humanitarian aid in war-affected locations, support for marginalized communities (e.g., Roma, LGBTQI+ individuals, and people with disabilities), support

for IDPs, and community recovery efforts in areas affected by occupation and war.

The organisations represented a cross-section of Ukraine's dynamic civil society, with some established before the full-scale invasion and others emerging in response to the humanitarian crisis. This selection was deliberate, ensuring that the study captured a wide spectrum of experiences and perspectives.

In selecting the organisations for interview in Poland, we sought to maintain a balance between pre-escalation and post-escalation organisations, migrant and refugee led organisations, registered organisations and informal initiatives, and a diversity of types of service provided. The organisations we mapped were concentrated in major cities, but were also to be found in towns of various sizes around Poland.

These qualitative approaches enabled the study to capture the diversity and complexity of women-led humanitarian responses in both countries, with a particular focus on how these initiatives evolved in response to the war.

The data for this study was collected in August–October 2024.

Ethical considerations

This study adhered to rigorous ethical standards to ensure the safety, privacy, and dignity of all participants, particularly given the sensitive context of war in Ukraine. Confidentiality was a priority, with no personal information shared without explicit consent.

Participants were fully informed about the research purpose, their role, and how their data would be used, with consent emphasising their voluntary participation and the protection of their information. In the case of Ukraine, safety measures were central to the research design – interviews were conducted in secure environments, with contingency plans for air raids or escalation near frontline areas.

Recognising the potential emotional toll on participants, interviewers were trained to handle sensitive discussions with care, offering support when needed. Trusted networks and partnerships were leveraged to connect with diverse voices, while recruitment efforts were tailored to respect the limited time of WLO leaders.

Data analysis

The collected data underwent a rigorous analysis process:

- *Transcription and coding: All interviews were transcribed and systematically coded using MAXQDA, a qualitative analysis software. This ensured consistency and depth in interpreting the data.*
- *Collaborative analysis: The OSWU and UH teams worked jointly on the analysis, bringing diverse expertise and perspectives to the interpretation of findings.*

The analysis revealed key themes, such as the intersection of systemic barriers and enablers, the evolving nature of leadership in times of crisis, and the critical role of women-led initiatives in humanitarian and recovery efforts. These findings provide a detailed understanding of how women-led organisations are navigating and shaping the humanitarian landscape in Ukraine and Poland.

Limitations of the study

Given the shifting realities of war, mapping WLOs in Poland and Ukraine is a dynamic and ongoing process. In both countries, several organisations newly formed after 2022 have since closed due to lack of funding, burnout, or the displacement of leaders. In addition, in Ukraine ongoing conflict limited access to some regions, particularly occupied territories and areas near the frontline.

In both cases, our focus was on local and grassroots organisations engaged in humanitarian action led by Ukrainian women. In both countries, we did not include Ukrainian WLOs whose primary form of action is media or political campaigning. Additionally, in Poland we omitted big Ukrainian NGOs who opened women-run branches in Poland after the start of the full-scale war.

Conversely, the category of informal initiatives that we included in our study was deliberately an open one. Its aim was to include the bottom-up experiences of women who started group activities in response to the war, but have not yet formalised their activities or are unable or unwilling to do so. In both countries, we presume that there are many more informal Ukrainian women's led initiatives beyond those studied in this research. Rather than being an exhaustive overview, the report therefore functions as a snapshot: it provides an insight into the experiences and opinions of Ukrainian women leading organisations operating during 2024.

"We didn't wait for international aid; we gathered food, coordinated shelters, and supported displaced families using our own networks."

Leader of women's initiative from the south of Ukraine

Background

Local Humanitarian Response

For both Ukraine and Poland the 2022 Russian invasion provoked an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. Ukraine was subject to a full-scale attack, provoking a wave of people displaced both internally and across the border to Poland.

In the immediate aftermath of the full scale invasion, the Polish Border Guard registered as many as 3.5 million border crossings to Poland and approximately 1.5 million to Ukraine between 24 February and mid-May of 2022.[3] By the end of the year, an estimated 5.9 million people were internally displaced within Ukraine due to the war, while nearly 5.7 million Ukrainian refugees and asylum-seekers were recorded throughout Europe.[4]

This mass displacement and widespread destruction have left people in Ukraine with a range of urgent needs. Previously occupied territories have suffered severe devastation and deep psychological trauma. Eastern and southern regions of the country struggle to accommodate large numbers of displaced people, placing immense strain on local resources. Areas near the front line and those not under government control remain largely cut off from assistance and continue to endure relentless aggression. Poland, on the other hand, has abruptly had to confront the challenge of building a multicultural welfare system, while responding to a large-scale refugee crisis.

In both countries the role of local bottom-up, informal and civil society networks was particularly significant in making it possible to withstand the

3 Duszczyk M. and Kaczmarek, P. (eds.) (2022) *Hospitable Poland 2022+*. Warszawa: Wise.

4 UNHCR. 2022. “Ukraine Refugee Situation”

initial period of the humanitarian crisis, while state institutions and international organisations were re-structuring their activities.[5] In the immediate aftermath of the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian women’s organisations – like other civil society organisations, initiative groups and volunteers – rapidly began to provide humanitarian responses using their own resources, skills and teams.[6]

In the cases of Ukraine and Poland, international aid agencies recognised the existence of an active local civil society and to an unusual degree have delivered humanitarian support through partnerships with local organisations already working in the field.[7] The financial support provided by INGOs contributed to a temporary abundance of resources that is a feature of the accounts of Ukrainian WLOs’ experiences in 2022. However, friction remains in the relations between international and local organisations with local partners in both Ukraine and Poland critiquing an asymmetry that they saw as characteristic of these relations.[8] Three years into the war, in Ukraine systemic inefficiencies in partnerships between international and local/national NGOs are reported as hindering sustained humanitarian response.[9] In Poland, exhaustion and shrinking of organisations engaged in humanitarian action are noted as key issues.[10]

The financial support provided by INGOs contributed to a temporary abundance of resources that is a feature of the accounts of Ukrainian WLOs’ experiences in 2022.

5 Duszczyk M. and Kaczmarek, P. (eds.) (2022) *Hospitable Poland 2022+*; Jarosz, S. and Klaus, W. (eds.) (2023) *Polska Szkoła Pomaganiu: Przyjęcie osób uchodźczych z Ukrainy w Polsce w 2022 roku.* Warszawa: Konsorcjum Migracyjne; Fatma, M., Astier-Ibrahim, I., Gaffey, K., et al. (2022) “Transformational Humanitarian Response: The Example of Poland”. Humanitarian Leadership Academy.

6 “Civil Society in Ukraine in the context of war: Report on a comprehensive sociological report” (2024); A Humanitarian Localization Baseline for Ukraine: Progress Report (2024).

7 On localisation in the Ukraine response: Hargrave, K., Bryant, J., Jarosz, S., et al. (2024) *Narratives and the Ukraine response: implications for humanitarian action and principles* and Michalak, M., De Geoffroy, V., Gabi, R., et al. (2024) *Grand Bargain Localization Commitments (Poland Case Study)*. Warsaw: Groupe URD and NGO Forum Razem. On localisation in humanitarian action, see: IASC (2024) *The Grand Bargain* and Nyajima A. (2024) “Is the localisation agenda working for women-led organisations?”, *Humanitarian Exchange Magazine*.

8 See the open letters written to international organisations by coalitions of NGOs first in Ukraine and then in Poland in summer 2022: https://globalfundcommunityfoundations.org/news/an-open-letter-to-international-donors-and-ngos-who-want-to-genuinely-help-ukraine/; https://konsorcjum.org.pl/en/open-letter-to-international-donors-and-organizations-that-want-to-help-ukrainian-refugees-in-poland/.

9 Annual Ukraine Localisation Survey, December 2024.

10 Charycka, B., Bednarek, J., Gumkowska, M. (2024) *When working in crisis becomes daily life. Local organisations supporting refugees in Poland*. Warszawa: Klon / Jawor.

The Case of Ukrainian Civil Society

Since the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022, Ukrainian civil society has demonstrated extraordinary resilience and leadership in responding to the humanitarian crisis. Building on networks and capacities developed since the conflict began in 2014, local organisations – ranging from established NGOs and religious institutions to newly formed volunteer groups – have played a pivotal role in addressing immediate needs. In the first six weeks of the invasion, nearly all humanitarian aid was coordinated and delivered by local actors, including approximately 150 existing NGOs and 1.700 new grassroots initiatives.[11]

These organisations have provided critical services such as humanitarian aid distribution, support for internally displaced persons (IDPs), and advocacy for marginalized groups. Despite being underfunded compared to international agencies, Ukrainian civil society has leveraged its deep understanding of community dynamics to respond effectively and rapidly to the evolving crisis. However, this locally driven response has also faced significant challenges, including limited access to international funding, physical risks of operating in conflict zones, and insufficient institutional support.

Complementing the efforts of civil society, the Ukrainian state and local authorities have played an essential role in coordinating and supporting the humanitarian response. Structures such as the Coordination Headquarters for Humanitarian and Social Issues and the Coordination Headquarters for Issues of Liberated Territories were established to manage interactions between donors, governmental bodies, and local organisations. Local authorities have worked closely with civil society to facilitate the distribution of aid, manage evacuation efforts, and support recovery initiatives. However, challenges such as resource constraints, safety risks, and the complexities of coordinating across multiple stakeholders have underscored the need for stronger collaboration between the state, local authorities, and civil society.

11 Enabling the local response: Emerging humanitarian priorities in Ukraine March–May 2022, June 2022.

We argue that Ukrainian WLOs form a particular case within these overall dynamics. In Ukraine, WLOs abruptly redirected their activities to grassroots crisis support: distributing humanitarian aid in war-affected locations, support for marginalized communities (e.g. Roma, LGBTQI+ individuals, and people with disabilities), support for IDPs, and community recovery efforts in areas affected by occupation and war. This radical change in activities has led to new roles for WLOs in communities across different regions. However, these activities are performed at a personal cost, with scant resources and under severe constraints.

In Poland, a new social infrastructure of organisations and initiatives led by Ukrainian women has emerged due to the crisis.[12] Poland, which since the Second World War has been a largely mono-ethnic state, is suddenly faced with the challenge of integrating a significant presence of Ukrainians whose lives have been distorted by war. Over two-thirds of the organisations we talked to were founded after the war escalation, and organisations who existed pre-escalation underwent a major acceleration of their activities. The emergence and growth of these organisations in towns and cities across the country is a significant innovation in the Polish welfare infrastructure, but one particularly susceptible to problems of diminishing resources.

In presenting the perspectives of Ukrainian WLOs and their leaders to an international audience, we encounter the challenge of how to make local voices audible in an international context where the "local" is systematically undervalued.[13] Voices from Eastern Europe emerge in a power dynamic, as this region has been designated as the backward "other" of more advanced Western Europe.[14] While the international community recognised active civil society as an exceptional element in the humanitarian response in Ukraine and Poland, we argue that there is a need to delve deeper into the perspectives of local actors.[15] Taking the dynamic and open-ended trajectories of Ukrainian WLOs as the principal focus of the report takes a broad and locally led approach to what is involved in everyday humanitarian action.[16]

12 Ukrainian organisations in Poland were also mapped in Leskiw, O., Leskiw, M., Harasym, T. (2024) *Raport z badania ukraińskich aktorów społecznych w Polsce: Analiza potrzeb i wyzwań*. Warszawa: KOMM.

13 This issue is discussed intensively in the anthropology of globalisation, see Tsing, A. (2004) *Frictions: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). In terms of challenges to communicating local practice in humanitarian action, see Viswanathan, V. (2023) Learning to be more 'locally led'? Current practice and evidence gaps in the international humanitarian system. London: ODI/ALNAP.; Dietrich Ortega, L.M., Skakun, Z., Cabezas Pino, A., et al., (2020), 'Who holds the microphone?' Crisis-affected women's voices on gender-transformative changes in humanitarian settings: Experiences from Bangladesh, Colombia, Jordan and Uganda. New York: UN Women; Oliff, L. (2018) 'From Resettled Refugees to Humanitarian Actors: Refugee Diaspora Organizations and Everyday Humanitarianism', New Political Science, 40, pp. 658 - 674.

14 The development of the term "Eastern Europe" is discussed by Wolff, L. (1994). *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

15 For how Ukraine poses new questions in terms of frames of humanitarian debate, see Atali, T. (2023) 'Why Ukraine is moving the needle on old debates about humanitarian neutrality'. *The New Humanitarian*, 16 May.

16 Richey, L. A. (2018). Conceptualizing "Everyday Humanitarianism": Ethics, Affects, and Practices of Contemporary Global Helping. *New Political Science*, 40, 625-639.

The Case of the Polish State

Another issue that emerges from the liminal status of Eastern Europe that is particularly felt in the Polish case, is that of an uncertainty as to the role of the state. On the one hand, Poland is a member of the EU and it has a functioning state system. On the other hand, since the Second World War Poland has been a largely monoethnic country. From being an outward migration country in the 1990s and 2000s, Poland has experienced a mass inward migration of Ukrainians after the beginning of the war in 2014, which immensely accelerated after 2022.[17] After 2015 however, Poland was governed by a party hostile to migrants and eager to re-examine historical conflicts with Ukraine. This political situation meant that just prior to the full-scale invasion, organisations in Poland supporting migrants and refugees faced a stark shortage of resources.

At its highest point in late 2022, there were 2 million Ukrainians registered with temporary protection status in Poland, while in late December 2024 this figure stands at 978 196.[18] This refugee wave was predominated by women who comprised an estimated 80% of the adult population (44% of the total population).[19]

In response to this situation, the Polish government implemented the EU Temporary Protection Directive and made legislative changes giving Ukrainians escaping the war a special status, "PESEL UKR". This law gave access to a range of social welfare benefits. With successive updates to the Law on Special Protection (the last in April 2024), this support has been rolled back. Currently, Ukrainians can benefit from special protection up until September 2025.

Poland has the highest rate of employment of refugees (65%) amongst OECD countries.[20] However, a 2024 study found that the net wages of 60% of refugees are less than 4000 PLN monthly, in other words roughly equal to or less than the minimum wage. [21] At the same time, Ukrainian women have also been actively founding businesses.

Poland is faced with a historic challenge of building a welfare infrastructure able to meet the needs of a multicultural population, the majority of whom are women and children displaced by a war that currently is only intensifying. While the new government has proved more open in involving migrant NGOs in public consultations, it is continuing the previous government's approach of rolling back refugee support and emphasising control of borders over refugee protection. [22] The future framework of state support for Ukrainians in Poland is thus highly uncertain.

17 Duszczyk M. and Kaczmarek, P. (eds) *Hospitable Poland 2022+* (2022).

18 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/products-eurostat-news/w/DDN-20240910-1. The figures published by the Polish government in December 2024 show the number of Ukrainians with temporary protection status is again rising, within a total of over 1.5 million Ukrainians in Poland. https://www.sejm.gov.pl/Sejm10.nsf/PosKomZrealizowane.xsp?komisja=ASW04S#12.

19 Jarosz, S. and Klaus, W. (eds.) (2023) *Polska Szkoła Pomaganiu: Przyjęcie osób uchodźczych z Ukrainy w Polsce w 2022 roku.*

20 Zyzik, R., Baszczak, Ł., Rozbicka, I., Wielechowski, M. (2023), *Uchodźcy z Ukrainy na polskim rynku pracy: możliwości i przeszkody*. Polski Instytut Ekonomiczny, Warszawa.

21 Dudek, B., Panuciak, A. and Strzelecki, P. (2024) *Sytuacja życiowa i ekonomiczna migrantów z Ukrainy w Polsce w 2024 roku*. NBP Report.

22 The government's migration strategy was published without consultation to the disappointment of NGOs: https://konsorcjum.org.pl/en/oswiadczenie-organizacji-pozarzadowych-w-odpowiedzi-na-strategie-migracyjna-polski-na-rzecz-prawa-do-ochrony-miedzynarodowej/.

Gendered humanitarian response

Women play critical roles in humanitarian action, often serving as first responders and leaders in crises, despite frequently being overlooked. Women bring invaluable contextual knowledge, skills, resources, and experiences to emergency preparedness and response, and resilience building.[23] Globally, humanitarian frameworks such as the IASC emphasise gender equality as a cornerstone of effective humanitarian response.[24] The IASC advocates for the inclusion of **women-led organisations** and women's rights organisations as equitable partners, recognizing their unique ability to provide **gender-sensitive and community-centred solutions** in crisis contexts. However, women remain significantly **underrepresented** in leadership positions within humanitarian organisations, where they are often confined to **entry-level roles**.[25] Despite making up over **40% of frontline humanitarian workers**, women's participation in **high-level decision-making** remains disproportionately low.[26] This trend is mirrored in political and business leadership, which is **markedly male-dominated** both globally and regionally.

In the Ukrainian case also, women played an important role in the humanitarian response, but encountered barriers to full participation and leadership roles. In the light of the full-scale invasion 66% of women's organisations in Ukraine are noted as providing services outside their usual scope to address immediate humanitarian needs and WLOs are reported as having responded to an overwhelming surge in demand.[27] This rapid pivot came with significant challenges, such as severe burnout among staff, lack of access to childcare, limited financial resources, and operational disruptions caused by displacement and security concerns. Despite their crucial roles, women have found themselves excluded from critical decision-making mechanisms.[28]

In Poland, the gender context for the response by Ukrainian WLOs is one where women are in the majority. Whilst Ukrainian diaspora organisations and organisations representing the Ukrainian minority in Poland have traditionally tended to be led by men, Ukrainian non-governmental organisations founded in Poland by migrants from Ukraine – even before the full-scale invasion – were largely led by women. This predominance of women leaders has been accentuated by the war escalation, which caused a refugee wave that was largely composed of women.[29] As a result of the crisis, Ukrainian WLOs in Poland have grown in number and in the scope of their work, but still face challenges of precarity and political representation.

23 Barclay, A., Higelin, M., & Bungcaras, M. (2016). *On the Frontline: Catalysing Women's Leadership in Humanitarian Action*. ActionAid International; CARE (2024), Women in War May 2024: Leaders, Responders, and Potential.

24 IASC (2024). Policy on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls in Humanitarian Action.

25 Bode, A. (2024) Gender dynamics in humanitarian leadership: navigating COVID-19 and beyond. *Int J Humanitarian Action* 9(9).

26 Patel, P., Meagher, K., El Achi, N. *et al.* (2020) 'Having more women humanitarian leaders will help transform the humanitarian system': challenges and opportunities for women leaders in conflict and humanitarian health. *Conflict and Health* 14, 84.

27 UN WOMEN (2022), Rapid Assessment: Impact of War in Ukraine on Women's Civil Society Organizations; CARE (2024), Rapid gender analysis.

28 UN WOMEN (2022), Rapid Assessment: Impact of War in Ukraine on Women's Civil Society Organizations.

29 On the gender dimensions of the refugee wave and how this should influence NGO support, see: Baran, M., Grzymała-Moszczyńska, H., Zjawińska, M., et al. (2023). *Superbohater* w spódnicy. Odporność psychiczna Ukrainek uciekających przed wojną w Ukrainie do Polski - raport z badań i rekomendacje dla trzeciego sektora. Warsazawa: SWPS.

