

# THE BARRIERS

## TO A FULFILLING LIFE IN ESTONIA FOR UKRAINIAN WOMEN DISPLACED BY RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

Insights from a feminist participatory action research study

2024



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# INTRODUCTION



## THE CONTEXT

The displacement caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine has highlighted the complex realities of forced migration, as nearly 6.7 million people from Ukraine (UNHCR, 2024) have sought safety across borders since the beginning of the full-scale war in February 2022. Estonia has become a new home to tens of thousands of Ukrainian refugees, the majority of whom are women (e.g., Anniste & Espenberg, 2022), with the whole country navigating the challenges of ensuring effective support systems and social cohesion. This context is particularly significant for Ukrainian refugee women, whose experiences of migration and settling in a new country are shaped by intersecting issues of gender, social roles, and structural inequalities.

Previous studies on Ukrainian refugees in Estonia have provided some insights into their living conditions, access to services, and integration experiences, while also highlighting concerning gender differences. IOM (2024) found that 44% of Ukrainian refugees in Estonia reported lack of employment as their most significant challenge to inclusion. Other common inclusion challenges included language (36%), homesickness (31%), financial (20%), and housing-related (18%) difficulties. Compared to other host countries, Estonia stands out in some respects. The gap between the employment rates of Ukrainian refugee men and women has been found to be among the smallest compared to other studied EU host countries (FRA, 2023), suggesting some progress towards gender equity in access to work and perhaps availability of childcare. Additionally, 83% of Ukrainian refugees in Estonia reported never or only rarely feeling treated unfairly because of coming from Ukraine (FRA, 2023), indicating a generally welcoming environment.

At the same time, challenges persist, particularly for women and refugees belonging to minority groups. FRA (2023) found that on average across studied EU host countries, nearly half of Ukrainian refugees in paid work (48%) reported that their jobs were below their level of education, with women (51%) more likely to experience this than men (39%). Feelings of emotional distress were also found to be widespread, with 49% of refugees on average across EU countries often feeling downhearted or depressed—this figure rises to 54% for women and to a stark 77% for LGBT respondents.

What is missing from this data is a deeper understanding of the unique everyday realities and challenges of Ukrainian women navigating displacement. That is why in this project we took a feminist participatory action research approach, centering the voices and experiences of Ukrainian refugee women in shaping the narrative and identifying solutions.

## WHAT IS FEMINIST PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH?

Participatory action research (PAR) is not a single research method but a broader approach to research and inquiry, which centers on the deep and meaningful participation of the people the most directly affected by the topic at hand (Burns et al., 2021). In PAR, participants become co-researchers.

Since we also position ourselves as feminist researchers, we applied the theoretical framework of feminist participatory research (FPAR, e.g., Reid & Frisby, 2008; Gervais et al., 2018), which entails:

- ✓ Co-creating knowledge with girls/women and people from marginalised genders on topics that matter to them.
- ✓ Designing the research process with the goal of supporting the participation and empowerment of co-researchers .
- ✓ Practicing reflexivity.
- ✓ Striving for social or political changes defined by the co-researchers and promoting their interests.

## PROJECT'S INITIAL OBJECTIVES

The project's objectives can be understood on two distinct levels: first, the initial objectives defined by Praxis coordinators at the project's inception, when pitching the idea to funders and recruiting a Ukrainian-speaking coordinator for the co-researchers' group; and second, the objectives later developed by the co-researchers' group for their participatory process and research. The original objectives of the broader project were:

- 🎯 To provide Ukrainian women and those socialised as women with a platform to express their previously unheard stories, experiences, demands, or recommendations to decision-makers in Estonia.
- 🎯 To empower marginalised communities of people displaced by Russian invasion and the full-scale war in Ukraine and now living in Estonia.
- 🎯 To offer Estonian policymakers and service providers new insights into the experiences, needs, and concerns of Ukrainian refugees.

## RESEARCH AND GROUP OBJECTIVES

After the formation of the co-researchers' group, these general project objectives were specified in co-researchers' group discussions. Following the principles of PAR, these discussions centred on ensuring that the objectives were shaped by the co-researchers' lived experiences and aspirations.

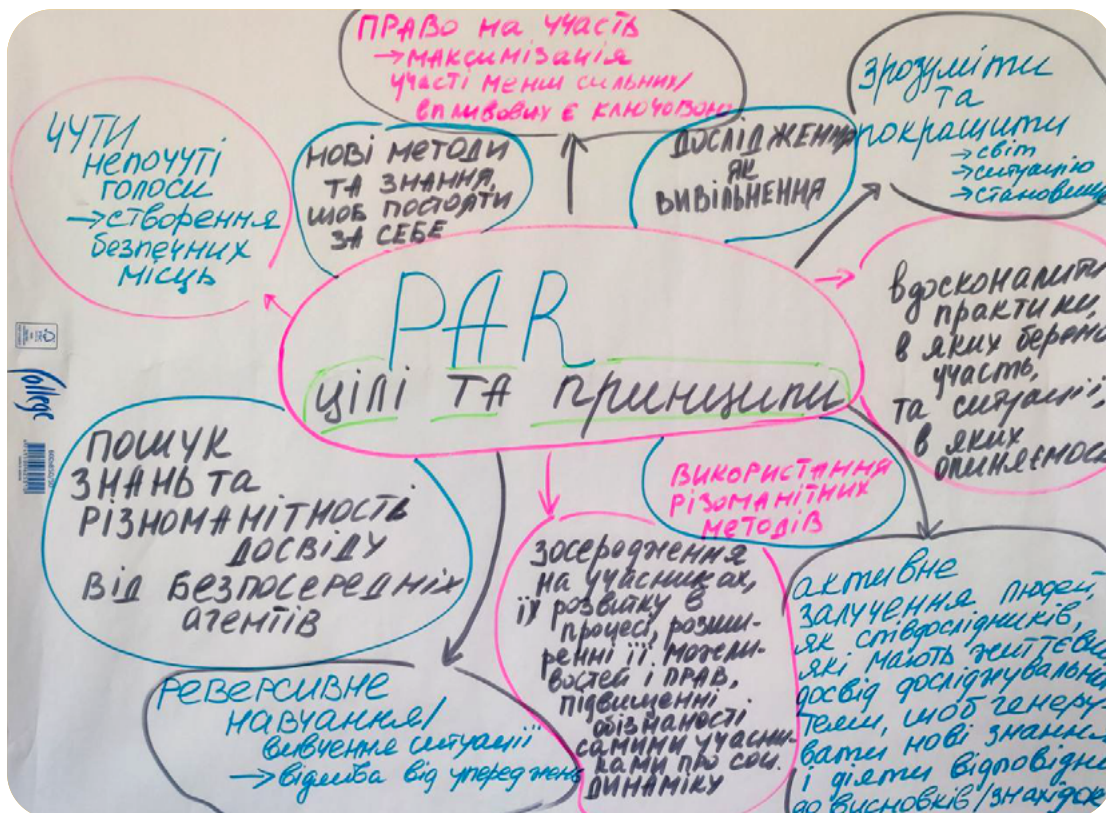
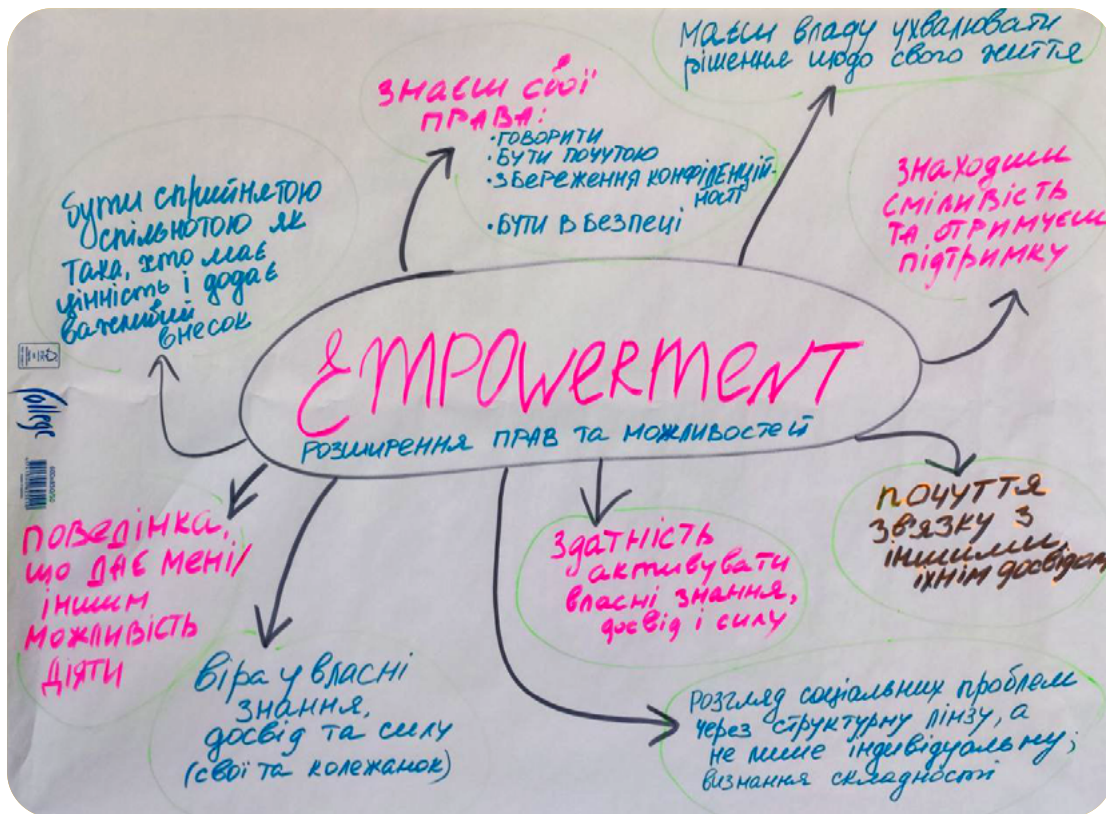
## GROUP GOALS AND RESEARCH QUESTION