Ukrainian women in Poland have been thrust into a role of social leadership in a crisis context in which both gender and displacement are factors. Gender in Polish society remains a hot political issue after the restriction of access to abortion by the previous government and the vibrant Women's Strike protests that contested it. Ukrainians in Poland are not able to participate in elections and face numerous barriers to inclusion in political bodies.[30] Equally, women leaders have to cope with how the perception of displacement itself is a challenge to the traditional role of home-based caregiver.[31] This sense of "obligation to home" becomes more complex in a time of war, in the context of debates about the need for Ukrainians to return for the further sustainability of the country.[32] Thus, questions of the transformations of Ukrainian WLOs in Poland occur in a specific, highly charged political environment.

Additionally, an important element in women's roles in the humanitarian response is the dimension of financial security. There is a high-level of employment amongst Ukrainians in Poland and the majority of refugees' primary source of income is their paid labour.[33] However, this work is poorly paid, with the gender pay gap for Ukrainians in Poland standing at 26% (compared to 10% overall for the Polish population).[34] Similarly, in Ukraine the material context for WLOs is deeply challenging, being shaped by a combination of systemic underfunding, operational pressures, and gender-based barriers. WLOs are forced to pool their limited resources and expand their activities far beyond their initial mandates to meet overwhelming demands. Funding models exacerbate this strain by being short-term, donor-driven, and misaligned with the actual needs on the ground. Donors and international organisations frequently sideline the core missions of WLOs, prioritizing funding for immediate humanitarian activities rather than supporting long-term, systemic change or operational sustainability. This disconnect leaves these organisations overburdened and under-resourced, undermining their ability to deliver impact, and thus highlighting the need for a fundamental shift in funding priorities and strategies.

When considering humanitarian response in gendered terms, it is important to also keep in mind

30 Babakova, O. (2024) Temat wojny w Ukrainie oraz migrantów i uchodźców z Ukrainy w polskim dyskursie politycznym: kwiecień 2023 – luty 2024. Warszawa: Fundacja Pułaski.

31 Urbanska, S. (2020) Weapons of the Weak Lovingly Packed in Jars. The Transnational Maternal Foodways of Polish Migrants in Brussels. Ethnologia Polonia 41: 69-91; Fedyuk, O., Kindler, M. (eds.) (2020) *Ukrainian Migration to the European Union*. IMISCOE Research Series.

32 "Які виклики для громад принесли війна, нестача людського капіталу та повернення українців додому" (2024) https://epravda.com.ua/projects/yaki-vikliki-dlya-gromad-801768/

33 Deloitte (2024) *Analysis of the Impact of Refugees from Ukraine on the Economy of Poland*.

34 Dudek, B., Panuciak, A. and Strzelecki, P. (2024) 'Sytuacja życiowa i ekonomiczna migrantów z Ukrainy w Polsce w 2024 roku'. NBP Report. On Ukrainian women's precarity in Poland during Covid, see Cope B., Keryk, M., Kyliushyk, I. (2021) *The Impact of Covid 19 on Ukrainian Women Migrants in Poland*.

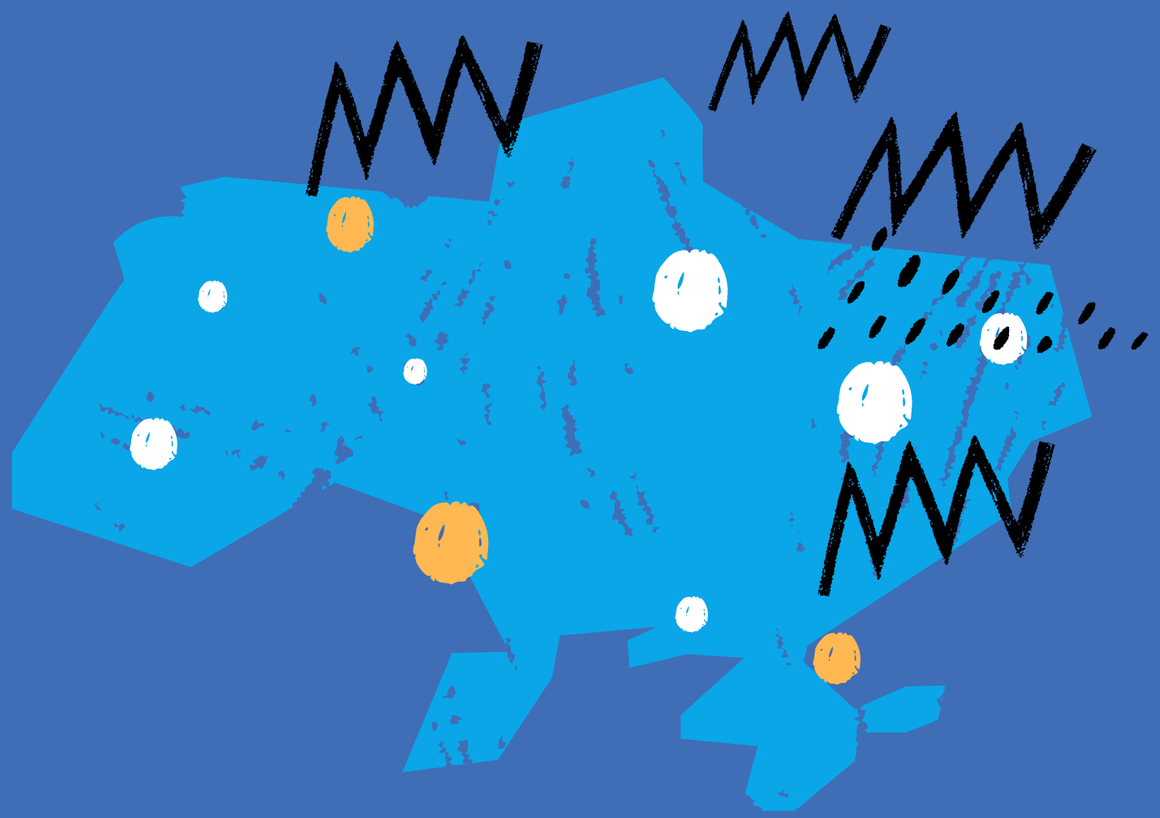
the profound disruption that the full-scale invasion is having on the roles and experiences of Ukrainian women and men.[35] The restriction on Ukrainian men of mobilisation age crossing the Ukrainian border implies a new understanding of the relations between the individual and one's social obligations, in which gender is a key factor. For Ukrainian men, the obligation to join the military has resulted in widespread **exposure to combat, death, and injury**, as well as displacement and trauma. Many men have taken on military roles voluntarily, while others seek to avoid conscription. This has had a profound impact on families and communities, leaving gaps in traditional support systems. At the same time, women have also taken on a **multitude of roles** – from participating in military service to leading humanitarian efforts and stepping into professional spaces previously predominated by men.[36] Women have also increasingly found themselves responsible for **caring for families alone**, navigating the emotional and logistical burdens of absent, injured, or deceased family members. Our study therefore tracks the experiences of Ukrainian WLOs in a context of wide-ranging social upheaval.

"Out of three women I know from our IDP community who are regular participants, all of them are now members of the IDP council. One is the council chair, another is the deputy, and the third is the secretary. They all hold such positions, and you can see how much others listen to them".

Leader of a displaced WLO in Ukraine

35 Numerous studies examine the war in Ukraine from a gendered perspective. See: Shand, T. (2022) 'Masculinities and Putin's War in Ukraine. Making the Connection Between Men's Gender and the Current Conflict'. *International Journal of Men's Community Social Health* Vol 5(2): 18-35; https://utppublishing.com/doi/pdf/10.22374/ijmsch.v5i2.84; 'Ukraine war "deepening harmful gender stereotypes", putting gender equality at risk' (2024): https://plan-international.org/news/2024/02/19/ukraine-war-puts-gender-equality-at-risk/.

36 On representations of changing roles of Ukrainian women in the light of the war, see: https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/publications-and-resources/research/briefings/europe/ukraine/gender-perceptions/#readtheresearchinfull.



We are the safety net. Without us, the gaps in the system would swallow people.

A volunteer from the south of Ukraine

Key characteristics of the humanitarian actions of Ukrainian WLOs

In the aftermath of the full-scale invasion, WLOs in Ukraine and Poland formed a point of first contact providing a range of vital services to those affected by war. They mobilised networks and used personal resources – household items, money, contacts – to provide immediate humanitarian response. The services that Ukrainian WLOs provide are holistic in nature, and are based on a community of experience with the affected population. Psychological support, economic resilience, and culture are blended in modes of humanitarian action focused on creating safe spaces and enabling personal development through long-term interaction. The fine grain knowledge emerging through everyday interaction with those affected by war enables Ukrainian WLOs to identify and overcome inconsistencies in the overall architecture of support. In both countries, although in somewhat different modalities, this humanitarian action has a markedly gendered profile.

a) Services Provided

As a result of the full-scale invasion Ukrainian WLOs in the two countries took on a range of vital functions. While some of these are recognisable from the canon of humanitarian action, others are more influenced by the organisations' previous activities or wider concerns, or by the specific contexts in which they now found themselves.

In the Ukrainian case, WLOs used their local knowledge to provide a wide variety of services, from organising evacuations to providing food, shelter etc., often in areas which were hard to reach and not served by international agencies.

One of the key areas of Ukrainian WLOs' work was organizing evacuations from besieged and frontline regions. Organisation leaders described mobilizing their networks to identify those in immediate need, coordinating transportation, and ensuring evacuees' safety despite ongoing military threats. For instance, one organisation in the south of Ukraine worked closely with local volunteers to establish safe routes, enabling the evacuation of families from areas under active shelling.

Food distribution also emerged as a critical service in these hard-to-reach areas. WLOs established informal supply chains, collaborating with local farmers and businesses, to procure and deliver food to communities cut off from larger aid networks. A volunteer from the south of Ukraine noted: *"In rural areas where no aid trucks could reach, we set up food hubs, ensuring that families wouldn't go hungry, even when access roads were destroyed"*.

Shelter provision was another priority, particularly for displaced families fleeing frontline zones. WLOs converted community centres, schools, and private homes into temporary shelters, offering

safety and stability to those with nowhere else to turn. In many cases, these shelters also served as hubs for other forms of assistance, such as clothing distribution and warm meals, providing a lifeline for vulnerable populations in remote areas.

Healthcare services, though constrained by limited resources, were also a significant component of WLO efforts in inaccessible areas of Ukraine. They distributed essential medicines, hygiene kits, and first-aid supplies, often relying on informal networks to procure these items when formal supply chains were disrupted. In some instances, they addressed urgent medical needs in communities without functioning healthcare facilities, by collaborating with local healthcare workers to set up makeshift clinics. Women-led organisations also provided psychosocial support in these areas, recognizing the emotional toll of displacement and conflict. Their efforts included offering mental health resources, facilitating group counselling sessions, and creating safe spaces for children. One NGO leader from the east of Ukraine described their work in a frontline village: *"We organized activities for children in a bomb shelter, giving them a sense of normalcy while their parents figured out the next steps"*.

Women-led organisations in Ukraine have consistently extended their support to frontline areas, often venturing into areas beyond the reach of larger aid actors. These efforts have been particularly critical in rural and war-affected villages, where the need for food, medicine and other essentials is acute. Their approach reflects a deep understanding of local realities and a willingness to operate under dangerous conditions. For instance, volunteers have taken on the responsibility of reaching isolated communities near the fighting, ensuring that assistance reaches those most vulnerable.

Incorporating community feedback was also pivotal in the redesign of aid distribution mechanisms. During interviews, leaders of local initiatives emphasized the importance of direct dialogue with affected populations. These conversations led to the reallocation of resources toward underserved demographics, such as elderly individuals unable to access central aid points. This nuanced approach to community needs further solidifies the role of WLOs in ensuring that humanitarian responses remain relevant and inclusive.

In working with IDPs also, the services provided by Ukrainian WLOs are informed by a **deep knowledge of the needs of those they are supporting.** In the case of supporting internally displaced people in Ukraine, WLOs were able to respond because they too had been through the experience of displacement. As an IDP NGO leader from the centre of Ukraine highlighted during the focus group discussion: *"We knew exactly what IDPs needed because we were also displaced. That's why our organisation became a lifeline for women and children arriving in these towns"*.

"We didn't just coordinate evacuations; we shared the same risks under fire, often moving alongside those we were helping to escape".

A leader from a frontline initiative in the south of Ukraine

Case: Adaptability in changing circumstances of displacement

In the face of occupation and violence, a women-led organisation from a frontline city in the South demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability. Initially focused on community development, the organisation was forced to pivot rapidly to humanitarian action as the invasion unfolded. Their proximity to the crisis allowed them to act immediately, often filling critical gaps left by the delayed response of larger international agencies by mobilising local communities to arrange evacuation and shelters for affected people.

When the occupation made it unsafe to remain, the organisation relocated to a safer city in the south of Ukraine. Despite this displacement, the team quickly re-established operations to support IDPs, particularly women and children. A central part of their work became the establishment of a community centre, which provided a range of services including psychological support and legal aid for those grappling with trauma and the complexities of displacement.

A member of the group described the dual challenge of providing aid while coping with their own displacement: "We were helping women find housing and navigate the legal system while our own team members were staying in shared rooms". Their community centre became a vital hub, addressing not only immediate needs like food and shelter but also long-term recovery, enabling them to focus on their mental health and to reintegrate into stable environments.

The organisation's efforts were particularly impactful in supporting children. Recognizing the significant psychological toll of war, they partnered with specialists to provide trauma-informed care and recreational activities for children. This holistic approach was essential in addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by displaced families.

In the Polish case, Ukrainian WLOs provide direct support to refugees, facilitate refugees' access to Polish welfare institutions, and gather and distribute aid to Ukraine. In the research, we divided the participants into organisations and initiatives that provide general assistance, and those that provide specialist support.

General assistance refers to organisations providing multi-dimensional support to Ukrainians in Poland and to Ukraine in the light of the war escalation. This kind of support is provided by already existing migrant organisations, newly founded migrant led organisations, refugee led organisations, and other informal initiatives. These organisations also vary in the scale, the type, and the location of their activities – ranging from small towns to big cities. The services provided included: information provision, material support, coordination of volunteer support, shelter, cultural activities, psychological support, vocational support, child support, aid to Ukraine, language courses. Given that the refugee wave is in the vast majority composed of women, these services are all provided primarily to support refugee women. For these women refugees, Ukrainian WLOs constituted a vital point of first contact, as well as a place to turn to when facing problems while rebuilding their lives in displacement.

By 2024 women leaders of organisations in Poland indicated a shift of emphasis towards more integrational and identity-building activities, but there are many points of commonality between the services provided now and back in 2022. Several organisation leaders noted that even today, the provision of informational support, accommodation, and material support are still necessary for vulnerable groups – even more so, as the Polish State reviews legislation and rolls back welfare support available to refugees. In contrast, cultural activities (especially for teenagers) were sought by refugees from the very first days of the crisis. For example, there was a rising interest to borrow Ukrainian books.

Organisations providing specialist support have profiles on topics such as: aid to Ukraine, educational opportunities for children, vocational integration, support of victims of human trafficking and sexual abuse, support for people living with HIV, artistic therapy, and working with disabled refugees. In the case of specialist organisations, expert knowledge of a specific field is combined with a shared trans-border experience to uncover a fine-grain understanding of specific issues emerging out of the crisis.

For example, a Ukrainian refugee WLO leader working with patients living with HIV explained how her experience of coming to Poland had opened her eyes to fundamental differences in the monitoring and the treatment of HIV in the two countries. Ukraine is treated as a country with an HIV epidemic, while Poland is not, and this asymmetry of systemic approach produces many particular and unexpected effects on the lives of refugees. Ukrainian WLOs are able to swiftly note emerging problems and work to alleviate them. For instance, the organisation leader described a situation where patients began to think they were dying *en masse* because they were receiving a smaller dose of medication of a higher strength; while Polish doctors could not understand why patients were reluctant to obtain treatment.

> "*[We] started to get scared in groups, thinking that we are dying, because we have a new treatment regime. But in fact, the medicine has a higher dose, so you don't need such a big amount. And all this information, all this communication is again conducted by us [the WLO] with the community, because Polish doctors have no understanding of the treatment system that we brought with us*.
>
> *There isn't this experience here; doctors don't really understand what the problem is. 'What do you want, what is it that you people lack, why are you not getting treated?'*"

This quotation is illustrative of the function mentioned by many Ukrainian WLO leaders in Poland. An in-depth knowledge of refugees' everyday experiences enables Ukrainian WLOs to act as diagnosticians and fix the problems that emerge from

the unpreparedness of the Polish welfare system to support Ukrainian refugees. Their activities include: finding ways for children to be accepted to schools, despite rejections from local education board officials; they help with returning the temporary protection status to refugees who had it mistakenly revoked; they assist elderly Ukrainians in confirming their digital identity in order to receive their Ukrainian pension; they ensure that families are able to cross borders even if the children and the parents have a different residence status in Poland. In addition, they diagnose pressure points in the support system that re-traumatise refugees. For instance, one WLO leader specialising in children's support noted that a teacher proposing that refugee children speak Polish at home could be interpreted by their families as threatening their maintenance of their Ukrainian identity.

As a result of the crisis, Ukrainian WLOs have come to play a vital role at the intersection of the welfare issues encountered by war-affected refugees and of the political systems within which these problems emerge. This connection of the personal and political has long been a key feature of feminist discourse. Through the gendered nature of the refugee crisis in Poland, Ukrainian WLOs have grown to become influential actors in navigating these two levels. One leader of an organisation in Kraków described this key role as that of developing non-systemic solutions to unite people and systems, and argued that this vital work goes unrecognized. Through this work, Ukrainian WLOs become significant voices in identifying problems in the Polish welfare system as it adapts to the needs of a suddenly multi-cultural society, which is additionally mostly comprised of women refugees.

b) Rapid Response

The immediate response to the full-scale invasion formed an important and dramatic part of the interviews and focus groups of the research. In both Ukraine and Poland, the invasion provoked an unprecedented social mobilisation in which Ukrainian women leaders of organisations played a key role. Participants in both countries described how – in the new context produced by the war – their initiatives turned out to have networks that could be quickly mobilised to provide invaluable support.

In Ukraine, women leaders consistently described their role in humanitarian action as one of rapid and immediate response to urgent needs, which they are able to fulfil by **relying on their local networks and resources**. For example, a leader of a women's initiative from the south of Ukraine explained how this process looks in practice: *"We didn't wait for international aid; we gathered food, coordinated shelters, and supported displaced families using our own networks".* During the initial phases of humanitarian response, one organisation noted that supply chain disruptions were overcome through informal networks and local volunteers, who risked their own safety to ensure essential goods reached affected individuals. A volunteer from the south of Ukraine explained how these networks enabled them to address urgent needs even as formal systems struggled to establish a foothold: *"We used every connection we had to get people out and ensure that supplies reached those who couldn't leave"*.

The local connections that facilitated rapid and effective support were highlighted as crucial , particularly in frontline and rural areas. Organisations operating in these situations underscored how **local knowledge was indispensable in understanding dynamic needs and support logistics**. One leader of an informal group from the north of Ukraine working with frontline volunteers described this vividly, explaining how *"we were the first to arrive with aid because we live here. International organisations often come later, but we are the ones who know where people are hiding, what they need, and how to get there safely"*. The ability of local organisations to act swiftly in high-risk environments stemmed from their **deep connections within the communities they served**.

The proximity to the frontline also builds a commonality of experience between Ukrainian women-led organisations and those they support during the humanitarian crisis. Women leaders consistently emphasized the interwoven nature of their roles and of the lived realities of those they serve.

For example, one leader from a frontline initiative from the south of Ukraine recounted the challenges of organizing evacuations while directly facing similar dangers: *"We didn't just coordinate evacuations; we shared the same risks under fire, often moving alongside those we were helping to escape"*. This shared experience of adversity fosters a profound solidarity, blurring the line between those providing aid and those receiving it.

Although the distance to the conflict was different in the Polish case, here too Ukrainian WLOs were instrumental in the immediate local response. Unlike in Ukraine, Poland had no experience of humanitarian crisis prior to February 2022. The Ukrainians who had come to Poland prior to the escalation, no matter whether the war had shaped their decision to leave Ukraine, were labelled disparagingly as labour migrants; and the organisations who supported them battled against a hostile political environment and lack of resources under the then Polish government. In the new context of the recent escalation of the Russian invasion, Ukrainian led organisations functioned as focal points for an organic and unprecedented mobilisation of support by Polish society for both Ukraine and Ukrainians.

One Ukrainian leader of an organisation in Kraków, which began coordinating humanitarian support from Poland to Ukraine in February 2022, provided a detailed description of the beginning of her organisation's activities. Her comments stress the immediacy and the organic nature of the response; the humanitarian response was initiated on the first night after the invasion through bottom-up activities of residents (both Poles and diaspora) who gathered a huge amount of support.[37] There was no blueprint for how this aid should be distributed, and in this context Ukrainian migrant initiatives emerged as those who had the most extensive networks and who were most actively engaged in coordinating this process.

> *"This was greatly shaped by the self-organisation of ordinary citizens living in Kraków, of volunteers from various NGOs, of members of the Krakow City Council, of local businesses, and of the diaspora – who were the main representatives we saw self-organising from the very first days. On the first night (i.e. from 24 to 25 February), so much aid for Ukraine was gathered in our neighbourhood, laid out in garages and yards, and it started to be taken to a huge square near Nowa Huta. There was no prior arrangement for this, but a lot of humanitarian aid was brought there.*
>
> *And we were shocked, because none of us, those who took the initiative and saw all of this, understood what to do with it. It was all created in an ad hoc manner. Very quickly, almost within a week, through the help of the Kyiv City Council, we were given huge logistics warehouses. [...] In this way, we very quickly had contacts and received humanitarian aid from 17 countries, mostly from Europe, followed by the US and the UK. And it all started with people who united, no one had ever been involved in humanitarian aid before, no one had ever been so active in volunteering*."

Ukrainians leading organisations or initiative groups in Poland suddenly found themselves to be hubs for profuse offers of support from various sources. Ukrainian WLOs had connections to those arriving from Ukraine and to those who remained there in ways that were essential for the successful distribution of the aid offered by Polish citizens. It is worth noting that this constitutes a striking transformation in the life of Ukrainian migrant women in Poland, previously described as limited

37 On the bottom-up nature of the Polish response, see Duszczyk M. and Kaczmarek, P. (eds.) (2022) *Hospitable Poland 2022+*; Jarosz, S. and Klaus, W. (eds.) (2023) *Polska Szkoła Pomaganiu: Przyjęcie osób uchodźczych z Ukrainy w Polsce w 2022 roku*.

by "hermetic connections" within their community group.[38] Due to the outpouring of solidarity with Ukraine from Polish citizens in the immediate aftermath of the full-scale invasion, this depiction underwent a radical reversal: Ukrainian leaders of organisations became "bridging ties" between local and international support networks.

Ukrainian women leaders describe that these networks formed spontaneously around them during the early phase of the crisis response. When asked about sources of support, the leader of an organisation from Warsaw specialising in aid to Ukraine replied: *"We didn't turn to anyone because, frankly, we didn't have time. We had no time at all. Not to look for sponsors [...] Somewhere out there, there was always someone who would help, who would bring people together, who would introduce us to those who were needed, or [to] some circumstances that would bring people together. It just happened".*

In this case, the networks that the organisation was able to call on were initiated during the Revolution of Dignity in 2014 and later further developed in providing Christmas humanitarian support during the war in Donbas.[39] These experiences and networks formed a basis for improvising the response to the new scale of crisis of the war escalation.

It should be noted that similar experiences of improvised organisation amid a mobilisation of resources have been reported by Polish organisations and by male Ukrainian migrants in Poland also.[40] It is nonetheless noteworthy that Ukrainian women have found themselves at the heart of key support networks of this kind.

c) Psychological Support

In both countries, Ukrainian WLOs described their roles as not just providing services, but as building personal connections with those affected by war.

In Ukraine, **women-led organisations have incorporated psychological support as an essential component of their humanitarian work**, emphasizing the creation of spaces that address both emotional and practical needs. For instance, leaders participating in focus groups shared that providing psychological assistance was integral to fostering stability in communities disrupted by war. As one displaced head of a Ukrainian organisation explained, *"Our work is not just about distributing aid but about creating safe spaces where people can process their emotions and regain a sense of normalcy"*.

In the absence of substantial institutional frameworks during the onset of the war, these **organisations demonstrated remarkable adaptability and responsiveness**. For example, a women-led group from a frontline region utilized its local knowledge to establish psychosocial support services tailored to its communities.

In areas with particularly acute challenges, the war has profoundly influenced WLOs' focus, with many prioritizing **youth and community development** as a means of resilience building. In the north of Ukraine, close to the Russian border, a community group shifted its focus from public activism to addressing the pressing needs of war-affected populations, such as the elderly and displaced

38 Kindler, M. and Wójcikowska-Baniak, K. (2019) "(Missing) Bridging Ties and Social Capital? The Creation and Reproduction of Migrants' Social Network Advantages: The Case of Ukrainian Migrants in Poland". *Central and Eastern European Migration Review*, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 95–116.

39 Pishchikova, K. and Ogryzko, O. (2014) *Civic Awakening: The Impact of Euromaidan on Ukraine's Politics and Society* (Madrid: FRIDE); Konieczna-Salamatin J. and Pryshchepa, K. 2016. Wolontariat na Ukrainie: gwarancja zmiań ustrojowych czy wpadanie w stare pułapki? *Studia Polityczne* 25 (3), 202–227.

40 Jarosz, S. and Klaus, W. (eds.) (2023) *Polska Szkoła Pomaganiu: Przyjęcie osób uchodźczych z Ukrainy w Polsce w 2022 roku*.

families: *"We are a small team, but we try to provide a sense of stability for families. The war took away their sense of normal life, and we aim to restore it piece by piece"*. In so doing, they emphasised how their approach aimed at working with people to develop their sense of agency: *"We don't just want to hand out fish anymore – we want to give people the fishing rod. Empowering people is the key to rebuilding communities" (leader of community initiative in the north of Ukraine).*

Several organisations introduced innovative methods to ensure their psychological services were accessible to the most affected groups. For example, projects, like mobile counselling units or group therapy for families addressed war-induced trauma, were organised. These services not only catered to immediate psychological needs, but also encouraged long-term community resilience. Leaders frequently highlighted the importance of engaging trained professionals in these efforts, with one participant emphasizing, *"to provide real help, we needed not just volunteers but certified specialists who could guide people through their recovery" (NGO leader, south of Ukraine)*.

In Poland, in addition to the introduction or upscaling of psychological consultations for refugees, the psychological dimension of the support provided by Ukrainian WLOs was interwoven through different activities, as part of holistic support centres. For instance, leaders of camouflage net-making groups described the process of work in terms of its therapeutic effect, a dimension captured in such names of groups as "Я сплету тобі оберіг" (I Weave you Protection) or "Odwaga bez granic" (Borderless Courage). Organisations providing accommodation support invariably incorporated provision of shelter with formal or informal psychological support by listening to the dramatic stories that had led refugees to need housing. Cultural events, workshops, women's clubs, or the founding of Ukrainian schools and playschools in Poland by Ukrainian WLOs all had a deliberate and pronounced dimension of community psychological support.

One organisation leader in Kraków specialising in child support explained their approach of listening to children's experiences in order to develop individually tailored modalities of support. The traumatic nature of the experiences that all Ukrainian children have been through requires providing them with tools for self-expression and thus for the means of personal development.

> "*We help, but not with a professional psychologist, but rather by creating a process, by creating lessons through which the child can be helped. [...] Our children are traumatised. It doesn't matter whether they actually saw bombs going off with their own eyes. They are already psychologically traumatised by the war, because it is in the air all over the country. [...] And through what we create for children, we give them this opportunity. 'How do you want to talk about this? What do you want to do with it?' They need to let this pain out. And this pain can only come out through creativity*."

As a result of this approach, Ukrainian WLOs engagement with those affected by war is not a one-off interaction. Rather, it is based on a process of engagement, wherein the initial provision of a sense of safety is the beginning of a journey of a transformation, in which sustained contact with beneficiaries and the development of community are inherent parts of the process. This was noted by a range of organisations, from those working with victims of human trafficking to those providing cultural workshops. This long-term approach can be difficult to justify in the statistics-driven-modalities through which NGOs report their work. This psychological component of organisations' work was, where resources allowed, supported through psychological supervision.

Case: empathy and encouragement

In the Polish case, organisations listen to the emotions generated by refugees' experience of displacement and support them in what can seem like an overwhelming challenge: contacting Polish institutions to enact their rights. The leader of the organisation supporting Ukrainian patients living with HIV in Poland describes their role in hearing the frustrations of the patients, and understanding the various components that lead patients to lose heart. The women's led organisation's personal relations with the patients and empathetic engagement with their situation enable them to play a vital intermediary role. This role of understanding and motivating is beyond the remit of the Polish medical services and outside the capacity of the Polish welfare system.

> *"It is obligatory, because a person's load increases, physical exhaustion increases, and treatment is relegated to the 20th priority. That's when we think, we have not called Katya, Petya or Sveta, for a long time.*
>
> *We start to pester them, and they say: 'I just don't have the strength, and I don't want to go to the doctor anymore, because I missed my appointment deadline.' The internal stigma starts all over again, and this is where we, as social workers, as representatives of a non-governmental organisation, can get involved. No matter what the doctor says, the patient has to get seen."*

As discussed earlier, Ukrainian WLOs identify and assist in overcoming obstacles that refugees encounter in their dealings with the Polish welfare system. The above example illustrates that this intermediary role also has a vital psychological component. Listening to those in vulnerable situations, and then working together with them to develop steps to resolve these issues is at the heart of the approach to case work adopted by the Ukrainian House in Warsaw. This psychological dimension of Ukrainian WLO support is a vital component in enabling refugees to respond to challenges and enact their rights.

In the case of Poland, this vital intermediary function is often overlooked in discussion about the future funding of Ukrainian NGOs. International humanitarian organisations – when justifying their decisions to withdraw from Poland – argue that they do not want to create a parallel system to that of the Polish state. This cooperative approach on the part of international organisations in seeking to avoid competition with state services is worthy of appreciation. However, in the light of this research we argue that this discourse indicates a blindness to the **vital complementary, psychological intermediary role that Ukrainian WLOs play in relation to state institutions in Poland**.

Given the current course of the war in Ukraine, psychological support will remain a burning issue for WLOs in both Ukraine and Poland. In Poland, precarity in displacement has been identified as intensifying the likelihood of developing PTSD as a clinical condition.[41] One organisation leader saw the outlook of PTSD as a pertinent frame for envisaging the future work of her organisation:

> "*[PTSD is not an illness visible at once], but only after three years. So, according to psychologists' predictions, we will soon see the first symptoms. And, unfortunately, PTSD is a disease that can kill the psyche very effectively even 30 years after a war trauma. Therefore, we all have boundless amounts of work to do.*"

This observation is important in Poland as the traumatic nature of war displacement is frequently overlooked in political discussions about further reforms of support for Ukrainian refugees. The key arguments used when justifying reforms are a discourse of equality – that there should not be discrimination between the treatment of Poles and Ukrainians – and a narrative of normalisation – that after almost three years in Poland, Ukrainians can be expected to fend for themselves. These discussions overlook that the everyday lives of Ukrainians in Poland are shaped by the trauma of war.

c) Economic Resilience and Personal Agency

As described above, a key element in the work of Ukrainian WLOs is that it is not only a question of delivering aid, but rather engaging with those affected by war and helping them rebuild their personal agency.

In Ukraine, many women-led organisations recognized early on that, while addressing immediate humanitarian needs like food, hygiene kits, and medicine was critical, communities required a **broader and more sustainable range of services**. This realisation was particularly significant for organisations that had previously focused on gender-specific issues, such as addressing gender-based violence (GBV), advancing women's economic empowerment, and promoting gender equality. To respond effectively to the evolving needs of their communities, these organisations developed a hybrid model that combined emergency humanitarian aid with stabilisation initiatives aimed at fostering long-term resilience.

41 Bilewicz, M., Babińska, M., & Gromova, A. (2024) 'High rates of probable PTSD among Ukrainian war refugees: the role of intolerance of uncertainty, loss of control and subsequent discrimination.' *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 15(1).

A defining feature of this approach was the **integration of direct aid with capacity-building programs**. Many WLOs also implemented **skills training, business development support, and retraining programs** for women affected by the war, teaching them how to navigate state assistance systems, prepare official requests, access public resources, and help them achieve independence and stability. A leader of an organisation from the centre of Ukraine explained: *"We teach women how to start small businesses, apply for microgrants, and retrain for jobs in demand. It's not about survival; it's about helping them thrive in new circumstances"*. These programs reflected a broader commitment to creating pathways for long-term recovery and economic resilience, addressing not only the symptoms of displacement but also its root causes.

These efforts also included community-wide economic empowerment initiatives, such as vocational training tailored to local market needs. In rural areas, WLOs conducted participatory needs-assessments, identifying the critical intersection of livelihoods and immediate humanitarian needs. For instance, one program offered agricultural training to women in areas affected by the war, enabling them to secure stable incomes by participating in sustainable farming cooperatives. By addressing systemic barriers – such as limited access to childcare or discriminatory employment practices – the organisation not only empowered women individually but also contributed to the economic stability of the broader community.

In Poland, the challenge of enabling Ukrainians to work in line with their qualifications has long been one of the principal areas where migrant NGOs were active.[42] In doing so, Ukrainian WLOs take a holistic approach to women's professional development, as for example in the work of the Ukrainian Women's Clubs at the Ukrainian House in Warsaw. The Ukrainian Women's Club was developed at the Ukrainian House as a resource for the professional development of Ukrainian women in migration in 2014; their work has been expanded in the light of the war. In the clubs, a wide variety of activities are offered to women with the aim of combining the provision of women with skills and information with the creation of safe spaces where women develop mutual relations and exchange resources. The programs of the clubs are developed in collaboration with the women who attend; and often the women who start as participants develop into activity leaders. In other words, these women move from being those needing support to those providing support and receiving income for this work. A similar approach of providing specific tools for personal economic resilience within an overall frame of holistic support was described by Ukrainian WLOs in their approach to vocational support, IT support and language classes.

Similarly, in Ukraine work within WLOs is noted as a significant path for the professional development of those affected by war. **WLOs have also created employment pathways for women who initially joined as volunteers.** As one leader of a women-led initiative from a community in the north of Ukraine shared: *"Many of the women who volunteered with us became part of our team. We trained them, built their skills, and gave them opportunities to lead. Their dedication has been invaluable".*

d) Cultural Proximity

For many Ukrainian women's organisations in Poland, **cultural activities formed an integral part of their spectrum of services supporting refugees**. In the context of the war, artistic workshops and meetings with artists, or the process of co-creation, as in the case of camouflage nets, become a therapeutic tool and a way to build community. A local activist in Mazovia presented exhibitions of paintings based on workshops in a local library. The paintings were accompanied by QR codes through which viewers could access the voices of refugee women telling their stories. Another local leader uses Ukrainian ethnic traditions as the basis of the films she creates through workshops with refugee children, in a town in

42 O. Fedyuk, M. Kindler (eds.) (2020) *Ukrainian Migration to the European Union*, IMISCOE Research Series.

the Mazovia region. In these examples, culture becomes a tool for expressing the range of experiences and emotions produced in reaction to war, and for building shared experience. The cultural dimension is thus integral to the specificity of the relations that Ukrainian WLOs are able to establish with refugees in Poland.

This dimension emerged in a different modality in the work of a foundation, led by Ukrainian women refugees, providing support in cases of human trafficking. A central role in the creation of the foundation – and the way its support is communicated – is played by a personalised online avatar. This avatar was designed in the image of and named after the leader's niece, who travelled with her to Poland. The decision to use a child from the family as the model for the online image of a vibrant woman wielding a sword went against the family's principles of protecting children from social media. However, in the moment of crisis, family experience and design were combined in order to communicate support in a form that is both anonymous, due to technology, and personalised. In this instance, creativity was deliberately deployed to mark what the leader saw as the organisation's greatest asset: its personal engagement. *"Notwithstand[ing] the fact that I have a lot of knowledge, experience of training sessions, and all that, I think our greatest strength is that we care. [...] Women affected by war help other women affected by war. And in the most difficult cases."* In the case of this organisation, the difficulty regarding cases of abusive relationships and human trafficking is offset by personal engagement and cultural proximity. Creativity, as in the development of the avatar based on her personal family story, is used as a means of expressing this different mode of engagement.

In Ukraine, WLOs working near frontline areas also use art as a key component in establishing **youth hubs** and safe spaces, even in high-risk environments. These hubs provide services such as **art therapy, educational support, thematic workshops, and psychological counselling**. A leader of an initiative from the south of Ukraine working in frontline regions described their motivation as that of using a mix of activities to rebuild hope: *"Our children lost two years to COVID and now two years to war. They need education, socialisation, and hope for the future. That's what we're trying to give them"*.

For Ukrainian WLOs in Poland culture functions as a tool for integration activities between refugees and host communities. By protecting and promoting cultural heritage, organisations build a sense of connection between their activities in the diaspora and those still in Ukraine. For example, there is a Ukrainian initiative in a small town in Mazovia organising meetings to discuss oral histories of the war in Borodianka. Another organisation supports refugee children in Mazovia with activities such as the creation of a board-game exploring their town as a multicultural space, havea large-scale embroidery project called "Visions of good neighbourliness", which runs until Ukraine's Independence Day[43] next year.