The specific objectives set by the group for their PAR process were the following:

- 1 Improving women's lives:** Creating conditions for personal and professional development, and a safe living environment.
- 2 Achieving clarity and structure:** Striving for a clear and organised life in new conditions.
- 3 Visibility and voice of Ukrainian women:** Ensuring the opportunity to be heard, respected, and recognized.
- 4 Enhancing equality:** Achieving equal rights and equal opportunities for Ukrainian women, similar to Estonian citizens.
- 5 Improving access to information and services:** Ensuring convenience and clarity of procedures related to staying in Estonia.
- 6 Resolving legal issues:** Determining legal status during the transition period and creating opportunities for long-term residency in the country.
- 7 Developing guidelines for solving life issues:** Working out practical solutions for adapting to life in Estonia.
- 8 Solidarity and support:** Creating a community that fosters support and a sense of solidarity, ensuring that no woman feels alone in her challenges.
- 9 Openness to collaboration:** Engaging state structures in dialogue and resolving pressing issues.
- 10 Expanding influence:** Achieving equal participation in Estonian society and influencing decision-making processes to address problems actively.

To move towards these objectives through a participatory action research process, the group formulated a final research question: **What are the barriers to a fulfilling life in Estonia for Ukrainian women displaced by Russia-Ukraine war?**

This question was agreed on, because it helped focus on identifying the main obstacles and finding ways to overcome them.



# 1. THE PARTICIPATORY PROCESS

## 1.1. PLANNING FOR PARTICIPATION

The depth of community, or co-researcher, involvement varies in every PAR project, ranging from limited input like consultation (see, e.g., Arnstein, 1969) during the research process to full community control over all decisions made in the process. In this project, we aimed for the deepest possible level of participation. This meant that we aimed to involve co-researchers in setting the research questions, collecting data, analysing data, deciding on and implementing action based on the findings.

At the same time, it was important to acknowledge that several aspects of the project had been determined in advance: the general timeline, the total budget, and even the feminist approach. We also recognised that adhering to feminist principles involves identifying and addressing the potential limitations to full participation faced by co-researchers, whether related to gender, age, living conditions, possible disabilities, caregiving responsibilities, etc. Not all participants might have equal time and opportunities to engage in every stage of the research process, depending on their circumstances, even if their participation is compensated. Therefore, we did not fix the frequency, timing, or location of the meetings before the co-researchers' group was formed and their situations and needs discussed.

## 1.2. BRINGING A GROUP COORDINATOR ON BOARD

To move the project forward from the initial idea of working with Ukrainian refugee women in Estonia using a feminist PAR approach, we knew it would be crucial to bring a new person to Praxis and recruit someone either from the Ukrainian refugee community or with strong ties to Ukraine and the necessary language skills to lead the process. Before sharing the call, we reflected on what kind of person might best support this project. We needed someone who was either well-connected within the displaced Ukrainian community in Estonia or motivated to build such connections, who was interested in exploring these experiences through a feminist perspective, and who had experience facilitating groups, whether through discussions, workshops, or creative activities. Although we considered the knowledge of social scientific research a bonus, we did not see it as essential, since we planned to provide training and ongoing support in participatory research methods. Language skills in both Estonian or English and Ukrainian or Russian were, however, necessary.

The recruitment process took place in December 2023 and January 2024. We received 12 applications, reviewed them against our criteria and eventually invited three candidates for interviews. After much discussion, we felt that Kateryna was the right person to take on the role of the co-researchers' group's coordinator.



Her strong network within the Ukrainian community in Estonia and her experience working with (women's) groups stood out, and we felt confident that she would bring the skills and sensitivity needed to lead the PAR process effectively. Looking back, this decision was justified – Kateryna created a collaborative and supportive environment within the co-researchers' group. This highlights the value of facilitation skills (which rarely receives attention in social scientists' training) and the ability to create inclusive spaces as key attributes for coordinating PAR. While a research background could also support the coordinator and the process, our example shows that it is ultimately the facilitator's ability to build trust and ensure all voices are heard that is essential – after all, group meetings are at the core of a PAR process.

### 1.3. BRINGING CO-RESEARCHERS ON BOARD

We designed the process and conditions of recruiting co-researchers together with Kateryna as the group's coordinator already on board. We aimed to create a diverse group of participants who were not only interested in exploring the gendered dimensions of migration and resettlement experiences but also willing to contribute as active decision-makers in the research process.

The key decisions we needed to make at the start of recruiting co-researchers were about the breadth of their profiles – for example, whether the group should include participants of similar ages – and the criteria for selection. We decided to include Ukrainian refugee women (arrived in Estonia after the beginning of the Russian full-scale war in Ukraine on 24th February 2022) over the age of 18 and not set any further criteria for age, legal status or area of residence in Estonia, because we believed the process will be long enough to create cohesion even in a quite diverse group.

To reach potential co-researchers, we used community social media groups on Facebook and Telegram, personal contacts, and Praxis' social media channels. We made sure that it would be clear in the recruitment communication that co-researchers are invited to join as equal partners in the research process rather than just as respondents. The key information for potential participants on different channels included the following points:

- + We are looking for people aged at least 18 who identify as women or have experience being socialised as women
- + Meetings are regular, last 2-3h and take place in the centre of Tallinn or sometimes online if the group decides so
- + There is a small financial compensation for participation and reimbursement of transport costs
- + General goal and values of the project
- + Brief explanation of the PAR approach
- + General timeline of the project: which month do the meetings start and end
- + General timeline of the project: meetings start in March and end in November 2024

Altogether 64 people interested in the project responded to this open call and filled out a short questionnaire about their background and motivation. The group coordinator followed up with phone conversations with people whose profile matched the criteria to clarify expectations and confirm their involvement. In the end, 19 participants aged 19-56 joined the group as co-researchers. Among the co-researchers many had children, there were several people who had a disability or a chronic health condition, two identified as lesbian, bisexual or asexual. Most of the participants lived in Tallinn and were employed or were studying.

The project coordinators held several discussions over what the compensation for participation in the project should be, what should be the requirements to get the compensation, and if formal contracts were to be concluded with the co-researchers, and if yes then which type of contracts. We also discussed the issue of copyrights related to project outputs. The project coordinators held several discussions regarding the compensation for participation in the project, the requirements for eligibility to receive the compensation, whether formal contracts and what type of contracts should be concluded with the co-researchers. Additionally, we addressed copyright issues related to project outputs.

It was decided that service contracts would be concluded with all co-researchers for the purpose of paying to facilitate the payment of financial compensation for attending meetings and the reimbursement of transport costs incurred when travelling to the meetings. The compensation was split in two instalments. Co-researchers were entitled to receive a gross payment of €470 for attending at least 70% of the participatory action research group meetings held between March and December 2024. The contract stipulated that the fee could be increased if the budget allocated for fees allowed or if some group members declined their fee. Some of the co-researchers who were registered as unemployed were worried about the fee impacting their right to unemployment benefits. Praxis tried to take this concern into account as much as possible when signing contracts.