Securing funding for cultural activities as part of a humanitarian response is difficult, and it is a challenge for international humanitarian organisations, for whose mode of work universal approaches are key. In the case of Ukrainian WLOs, a shared cultural intimacy is at the heart of relationships between those affected by war and those providing support. As the war extends, the role of culture in maintaining morale and a sense of individual human agency becomes more significant.

e) Geographical differences

Women-led organisations in Ukraine and Poland are adapting to geographical differences, addressing the unique needs of frontline villages, rural areas, and urban centres while building strong cross-border connections to deliver aid and support.

43 Ukraine's Independence Day, celebrated annually on August 24, commemorates the adoption of the Declaration of Independence of Ukraine.

In the case of Ukraine, out of the barriers and opportunities for humanitarian action emerges a **new geography of humanitarian support** that reflects the evolving dynamics of the war in Ukraine and its ripple effects. Differentiation in **geographical access, needs, and organisational responses** highlights both the challenges and ingenuity of women-led organisations in delivering aid.

WLOs in Ukraine have been instrumental in addressing the needs of communities in frontline and rural areas where access is challenging. These regions often face significant gaps in aid delivery due to security risks and logistical constraints. A grassroots initiative operating near the frontlines in the south of Ukraine shared that they consistently delivered essential supplies such as food and medicines to villages under threat: *"Our volunteers deliver food and medicines to villages close to the fighting because nobody else goes there. It's dangerous, but people are waiting for us"*.

In rural areas, WLOs have also addressed specific community needs, such as supporting vulnerable populations during harsh winter months. One leader of an informal volunteer group from the south of Ukraine described their focus on elderly residents, ensuring the delivery of hygiene products and critical medicines despite limited transportation options: *"Even when roads were impassable, we found ways to get aid to those who needed it most"*. Their work also extended beyond material aid, offering psychosocial support to help alleviate the mental health burden faced by these populations.

Women-led organisations have not only succeeded in reaching hard-to-access areas but have also fostered **connections between different geographical locations** in Ukraine. These networks allow for the movement of resources and knowledge between urban hubs and frontline or rural regions. For instance, WLOs in cities like Kyiv and Dnipro often coordinate with grassroots groups near the frontlines, ensuring that critical supplies – such as food, hygiene kits, and medical aid – are delivered to areas most affected by the war. A leader of a women-led organisation from Kyiv shared: *"We take supplies from donors in Kyiv and send them to women volunteers working close to the fighting. They know exactly where to go and who needs the help"*.

In Poland as a result of the escalation, there is a new infrastructure of organisations and initiatives led by Ukrainian women that responds to the new scale of Ukrainians in towns and cities throughout Poland. One of the research participants from a town in Silesia made the point that 10% of the inhabitants of the town were now Ukrainians and that they needed support. While her organisation was an active part of the local NGO networks, she expressed frustration that it was invisible to INGOs and from the perspective of Warsaw. A number of Ukrainian WLOs in different cities portray cooperation with local institutions in developing initiatives; including an organisation in Katowice that runs a Ukrainian library in cooperation with a local college of higher education, an organisation in Olsztyń that collaborates with the town's social welfare office to run a youth centre for refugees, and a Ukrainian playschool founded by a Ukrainian WLO in Szczecin that works in cooperation with the pedagogical department of Szczecin University to develop a dual Ukrainian–Polish playschool curriculum.

These initiatives demonstrate how Ukrainian WLOs bring innovation into local urban environments in Poland. Another example was reported in Kraków, where an organisation supporting refugees with disabilities noted the lack of a hairdresser accessible for those with physical or mental disabilities. The organisation, therefore, arranged for a refugee woman, who has a disabled child and a husband serving in the military, to provide haircuts in a space specially adapted for this kind of clientele.

While these examples indicate a potential of Ukrainian WLOs at the local level, Ukrainian WLO leaders felt that this was not fully utilised. One WLO leader in the focus group discussion on the experiences of Ukrainian WLOs in Polish provincial towns saw the need for a change in perception:

> *"I would like to show more how we are a resource for local communities, that we*

> *are taxpayers, that we can create and develop businesses, develop foundations, realise great projects, and I would like to radically change the image of a person with a migration experience. [...] I would like it to be perceived as a potential, because now it is perceived differently. I think we really need to work on this image, because, in fact, we did not flee poverty from our country, we fled war, we want to save our children."*

As the above comment indicates, the experiences of Ukrainian WLOs in terms of cooperation with local authorities in Poland are ambivalent, even despite the new roles they have taken on. Ukrainian women leaders reported very **different experiences in interacting with local authorities**. Many of the research participants, both in big cities and in smaller towns, spoke of successful interactions with local councils and public institutions, especially in the early days of the full-scale invasion. Many of them equally reported difficulties arising from local support drying up after 2022. Others spoke of frustrations with city councils, particularly in their inability to effectively coordinate refugee support and realign city programs to include the now significant Ukrainian component of the population. An organisation from Kraków, for example, noted that Polish city social welfare policies – such as those addressing the needs of a particular section of the population, especially the elderly – so far fail to take into account that 10% of the elderly in the city are from Ukraine.[44]

Almost all the organisations we spoke to **mentioned a lack of premises adequate to the new level and scale of services** that they now provide. While serving organisations' practical needs, such premises would also act as a representative point for Ukrainians within their local communities.

At a larger scale, **this new infrastructure of Ukrainian WLOs in Poland also encompasses cross-border relations with Ukraine.** The organisations distributing aid to Ukraine, spoke of the role that personal connections played in ensuring that aid was directly targeted to trusted groups and individuals who need it. One organisation spoke of the obstacles and frustrations caused by the unpredictability and frequent changes in the Ukrainian system of the control of goods travelling across the border. Consequently, the hands-on experience of her organisation in resolving these issues makes them a key expert in navigating connections between Poland and Ukraine.

Ukrainian women leading groups making camouflage nets form an example of bottom-up initiatives with both local and international impact. The making of nets has therapeutic and community-building value amongst groups of refugees – including those unable to work – in different towns in Poland. At the same time, the women leading such groups act as connectors between those sending aid from different international locations and to those receiving the aid in specific locations around Ukraine. For one leader of a net-making group, for example, this involves travelling to Bavaria to pick up a fire engine and driving the fire engine herself, ensuring its hand-over in Kharkiv.

Ukrainian women leaders of organisations in Poland described still being active in organisations or on councils in their hometowns in Ukraine, including in now largely destroyed frontline locations. Many also mentioned fulfilling requests for medicine and other forms of aid from those still in Ukraine.

Women-led organisations in Ukraine have demonstrated remarkable capacity for horizontal collaboration, particularly in connecting geographically

44 Several participants mentioned how the refugee communities in smaller towns had changed over the three years of the war, with the most talented draining away to major cities. The geographical spread of Ukrainian led organisations, and how they match with the dynamics of change of the Ukrainian population in Poland will require further research. See: work done at the Laboratory of Urban and Regional Migration Policies at Warsaw University's Centre for Migration Research: https://www.migracje.uw.edu.pl/projects/the-laboratory-of-urban-and-regional-migration-policies/; Wojdat, M., Cywiński, P. (2022). *Urban Hospitality: Unprecedented Growth, Challenges, and Opportunities. A Report on Ukrainian Refugees in the Largest Polish Cities*. Union of Polish Metropolises.

diverse regions to ensure aid reaches the most vulnerable. These collaborations are vital in overcoming logistical challenges and ensuring that rural and frontline communities receive the necessary support. A respondent from a WLO noted that their team partnered with organisations in other regions to share resources and streamline aid distribution. In the south of Ukraine, women's organisations have developed networks that enable them to mobilise resources rapidly and to coordinate responses effectively. These networks bridge urban centres and remote villages, thus fostering a unified response strategy. One leader from a Ukrainian NGO emphasized that these collaborations were crucial for sharing knowledge about specific community needs and devising tailored responses that reflect local realities: *"We build bridges between cities and villages, coordinating deliveries of aid and sharing information about people's needs"*. This ability to connect geographically diverse areas underscores the strength of locally rooted networks led by women.

We do not underestimate the challenges involved in developing partnership between different spaces against the destructive backdrop of the war. However, **the work of Ukrainian women's led initiatives in Ukraine and Poland establishes an emergent social infrastructure connecting the different micro-level contexts of everyday experiences with international networks of cooperation and support**. In Poland, some organisations reported cooperation between Ukrainian led organisations in different cities in Poland. Many also mentioned that they were grateful for the chance to exchange experiences and ideas through this research, and would welcome more substantial connections. This is a promising new geography that needs further support.

The work of Ukrainian women's led initiatives in Ukraine and Poland establishes an emergent social infrastructure connecting the different micro-level contexts of everyday experiences with international networks of cooperation and support.

We are actually a resource for ourselves… But in truth, it's getting harder and harder and harder every time.

Ukrainian refugee
WLO leader in Poland

Challenges for Ukrainian women-led organisations

After three years of humanitarian action, Ukrainian women led organisations find themselves in situations of intense pressure. Women-led organisations in Ukraine in particular deal with exhaustion and barriers to accessing and processing funding. Organisations in Poland confront severe precarity, emerging as a result of funding-related and political uncertainty. In both cases, we diagnose a mismatch between the value of the work performed by Ukrainian women led organisations and the frameworks that support them.

a) Exhaustion

In Ukraine, the intense demands of humanitarian work have led to **burnout** and **resource exhaustion** among WLO teams. Many leaders described the physical and emotional toll of their work, particularly in smaller or frontline communities. A focus group respondent from the north of Ukraine shared: *"People [in the community] don't realise we work for free. We give everything we have, and then we're met with complaints or resentment. It's frustrating and exhausting"*.

The burden of **unpaid care work** is another significant barrier adding to the burden carried by women in providing humanitarian support. Many women leading WLOs are simultaneously caregivers, balancing the demands of supporting their families with their professional and volunteer roles. As a leader from an NGO operating in a frontline area shared during a focus group discussion: *"I organise humanitarian aid, coordinate volunteers, and then come home to take care of my children and elderly parents. There's no time to rest"*. This dual responsibility creates **physical and emotional exhaustion**, further exacerbated by the stresses of ongoing conflict.

In most organisations in Ukraine, women work as sole proprietors (FOPs[45]), which means they lack social protections such as paid leave or sick days. This affects their work strategies (e.g. working longer hours), limits their free time (leaving almost none), and prevents them from recovering fully when sick, given their heavy workload and commitments.

In Ukraine, some organisations have decided to reduce or close their humanitarian work, citing team burnout and the emotional toll of this type of work as key reasons. Local leaders in both countries noted that humanitarian work can have significant psychological strain and impact people's morale and motivation. One leader of an organisation in Ukraine described how relations with her organisation had been changed by humanitarian work:

45 FOP – a legal status for self-employed or small-scale entrepreneurs in Ukraine.

> "*There is burnout in the team. Humanitarian work takes a lot of energy. Honestly, from a psychological perspective, dealing with ungrateful people who always feel entitled to something is exhausting. We've noticed that people now see our organisation not as a group capable of creating and driving community development, but just as an organisation that hands out aid and money. And they aren't even embarrassed to say that they don't see us as recognizable or unique*."

For Ukrainians in Poland, it can seem uncomfortable to note the strain of maintaining humanitarian support, when the burden on those back in Ukraine, and especially close to the frontline, is much more intense. However, humanitarian action in the diaspora has specific modalities of fatigue. One refugee organisation leader provides a poignant description of the adaptability and resourcefulness that she has learned in different contexts and responding to different stages of crisis. However, she also gestures to a profound entropy of a crisis that has so many levels, and from which currently it is difficult to see an exit.

> "*We are actually a resource for ourselves. Due to the fact that we are psychologists, consultants, and mothers ourselves. For example, I have five children, and four of them are with me here. And I need to take care of them all and work harder, help others. But I have been working in this mode for many years. That's why I have these skills, I know how to cope, how to get myself up again when I'm lying comatose. But in truth, it's getting harder and harder and harder every time. And you just realise that it's not clear when it will end, it's not clear when it will get easier.*"

Many organisation leaders in Poland consider their drive or their character to be the primary resource they draw on. They spoke of the need to keep helping because they are in an easier situation than those in Ukraine; this awareness of asymmetry resulted in challenges on how to maintain a proper work–life balance. A leader of an organisation supporting refugees with disabilities voiced the psychological and physical challenges of being a mother and moving with children, who have disabilities. The leader mentioned that a child of one of her staff members had recently passed away in palliative care. For those working in the organisation, this child's death had raised the question afresh of how to achieve a balance between working to support others and the need to dedicate time to your own children, especially if this time is limited.

A leader of an informal initiative providing creative workshops for refugee children in a small town in the Mazovia region spoke movingly of being a single parent also dealing with oncological illness. In conclusion, she expressed an underlying existential drive, fundamental to the perspective of Ukrainian organisations: the humanitarian crisis is a question of survival. *"Honestly, this is an evolutionary moment, our task is to survive, each of us. And this is what drives us. And how successful we will be depends on two things: health and money, that's all".*

b) Displacement and Recognition

In Ukraine, women leaders described how local authorities and communities were often unaccustomed to working with new, relocated organisations, resulting in initial **mistrust and scepticism**. As one key informant from an organisation displaced from the south of Ukraine explained: *"When we arrived, we were seen as outsiders. People didn't trust us to help – neither [did] the authorities nor the local communities. They thought we didn't understand their situation"*.

Building trust in new geographical contexts required significant effort. Communities were sometimes hesitant to engage with organisations they perceived as "outsiders". A leader from an NGO in the centre of Ukraine explained: *"We had to show through action that we were here to help – not compete with local groups. It took months of hard work to gain trust"*. Another leader from an organisation displaced from the east of Ukraine stated: *"We had been doing this work for years in Donetsk. But when we relocated, it was like starting over – explaining who we are and proving our credibility all over again"*.

In Poland, some organisations, particularly those working outside metropolises, encountered barriers in achieving recognition or acceptance amongst already functioning networks of NGOs. Several organisations confronted an openly stated unwillingness to cooperate with NGOs that were not already known. New organisations mentioned a need for exchanges of information and for developing contacts, and organisations in smaller towns spoke of their desire for more cooperation between different locations.[46]

In the Polish context this is particularly important, as the research indicated integration into local networks, notably those of NGOs, is a powerful enabling factor in the development of Ukrainian women-led NGOs in Poland. An organisation working to counter human trafficking praised the network of organisations in Poland working to fight for reproductive rights. This organisation cooperated with a Polish NGO to provide in-depth legal, medical, and emotional support to a person with disabilities who had suffered sexual abuse as well as stalking. This is a powerful testimony, as to the value of cooperation between Polish and Ukrainian organisations.

c) Precarity

In Ukraine, women-led organisations consistently report the challenges posed by a lack of financial support from international partners for operational costs.[47] While international actors often fund specific projects or aid distributions, critical expenses such as office rent, utilities, internet, transportation, and even stipends for volunteers remain uncovered. This gap has led to unsustainable working conditions for many organisations. One respondent from the centre of Ukraine described the toll this has taken: *"We became the hands and feet of aid delivery, but donors didn't cover our basic [organisational] costs. Eventually, it wore us down, and we had to stop"*.

For many WLOs in Ukraine, current changes in funding dynamics pose an existential threat. An organisation from the centre of Ukraine highlighted the strain on operational capacity in transit regions: *"In 2022, we were helping 2,000-4,000 people every day. We grew our teams when donors arrived, but now funding has dropped, and we don't know how to keep the offices running"*. As funding declines, civil society organisations and volunteers often cover gaps out of their own pockets, but this approach is no longer tenable. One leader from the north of Ukraine illustrated this reality: *"We're not asking for a salary. But if at least some costs could be covered... In our project, for example, even banking services weren't included. We took it from our account, transferred it, and I paid banking fees out of my pension that is 2361 UAH. I paid 1050 UAH for services"*.

The strain is particularly acute for frontline and local organisations. These organisations experienced exponential growth following the start of the full-scale invasion, with some expanding their teams threefold, fivefold, or even tenfold to meet rising demands. However, the absence of stable funding makes managing these larger teams increasingly difficult. One leader of a Ukrainian NGO explained, *"There were few humanitarian projects where you could get regular assistance. It wasn't sustainable – you'd get something once, and that was it. People ask, and you can't even answer when"*.

For WLOs in Ukraine, short-term funding for projects remains a significant barrier. On average, most projects span only 4 to 6 months, leaving organisations in a constant state of flux and limiting their ability to grow, plan strategically, or make a broader regional impact. A leader from a small NGO in the north of Ukraine explained*: "Our projects are typically short-term, and the administrative percentage allocated is very small. Most of the work has been driven by enthusiasm. There was some funding for administration, but it wasn't enough to make staying in the community a sustainable decision"*.

46 The need for more cooperation was also reported in Leskiw, O., Leskiw, M., Harasym, T. (2024) *Raport z badania ukraińskich aktorów społecznych w Polsce: Analiza potrzeb i wyzwań*.

47 When respondents in the interviews refer to "donors," they are typically referencing international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) that provide funding to national and local NGOs in Ukraine and Poland. Direct funding from institutional donors to small national organisations is rare, with most resources being channelled through intermediaries such as INGOs.

This situation exacerbates a pressure on organisations – particularly those that are smaller or newly established ones – to accept any and every funding opportunity that presents itself. Respondents noted that the fear of future rejection forces many to take on unsustainable workloads, even when project terms are unsound, or misaligned with their organisational priorities. As one charity leader from the centre of Ukraine explained, *"We understand that if you refuse once, no one will offer you anything again. Even if they ask you to write a flawed project, and you know it will reflect poorly on you, if you refuse, they won't invite you to participate next time"*.

Organisations in frontline areas like Kherson and Zaporizhzhia highlighted that external pressures often require immediate reallocations of resources, a flexibility that is not always accommodated by current funding structures. One leader from a city in the south of Ukraine remarked on the difficulty of adapting to these conditions*: "When shelling happens, priorities change in an instant. We can't always follow the original plan, but explaining this to donors is another layer of work we don't have time for"*. Another respondent from a national NGO operating close to frontlines described the logistical challenges of relocating staff under fire in similar terms: *"We had to move people at a moment's notice. There was no time to submit a request to donors or justify the expense; we just had to act"*.

While some organisations have access to funds for unforeseen expenses, such arrangements are rare and insufficiently widespread. A leader of an organisation from the west of Ukraine shared an example of such support: *"We have an agreement with one donor for unforeseen expenses. For instance, when a window cracked in Kryvyi Rih due to an explosion, we could replace it with these funds. But this is just one partner that allows this. Such flexibility in funding is crucial when working with partners"*.

To address these challenges, respondents emphasized the need for international actors to adopt funding models that include provisions for operational costs as part of project budgets. Additionally, they called for more flexible and long-term funding arrangements to provide stability and allow organisations to focus on strategic, impactful work rather than constant fundraising and reporting. As one leader of a national NGO from Ukraine succinctly stated, *"We're not just delivering aid; we're rebuilding lives and communities. But without basic support, we can't do it for much longer"*. Respondents consistently called for a shift toward more sustainable, institution-oriented funding. As one leader from south of Ukraine summarized: *"We need funding that supports not just our projects but our people. Without that, we're running on empty"*.