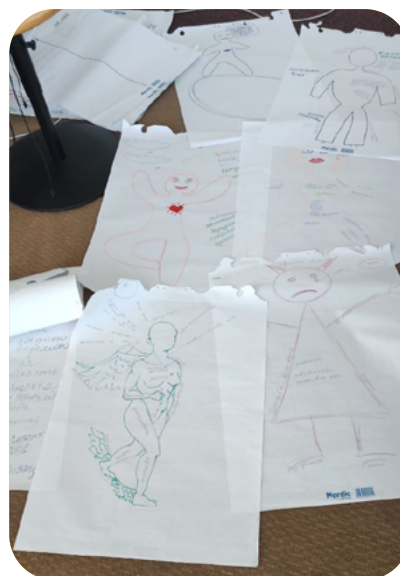
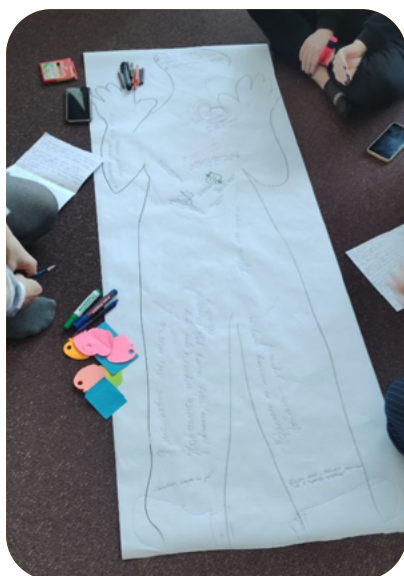
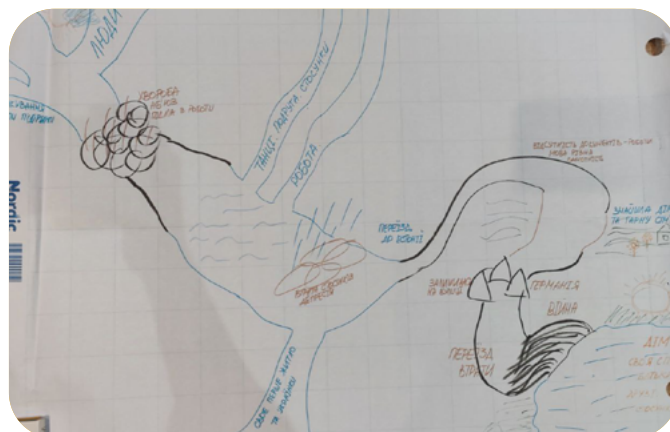
Regarding the issue of intellectual property, it was stated in the contracts that the co-researchers provide Praxis with a 20-year intellectual property licence to use the outputs of the project for no extra fee.



## 1.4. ACTIVITIES AND STRATEGIES IN GROUP MEETINGS

After forming the co-researchers' group, the rest of the PAR process centred around their group meetings which also made up much of the research process (discussing and prioritising issues to identify the research question, learning and choosing methods, analysing and interpreting data, identifying actions needed). Some of the activities used in the group meetings to support active participation, mutual respect and collaboration included:

- ✓ **Building trust.** We started with exercises to help participants feel safe and comfortable sharing their experiences.
- ✓ **Participatory methods.** We incorporated various participatory and creative methods, such as:
  - **Rivers of life** (see, e.g., Howard, 2023) for reflecting on significant life events.
  - **Body mapping** (de Jager et al., 2016; Oosterhoff, 2023;) to explore emotions and experiences through physical sensations in the body.
  - **Journalling** for personal reflections and observations.
  - **Group brainstorming** and discussions to collectively generate ideas and discuss issues.



These methods contributed to stronger interaction, deeper understanding of topics, and effective collaboration.

- ✓ **Energisers:** We regularly used short energising activities to keep the atmosphere positive even during challenging discussions.
- ✓ **Reflection circles:** These provided a space for everyone to share their thoughts and feelings about the process and gather information on any possible adjustments needed.
- ✓ **Skill-building sessions:** Praxis organised workshops for the co-researchers' on data collection methods, interviewing and qualitative data analysis (leading by **Elisabeth Kendrali**).
- ✓ **Thematic workshops:** gender equality workshop (leading by **Mari-Liis Sepper**), photo-reflection workshop (leading by **Annika Haas**).



## 1.5.

### HOW WE ADAPTED TO CHANGING GROUP DYNAMICS AND FEEDBACK

From the beginning, we wanted the process to be flexible and adapt as the group's needs and dynamics evolve. These are some key adaptations and ways in which we tried to maintain flexibility, support relationships and wellbeing in the co-researchers' group:

- 1 **Predictable schedule:** The co-researchers decided to hold meetings twice a month and always on the same day which provided predictability for everyone.
- 2 **Flexible modes:** Co-researchers could join the meetings online if they couldn't attend in person.

- 3 **Responding to feedback:** Early in the process, the co-researchers highlighted that it was important to them to balance between creating meaningful and deep connections within the group and achieve practical outcomes. We paid attention to blending reflective activities with action-oriented tasks in the group meetings.
- 4 **Resolving challenges:** The group created a cooperation agreement in the beginning of the research process. When we encountered a breach of confidentiality, we could refer to the agreement, work together to solve the issue and strengthen trust within the group instead of undermining it.
- 5 **Staying connected:** We expected the research process to be emotionally demanding, so we created informal spaces for participants to share ideas and connect between also our meetings. For example, co-researchers decided to start a common group chat and connect on social media to keep in touch. Midway through the process, we organised a field trip to the countryside together with Praxis coordinators. Alongside creative and PAR workshops, the trip also strengthened relationships and the sense of collaboration.
- 6 **Getting rest and maintaining engagement:** Midway through the process during the summer, we paused the co-researchers' meetings for three weeks. During the break, however, the group had a weekly journaling task – a "gender diary". At the end of the week, they were encouraged to reflect and note down the situations or decisions from the week where they recognised how gender influenced behaviour, expectations or opportunities in some way. This could include instances of gendered power dynamics, such as unequal roles or responsibilities in family, work, or social settings, or moments when gender norms or stereotypes shaped interactions. The aim of the activity was to develop a deeper awareness of how gender operates in everyday life, as part of the broader feminist consciousness-raising process in the project. .

In general, the co-researchers' group meetings evolved from team-building activities and more exploratory discussions into more practical activities, like planning data collection, interviewing or analysing data together.



## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### CO-RESEARCHERS' DUAL ROLE

In this research process, the co-researchers were both researchers and respondents/data providers in the more traditional sense. This means that they were not only actively engaged in meetings, making decisions about research design, but they also created the data that they later analysed to answer our research question. In this way, the co-researchers contributed both their personal experiences of resettling in Estonia and the reflections they developed during the research process.



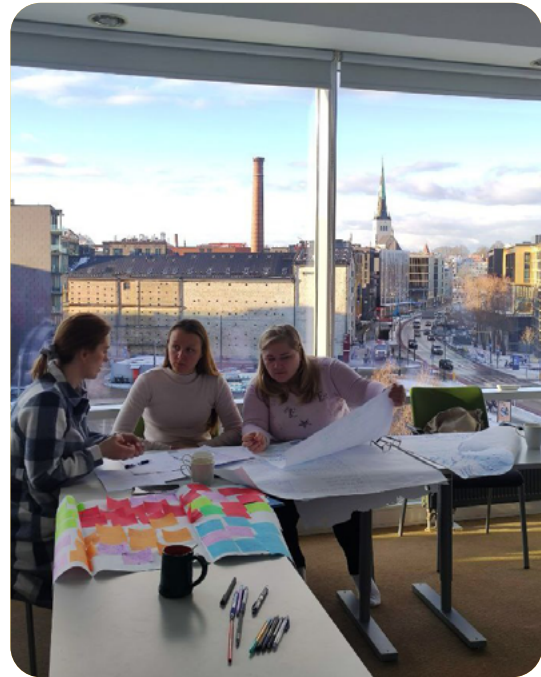
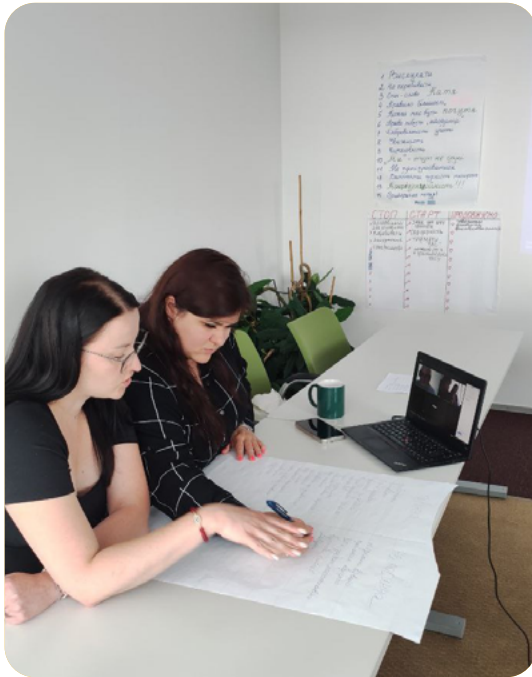
### DATA COLLECTION AND GENERATION

In PAR, methods can be understood in two ways: firstly, methods to facilitate the group and the collaborative process (getting to know each other, building trust, exploring issues, prioritising issues, etc) and secondly, methods for data collection and analysis, i.e., research methods in a more conventional sense. Often, these are not totally distinct but overlap, because participatory techniques used in group meetings do not only support discussions but can also generate data relevant to the research question. These overlapped in our project too.

We analysed data from two different sources:

- 1 materials and notes from our meetings.
- 2 interviews conducted by co-researchers.

This means that we used a variety of participatory methods to create data, most of which were part of our regular group meetings. However, the decisions regarding data sources were made only towards the end of the process after deciding on the research question. We decided to use materials and notes generated during our group meetings as data, because group meetings were a space for discussions and experience-sharing regarding Ukrainian refugee women's barriers to a fulfilling life in Estonia, generating rich material for analysis.



**Altogether, we had 18 regular co-researchers' group meetings from March 2024 to November 2024.** As these meetings formed the core of our PAR process and ended up being one of the main sources of data for the research, we will lay out the key stages of our group meetings' process here:

- 1 Building trust:** In the beginning, creating a safe and supportive environment was a priority. This helped participants overcome initial hesitations, feel secure, and engage openly in discussions. Activities and conversations were designed to foster mutual respect and understanding within the group.
- 2 Exploring issues:** Through collective reflection and experience-sharing, co-researchers identified and examined personal and shared challenges of resettling in Estonia. This stage provided the group with a clearer understanding of the key issues and laid the ground for further analysis.
- 3 Prioritising issues:** After identifying various challenges, the group worked together to prioritise the most pressing and significant ones with the goal of specifying their research question.
- 4 Reflection:** Throughout the process, co-researchers reflected on their experiences, insights from the meetings, and any possible changes in their understandings. These reflections also contributed to the research data and at the same time, supported personal growth and strengthened the group's cohesion.

In addition to the 18 regular meetings, we organised a three-day **trip to the countryside**. This offered co-researchers a new level and environment for interaction. Co-researchers deepened their connections and participated in workshops to develop creative and research skills. We also had **additional online meetings** in the final month of the project in order to finalise the data analysis and the research report. The project finished with a **celebratory final meeting in December**. This event served as a space to reflect on the project, express gratitude, celebrate the group's achievements and lay ground for future plans together.





## ADDITIONAL DATA COLLECTION METHODS

In addition to data generated through our regular group meetings, we also employed other methods, such as **individual interviews** to gain a deeper understanding of personal experiences. Altogether, co-researchers conducted six interviews with each other (duration of up to 35 minutes). Before the interviews, we developed interview protocols together, discussed how to make the interviewing process comfortable, safe and effective. **We also used a short online survey** to collect qualitative information on consequences resulting from delays regarding document renewals which was distributed also outside of the co-researchers' group.

## DATA ANALYSIS

For the data analysis, we first worked on **coding and categorisation**. Data from meeting notes, interviews and other materials we had created were coded and then grouped into themes. Co-researchers first worked individually on a particular part of data (e.g., notes from one meeting) and then formed small teams to compare the codes they had created, then group similar codes and eventually name the groups. This was followed by **discussion and refinement of themes**. Co-researchers held discussions to refine and clarify the key findings, ensuring the analysis was comprehensive and accurately reflected their experience.

This way, the co-researchers had more control over their own data and how their (sometimes very personal) stories were represented and interpreted than they would have had in a more traditional research process where they might have been only data providers as survey respondents or interviewees.

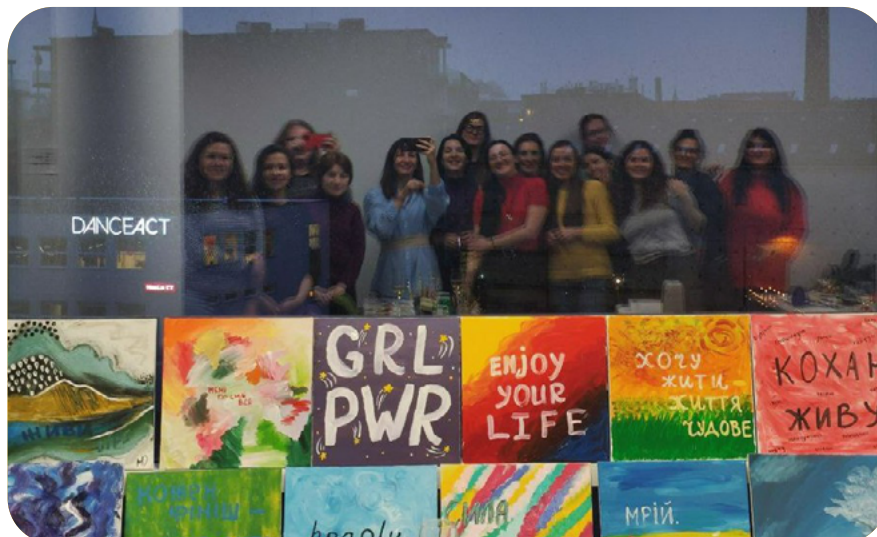




## ETHICS AND CARE

Throughout the research process, we paid attention to ethical considerations and mutual care:

- ✓ **Confidentiality:** We established clear cooperation agreements from the start and addressed any breaches to rebuild trust.
- ✓ **Informed consent:** All participants provided verbal or written consent for their involvement and the use of their data within the project.
- ✓ **Creating a safe space:** The group coordinator paid attention to co-researchers' feelings of comfort and ensured the freedom to speak up or remain silent as needed.
- ✓ **Emotional support:** The participants' emotional needs were recognised and supported during our meetings, particularly during discussions of conflicts or challenging topics.
- ✓ **Mutual care:** Participants actively cultivated empathy and support for one another, fostering a trusting and collaborative atmosphere.



## 3. ANALYSIS, FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 3.1. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the research and describes how our feminist approach influenced our perception and interpretation of the data.

This section of the analysis includes a number of quotes derived from interviews conducted by the co-researchers with each other, the survey results, and statements made by the co-researchers during regular meetings.

#### 3.1.1. FORMULATION OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The research process revealed that the challenges faced by Ukrainian women displaced to Estonia are numerous and interconnected. Each barrier manifests with varying dynamics for different women, making it difficult to focus on just one aspect for the study.

Ultimately, we formulated the central research question as: **What are the barriers to a fulfilling life for Ukrainian women displaced to Estonia?**

By “**fulfilling life**,” we mean a state where women have stability and security, the ability to realise their rights, receive psychological support, be protected from discrimination, develop both professionally and personally, and feel like part of society.

Throughout the research, we identified the **following barriers** to achieving this state: document processing for the extension of legal stay in the country, language barrier, employment difficulties, psycho-emotional pressure, equal rights realisation, lack of information, and the absence of a focus on women in adaptation programmes.

**The main challenges** we faced while formulating the research question were, first, integrating a gender perspective into the analysis – this was both our strength and the source of new questions – and second, the need to focus on a single key issue among a multitude of topics, as all of them are equally important for understanding the experience of Ukrainian women in Estonia.

**The following sections will address each barrier in detail.**

## 3.1.2.

**ISSUES WITH DOCUMENTS (DELAYS IN DOCUMENT RENEWAL FOR TEMPORARY PROTECTION)**

One of the most distressing issues for most co-researchers—and, as it later emerged, for other Ukrainian women with temporary protection in Estonia—was the delay in issuing documents during the mandatory renewal of temporary protection. Many found themselves in a situation where their previous documents were no longer valid, yet new ones had not been issued, despite people submitting having submitted their applications on time. In addition to the intense anxiety caused by the delay and the uncertainty of its outcome, the situation led to various consequences that each individual had to navigate alone, often without knowing how to proceed.

Here are some of the consequences of document delays that we identified:

- 1 **Loss of rights and opportunities:**
  - **Exclusion from the residence register.** Consequences: inability to receive certain social benefits or assistance (payment for a special group in kindergarten, compensation for starting school).
  - **Complete or temporary loss of various social benefits and allowances**
    - Of these, 6 cases concerned benefits or allowances for children.
    - 3 cases included the loss of transport benefits.
  - **Loss of the opportunity to study Estonian language** – exclusion from courses where studies had already begun
  - **Loss of the right to drive and use parking** (for which payments had already been made)
  - **Loss of health insurance and access to medical services**
  - **Difficulties or complete loss of the ability to use Töötukassa (Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund) services**
  - **Loss of a job**
  - **Loss of banking services**
  - **Loss or difficulties in exercising the right to education for children**

*Due to the delay in documents, I was removed from the residence register after a week – because of this, my paid parking for a year near my home (in the Kesklinn area) was cancelled, and I had to park under general hourly conditions, which is very expensive. Also, when applying for part-time work (employment contract), I received a letter from the tax office on how to pay taxes as a non-resident (as far as I understand, I automatically became a non-resident) – I did not respond to this situation, thinking it would be rectified when my documents were restored. Public transport – trains were not accessible because I lacked an ID card for verification; buses were possible, but if there had been a control of tickets – I don't know how it would have ended*

*Of course, during this time, it was impossible to get a job or perform any operations requiring identification. I was also removed from Töötukassa (meaning I lost health insurance coverage for some time), studies were not interrupted (probably because they had already been paid for), and payments were restored after receiving the document.*

*For the two months I was without the card, I couldn't use the travel benefits for train rides, which were still valid then. Since I live in Tartu and work in a hybrid format for a Tallinn company, this complicated my commutes to work. I also had to give up attending Estonian language courses in Tallinn, for which I had already signed up, considering the free travel – because without a valid ID card, I would have had to buy the Tartu/Tallinn/Tartu ticket myself, which would have been unaffordable given my income at that time.*

## 2 Financial consequences:

### ● **Unplanned financial expenses**

- The necessity to pay for travel.
- The necessity to pay again for parking.
- The necessity to travel to Ukraine for additional documents.
- The necessity to pay for a doctor's visit.
- The necessity to pay for a place in kindergarten.