In the Polish case, 2022 was characterised by a temporary abundance of resources, which were crucial in enabling the emergence or rapid growth of Ukrainian WLOs in a range of locations. Despite this, less than half of the 30 organisation and initiative leaders we interviewed lived primarily from the income they earn from running their organisations. Less than a third of the organisations were directly funded by international humanitarian associations. The majority received support from a mix of grants from Polish NGOs, local authorities, civil society development organisations, the Erasmus Programme, donations etc. Organisations that have upscaled have also managed to offset the costs of rapid growth by running projects with a dizzying array of international donors.

Frictions between diaspora humanitarian support and funding structures

Organisations in Poland providing aid to Ukraine functioned primarily through donations, as part of their support was distributed to and through the army. For Ukrainian organisations in Poland the distinction between the military and civil society in Ukraine is not always clear-cut, since many people have relatives or friends from all segments of society who are now part of the army.[48] The military also supports humanitarian assistance through its distribution networks to frontline areas. Ukrainian WLOs did not draw a categorical distinction to whom first aid kits, generators, and other equipment were sent: the moral imperative was to support Ukraine. After three years of war, organisations in Poland working to gather and distribute aid to Ukraine describe a context in which raising funds through donations becomes ever more difficult, while the needs in Ukraine only intensify.

For Ukrainian organisations in Poland that had received support from international humanitarian organisations, the injunction that they should strictly avoid "military connotations" was at odds with a moral obligation to demonstrate solidarity with those actively defending Ukraine. The outcome was a difficult dance in which both Ukrainian led NGOs and international humanitarian organisations tried to incorporate the perspectives of the other party, but also experienced frustration.[49]

In Poland, women leaders also reported that the constraints of humanitarian support meant that organisations had to nuance their work or re-prioritise activities to fit into the availability of programmatic funding. Ukrainian organisations went through a somewhat "Jekyll and Hyde" experience of receiving visits from international organisations who expressed delight at the genuine and multivalent services provided, and then engaged in difficult, time-consuming consultations to realign these services to the donor's categorisations.

A leader of an organisation expressed her frustration about the dissonance between supporting victims of sexual violence and the funding frameworks:

> *"For many organisations, if they receive money from donors to help in Poland, they then have to report on how many refugees they have served in Malopolska and how many in Silesia. And this contradicts my ethical principles. I believe that aid should not look like this, that I should not base my aid plans on geography or on my KPIs for rape. I am shocked when some funders ask me directly how many rapes you are planning for the next month."*

48 See Hargrave, K., Bryant, J., Jarosz, S., et al. (2024) *Narratives and the Ukraine response: implications for humanitarian action and principles.*

49 Atali, T. (2023) 'Why Ukraine is moving the needle on old debates about humanitarian neutrality'. *The New Humanitarian*, 16 May.

In Poland, virtually all the Ukrainian WLOs with whom we talked in late 2024 described a constraint on resources that threatened the sustainability of their activities. In this context, one Ukrainian WLO leader made the argument that Ukrainian organisations offer better value for money because they are closer to the needs of beneficiaries. It is the localness of the organisation's knowledge, its embeddedness in the refugee experience, that she cites as the organisation's competitive advantage and also as a money-saving potential. Yet this local knowledge and the individually tailored approach of Ukrainian women's led NGOs is undervalued in the statistics-driven planning of most donors. She noted:

> "*Our opinion is important because we are the ones who work with these people, we know their needs, we know how to use this money better, not the way [an INGO] would come along and do it.*"

In the Polish case, the withdrawal of international organisations coincides with the Polish state's rolling back of welfare support for refugees. Moreover, it is unknown what the status of Ukrainian refugees in Poland will be after September 2025, when the current version of the Special Act for the Support of Ukrainians ends. Most refugees primarily support themselves through paid income, and their average wages are low.[50] For a leader who moved through various interim stages from Donetsk to Suwalki, the material realities of women in her town limited the kinds of support that she could offer them: *"In Suwalki, they work 12 hours a day at the factory, and have one day off. They need to come home, do their laundry, lie down, cook enough beetroot soup for the whole week, and that's it".* In this context, the precarity now faced by many NGOs in Poland hits Ukrainian WLOs particularly hard.

Considering the prolongation of the war, Ukrainian organisations in Poland, much like their counterparts in Ukraine, identify a strong necessity for institutional rather than project-based support and spoke warmly of rare donors who have been willing to offer flexible funding. One organisation leader argued that Polish authorities should recognise the value of the work done by Ukrainian WLOs and provide some stable funding.

> "*If there was just some kind of funding – without grants, without making up different stories about different workshops and so on. You are a support organisation, you want to help, and for there just to be something coming from, for example, the Polish authorities. Because we are in some way dealing with people and taking on their responsibilities*."

d) Personnel

In the immediate aftermath of the war escalation, most Ukrainian organisations in Poland relied primarily on volunteer work. On the back of the new level of needs and mass offers of volunteer support, **organisations underwent a period of super-acceleration and started to work on a much larger scale.** Some, on the wave of the influx of resources, were able to hire staff, primarily the volunteers who were already working for their organisation. This required the expansion and the rearrangement of organisational structures to be appropriate for much larger teams. These teams largely developed their experience on the job, reacting to the successive phases of the crisis. As a result, the knowledge developed by the organisations over their three years of humanitarian action is for the most part contained in the personnel who work for them.

Other organisations are still primarily built on volunteer work for tasks such as leading masterclasses, packing humanitarian aid, coordinating camouflage net making, running conversation classes, interpreting at visits to doctors, making exhibitions. Several organisations reflected on the benefits of volunteer work in creating warmth in the community: an organisation leader in Warsaw, for example, stated that people from *"all over Ukraine, from Mariupol, from Kherson, from Kharkiv, from Poltava, many from Donetsk, students and workers pop round in breaks or after work to pack boxes for a couple of hours"*. This voluntary work generates a feel-good factor for a community of like-minded people doing whatever they can to support Ukraine. One participant, on the other hand, reflected rather cynically that in Poland there is an expectation that the NGO sector should be run on the basis of free labour performed outside the hours of a primary job.

By 2024 – despite there not being a discernible change in the overall war situation, nor of the needs encountered by Ukrainians in Poland – Ukrainian WLOs confront the **challenge of maintaining services with the shrinking availability of either volunteers or of resources to employ staff, or both**. The trajectory of one migrant organisation reflects how the roller-coaster availability of resources has affected organisations; their staff started from a pre-war number of 12, increased to 115 in 2022, and is now back to only about 30 to 40 people. Ukrainian WLOs have faced a dramatic challenge of how to reorganise and manage organisations on a much larger scale, and now equally how to deal with their shrinking. The majority of people who started working for Ukrainian led organisations are Ukrainian women migrants and refugees: thus, **institutional precarity also implies economic uncertainty for the refugee women working there**. How to build a sustainable organisation based on the experiences of the last years and how to humanely manage the reduction of their staff are challenges currently facing many organisations.

The challenges of late 2024, in terms of the relations between resources and personnel, are experienced somewhat differently by newer organisations. A leader of an organisation in a provincial town in Poland described her current situation as follow:

> *"If I look upset right now for some reason, it's because the year is ending and I'm running out of money. And I'm sitting here, thinking about resources. At the beginning, I had no resources: now I have human resources – not just me personally, because I used to be a one-woman orchestra – now I have people who deal with paperwork, I have people who are creative, I found a person who writes grants. She hasn't received anything yet, but it doesn't matter, at least she's writing, at least I'm not spending time on it anymore. I mean, I have everything, if only there was more funding now. We have loads of everything else."*

In Ukraine, a shortage of personnel presents a critical challenge for both the country and its civil sector, compounded by intersecting issues of gender imbalances and gendered expectations. Respondents highlighted the urgent need for skilled experts, yet the available talent pool has been significantly diminished. **Professionals have emigrated or transitioned to international organisations, and financial pressures have forced many to leave civic activities altogether**. This talent drain disproportionately affects women, who often bear additional caregiving responsibilities that restrict their professional mobility and engagement. A leader from the north of Ukraine explained: *"Two years have passed, and some women, particularly because we are in remote villages, are seeking better opportunities and are beginning to leave. They move to larger cities and so on. Even within our team, we are seeing an outflow of people who are vital resources for us. While we continue to collaborate remotely, it is no longer the same level of cooperation"*.

The shortage is particularly acute in rural and frontline areas, where opportunities for professional growth and capacity-building are limited. One respondent from a national NGO noted that the migration of skilled workers has created gaps in leadership and organisational continuity, adding: *"The ones who leave are often those with the most experience, the ones we rely on for big decisions. Losing them means starting over with less experienced people who need training we can't always provide"*. This challenge is further complicated by the fact that rural women, in particular, face heightened barriers to accessing professional op-

50 Dudek, B., Panuciak, A., Strzelecki, P. (2024) *Sytuacja życiowa i ekonomiczna migrantów z Ukrainy w Polsce w 2024 roku*.

portunities due to caregiving responsibilities and a lack of local support networks. The geographical isolation of some WLOs limits their ability to attract qualified specialists or participate in capacity-building opportunities. As one participant of the focus group discussion from on frontline community explained: *"It's hard to bring experts to our village. Travel costs and accommodation make it expensive, and donors don't always account for these logistical challenges"*.

Many organisations reported struggles with maintaining team cohesion amidst the evacuation of staff members and their families, the need for medical and psychological support for team members, and the logistical difficulties of relocation. A respondent from the north of Ukraine described the emotional toll on her team: *"We've lost team members to relocation, and those who remain are exhausted. They need support, but we don't have the resources to provide it"*. A respondent from a WLO in the north of Ukraine also highlighted the emotional exhaustion of her team and expressed her concerns about her ability to look after them: *"We're asking people to do incredible work under unbearable conditions. They're tired, grieving, and often homeless themselves. How can we support others if we don't first support our teams?"*

Smaller organisations struggle to retain core teams due to the short-term nature of projects, insecure funding, and the migration of trained staff to larger NGOs or international organisations. A leader from the south of Ukraine noted that this trend creates significant gaps in institutional knowledge and operational capacity: *"We train people, invest in them, and then they leave. It's understandable – they need stability – but it's devastating for us as an organisation"*. Larger organisations, while better resourced, face similar difficulties in maintaining expanded teams. One NGO leader operating across multiple regions described the impact of dwindling humanitarian funding: *"Funding for humanitarian response has decreased overall. In 2023, we had the most funding from humanitarian organisations. We had 60 people, and now we're down to about 45 across four regions"*.

Another layer to this issue is the difficulty of retaining younger professionals, who are often drawn to better-paying and more stable roles outside the civil sector. Respondents repeatedly emphasized that NGOs cannot compete with international organisations in terms of salaries and benefits. As one leader of a national NGO explained: *"We train these young women, invest in their development, and then they leave for international organisations because they offer what we can't – financial stability, career paths, and resources"*. This constant turnover not only disrupts operations but also drains institutional knowledge from local organisations.

Without sustainable funding, organisations are unable to offer competitive salaries or secure long-term commitments from their teams. Respondents from frontline areas described how this precarious situation places additional strain on female leaders, who must often take on extra responsibilities to compensate for staff shortages. One participant of the focus group discussion from on frontline community remarked, *"We're expected to do everything – manage projects, deliver aid, write reports, and now, find new people to replace those who have left. It's exhausting, and there's no end in sight"*. Organisations in both countries mentioned the need to set up specialized roles for communication, monitoring and evaluation, and administration, but funding constraints make it difficult to create dedicated positions. These responsibilities are often distributed unevenly, with women frequently bearing a disproportionate share of the workload, leading to inefficiency and burnout. To address these challenges, respondents called for targeted interventions, including funding mechanisms that allow NGOs to offer competitive salaries and invest in staff development. Investing in capacity-building programs specifically designed for rural and frontline areas was identified as a priority to help rebuild the talent pipeline. A leader from the south of Ukraine noted, *"We need support to train and retain people locally. Otherwise, we'll keep losing our best to larger cities or international organisations"*. As another leader of an organisation from west of Ukraine emphasised, if we want to build sustainability then people are key: *"Sustainability isn't just about projects. It's about people – their skills, their well-being, and their ability to stay in this work"*.

e) Caregiving

The influence of **gender roles** on women's leadership and participation in the civil sector is profound, particularly in the context of caregiving responsibilities. **These roles not only limit women's ability to engage fully in professional opportunities but also reinforce systemic barrier**s that undermine their contributions. In the turbulent context of Ukraine, these restrictions are especially profound. While further research is needed, several preliminary observations illustrate the challenges women face today.

Caregiving responsibilities impose significant constraints on women's professional activities, particularly in frontline or smaller communities where **gender norms** often dictate their availability. This limits women's ability to attend offline events and training sessions, thereby reducing their access to essential information, skills, and networking opportunities. As a respondent from the south of Ukraine shared:

> "*I have children and a family, and I cannot always attend offline training sessions that I would like to. My child is attending online school, and there is no one to leave her with because her grandmother lives in another village. We are also constantly on the move, renting homes in different places. This affects not only me but also other women in similar situations who cannot attend events or training they want to*."

For refugee women in Poland – who commonly care for children without the support of other family members – the ability to participate in humanitarian work is tied to the rhythms of the public provision of childcare in playschools and schools. Research participants described how refugees who work during school holidays, weekends, and evenings encounter problems in combining this work with childcare.

The challenges extend beyond logistics to include significant financial burdens. Women frequently pay out of pocket for childcare or eldercare arrangements to participate in work-related activities, further entrenching gender-based inequalities. A leader of an NGO from the west of Ukraine that is working with Roma women highlighted the broader implications of this issue: *"We strongly support practices that allow women to bring their children to events with organized childcare. However, in cases where this support is unavailable, it has tangible consequences. For instance, a woman was not hired as an expert because the donor would not fund childcare costs, making her uncompetitive for the position".* Respondents consistently emphasized the need for funding mechanisms to include provisions for childcare and eldercare, as well as for policies that actively support women's participation in professional activities. As one leader from an NGO in a rural community in south of Ukraine explained, *"If we're serious about supporting women's leadership, we need to start with the basics – making sure they can show up"*.

This financial burden and lack of systemic support often force women to make difficult choices, such as prioritizing caregiving over professional development or reducing their involvement in leadership roles. A leader from the south of Ukraine described how many women in her organisation bring their children to events because they cannot afford childcare. However, this solution creates additional stress: *"It's not just about having children there; it's the worry about their safety, their behaviour, and whether they're distracting others. It divides attention and makes it harder to focus"* .

These constraints are particularly evident in rural and frontline areas, where access to childcare facilities and family support networks is often limited or non-existent. One participant of the focus group discussion from the north of Ukraine noted the cascading effects of these limitations on women's engagement in capacity-building programs: *"When women can't attend training or events, they miss out on learning new skills and meeting potential partners or donors. This impacts not just them but their organisations too" (NGO leader from west of Ukraine).*

In many cases, caregiving responsibilities remain unacknowledged as additional work, leading to emotional and physical exhaustion. This unrecognized burden is a reflection of entrenched gender roles that undervalue women's labour both within

and outside the workplace.[51] However, some organisations are beginning to address these issues through informal agreements or formal policies, such as flexible schedules and remote work options. These measures represent important steps toward mitigating the impact of gender roles, though broader systemic support is needed. By recognizing and valuing caregiving as a shared responsibility, stakeholders can foster a more equitable environment that supports women's leadership and sustains their contributions to the civil sector.

f) Political Tensions

The mass solidarity shown by Polish society to Ukrainians in 2022 was a remarkable phenomenon that has been rightly celebrated. Even at that time however, warnings were made of the need for systemic and multi-sectoral planning to avoid this support from evaporating.[52] Today, there is still a political consensus of support for Ukraine in Poland, and many Poles continue to be supportive of Ukrainians on an everyday basis. A number of organisations that we spoke to reported having ongoing and successful collaborative projects with local authorities and institutions at the local level. However, political tensions were reported as now playing a role in the lives of a number of organisations. These developments coincide with the government's publication of a long awaited migration strategy, which presents migrants and refugees as a threat to the peace of mind of the Polish population, and over whom the government needs to exert well-organised control.[53] It is remarkable that this document comes shortly after the "feel-good factor" in Polish society, which was generated by its openness to those fleeing to Poland as a result of the humanitarian crisis.[54]

After three years of war, women organisation leaders report dealing with acts of provocation aimed at accentuating tensions between the refugee and host populations. In Szczecin a banner promoting integration by saying "Hello Neighbours" in Ukrainian ("Privit susidy") was defaced within 24 hours. Later an anti-Ukrainian poster was put on the fence of the house of the Ukrainian organisation leader. In another case in a small town in Mazovia, graffiti written in Russian saying "Glory to UPA", the Ukrainian Insurgent Army widely resented in Poland, was sprayed on a Polish Second World War monument. Such inflammatory activities have been repeated in bigger cities and in anti-Ukrainian posts in social media. One graffiti attack against the Ukrainian House in Warsaw was repeated in the same form on a Ukrainian monument in Germany, indicating that this was the product of a coordinated international action. Ukrainian WLOs had both become objects of such attacks and are engaged in monitoring and responding to the diverse activities of Russian propaganda.

In discussing the shrinking of access to resources at the local level, leaders of organisations expressed ambiguity as to whether cooperation with municipal institutions had ended because of the shortage of resources or because of rising political resentments. The Ukrainian House has also encountered an instance in which a local authority refused to allow school premises to be used for a Ukrainian Saturday School, as provided

51 Vosko, L., MacDonald, M. and Campbell I. (eds.) (2009). *Gender and the Contours of Precarious Employment.* London: Routledge; Conaghan, J. 2020. 'Covid-19 and Inequalities at Work: A Gender Lens' : https://futuresofwork.co.uk/2020/05/07/covid-19-and-inequalities-at-work-a-gender-lens/.

52 Duszczyk, M., Kaczmarek, P. (eds.) (2022) *Hospitable Poland 2022+.*

53 Point 1 of the Migration Strategy entitled "Regain Control. Ensure Safety" states: "Migration processes must not increase the level of uncertainty in the daily lives of Polish residents". https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/odzyskac-kontrole-zapewnic-bezpieczenstwo---strategia-migracyjna-na-lata-2025---2030. For a discussion of the strategy, see Anastasiia Verkhovetska (2024) «Стратегія згадує мігрантів, іноземців і українців. Більшість українців, проте, залишається мігрантами і іноземцями»: уряд Польщі ухвалив міграційну стратегію на 2025-2030 роки, https://naszwybir.pl/migratsijna-strategiya-2/.

54 Duszczyk, M., Kaczmarek, P. (eds.) (2022) *Hospitable Poland 2022+.*

for by Polish law, on the grounds that teaching about Ukrainian culture could serve as a tool for incubating Ukrainian nationalism.