*In Tallinn, we applied for an ID card for the child, submitted everything on time, but the delay of the card occurred without reason for a month. We were told it wouldn't affect anything, but I called and went in to insist on processing it, and eventually, it was done. However, when the kindergarten director told us that we had the right not to pay for the special group, like the other parents, she submitted an application, but the social department refused us, stating that we had missed that particular month during the processing of the ID card, that we supposedly did not have a full year of residence, and we had to go and renew everything from scratch, including registration, etc.*

- **Financial burden:** there were instances where people had to borrow money
- **Unexpected decrease in the monthly family budget** due to the cancellation of child and other benefits

During the delay in documents for the renewal of temporary protection, a number of problems arose:

- 1) I couldn't register my children with a doctor, even though I had a referral;
- 2) In transport – I had to pay for the ticket (train fare in Tallinn, fortunately, I wasn't fined);
- 3) Child benefits were halted, but they were paid later when I brought the new document; it was financially difficult and unexpected.

I am mentally preparing for March 2025, not planning anything for that time, as I do not know what unpleasant surprises await me and how long I will have to wait.

### 3 Negative impact on health: Impact on physical and psychological health

- Uncertainty and fear regarding the renewal of documents
- Inability to attend a doctor's appointment covered by insurance
- Necessity to travel to Ukraine for a doctor's visit and undergo surgery there

During the same period (about 2 weeks before her documents officially expired), an unexpected issue arose regarding the need to provide a certificate of non-receipt of income from Ukraine. This woman is from a temporarily occupied territory, and there were difficulties obtaining this certificate online; no one wanted to help her, she called Ukraine several times about this. She had to travel to Ukraine at her own expense, using funds she borrowed from friends to obtain this certificate in person. At that time, she called the police to clarify whether her protection would be extended, as there were about 10 days left until the end. They told her to wait, but there was no clear answer. Since she was unsure if she would have her documents in time, she had to cancel a doctor's appointment planned in Estonia just a few days after her card expired because she didn't have spare money for the consultation. She ended up going to a doctor in Ukraine – the situation turned out to be serious, and she required a minor surgical intervention, which she also had to pay for out of pocket in Ukraine. She doesn't know whether they would have accepted her for free in an Estonian hospital or if her insurance remained, but she was immediately excluded from her language courses as soon as her card became invalid – she suspects that medical care would also have been chargeable.

### 4 Problems with identification and rights:

- Loss of driving rights
- Inability to get a job or perform operations requiring identification
- Requirements for new certificates from Ukraine

**There were also potential risks we identified:**

**1 Risk of lacking necessary documents during exams:**

- If exams coincide with the period when new documents have not yet been received, previous documents are no longer valid—the person will not be allowed to take the exam.

**2 Uncertainty and stress:**

- Fear regarding the renewal of documents in the future.
- The absence of clear guidelines and/or information materials suggesting refugees desired course of action. The absence of a clear guidelines can lead to additional emotional burden.

*I registered for the state B1 level language exam. I was waiting for my documents and was nervous every day. I received my ID card a day before the exam. It was a huge stress and a feeling of uncertainty. Now all of our documents will expire in March 2025, just before my child's exams in the 9th grade, and we are already starting to worry about potential delays.*

The interviewees shared that all of this occurred against a backdrop of communication problems. No one could provide answers to questions about what to do, how long to wait, or how to address the consequences. The only response people received was to wait. This indicates a lack of information among police officials and other services. Women lacked clear information on what to do in case of document expiration and what to do when they faced the consequences.

*At first, I simply didn't know that I had to renew it myself. Then it turned out that I needed certificates from Ukraine, which I simply cannot obtain because no one is responding to me. So the only option is to go to Ukraine, leaving my children without proper care since I have no one in Estonia except them.*

*The lack of information and a clear action plan that one could prepare for in advance led to the fact that since the last renewal of protection in April 2024, I have not been receiving assistance for my three children. At first, I simply didn't know that I had to renew it myself. Then it turned out that I needed certificates from Ukraine, which I simply cannot obtain because no one is responding to me. So the only option is to go to Ukraine, leaving my children without proper care since I have no one in Estonia except them.*

A global consequence of all these situations is a further potential and, in some cases, already real refusal to deal with Ukrainians, as for employers, course organizers, landlords, etc., these represent potential problems and loss of funds.

*In March 2023, she started B1 level Estonian language courses. Due to the expiration of temporary protection during the waiting period for document processing, Töötukassa ceased payment to the language school (Atlasnet), and the woman was expelled from the courses. Time was wasted, nerves were frayed, and there was a missed opportunity to continue studying this essential language for life and work in Estonia, resulting in damages to both the state as a portion of the course was paid, but the course was not completed and the business as the school did not receive funds, the waiting list for courses is long, but you cannot take another person for the freed spot. There is a likelihood that from now on this school will not accept Ukrainians with temporary protection for courses because their status might not be extended, leading to losses for the company. Such cases are not isolated.*

**We identified several ways in which women coped with the situation of document delays:**

- 1 Seeking alternative sources of funding:** such as borrowing money from acquaintances or relatives, and covering personal expenses for medical services
- 2 Seeking additional medical assistance:** such as consultations with doctors outside Estonia, including trips to Ukraine for consultations with doctors, as access to local medical services was limited.
- 3 Personal adaptive strategies and preparation for uncertainty:** Women learned to be flexible in different situations, adapting to new demands and unpredictable conditions, often taking risks and finding temporary solutions to overcome difficulties. This included planning with possible delays in mind: Some women are mentally preparing for possible delays and unpredictability in March 2025, no longer planning any important events due to uncertainty about the documents.
- 4 Seeking information and support:** such as using social media to share information and advice: Women often used social media and online groups to find answers to questions, which helped them quickly learn about the necessary actions and possible solutions. They also turned to informal sources of information: reaching out to friends, acquaintances, or NGOs to understand how to act in their situation. These cases and issues were also discussed at our PAR meetings, so using advice from other co-researchers also became an important source of information and support.

*I submitted on time, in three months, as indicated. But the documents came with a delay, and no one warned me that they would be delayed and did not explain the reason. As a single mother in another country, I have such a situation, namely such uncertainty, which is mentally difficult. According to all databases of documents, I became invisible, and I lost children's certificates, then they were paid. For me, this amount is significant. But no one told me that it would be so. The documents were delayed for 1.5 months. And thanks to this PAR project, the discussion of similar situations in women, I began to call and write to all services to be visible and show what I am. So that it is possible to prepare in advance.*



- 5 Use of the human factor:** such as making regular phone calls. Some women regularly called the responsible authorities, reminding them of their case and emphasizing the importance of speeding up the process. Dependence on the decisions of key people in a particular situation and their “entry into position”. In many situations, the result depended on the willingness of different people to meet and make decisions in favor of Ukrainian women. This shows that the individual approach and the human factor were often decisive in such situations. But often even with the willingness of a particular official to meet them halfway, it was impossible due to administrative gaps – as happened in situations of dropping out of the register of residence in Tallinn.

*The delay in my documents was quite insignificant. One week. Nevertheless, this created some discomfort. At that time, I attended Estonian language courses from the unemployment insurance fund. I, my inspector and everyone involved in this process had to “enter the regulations” and deliberately ignore the fact of the expiration of the document without any guarantees whether it will be provided at all, or instructions for further action if the protection is not extended. I can’t imagine what would happen with a longer delay.*

*Just in May-June, when I was without a card (the previous one expired in the first days of May), it was time to extend my main contracts in Estonia – with the employer and with the owners of the apartment I rent. My registration of my place of residence in the Tartu community was automatically terminated. Fortunately, neither SmartID nor the agreement with SEB Bank stopped working; The employer and the owners of the apartment were also understanding. The employer even agreed to compensate me for my travel from Tartu-Tallinn to the office. But both they and I did not add confidence to the fact that my Estonian documents were in limbo. For me personally, it was quite a stressful time.*

These strategies show women’s ability to adapt and be resilient in situations of uncertainty, as well as their willingness to actively seek ways to overcome the difficulties associated with the delay in documents, but we still have a number of proposals to further reduce this stressor and the risks of all potential consequences.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING THE SITUATION

The ideal scenario would be to renew the documents on time – without delays and their consequences. This would guarantee a legal and peaceful stay in the country. At this point, the reality is that most women are very worried about possible delays and their consequences. Therefore, guarantees, guidelines of action and the availability of support are extremely necessary. We see that many efforts have already been introduced to speed up the procedure for submitting documents for renewal and their processing.