These tendencies are not expressed in overtly gendered terms. However, the fact that most of the organisations representing Ukrainians in Poland are women-led mean that WLOs have to deal with their consequences. The women that we talked to had also witnessed abuse of children in schools on the basis of being Ukrainian, with one organisation saying that according to their survey children suffered racial discrimination in over 70% of schools. Women also reported themselves having been subject to invective (e.g. accused of being Ukrainian spies) and told they should leave. Expressions of anti-Ukrainian sentiment or acts drawing attention to unresolved historical conflicts between Ukraine and Poland were interpreted negatively by women leaders, who saw such acts as offensively blind to the current context of war in Ukraine.

Equally, given the incremental suffering caused by the war within Ukraine, Ukrainian organisations in Poland face challenges to maintain political unity with Ukraine. Most of the WLOs were actively involved in providing both symbolic and material support for Ukraine, and this was cited as the major motivator for activities carried out in Poland. At the same time, fundraising to support Ukraine needs to be balanced with using resources to provide services or enable institutional development in Poland. This context leads to divergent emotions. One organisation leader in Poland with her disabled daughter spoke of the pain she experiences in having succeeded in adapting, at the same time as her hometown in Ukraine has been devastated.

> "*Since the beginning of the war, we have had no water, no heating, no food. [...] For me it's a very difficult topic. That I have adapted. [...] Everything is broken in the village, for me, for my husband, for my parents. But I know that I will return to Ukraine. I know that my children will return to Ukraine.*"

g) Administrative challenges

In Ukraine, respondents and focus group participants consistently highlighted the growing challenge of bureaucratisation and reporting requirements of funders since the onset of the full-scale war in February 2022. While these processes are often intended to ensure transparency and accountability, they have placed significant strain on women-led organisations, limiting their capacity to focus on program implementation. As one key informant from a women-led grassroots organisation in Ukraine explained, *"We spend more time filling out forms and reports than actually doing the work. The funding is short-term, and the demands are endless".*

Several respondents noted that requirements often fail to account for the fluid and rapidly changing conditions under which these organisations operate. For example, in frontline areas WLOs described the difficulty of meeting rigid reporting deadlines while simultaneously responding to urgent needs such as evacuations and distributing aid. One NGO leader from the south of Ukraine remarked, *"The paperwork doesn't reflect the realities on the ground. By the time we've written one report, the situation has already shifted, and we're behind on what needs to be done".*

The bureaucratic burden has broader implications for inclusivity and equity also. Smaller, grassroots organisations, which often lack the administrative capacity to meet complex requirements of international actors, are disproportionately affected. One grassroots leader from a city in the south of Ukraine shared how these demands not only delayed their access to resources but also placed them at a competitive disadvantage compared to larger, more established NGOs.

These escalating demands exceed pre-crisis levels and can be traced to several interrelated factors. Frequent changes in the management of INGOs disrupt continuity and create new administrative hurdles. Each change in personnel necessitates rebuilding relationships, re-establishing trust, and engaging in time-intensive knowledge-sharing processes with incoming staff. Meanwhile,

the establishment of Ukrainian offices and representations by international organisations has introduced additional layers of oversight and procedural rigour.

NGO leaders repeatedly highlighted the toll these administrative burdens have taken on both individuals and organisations. One respondent in Ukraine described an overwhelming impact: *"Everyone is stressed by the workload and very limited time, combined with increased donor demands. The requirements are extremely serious. As a result, there's little time for reflection, strategic planning, or even celebrating achievements – project milestones and other successes. There's so little time left that we don't even get to enjoy the results of our work".*

The complexities of these demands often translate into extensive documentation processes that divert valuable time and resources from programmatic activities. A particularly stark example was shared by an organisation that attempted to hire a sole proprietor, only to face a bureaucratic ordeal requiring over 75 pages of documentation. This paperwork, prepared in Ukrainian, then had to be translated into English to meet the INGOs' requirements. One NGO leader in Ukraine remarked on the growing challenge: *"The problem is that the amount of documentation is increasing and some requirements are becoming excessively complex".*

The cumulative effect of these challenges is far-reaching. While greater accountability in the humanitarian sector is important, the current approach often fails to account for the limited resources and time constraints faced by local implementers. To address this, it is essential to foster open dialogue between INGOs and local organisations to ensure that requirements are streamlined and contextually appropriate.

This needs to be done through real dialogue and not through **bureaucratic coordination mechanisms** that favour larger, international organisations. These mechanisms are often time-consuming and exclude local women-led initiatives from decision-making processes. A respondent from the south of Ukraine highlighted the frustration of many WLOs: *"We are invited to coordination meetings, but our voices are rarely heard. It feels like a box-ticking exercise, not genuine inclusion"*. This dynamic undermines the localisation agenda, marginalizing WLOs despite their unique capacity to address community needs effectively.

Furthermore, donors and INGOs must invest in capacity-building initiatives that enable small organisations to meet compliance standards without diverting resources from their operational priorities. Finally, adopting flexible frameworks that prioritise tangible outcomes over rigid procedural adherence is crucial, particularly in high-stakes and rapidly evolving environments.

In Poland, the problems mentioned by most women leaders were those related to navigating the Polish system of registering and administering organisations. The majority of the organisations with whom we spoke had registered organisations. However, almost invariably, this had been done with the support of a specialist Polish volunteer or the support of a friendly Polish organisation.

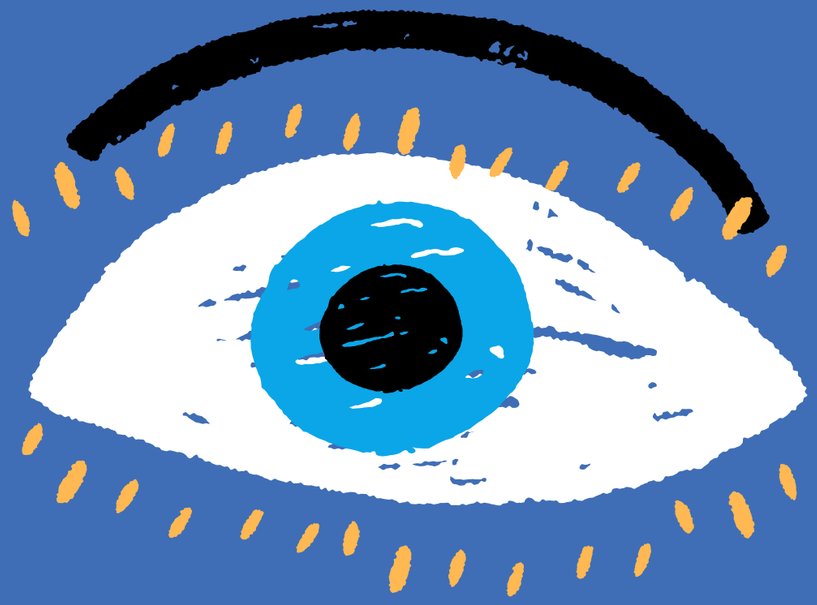
In addition, the process of registration seemed like a lottery, with documents accepted or rejected on the whim of a particular judge. Organisations also mentioned that while they had registered in order to gain access to larger funding streams than one-off 5000 PLN (€1000) grants, registration initially brought more costs than benefits.

Several Ukrainian women leaders in Poland mentioned difficulties in finding accountants ready to work with their organisations. The current combinations of regulations of NGO finances and small budgets makes finding an accountant a challenge for Polish NGOs, but it is even more difficult for Ukrainian organisations. One organisation describes the important role of basic administrative support in enabling organisations to function, and how this procedural issue was frequently overlooked in the chaotic and often unhelpful support provided in the direct aftermath of the invasion.

> *"Everyone started offering a load of blankets, a load of everything, and I told them I needed an accountant. And they were calling me and saying, 'Well, we can offer psychological help'. And I was saying, 'I'm very glad, but I don't need that in Polish. I need an accountant.' I don't know what to do with all these finances, because before I only had one event a year. Well, no one gives you an accountant for free, no one proposed their services for free, just for the record. 1000 people called me with psychological help, but not a single accountant."*

"We're asking people to do incredible work under unbearable conditions. They're tired, grieving, and often homeless themselves. How can we support others if we don't first support our teams?"

Leader of a WLO
in the north
of Ukraine



This is our mission – for women to take the helm now.

Ukrainian WLO leader in a Polish provincial town

The Potential for Change

In a tragic context, humanitarian response has thrown Ukrainian women into new leadership roles. The fact that women have to take the helm for now generates new gender roles and attitudes. Given already visible threats of reversion to pre-crisis hierarchies, these transformations require further support. This is particularly important in developing the potential of Ukrainian women to contribute to Ukraine's future reconstruction.

a) Transformations of Previous Experiences

In response to a question about the changes brought about by the war escalation, one organisation leader in Poland framed her views in terms of loss and possibility. The onset of the war brought an end to the projects she had been working on, putting a stop to this part of her life and leaving her with a heavy burden of thoughts about the children in Ukraine she was not able to help. However, and she noted that this is a terrible thing to say, this catastrophe has also opened up new opportunities.

> *"First of all, it's a destructive impact, because this phone call from my friend took away part of my life, everything that I had been building... The second aspect is the regret for the number of children we could not help in Ukraine. [...] And the third is [...] I perhaps say a terrible thing, it's scary, but for some of us, the war gave us an opportunity. It gave us an opportunity for something else, for a transformation of projects, a transformation of people. Because some people, yes, they are broken, but they have found the strength to create themselves anew."*

As a result of the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian women leaders of organisations in both countries found themselves in situations where previous professional and civic experience was applied in a new context. In the extreme circumstances of the immediate aftermath of February 2022, an organisation leader in Poland described how the experience of, for example, being a good manager in Ukraine could be transformed into that of acting as coordinator of emergency aid between Poland and Ukraine:

> *"This would be a completely new experience for all of us, and it seems to me that the experience that we all had was mostly the experience of people who had proved themselves as good managers and organisers in other areas, and now it just manifested itself in such extreme conditions. And this was the most important criterion that contributed to the creation of a foundation or an NGO."*

These kinds of transformations and learning on the job were characteristic of the early stages of the response of WLOs in both countries.

In many cases, the experience applied had been gained through NGO work. Of the refugee led organisations active in Poland we spoke to, the majority had previous experience of working in NGOs in Ukraine. Refugee women initiative leaders had previously worked in such fields as local government, law, vocational training, HIV patient support, journalism on reproductive rights and human trafficking protection, documentary film-making. These women were thrown into a new context in which these skills could be applied with a fresh significance. For example, journalism on reproductive rights was transformed into an avatar fronted online service providing support in cases of human trafficking and sexual violence. Or in another case, documentary film-making and an interest in ethnography transformed into cartoons co-created with refugee children in a Polish provincial town. Many organisations, both those led by refugees and migrants, were built on experience of civil activism acquired through the Maidan protests and further developed after the onset of the war in Donbas in 2014.[55] In 2022, these experiences were applied in new contexts.

Equally, during this period, the knowledge Ukrainians gained through migration to Poland suddenly became in itself valuable. In the light of the wave of refugees, **the skills possessed by migrants as a byproduct of labour migration** – a knowledge of Polish and Ukrainian languages, understanding how the Polish social welfare system functions, experience of crossing the border and transferring goods across the border and a cultural commonality with refugees – **suddenly became precious assets enabling the humanitarian response**.

For women who came to Poland to escape the massive Russian invasion, the transformation of activities was intertwined with the physical movement of war displacement. **Skills and experience developed in Ukraine became the foundation for new modes of activity in Poland.** However, it is important to recognise that this transformation occurred **in a context of an extraordinary abundance of resources facilitating organisational development.**

In the case of one initiative, a whole group who had founded an extra-curricular education project with children in eastern Ukraine moved *en masse* with a group of children under their care to Poland. Upon arriving in Poland, the group of 7 teachers and 9 teenagers was initially taken to a small town, where they were offered shelter. After three weeks, they were told they had to move on. The next stage saw them volunteering at a major city train station in a project supporting refugees. Through contact with a sympathetic Polish volunteer, the group was chosen to carry out the child support section of a project, for which a grant had been won, but for which there was no organisation to fulfil the task. When the project finished, the group found a premises near the Kraków Old Town and started a child support centre. At the time of research, they were leading workshops for children, but were continuing to seek funds.

While this story was unique in that the group moved as a group, it has a number of elements that resonated more widely in the accounts of other organisations. Firstly, the group moved with NGO experience previously developed during their work with a local community in Ukraine. Secondly, it is a story with a mix of risk and serendipity. At times it seemed there were no chances for the organisation to survive (and their future is still precarious). But through their volunteer work, they were lucky enough to encounter someone with an opportunity where their skills became useful: there was financing for a project, but no one to run it. Thus, these women found themselves in a new environment in which there were resources to cultivate their expertise.

While this is a specific case, in the early part of the crisis response, many participants in the research reported being able to draw on resources and opportunities – whether this was volunteering, support from Polish NGOs or professionals (for

55 Pishchikova P. and Ogryzko, O. (2014) *Civic Awakening: The Impact of Euromaidan on Ukraine's Politics and Society.*

example in submitting the documents needed to register a foundation), premises, materials, or financial support – that fostered the further development of their organisation. We see in this generative improvisation of organisational forms – embodied anew by Ukrainian WLOs in Poland at the beginning of the crisis – a social phenomenon reminiscent of the self-organising social formations conceptualised by the leaders of the *Solidarity* movement.[56]

In 2022 in Poland, we identify a situation of skilled women moving under extreme conditions to a new context marked by a temporary abundance of resources. This period of the possibility for an extraordinary bottom-up application of previous experience in a new context was marked by a mix of ebullience, trauma, and precarity. One of the leaders referred to this as the period of "limited intelligence and courage":

> *"My sister calls all the actions of that period, weak-minded and brave, because we did not know that literally six months after that, all funding would dry up. Perhaps if I had known that it would be so difficult, I might not have opened anything. But at that moment we had funding. We bought children's furniture, we bought pots, nappies, and everything, and we opened the shelter."*

This comment demonstrates the importance of the temporary abundance of resources that at the time was enabling Ukrainian women to start vital support services and to develop new leadership roles. It also underscores how the perspective changed by the time of the interviews in 2024.

In Ukraine, many WLOs were not initially established as humanitarian organisations but were compelled to step into this role due to the urgent needs brought on by the war. Many respondents shared personal accounts illustrating the intersection of professional and personal crises. An NGO leader from a rural community in north of Ukraine recounted:

> *"Our house was completely destroyed; I have a large family – two grandchildren, my daughter-in-law, my son, and me. There were five of us. We had a beautiful home, large, with everything we wanted. Our dream kitchen. Life was good. And then, suddenly, nothing. We barely escaped from the house with nothing but the clothes on our backs. This work became like medicine for me, something to distract me from the loss."*

These stories highlight how the personal resilience of staff members is often intertwined with their professional contributions, emphasising the need for financial support that acknowledges both. Similar stories of the therapeutic experience of support work were also divulged by leaders in Poland.

For many of these organisations, **this transition to emergency response required significant personal and organisational adjustments.** Leaders spoke of the sacrifices they made to support others while navigating their own precarious circumstances. One relocated leader from the east of Ukraine shared, *"I was helping other women find housing while I was sleeping on someone's couch myself"*. These accounts highlight the dual burden borne by local leaders, who often balanced their own vulnerabilities with their commitment to the needs of others. This dynamic underscores the reliance on resilience, but also points to the pressures that came with stepping into such unusual roles under extreme circumstances.

In responding to the full-scale invasion, women leaders threw themselves into new situations,

56 Jacek Kuroń developed his theory of self-organising entities in Kuroń, J. (1977). "Myśli o Programie Działania". Aneks 13–14: 4–32. The Polish response to the Ukraine crisis has been analysed in terms of "solidarity" for example by: Digidiki, V., Bhabha, J. Markowska-Manista, U. & Dobkowska, J. (2024). *Building Inclusion, Sustaining Solidarity towards migrants in frontline local communities: The case of Poland during the Ukrainian Refugee Crisis*. Harvard FXB Center for Health and Human Rights, Boston, USA.

where challenges could be overcome through their individual involvement. **Learning took place on the job, allowing the women to compensate for any lack of effectiveness through their intense personal engagement.** A common motivation mentioned by Ukrainian women leaders in Poland was the desire to do more to support those whose lives were at risk back home. However, this integration of the reality of war into everyday life is deeply unsettling. How can one measure their own efforts to support Ukraine when friends and family are risking and losing their lives?

For organisations in Ukraine, the destruction of war directly impacts the realities of everyday work. One organisation leader who relocated from temporarily occupied territories described how the process of departure required her to destroy all the documents that had served to verify the work of her foundation. In this instance, the standard requirements of running an organisation became impossible due to the women's involvement with the war: *"Essentially, I had to destroy or burn all statutory documents at home, hide or bury them because there was no way to take them with me. Everything that existed before the full-scale invasion – it's all gone" (NGO leader from south of Ukraine).*

Frontline organisations face additional challenges, including **personal safety risks, infrastructure collapse, and uncertainty about evacuations.** One interviewee from the south of Ukraine shared: *"Our team works in constant fear. During one meeting, plaster was falling from the ceiling because of shelling nearby. How can we work effectively under these conditions?"*

In the extreme conditions of the full-scale invasion Ukrainian women transformed previous experiences into new abilities of leadership in humanitarian support. However, the crisis has also made previously unimaginable destruction an everyday part of the work of Ukrainian WLOs. How can we build on what Ukrainian WLOs have achieved in the last three years in such circumstances?

b) Women's leadership and political representation

In Ukraine, the interviews highlighted two significant trends shaping women's roles in community decision-making. On the one hand, respondents noted a growing recognition of women's contributions in humanitarian work, citing their strong reputations for active engagement, responsible decision-making, and professionalism. Women have successfully demonstrated their ability to excel in traditionally male-dominated areas, taking on leadership roles that were previously inaccessible to them. This shift has not only validated women's capabilities but also opened doors for them to engage in governance and community-building efforts.

One notable outcome of this shift is the emergence of women leaders who were previously uninvolved in formal community work. These individuals, often motivated by the humanitarian crisis, have stepped into roles that range from managing social projects to leading community spaces, and participating in local self-governance structures. As one NGO representative of a displaced organisation observed, *"Out of three women I know from our IDP community who are regular participants, all of them are now members of the IDP council. One is the council chair, another is the deputy, and the third is the secretary. They all hold such positions, and you can see how much others listen to them".*

In one region of northwestern Ukraine, a decade-old women-led organisation demonstrated how **gender-inclusive policies can drive structural change at the local level**. This organisation worked to integrate women's voices into local governance, focusing on gender-equitable representation and creating opportunities for rural women to achieve economic independence. For instance, their initiatives involved providing mentorship programs that paired women with local female leaders to enhance leadership skills and encourage civic participation. Additionally, they collaborated with municipal authorities to

implement family-friendly workplace policies, making it easier for women to balance caregiving responsibilities with employment.