We also believe that the following could help with this:

- ✔ **Process automation and temporary involvement of Ukrainian specialists:** Hire Ukrainian specialists to support document processing, which will speed up processes and take into account cultural and linguistic specificities.
- ✔ **Clear guidelines, e.g., in a booklet, of actions for paperwork:** Develop a simple and understandable guidelines for submitting documents for renewal of status, which contains step-by-step instructions and deadlines for considering applications.
- ✔ **Openness of information to all government agencies:** Ensure that data on the status of applicants is available to all relevant government agencies to improve coordination.

We believe this would already lead to positive consequences such as saving time, which is critical for Ukrainian women in Estonia, and reducing stress.

**To prevent a number of administrative consequences in case of delay in documents, we suggest:**

- ✔ **Implement the legalisation of the transition status:** officially recognize the status of the transition period (waiting) between the submission of the application and the receipt of new documents.
- ✔ **Improve interaction between state registers:** Optimise interaction between different state registers so as not to lose a person from registers in case of a document falling out of the database.
- ✔ **Warn about delays and possible consequences** and provide appropriate advice and support.

**These steps, in turn, could provide women:**

- ✔ **Legal protection:** women, especially mothers, will be able to feel more protected during the waiting period, reducing the risk of losing their legal status.
- ✔ **Ability to plan while waiting:** being able to legally stay in the country will allow women to continue working and organizing their children's lives.
- ✔ **More effective social support:** better coordinated data between different government agencies will contribute to better service for Ukrainian women, in particular on housing issues or child benefits.

**The life of Ukrainian women in Estonia would also be greatly facilitated:**

- ✓ **Official Decree on Guarantees for Ukrainians:** Issue an official decree guaranteeing that Ukrainians, regardless of gender, will not be forcibly deported, even while waiting for the renewal of documents.
- ✓ **Extension of temporary protection for several years:** Consider extending temporary protection status for a long period (2-3 years) to ensure stability and predictability for Ukrainian refugees.

*Without a timely decision to defend myself, I had serious inconveniences, but still no problems. But during such a transition period, my friends had problems – they did not renew their work or bank contracts, lost their driver's license and car parking contract, there was no opportunity to receive social assistance or enroll a child in an educational institution, etc. Those who were registered with the Unemployment Insurance Fund or the Health Insurance Fund were automatically removed from the register.*

*That is, there was a lack of awareness from employers/banks/services/kindergartens about how to act in this situation and some, it seems, «played it safe» by refusing to deal with Ukrainians. In addition, the interaction of different registers does not provide for a “transition” period for updating documents – because the system is tied to the ID card and registration of the place of residence were automatically disconnected regardless of whether the person applied for an extension.*

**Delayed paperwork can have special consequences for women, given their social role, gender expectations, and the circumstances they face. Here are some examples of how these consequences are related to gender:**

- 1 Impact on mothers:**
  - **Loss of social benefits and child benefits:** Since women are often the primary caregivers of children, a delay in paperwork that leads to the loss of child benefits or benefits can have particularly serious consequences for them. This can affect their ability to provide children with adequate living conditions, kindergarten attendance, education, and medical services.
  - **Forced financial costs:** The loss of social benefits can mean that women, especially single mothers, are forced to look for additional sources of income or even borrow money, which increases the financial burden.
- 2 Restriction of access to medical services:**
  - **Loss of health insurance:** Women, who need regularly or more often medical services, face higher health risks due to the loss of health insurance. This can negatively affect their ability to maintain health and well-being, which in turn can affect their ability to care for children and work.

- 3 Limitation of economic independence:**
  - **Difficulties with employment:** The lack of up-to-date documents makes it impossible to officially employ, which creates additional barriers for women, who already often have limited access to the labor market (due to discrimination, inequality in pay or the constant need for childcare.). This can deprive them of financial independence or force them to seek less secure or informal forms of employment.
  - **Loss of banking:** Women who are in business or self-employed may be particularly vulnerable to document delays that make it impossible to bank, access accounts, loans, and other financial services.
- 4 Stress and psychological distress:**
  - **Uncertainty and fear:** Women, especially mothers, may experience more stress due to the delay in paperwork, as it directly affects the safety and well-being of their family. Uncertainty about the future can cause emotional stress, particularly when it comes to accessing the necessary social and financial resources.
  - **Social expectations and pressures:** Women are more likely to face pressure to ensure family stability and well-being. The delay in documents can increase this pressure, which affects their psychological health.
- 5 Loss of access to education and professional development:**
  - **Loss of the opportunity to study:** If a woman is unable to learn Estonian or has lost the opportunity to continue her studies, this can limit her professional development and career prospects, which has a long-term negative impact on her financial situation.
  - **Children's educational rights:** The loss or restriction of children's rights to education can also affect women more, because they are more often the ones responsible for organising their children's education. This will also create additional stress and anxiety.
- 6 Financial risks for families where a woman is the main breadwinner (very common among Ukrainian refugee women in Estonia):**
  - Women who are the main breadwinners in the family, especially in one-child or large families, may face financial instability if the delay in documents affects their ability to work, receive social benefits or use banking services.

Thus, the delay in documents creates additional risks and challenges for women, exacerbating already existing gender inequalities. Taking into account gender perspective allows for a better understanding of how these consequences can negatively affect different populations and make more sensitive decisions and policies.

### 3.1.3. LANGUAGE BARRIER

Many Ukrainian women face challenges due to insufficient knowledge of the Estonian language. Command of English and Russian languages can help mitigate this issue to some extent, but full integration, including obtaining a decent job, requires reaching at least a B2 or even C1 level in Estonian.

The main aspects of the language barrier for Ukrainian women in Estonia are related to their daily lives and needs:

- 1 **The necessity to earn living:** Most Ukrainian women in Estonia are forced to work to support themselves and their families. This significantly limits their ability to learn the language, as working leaves little spare time. As a result, the language learning process often stretches over a long period or desired level of language skills becomes nearly impossible to achieve quickly.
  - **For women, especially those with children,** learning the language often presents additional challenges, as they juggle work, parenting responsibilities, and the need to acquire a new language. This difficulty is further exacerbated if they have limited access to language programmes or struggle to find sufficient time to study;
  - **In turn, this creates an emotional burden:** for mothers facing a language barrier, learning a new language can be emotionally exhausting. They often experience stress and anxiety about their ability to provide better opportunities for their children while lacking the necessary resources for effective learning.

*You start looking for a job, trying your best, and realize you need to know either English or Estonian. Knowing English is one thing, but if you don't know Estonian, that's where the problems begin. Okay, you find Estonian language courses. They offer you the chance to study, but at the same time, you're already working, and you can't afford to attend the courses. So, you have to choose between studying or working because you need to simply survive. And in such moments, you start feeling like losing your mind because everything piles up.*

*Since we all registered at the unemployment office here, we were allowed to complete A1 courses. But I can't continue with A2 because I'm working. I found a job through the unemployment office within five months, but my job takes up all my time. When I come home from work, I have no time to rest no matter how exhausted I am: I have to cook, go to the grocery store, clean the house, iron kids' clothes, etc, etc. Courses require a certain amount of time and I don't have this time.*

*When you work all day and then attend an evening language course, you're already drained because you worked eight hours, sometimes at physically demanding jobs. After that, nothing sticks in your head.*

- 2 Limited opportunities for further learning:** Available language courses often focus on basic levels aimed at passing exams, while more advanced levels require significant financial investment. However, even after completing these courses, women often lack sufficient knowledge for qualified work. At this stage, opportunities for further learning or improving language skills are often unavailable, creating an additional barrier to full integration and professional growth.

*I now have a B1 level, which is enough for some very specific positions. However, for any serious job where you can fully support yourself, you need at least a B2. And there's a huge gap between B1 and B2. You need to invest in courses, practice, and all these things. But right now, I realise I can't take B2 courses because I barely mastered B1. I wouldn't mind retaking B1, but since I already passed the exam – even with a score as low as 60 – I'm not eligible for free courses anymore. They assume my language level is sufficient now, but it is not. I'm somewhere around B1, but it's not my working language level yet.*

- 3 Issues with teaching quality.** These include a lack of teachers, large or inconsistent group sizes, inadequate teaching methods, and a lack of individual approaches or modern, effective techniques tailored to practical life rather than just exam preparation.

*Sometimes I had courses where the teacher wasn't very interested in teaching us anything. They would just formally show up, assign homework, and move on. More than once, I raised my hand to ask a question because I wanted to learn more or clarify something, but I could see from their face that they didn't want to waste their time pausing for the answer. They wanted to stick to their schedule, move from exercise four to five, assign exercise number six as homework, and say good-bye. They weren't genuinely interested. I feel this is a real barrier in Estonia – they lack resources, particularly teachers.*

*The current teacher is very good. She knows Estonian very well but speaks poor Russian. When you ask her for clarification on rules, she struggles to explain them in Russian, which makes it hard for me to understand these rules. I also worry that after completing the A2 course, I won't acquire the necessary knowledge for communication or passing the exam. The course moves on very fast, and for such a complex language as Estonian, much more time is needed. Everyone learns differently – some find it easy to learn a foreign language, while for others, it's very challenging.*

Ukrainian refugee women also face difficulties attending language courses due to strict requirements for attendance and active participation, which do not account for their complex life circumstances. Class schedules may change during the course, but mandatory attendance obligations remain unchanged. This makes planning difficult and creates additional pressure, especially for those with unstable work schedules or personal responsibilities.

*Some Ukrainian women in my group were marked as 'inactive' by the teacher and course curator, even though they had irregular work schedules and attended courses while at work, listening and taking notes without microphone or video. We always informed the teacher /.../ but the course curator still marked these sessions as missed.*

*Some Ukrainian women in my group were marked as 'inactive' by the teacher and course curator, even though they had irregular work schedules and attended courses while at work, listening and taking notes without microphone or video. We always informed the teacher about this in the chat while posting our names and date at the start of the session. But the course curator still marked these sessions as missed. After an unpleasant conversation about this, three women stopped attending the courses altogether.*

An additional challenge is the condescending attitude from some teachers or course administrators, who perceive participants as “undisciplined” or “ungrateful” students. Partial participation or notifying about temporary inactivity for valid reasons is often treated as absenteeism. Such attitudes demotivate participants, undermine their dignity, and reduce the effectiveness of integration programs.

*Their conclusion from any partial inactivity in class is that we're 'just taking advantage of their goodwill.' And everything comes down to the human factor – if you cry and share your personal struggles as a displaced Ukrainian woman during the war, a kind Estonian woman might help you out. I'm grateful for the support, but I wish I could receive it without being humiliated or forced to beg.*

- 4 Labor market integration.** Language requirements make it challenging for Ukrainian women to find jobs in their professional fields. Many are forced to take positions that do not align with their qualifications or prior experience. They face a dilemma: whether to spend time learning the language or work to support themselves and their families. State programs and language courses often fail to meet real needs for language education, leaving individuals without opportunities to improve their skills to the required level – above B1.

*I know for sure that it's necessary to learn the language up to B2 and even C1 level, and it should be accessible. Accessible teachers, flexible schedules, and affordable costs – this should all be part of a state program. I believe that learning the language is about the well-being and security of living in Estonia as a whole.*

In addition to the issue of accessing adequate jobs, the language barrier has broader implications that affect various aspects of life for Ukrainian refugee women in Estonia:

- 1 Limited access to essential services:** Insufficient language skills create difficulties in accessing critical services, especially those related to physical and mental health. This often leads to women avoiding medical institutions, fearing their needs will not be understood or addressed in a timely and appropriate manner. Similarly, language barriers may prevent them from seeking mental health support, particularly when specialised services or support groups are involved.
- 2 Social isolation:** A low level of Estonian proficiency often leads to a sense of social isolation. It limits opportunities to communicate with locals, participate in community life, and build social connections. The lack of such connections exacerbates feelings of loneliness and further complicates adaptation to new living conditions.
- 3 Reduced awareness and access to information.** Language barriers result in limited access to crucial information about services and opportunities, such as healthcare or educational programs.

*It's about restrictions in communication, in work, and even in some medical services like consulting a psychiatrist.*

*At an event under Tartu 2024 – European Capital of Culture, they were talking about the historical cooperation between Estonians and Finns. I was trying to translate using an app, but I could only pick up scattered words, so I couldn't fully understand what was happening between the Estonians and Finns. It would have been fascinating to grasp the historical context, but because of the language barrier, it was very difficult.*

The language barrier for women not only hinders their adaptation but also **exacerbates gender inequalities**:

- + Increased dependence on others.** Women often become dependent on men, relatives, or others for translation or access to information. Financial dependence also becomes an issue, as limited job opportunities hinder their ability to earn a sustainable income
- + Employment in low-wage sectors.** Due to language barriers, women are frequently limited to low-paying jobs in sectors such as cleaning, support roles in service industries, or other fields where language is not a primary requirement. This perpetuates economic inequality between men and women.
- + Limited access to education.** Language barriers restrict women's ability to pursue education, a critical factor for social mobility. This is especially important for women, as their education directly influences their financial independence and societal status.



- + **Mental health challenges.** Language barriers can cause significant stress for women as they try to adapt to a new environment. This affects their self-esteem, mental health, and overall well-being. Being unable to express their needs or feelings amplifies their sense of helplessness and alienation.
- + **Limited access to medical care.** The inability to communicate effectively with a doctor negatively affects both their own health and the health of their children, for whom they often act as advocates. This situation also creates additional psychological pressure, leading women to seek medical advice only in extreme cases – when the pain becomes severe and urgent intervention is required, rather than for preventive care.

Creating opportunities for language learning should be a core element of integration strategies, particularly for women. This would help them access employment, education, and social services, and improve their position in society.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING THE SITUATION

Regarding Estonian language courses:

### 1 Transparent and clear enrolment process.

The idea involves creating a unified interactive online calendar for enrollment in state-funded language courses. Instead of following the schedules of language schools, as is currently the case, courses would be scheduled based on participant demand. Participants would pre-select their desired language level and mark the days and times that suit them best.

It's worth mentioning that convenient times for those attending A1-A2 courses (new arrivals, often not yet employed) might differ from those attending B1-B2 courses (likely already working and more adapted).

During enrolment, participants should be able to see how many others have chosen the same time slots. This will encourage them to select popular slots, which increases the chances of forming groups. Access to the calendar could be enabled via Smart ID, with conditions like choosing three 2-hour slots or two 3-hour slots per week.

This approach would provide organisers with comprehensive data about the demand for various course levels for refugee applicants, and their preferred learning times (e.g. weekends or evenings). This would allow for more effective course planning based on real needs and reduce cases where participants drop out due to inconvenient schedules.

Using this data, Integratsiooni Sihtasutus could identify the most popular slots among Ukrainian refugees and hold a tender among language schools to see which ones are ready to conduct lessons on the days and times that participants prefer. This could be a pilot project implemented alongside the traditional course scheduling system, with results from both approaches compared after a year.

**2 Conduct regular surveys to identify challenges in language learning:**

- Develop systematic surveys to identify key challenges in the learning process.
- Regularly analyse the data and adjust courses and methodologies to address the identified issues.
- Use the findings to improve teaching, boost student motivation, and achieve better outcomes.

**3 Diversify learning plans:**

- Create several learning plans tailored to the levels and interests of students (basic, intermediate, advanced).
- Develop adaptable plans for individual needs (different age groups, people with special needs, courses for specific professions, travelers, students, etc.).
- Introduce flexible approaches, such as combined courses that integrate theory with practical exercises.

**4 Provide free state-funded B2 and C1 courses.**

**5 Leverage best practices from other European countries:**

- Ensure new arrivals receive sufficient state support to dedicate time to learning the language.
- Design courses aimed at achieving confident language proficiency.

**6 Revise distribution of course information**, because currently it does not work well – by the time the addressee receives the information, it has already lost its relevance.

- Synchronise data on completed language courses and passed state exams (Settle in Estonia, Integratsiooni Sihtasutus, etc.) so that target audiences only receive invitations to relevant courses.
- Clearly define target groups for language courses. For example, research could be conducted to estimate the potential number of participants interested in future free B2 courses.
- Notify participants about new courses and available slots in a timely manner, avoiding late announcements when spaces are already filled.

**7 National campaign to promote teaching as a profession and incentivise future teachers.**

Since the availability of courses is often linked to a shortage of teachers, a national-level plan should be developed to encourage Estonians to pursue teaching careers and enroll in pedagogical programs. Being an Estonian language teacher should become prestigious.