One of the most remarkable aspects of WLOs' work has been their ability to foster community solidarity. These organisations have mobilized communities to share resources, address immediate needs, and build resilience. A focus group participant from the north of Ukraine described this spirit of unity as a driving force for recovery, noting, *"We've learned to come together, support each other, and share resources. This spirit of unity will drive our rebuilding efforts"*. In the south of Ukraine, a WLO successfully implemented a project to create safe recreational spaces for children, uniting community members around a shared goal and demonstrating the power of collective action.

The war has catalysed a significant transformation in how women engage with the authorities. Women leaders are no longer hesitant to approach decision-makers but are now proactive advocates for their communities. Their ability to position themselves as initiators and experts has been instrumental in advancing local priorities. Maintaining this momentum is essential to solidifying the gains achieved during the war. Such advocacy efforts have challenged traditional gender norms and created new pathways for women's participation in governance.

The war has also provided WLOs with valuable practical experience in managing crises and adapting to rapidly changing circumstances. Leaders have expressed the urgent need to institutionalise the knowledge and skills gained during this period. One NGO leader in Ukraine highlighted the importance of formalizing their approaches, stating: *"We cannot afford to reinvent the wheel every time. We've learned how to respond to crises efficiently; this knowledge must be formalized and embedded at the state level"*. This call for systematisation underscores the critical role that practical, locally informed expertise plays in building long-term preparedness and resilience. For example, one organisation developed detailed protocols for managing psychological trauma among children exposed to missile attacks, which they aim to integrate into broader educational and healthcare systems.

However, despite these advancements, challenges remain. Respondents pointed out that women's increased participation is not always accompanied by structural support or recognition. In some cases, their roles are still viewed as temporary, tied to the immediate needs of the crisis rather than as a permanent shift toward greater inclusivity. A focus group participant from the north of Ukraine emphasized, *"Women have proven their capacity, but we still hear comments like, 'This is just for now; when things stabilize, we'll go back to the way it was'. That mindset needs to change".*

Despite the crucial new roles that they have taken on, Ukrainian women, especially those leading smaller organisations, are frequently excluded from decision-making processes driven by larger NGOs and international agencies: *"Decisions about aid distribution are made in offices far from the frontline" (NGO leader from a rural community in the south of Ukraine)*. Participants expressed frustration over the disconnect between decisions made in distant offices and the realities on the ground. WLOs felt that their rich local knowledge was not fully utilised in developing systemic plans. A leader from a relocated organisation described the frustration: *"We're on the ground doing the work, but we're left out of the bigger conversations. It's like we don't exist".*

In the light of the humanitarian crisis, Ukrainian WLOs in Poland have also reached a new level of inclusion in political discussions. Despite this, organisations face an array of barriers when seeking to advocate for Ukrainian refugees. These barriers are constituted both by obstacles to the political representation of Ukrainians in Poland, and by those of a political culture dominated by men at

both the national and the local levels.[57] Ukrainian WLOs try to compensate for these obstacles by presenting their knowledge about refugee experiences on all possible fora, but encounter barriers in seeking to do so. A leader of a well-established organisation in Poland described this situation: *"We are a source of information, we are a source for carrying out research, we are supposed to participate in all possible coordination meetings, advocacy meetings, on various topics. And it turns out that you could spend all your time doing only this, and it is not funded in any way".*

Leaders of Ukrainian WLOs in Poland described how the transformation of their roles was causing changes in attitudes. One leader of an organisation sending aid to Ukraine commented that the experiences of the last year had convinced her that she had in fact been a feminist since childhood. When asked about how the crisis had impacted on the roles of men and women in Poland and Ukraine, she answered that the situation of her being the primary driving force of a leading NGO in distributing aid to Ukraine causes surprise, but also forces a change of attitude. The leader noted that there is resistance:

> *"But this is changing. People see that there are real effects. And when you introduce them to the full activity, you show them facts, figures, etc. 'Oh, we didn't think it was that serious. How did you manage it? You are such a soft power, you are such gentle women, ordinary, modest. How can you manage all this?' It's not just that we manage, we organise, but that people have accepted the fact that women are in charge, both the men and women who help us in this. Because those who don't accept the fact that women are in charge simply are not helpful, they're a nuisance. Because they can't get their heads round it the whole time, they cannot be effective, because they don't accept a woman as a leader and that's it."*

In most cases, leadership is being performed by women who brought experience from other fields or from initiatives run in other locations. The leadership is also being developed further as an intense and debilitating crisis continues to unfold. Participants in the research discussed various features of women's leadership that they saw as important: a more horizontal leadership style, seeking to instigate cooperative modes of work within and between organisations, a focus on holistic (or in the language of feminism intersectional) modes of support, a strong urge to help, an elasticity in responding to crises and a powerful sense of engagement. In Poland, one of the leaders identified this work as having a strong feminist inspiration and principles: *"Positive women move the universe. And I, as a feminist, can say that in all humanitarian missions, if there were no women, nothing would work at all. Because women do 90% of all this backend work, the negotiations, the logistics, and the emotional support"*.

Some organisation leaders in Poland also celebrated what they saw as an under-appreciated heroism of women crossing the border and starting a new life in order to provide a safe environment for their children. They argued that this process, if properly supported, in itself had a transformative potential.

In the Ukrainian case, participants in the research pointed to a potential regression in women's roles, particularly concerning decision-making and access to resources in their communities (municipalities) for humanitarian work. Some respondents expressed concern over an increasing thematic segregation in humanitarian work, whereby roles are "assigned" to women. They see this potentially as evidence of a token involvement in decision-making, an inclusion based on a pragmatic response to immediate needs, rather than a meaningful shift toward gender equity in leadership. While women played pivotal roles during the peak of the humanitarian crisis, this momentum is at risk of being undone. As an NGO leader from the south of Ukraine explained:

> "*When needed, they were given full powers over checkpoints, food distribution, decision-making, and so on. But now, as things have somewhat stabilized and communities were liberated, they say that men have stepped in – some even from other regions – or that representatives of military-civilian administrations have been appointed, and they've brought in a bunch of men to secure exemptions from mobilisation. And so, again, women's positions are being shifted to lower roles, or some are being dismissed altogether*."

Despite their significant professional contributions, many women in Ukraine, especially in smaller communities, do not identify themselves as leaders. Social norms and internalised attitudes often lead women to downplay or conceal their achievements, framing their work as an extension of caregiving responsibilities rather than leadership. As one representative of a national NGO from Ukraine explained, *"Every one of them could be called a leader, but none of them would consider herself one. That's because, truly, it's part of our female socialisation – to just help everyone, care for others, and so on. But the scope of work this covers is enormous".* This dynamic not only impacts recognition but also influences women's confidence and willingness to claim leadership roles.

In Poland, the role of women's leadership was also presented first and foremost as a necessity given the extraordinary current situation. One of the women leaders presents her leadership in such terms: *"This is our mission – for women to take the helm now. At least while the war is on. Maybe this will change over time. But this is not some kind of feminism, or some kind of struggle to prove that we, women, can also be leaders. No, it's just the reality that we are facing. I personally don't consider myself a feminist, but feminists consider me a feminist".*

Respondents in Ukraine highlighted the critical need to retain and expand the positions women currently hold: *"Going forward, it's still necessary to fight for this space, but there's a chance to step in – a point of entry has appeared. I don't believe it will remain this way automatically; we need to keep striving and securing our place*" (national NGO leader from Ukraine).

Women's involvement in volunteering and activism during the war is deeply rooted in a desire to belong to a community with shared values. These motivations have fostered networks of mutual support that extend beyond immediate crisis response. These networks, described by respondents as transformative, have enabled women to transition from informal volunteering to structured leadership roles.

The transformative potential of these networks is particularly evident in how women-led organisations are leveraging collective action to address systemic issues. In frontline regions, respondents emphasized their role in rebuilding community resilience through localized initiatives such as setting up youth centres, organizing skill-building workshops, and creating platforms for civic engagement. These efforts not only address immediate needs, but also provide women with avenues to exercise leadership and influence local decision-making processes.

However, respondents also pointed to the challenges of sustaining this momentum. Many noted that women's expanded roles in governance and activism are not guaranteed to endure without continued investment in leadership development and institutional support. One NGO leader from a rural community in the south of Ukraine explained: *"We've shown what we can do during the war, but if the structures around us don't change to include us, it will be difficult to keep these positions*". This underscores the importance of integrating gender perspectives into recovery policies and ensuring that women's leadership is systematically recognized and supported.

57 On mechanisms through which Ukrainians are excluded from political discourse in Poland, for example through a lack of voting rights, see Olena Babakova. 2024. Temat wojny w Ukrainie oraz migrantów i uchodźców z Ukrainy w polskim dyskursie politycznym: kwiecień 2023 – luty 2024. Women account for 16% of mayors and heads of town councils, while the overall situation of women in local government is slowly improving. See Magdalena Szefernaker, *Samorząd na obcasach. Pelpin: Bernardinum, 2024).*

Additionally, respondents emphasized the role of **solidarity among women-led organisations as a critical factor in amplifying their collective impact**. Collaboration between women-led initiatives in Ukraine and Poland has been instrumental in sharing best practices and strengthening advocacy efforts at the international level. This cross-border engagement is particularly significant in addressing shared challenges, such as the integration of displaced populations and ensuring gender-sensitive recovery planning.

While women are increasingly recognized for their contributions, thematic segregation, structural barriers, and societal norms pose significant risks. Addressing these challenges requires intentional efforts to document, support, and sustain women's leadership across diverse sectors. By fostering networks and enabling transitions into governance roles, Ukrainian communities can leverage the full potential of women leaders for lasting change. However, this challenge of achieving stable political representation occurs at a moment when WLOs in both countries are struggling for resources.

The multiple threats challenging the further development of Ukrainian women's leadership roles were highlighted by one organisation leader from Kraków. When asked about how to further develop her organisation's potential, the leader spoke of a multitude of changing and inter-related challenges. The need to preserve the well-being of staff has to go hand-in-hand with being effective at a moment when organisations have to deal with a cutting of resources. At the same time, the organisation has to update its analysis of its provision of services to the changing needs of refugees, who are themselves a product of the changing situation of the war and fluctuating legal frameworks. New solutions then need to be presented and negotiated with the different levels of public administration, which may also have a shifting agenda or be staffed with new people who need convincing afresh.

This all takes energy and involves risk at a moment, when there is great uncertainty over the future resources that the organisation will have at its disposal. The organisation leader put these mixed challenges as follows:

> "*I don't even know what to say is important, because there are a host of challenges and a mass of questions in every direction. How to organise, how to take care of well-being, but also how to be efficient. Because we also witness burnout or exhaustion, which also has its consequences on the efficiency of work, on creativity, on the search for new solutions. Because it's easier, if we already know everything and how it should be done. But time requires constant analysis, and constantly changing something and implementing something new. It requires convincing this same administration or a new one, that this makes sense and that the situation is different now than it was before. We need to invest in this: it requires effort and it is also a risk.*"

c) Vision for Ukraine's recovery and development

As Ukraine continues to face the multifaceted impacts of war, women-led organisations are driving forward an ambitious vision for both immediate response and long-term recovery. Their approach reflects the ability to bridge the gap between immediate local needs and broader recovery strategies, leveraging their intimate knowledge of community dynamics and their hands-on experience during the humanitarian crisis.

A respondent shared that south of Ukraine WLOs played a central role in assessing damage and identifying needs during the war's early days, rapidly coordinating efforts to provide support where it was most critical. Their involvement went

beyond humanitarian aid; they documented gaps in services and infrastructure, thus creating an evidence base for informed recovery planning. A women's initiative leader illustrated their commitment, highlighting that WLOs are not merely waiting for external assistance: they are proactively engaging in rebuilding homes, establishing community centres, and offering vital social services for displaced families and vulnerable groups: *"We cannot wait for someone else to rebuild. We are ready to participate – whether in repairing homes, setting up community centres, or running social services for families"*.

In Poland, Ukrainian women leading organisations and initiatives viewed their work as part of a continuum – supporting refugees in Poland, supporting Ukraine, and building potential for women's role in the country's future – all seen as different strands of a single overarching endeavour. The terms in which a Warsaw based Ukrainian leader described her organisation's approach to vocational training expressed a connection between individual and national contexts, and between the present and the future. For her, professional training is not just a question of individual career development: it constitutes part of a common front in which the organisation's work in Poland contributes to the future security of Ukraine: *"I believe that we as non-governmental organisations have a common front: that we are all to a greater or lesser extent engaged in community security. I am convinced that without psychological, economic, financial, and informational security, there will be no national security".*

For many WLOs in Poland, thinking in terms of post war seemed a distant horizon. However, many of the organisations' activities – cultural projects, Ukrainian language support, child support, etc. – were done with a view of strengthening human capital for the future of Ukraine. Some organisations already enact cooperative projects between specific locations in Ukraine and Poland, such as online meetings between intercultural assistants in Poland and schools in Ukraine. The majority of organisation leaders say that they either plan or would like to engage in such activities, such as one leader planning to build entrepreneurial exchange between Odessa – Kielce.

Women-led organisations in Ukraine are actively investing in strengthening women's leadership at both local and national levels, recognizing the need to prepare women for governance roles in the post-war period. As one NGO leader from the south of Ukraine emphasized, *"We are training women for leadership roles now because after the war, decisions will be dominated by those with military ties. If women aren't prepared, they'll be left out"*. This anticipatory approach reflects an acute awareness of potential post-war governance challenges and a commitment to ensuring women's representation in decision-making processes.

A cornerstone of WLOs' efforts has been their advocacy for gender-sensitive approaches to recovery planning. Through persistent engagement with policymakers and donors, these organisations are advocating that gender considerations are included in strategic frameworks. However, leaders remain concerned about the sustainability of these gains. Without sustained donor and governmental commitment to inclusive practices, there is a risk of marginalisation. As one women's NGO leader from west of Ukraine explained, *"If donors and authorities don't prioritise gender-inclusive approaches, women will be sidelined again. We need strict conditions for funding to guarantee inclusivity"*. This sentiment reflects a broader concern about the underrepresentation of women in decision-making roles and the potential for gender-blind recovery projects. In frontline areas, WLOs are particularly vocal about the need to prioritise women-led recovery initiatives to address the compounded vulnerabilities of women and marginalized groups.

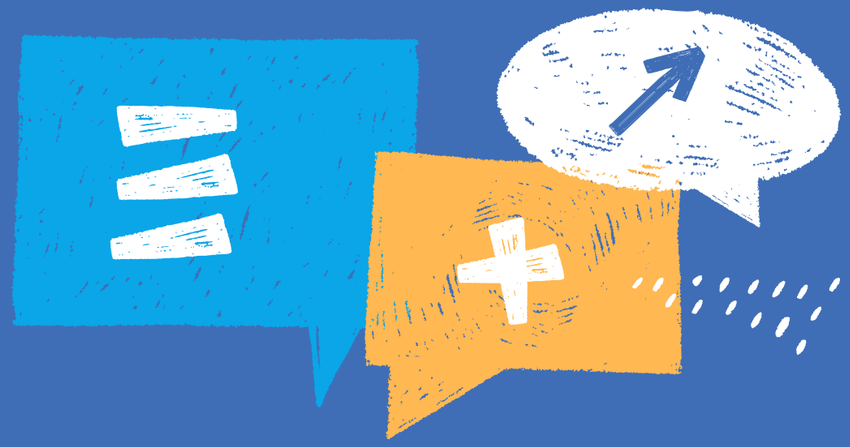
Looking beyond immediate needs, WLOs are also focusing on strategic, long-term planning. Many

organisations are developing multi-year strategies to sustain motivation and ensure a coordinated recovery. As one leader from the centre of Ukraine explained, *“We need hope to plan for the future. That’s why we’ve already created a strategic plan for 2025-2027. Recovery and growth are at its heart”*. These forward-looking efforts reflect a commitment to balancing immediate humanitarian needs with systemic change and sustainable development.

Despite these achievements, WLOs face systemic barriers that could hinder their full participation in recovery planning. Limited access to funding, coupled with a **lack of institutional recognition**, often leaves their contributions undervalued. Leaders frequently stressed the need for more robust partnerships with international actors and governmental bodies to amplify their impact. As one participant of the focus group discussion explained, *“We have the knowledge and experience, but we need allies to support our work and ensure it is scaled up”*.

By combining practical expertise, gender advocacy, and community mobilisation, WLOs are not only responding to the current crisis but also shaping a vision for an inclusive, resilient future. Their vision combines immediate humanitarian responses with systemic, long-term strategies that prioritise human capital development, gender-sensitive planning, political leadership, and mental health recovery. For international organisations and donors, supporting these grassroots efforts will be critical to achieving equitable and sustainable outcomes in Ukraine’s recovery process.

Conclusions and recommendations



In both Ukraine and Poland, transforming how they operate and highlighting their crucial role in humanitarian response and recovery. These organisations have been essential in addressing immediate needs during the crisis and remain vital today, despite declining resources and significant challenges.

In response to the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian WLOs in both countries mobilised resources developed as a result of the growth of Ukrainian civic activism to provide immediate crisis support. Learning was done on the job, with previous experiences transformed in new contexts to deliver and upscale vital services. Challenges were overcome through intense personal engagement and a sense of mission.

In Ukraine, WLOs responded quickly to the outbreak of war, using their local knowledge and networks to provide urgent aid, such as evacuations, food, shelter, and medicine, often in areas that international agencies could not reach. Their work was not limited to material aid; many also provided psychological support to address the emotional toll of the conflict. Initiatives such as youth hubs, art therapy programs, and safe spaces helped foster resilience in communities severely affected by war.

Over time, many WLOs in Ukraine have shifted their focus toward longer-term goals, including integration and community-building efforts. They introduced training programs, business development support, and skills workshops to empower women and help them regain independence. This shift reflects the ongoing need for both immediate humanitarian aid and sustainable solutions. Despite these efforts, WLOs face serious challenges, including team burnout, limited funding, and difficulties in retaining staff, many of whom are also coping with the impacts of war.

In Poland, Ukrainian WLOs experienced rapid and far-reaching transformations in meeting the needs of the huge wave of refugees, the majority of whom are women. In the context of the massive mobilisation of resources in Polish society in the aftermath of the invasion, Ukrainian women refugees and migrants started new initiatives or upscaled exist-

ing ones. Knowledge of the Polish welfare system, language skills and shared cultural experiences became vital assets in supporting refugees to navigate a new environment and access resources.

Ukrainian WLOs in Poland act as pioneers as the state faces the sudden challenge of providing welfare services to a much larger Ukrainian population. Ukrainian WLOs accompany refugees in the everyday obstacles emerging from a rapidly evolving and inconsistent support environment. Out of the crisis, a new infrastructure of Ukrainian women-led hubs of community resilience and social entrepreneurship has emerged in towns and cities across Poland. These function as key elements in maintaining support for Ukraine and promoting social cohesion in Poland. However, by 2024, many faced dwindling volunteer numbers and insufficient funding, creating instability for both the organisations and the refugee women working in them.

One of the strengths of WLOs in both countries is their ability to bridge geographical and logistical divides. In Ukraine, they have created networks to connect urban centres with rural and frontline areas, ensuring aid reached those most in need. In Poland, they coordinated with groups across the border to deliver resources and share knowledge. These efforts highlight the importance of local and cross-border cooperation in addressing humanitarian challenges.

The activities of Ukrainian WLOs in the crisis have brought new leadership roles for Ukrainian women, which are producing changes of attitudes. Despite their achievements, however, WLOs continue to face structural and systemic barriers. Many report that funding priorities from donors focus on short-term humanitarian activities and overlook the need to support the core missions and sustainability of these organisations. Limited access to funding, coupled with a lack of institutional recognition, often leaves their contributions undervalued. Leaders of these organisations frequently stressed the need for more robust partnerships with international actors and governmental bodies to amplify their impact.

Leaders expressed frustration at being excluded from decision-making processes and highlighted the need for greater institutional recognition of their contributions. In smaller communities, traditional gender roles and caregiving responsibilities add further strain on women leaders, limiting their ability to fully engage in their work. In Poland, Ukrainian women leaders face barriers to political representation based on gender and nationality.

WLOs have also demonstrated the value of cultural and psychological support in their efforts. In Poland, activities such as dual-language education and artistic events help refugees maintain a sense of community and share emotions. Similarly, in Ukraine, WLOs have created youth hubs and safe spaces that combine practical support with emotional and educational resources. These efforts illustrate the multifaceted approach these organisations take to support those affected by war.

The work of Ukrainian WLOs is built on personal resilience, local knowledge, and a deep commitment to their communities. It is holistic in nature and aims at personal and community development. However, sustaining their impact requires stronger financial and institutional support. Funding structures need to prioritise long-term stability and ensure these organisations are part of recovery planning. Local authorities, donors, and international organisations must recognise the expertise of WLOs and engage with them as equal partners in shaping solutions.

This report highlights the critical role of WLOs in Ukraine and Poland. Their ability to respond to complex challenges with limited resources has been remarkable. However, the ongoing demands of the crisis, combined with declining support, threaten to undo their progress. To preserve and expand their achievements, it is essential to address these challenges, strengthen partnerships, and ensure that women-led organisations have the resources and recognition they need to continue their work effectively.

Recommendations

General recommendations for donors and international humanitarian organisations

- **Longer Term/Flexible Financing for Local WLOs.** *WLOs, both in the war affected country and the diaspora, require not only project funding, but also financial support to sustain and develop their organisations. WLOs need to have operating costs covered and funding that extends beyond the short-term horizons, as seen in Ukraine. In Poland, more Ukrainian WLOs require support from INGO funding. Long-term and flexible funding that would allow WLOs to adapt their organisations to changing needs is required in both countries, with flexible funding especially crucial in frontline areas. Supporting local WLOs reinforces the local networks and resources that they mobilise bringing short and long-term cost efficiencies. Investing in organisations grounded in community resilience becomes increasingly important as the crisis extends.*

- **Simplify Administrative Processes.** *While accountability must be ensured, administrative procedures should be designed to facilitate the work of both local partners and donors. Ukrainian WLOs seek to maximise support with limited resources, and therefore require administrative requirements to be simple and efficient. Administrative flexibility is especially needed in cases where context fluctuates violently.*

- **Collaborative Project Design.** *INGOs should place greater emphasis in their work on developing genuine partnerships with Ukrainian WLOs. INGO staff should work more directly with local and diaspora NGOs, visiting them to learn about how they work and about how they see and enact humanitarian action. The logic behind the development of joint INGO–Ukrainian WLO projects should be that of creating projects that seek to enhance the work of organisations with existing local experience and who are already mobilising resources to provide crisis support before INGOs reach them. This partnership approach can make*

support projects better grounded and more inclusive. Partnerships through which both sides can learn from each other would question the top-down expert–local relationship that prevails in humanitarian response, and bring genuine value to both sides. Discovering how a particular local organisation understands and enacts humanitarian action should be incorporated as a major ambition and challenge in INGO work. Ukrainian WLOs are trusted by those affected by war; INGOs by donors. Genuine partnerships with local organisations are needed for INGOs to succeed effectively in their missions of supporting affected populations.

- **Create Spaces for Development of Women's Leadership.** *Both in the conflict zone and in the diaspora, INGOs should support women in developing leadership roles that emerge as a result of crises and ensuring their long-term sustainability. Spaces should be convened for the exchange of experiences and ideas between local women leaders. Leaders of WLOs welcomed the possibilities for exchange arising from this research project. These should also focus on the exchange of ideas regarding the possibilities and challenges that leaders of local women's organisations face. The creation of mentorship projects between leaders of local women's organisations should also be supported.*

- **Psychological support for Local WLOs.** *Humanitarian support places intense psychological strain on local WLOs and their leaders, particularly in the conflict zone, but also in the diaspora. Therefore, the provision of support for psychological supervision and regeneration activities (activities enhancing work-life balance) needs to be incorporated into both the design of projects and their budgets.*

- **Locally Grounded Capacity Building.** *Ukrainian WLOs, particularly newly founded initiatives and organisations, need capacity building training and mentoring to professionalise and sustain their activities. This support in building organisational capacity must be rooted in the realities of the local contexts.*

- **Support Advocacy Work of Ukrainian WLOs.** *Ukrainian WLOs have valuable insights into the everyday challenges of those affected by war, but both in Ukraine and in Poland voiced the difficulty of making this information heard in representative bodies. INGOs can invite Ukrainian WLOs to present their insights at various fora, whether locally, nationally, or internationally. This both assists in including the experiences of those affected by war in political decisions, but also supports the leadership roles of Ukrainian WLOs.*

Ukrainian State/ Local (Hromada) Authorities

- **Inclusion in the Recovery Process.** *On the national level, women leaders and WLO representatives should be included in the recovery processes not only as implementation partners, but also as stakeholders contributing to policy development, programme design, and financial allocation, including the implementation of the Ukraine Facility Plan.*[58]

- **Political Participation.** *The experience that women leaders and WLOs representatives have gained in managing the humanitarian crisis during the war should be translated into political capital. The national government and local authorities should ensure that there are favourable conditions and a safe environment for women to participate in the first post-war elections, both as voters and candidates. Women need to be meaningfully included in decision-making processes on the national, regional, and local level.*

58 The Ukraine Facility Plan is the European Union's financial assistance program aimed at supporting Ukraine's recovery, reconstruction, and modernisation from 2024 to 2027. It provides up to €50 billion to help maintain Ukraine's macro-financial stability, fund essential state functions, stimulate investments for economic recovery, and offer technical assistance for reforms and capacity building. The plan emphasizes transparency, accountability, and alignment with Ukraine's needs and EU standards, ensuring both immediate support and long-term development.

- **Cooperation on the Local Level.** *Local authorities should actively cooperate with WLOs in the development of local policies, community programmes, and recovery plans, as well as the implementation of these respective projects. Among the formats of cooperation could be the inclusion of WLO representatives to local councils' advisory bodies, coordination councils, and so on.*

- **Cooperation with WLOs in the Diaspora.** *The national government should provide the conditions and environment for developing cooperation with migrant and refugee WLOs abroad. The government recently founded a Ministry of Unity, which is working to develop cooperation with the diaspora, and includes members of Ukrainian WLOs in Poland in its working groups. This is a positive development that should be continued.*

Polish National and Local Authorities

- **Minimise the Precarity of Refugees.** *Ukrainians in Poland continue to face severe challenges in the light of the ongoing war in Ukraine. While drafting legislation for the further support of Ukrainian refugees, the Polish government should consider that precarity in displacement is a factor intensifying the psychological trauma suffered by refugees. The solidarity demonstrated to Ukraine and Ukrainians by the Polish people and their government in the immediate aftermath of the invasion had benefits on all sides. The Polish government should incorporate this positive experience into the development of its migration policies in a more comprehensive manner, and in reforms of the laws framing the support for Ukrainian refugees in Poland. The activities of Ukrainian WLOs should be supported as key elements in building a resilient Ukrainian community in Poland.*

- **Acknowledge the Role of Ukrainian WLOs in the Polish Welfare System.** *Ukrainian WLOs work as a supplement to the Polish welfare system. They facilitate the interactions of refugees and migrants with Polish institutions. They support migrants by contacting relevant institutions, compiling and filling out necessary documents, providing language assistance, making appeals against improper decisions, and more. This work is currently taken for granted. It should be acknowledged as integral to the state system of migrant welfare support and be financed as a part of it.*

- **Premises.** *Polish local authorities should support Ukrainian organisations with premises adequate to the new levels of their activities. Ukrainian WLOs in towns across Poland reported challenges with the premises they currently have, which are inadequate to serve the growing of Ukrainians in Polish towns and cities, and that are not fully accessible for the various groups of the Ukrainian population. Supporting Ukrainian organisations in Poland with appropriate premises would function as a focal point for building Ukrainian community resilience and increasing the visibility of the Ukrainian community in Polish towns and cities.*

- **Political Representation.** *Given that Ukrainians without Polish citizenship are not able to vote – even in local elections – Ukrainians do not have direct representation in Polish political life. In this context, Ukrainian WLOs need to be included in representative and consultative bodies at national, regional, and local levels as vital sources of information on the changing challenges faced by Ukrainians in Poland. This work must also be financed.*

- **Ukrainian WLOs as Local Social Entrepreneurial Assets.** *Local authorities should foster the activities of WLOs as a key resource at the level of towns and cities. The new influx of Ukrainians to towns in Poland has a rich potential for local urban development. Ukrainian WLOs can function as sites for entrepreneurial, social, and cultural innovation in the local*

context, and this should be harnessed by local authorities. Support is especially needed for new organisations. Local authorities should encourage and support the development of partnerships between local public institutions and Ukrainian WLOs. Such partnerships can be valuable in integrating refugees into Polish society, developing innovative multi-cultural projects, and thus resulting in mutually beneficial impacts for both partners.

- **WLOs for Cooperation with Ukraine**. *The Polish national government and local authorities should consider Ukrainian WLOs registered in Poland as a valuable asset in building cooperation with Ukraine, especially for the future reconstruction of Ukraine.*

Ukrainian WLOs in Ukraine and Poland

- **Inter-WLOs Cooperation.** *It is important for WLOs both in Poland and Ukraine to initiate and implement projects supporting information exchange between Ukrainian WLOs. In Poland, further steps are needed for strengthening connections and collaboration within the growing network of Ukrainian women-led organisations across the country.*
- **Ukraine–Poland Cooperation.** *More projects need to be developed to to advance cross-border cooperation between Ukrainian WLOs. These projects should aim to foster mutual learning, shared experiences, and joint advocacy initiatives. It would also be important to strengthen connections through dialogues, retreats, and collaborative campaigns between WLOs in order to amplify the voices of Ukrainian women across Europe.*
- **Diversify Funding Sources.** *While the war in Ukraine is ongoing and the humanitarian crisis is extending, access to resources becomes scarcer. As a result, Ukrainian WLOs must seek to diversify sources of funding. This in itself requires an investment of time and resources, which in the context of the crisis are in short supply.*
- **Develop Partnerships with Local Institutions.** *In both countries, cooperation with local institutions can bring mutual benefits. In Ukraine, women leaders should consider joining representative institutions at the local and regional levels to make their voices heard. In Poland, WLOs should seek to develop cooperation with local and regional authorities. However, developing such partnerships requires additional resources.*

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Annexes

Annex 1. Anonymised list of key informants in Ukraine

No.	Type of organisation	Type of location	Location	Topic
1	National CSO/network	City	Western Ukraine	GBV, shelters
2	National CSO/network	City	Western Ukraine	Humanitarian assistance, human rights activities, work with Roma women, organisation of shelters
3	National CSO/network	City	Western Ukraine	Assistance to relocated businesses, humanitarian activities, advocacy and protection of rural women's interests
4	National CSO/network	City	Central Ukraine	Support for women living with HIV
5	National CSO/network	City	Central Ukraine	Targeted humanitarian assistance to women, support to shelters
6	National CSO/network	City	Support to IDPs	Evacuation, support to IDPs
7	National CSO	City	Central Ukraine	Advocacy, people with disabilities
8	Local NGO	City	Central Ukraine	Feminist organisation Humanitarian support + work with IDPs + IDP women started working for them
9	Local NGO	City	Central Ukraine	Feminist organisation Humanitarian support + work with IDPs + IDP women started working for them
10	Local NGO	City	Southern Ukraine	Support to liberated and frontline communities
11	Local NGO	City	Southern Ukraine	Humanitarian assistance to LGBTQAI+ people; support to liberated and frontline communities
12	Local NGO	Town	Eastern Ukraine	Work with youth, children, including humanitarian aid
13	Local NGO	City	Southern Ukraine	Humanitarian assistance in liberated communities, human rights protection, work on institutional strengthening of NGOs, work with young women, etc.
14	Local NGO	City	Central Ukraine	Support to IDPs
15	Local NGO	City	Southern Ukraine	Support to IDPs
16	Local NGO	Town	Northern Ukraine	GBV, support to IDPs, support to liberated communities
17	Local NGO	City	Zaporizhzhia	Support to IDPs
18	Initiative group	Rural community	Northern Ukraine	Distribution of HA after liberation
19	Initiative group	Rural community	Northern Ukraine	Distribution of humanitarian assistance to liberated communities
20	Initiative group	City	Southern Ukraine	Humanitarian work in liberated and frontline communities, the target group is mothers raising children on their own, families with children with disabilities.
21	Volunteer	City	Southern Ukraine	Creating IDP centres, social laundry, helping IDPs, etc.

Annex 2. Anonymised list of FGD participants in Ukraine

	Type of organisation	Type of location	Location	Topic
FGD with respondents from communities close to frontline / Russian border				
1	Initiative group	Rural community	Northern Ukraine	Support to IDPs
2	Local NGO	Rural community	Southern Ukraine	Support to frontline communities, human rights protection, work on institutional strengthening of NGOs, work with young women
3	Local NGO	Medium sized town	Southern Ukraine	Displaced from Kherson and work in Odesa oblast with IDPs
4	Local NGO	City	Northern Ukraine	Support to war-affected communities close to Russian border
5	Local NGO	City	Northern Ukraine	GBV
6	Local NGO	Medium sized town	Northern Ukraine	Support to IDPs, support to liberated communities
8	Regional CSO/network	City	Southern Ukraine	Support to IDPs
FGD with respondents from communities located remotely from the frontlines				
9	Local NGO	City	Central Ukraine	Humanitarian assistance for IDPs
10	Local NGO	City	Western Ukraine	Support to IDPs and war veterans
11	Local NGO	Rural community	Central Ukraine	Support to local community, work with youth
12	Local NGO	City	Western Ukraine	Support to IDPs
13	Local NGO	City	Western Ukraine	Support to families, support to people with disabilities, support to IDPs

Annex 3. Anonymised list of key informants in Poland

#	Type of Organisation	Location	Date of Founding	Type of Leader	Topic
1	Formal	Wroclaw	Post-Escalation	Pre-2014 Migrant	General Support
2	Formal	Kraków	Pre-Escalation	Pre-2014 Migrant	Specialist Support: Disabled Refugees
3	Formal	Kraków	Pre-Covid	Pre-2014 Migrant	General Support
4	Formal	Kraków	Post-Escalation	Refugee	Specialist Support: Human Trafficking
5	Formal	Kraków	Post-Escalation	Refugee	Specialist Support: Children
6	Formal	Warsaw	Pre-Covid	Pre-2014 Migrant	Specialist Support: Aid to Ukraine, Humanitarian Support
7	Formal	Warsaw	Post-Escalation	Post-2014 Migrant	Specialist Support: Vocational Assistance
8	Formal	Warsaw	Post-Escalation	Refugee	General Support
9	Formal	Toruń	Post-Escalation	Pre-2014 Migrant	General Support
10	Formal	Suwalki	Pre-Escalation	Post-2014 Migrant	General Support
11	Formal	Katowice	Post-Escalation	Refugee	General Support
12	Informal	Warsaw	Post-Escalation	Pre-2014 Migrant	Specialist Support: Aid to Ukraine
13	Formal	Poznań	Pre-Covid	Pre-2014 Migrant	General Support
14	Formal	Bydgoszcz	Post-Escalation	Refugee	Specialist Support: refugees with HIV
15	Formal	Zory	Post-Escalation	Post-2014 Migrant	General Support
16	Formal	Kielce	Pre-Covid	Refugee	Specialist Support: Vocational Assistance
17	Formal	Lublin	Post-Escalation	Refugee	Specialist Support: Culture
18	Formal	Olsztyn	Post-Escalation	Refugee	General Support
19	Formal	Kraków	Post-Escalation	Post-2014 Migrant	Specialist Support: Education
20	Formal	Warsaw	Pre-Covid	Pre-2014 Migrant	General Support

Annex 4. Anonymised list of FGD participants in Poland

No.	Type of organisation	Location	Date of Founding	Type of Leader	Topic
FGD with Informal Initiatives					
1	Informal	Mińsk Mazowiecki	Post-Escalation	Refugee	General
2	Informal	Grodzisk	Post-Escalation	Post-2014 Migrant	General
3	Informal	Mława	Post-Escalation	Refugee	Specialist Support: Culture
FGD on Aid to Ukraine					
4	Formal	Kraków	Post-Escalation	Refugee	Specialist Support: Aid to Ukraine
5	Informal	Warsaw	Post-Escalation	Post-2014 Migrant	Specialist Support: Aid to Ukraine
6	Formal	Szczecin	Post-Escalation	Pre-2014 Migrant	Specialist Support: Pre-school Education
FGD with Organisations Outside of Metropolises					
7	Informal	Kwidzyn	Post-Escalation	Refugee	General
8	Formal	Brusy	Post-Escalation	Refugee	General
9	Formal	Lubon	Post-Escalation	Refugee	Specialist Support: Culture

About the Research Partners

Open Space Works Ukraine is a female-led private social change enterprise established in 2016, expanding its focus to humanitarian research in 2022. Its aim is to provide evidence-based support to humanitarian and civil society actors, enhancing local leadership in Ukraine's humanitarian response. This study complements Open Space Works Ukraine's broader portfolio of research initiatives on the role of Ukrainian civil society and local actors in humanitarian efforts. Other research projects include studies of humanitarian narratives in Ukraine, studies on perception of humanitarian aid in Ukraine, and studies on the roles of Ukrainian civil society organisations in the humanitarian response in Ukraine.

The Ukrainian House Foundation is an NGO founded in Warsaw in 2009 by migrant women from Ukraine. Since then, it has been working to support Ukrainians in Poland and to build bridges between Poland and Ukraine. The Ukrainian House underwent a rapid upscaling of its activities in February 2022, transforming into a crisis response centre. The present research project is informed by the Ukrainian House's insider's perspective as a Ukrainian women's led organisation responding to the humanitarian crisis. The project builds on the foundation's pre-escalation research analysing the changing situation of Ukrainian migrants in Poland, in particular on the project on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Ukrainian women migrants in Poland.

“We barely have time to celebrate our wins … or to process what we’ve lost”

The Role of Ukrainian Women-led Organisations in Humanitarian Action in Ukraine and Poland in 2022-2024

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