*I admired Germany's approach. My friends there completed A1 to B2, some even started C1, thanks to state support while focusing solely on language learning for a year. In contrast, many of us, especially women with children, struggle. Kids adapt quickly, but adults learn in fragments—A1 one year, A2 the next, forgetting much in between while juggling work and domestic responsibilities. It's overwhelming, and I'm unsure how to solve it.*

*Keelekohvik is good, but a teacher and proper methodology are essential. The state should incentivize employers to support Estonian language learning. Current initiatives, like the A1 requirement, are great and should expand to offer free courses up to B2 and C1. You shouldn't say, 'You've reached B1, and the rest is your problem,' because that's often where it ends. Learning a language is a challenging process that requires significant resources, both external and personal, which a person draws from their family and life. With Estonia's small population, this issue could be resolved in 3–5 years with a focused approach, removing language as a barrier entirely.*

#### On breaking the language-work cycle:

- ✓ **Language integration through work:** Offer courses that allow learning Estonian in the context of work activities, combining education with on-the-job practice.
- ✓ **Programs for working individuals:** Establish state or employer-led programs where learning Estonian is an integral part of the work process. This could include allocating work hours for language study or providing paid courses, allowing employees to combine work with learning without losing income.
- ✓ **Employment opportunities without language proficiency:** Launch initiatives to employ individuals who have not yet achieved sufficient language proficiency, with opportunities to learn on the job or through state-supported courses.
- ✓ **Employer incentives:** Encourage employers to hire non-Estonian-speaking workers by offering benefits or tax incentives to cover language training costs.
- ✓ **Flexible language requirements:** Set flexible Estonian language proficiency standards for certain roles, particularly at the initial stages of employment.
- ✓ **Paid learning days:** Compensate employees for attending language courses during work hours.
- ✓ **Repeat courses as needed:** Allow individuals to retake language courses, even if they already have a certificate, to address situations where they lack practice and confidence in speaking the language.
- ✓ **Specialized training programs for Ukrainian teachers:** Develop targeted programs (e.g., one-year courses) to prepare Ukrainian educators to work in Estonian schools. This would simultaneously address local teacher shortages and provide Ukrainian refugees with employment opportunities while achieving high-level language proficiency. If certain conditions are taken care of (for example, part-time work and combining work with regular Estonian language studies during working hours in a convenient location), Estonia will receive the trained and motivated education workers it so desperately needs. A similar approach could later be expanded to other professions, such as doctors, helping alleviate labor shortages and improve employment rates among Ukrainians and other migrants in Estonia.

Initially, during my A1 language course, my employer was supportive, giving us paid time off to attend. Now, for the A2 course, we must find our own time. The course runs from September to May, which is too demanding with my irregular work schedule. I often get called in on my days off due to emergencies, as many of us work two jobs. If language courses were integrated into the workday, it would be much easier – I could drop my child at daycare, attend classes, and still count it as a workday. Currently, I work 24-hour shifts, sometimes 35 hours, with little regard for whether I can manage.

The biggest barrier for me is the combination of language and work. This isn't just something to help us, Ukrainians – it's for everyone. It's like the 'curb-cut effect': ramps built for people with disabilities also benefit parents with strollers, cyclists, and others. Similarly, hiring people and investing in their Estonian language learning – even if this means paying them a bit lower wages from the start – would benefit not just us but the entire community.

Employers could deduct language education costs from salaries if employees agree to start with a smaller wage, with the promise of fair pay after reaching a certain level in six months. This isn't just for Ukrainians – locals and long-term residents need it too. Such a solution benefits everyone and makes a real impact.

#### Regarding support for Ukrainian children:

There is a significant need to help Ukrainian children learn Estonian, with a strong demand for accessible learning opportunities for children and teenagers. Reducing pressure on them in this process is also crucial. Suggested solutions include:

- + Accessible language courses and study camps for children and teenagers.
- + Lowering Estonian language proficiency requirements for Ukrainian children.

### 3.1.4. EMPLOYMENT-RELATED ISSUES

A barrier to a fulfilling life for Ukrainian refugees in Estonia is the difficulty of finding employment due to several factors. In particular, there is the problem of the language barrier: without knowledge of the Estonian language, it is difficult to find a well-paid job. Often, work requires a high level of language proficiency, which complicates opportunities for integration into the labor market. Additionally, irregular work schedules, the inability to combine work with studies, and the lack of flexible options for women with young children create additional difficulties for professional fulfillment. Many women have several jobs or have limited access to language courses due to a lack of time, which reduces their chances of career growth.

*I feel very bad about this. Every time I hear that I do not have enough knowledge of the Estonian language to be hired, I feel stressed. Töötukassa insists that I find any job as soon as possible. But, due to my health, physically demanding work does not suit me. And these are the only vacancies that are offered without the requirement of knowledge of the Estonian language.*

#### Compositions of the barrier:

- +** **Low pay for work available to women:** Ukrainian women are often forced to work in low-paid and exhausting jobs that do not meet their qualifications, experience, or needs.
- +** **Excessive language requirements:** Many jobs require a high level of Estonian language proficiency, which becomes a serious barrier for those who do not speak the language at the required level.

*Until September of this year, my job was stable: I worked at a school, learned Estonian, and believed that I had time to learn the language. In May, I successfully passed the A2 level exam and continued to learn further. I believed that I was confidently progressing. The school principal assured me that there was information stating that teachers from Ukraine were given five years to master the language to level B1. But in August, everything changed; my employment contract was terminated due to the lack of an appropriate language level. I found a job at another school, where the principal was also sure that teachers from Ukraine could be hired without a B1 category. However, I was fired a month later. I was informed that the Department of Education does not give permission to conclude an employment contract. And I am not the only one in this situation: I know at least five teachers who are currently unemployed.*

*And I could have been understanding of the situation if I hadn't known that my colleagues, with whom I had concluded employment contracts, work in other schools in Tallinn. So, some are lucky, and some are not? Given the lack of teachers, the state is not accommodating its own citizens. And it turns out that if there is no teacher, there are no lessons in a certain subject, or some teachers, for example, in English, have a double burden*

- + Inconsistency of the contract with the nature of work and working conditions:** For example, when a short term services contract is concluded with a worker for one month and is extended every month. This practice limits people's access to social guarantees, including rights to payed vacation and health insurance. As a result, the worker does not have health insurance, vacation, etc., even though they actually work under the terms of a permanent employment contract.
- + The vicious circle of "language-work":** Without language proficiency, people cannot find a decent job, but they have to work right away to earn money. At the same time, having at least some kind of a job, there is often no energy or time left for Estonian courses. It is almost impossible to escape from this circle.

*At first, when I was still finishing A1, I was employed, and our management was accommodating: for example, they gave us the paid days when I had to go to courses. At the moment, when I need A2 courses, we were told that we have to find our own time to attend these courses. Courses at level A2 last a long time, from September to May, when the exam is taken. It is a very long time for me. I don't have that time because I work on an irregular schedule: for example, today I have a day off, and I am called to work due to force majeure circumstances that arose at work, and we need to find a person because almost all of our girls work two jobs.*

- + Lack of opportunities for practice or internships in Estonian teams** limits the possibility of gaining experience and improving work and language skills.

*In my case, it would help me a lot if they simply extended this minimum contract with minimum money. Even if it remained the same as now, I would be happy, but at least for another year, so that I could learn the language better...*

*It would save me if they extended my contract at the university, even for the same little money or a little more. But at the same time, I would have more opportunities, for example, to learn a language – both English and Estonian. Because after that, regardless of whether I can win a research grant or not, I will know languages, and I will be able to apply for a job as a sociologist here. Because now I can't. I don't know Estonian. I can't be an interviewer and work for any Estonian company.*

*...In my case, it would help me a lot if they simply extended this minimum contract with minimum money. Even if it remained the same as now, I would be happy, but at least for another year, so that I could learn the language better – both languages. And then I would be able to be independent and look for a job more on my own. Because right now, I don't need money so much as the knowledge and experience.*

*Plus, the university provides some additional opportunities. They have Estonian courses and English courses. They sometimes organize parties where you can go and relax. They have trips around Estonia, you learn something new.*

- + **"All gaps are filled by us"**. Many Ukrainian women fill vacancies that no one else wants to fill. In addition, in order not to lose their jobs, they often accept conditions that are unacceptable to the local population (working several shifts in a row or systematically going to work on a scheduled day off).

*... But I can't work night shifts due to my health because if I work for a while, I don't know what the consequences will be for my body. Since I have a child, I'm looking for a job that won't worsen my physical condition.*

*I agree that all gaps are filled by us. I tried to apply for one vacancy. It was sorting construction waste. I came for an interview. The amount was small for me. €6.5 net. I was told that the wind does not blow in the shop. This room is not heated. Eight hours of work standing. Nothing is equipped there; there are no changing rooms, and there is nowhere to heat food.*

*In general, the conditions are that Ukrainians are ready for everything and will go for such work. This is what is expected. Plus, I was told that part of the money is given on the card, and the rest will be "in an envelope". There is no sick leave or vacation; everything is at my own expense. I can't take such a job. I want to work with good working conditions. But the problem is that I don't know Estonian language. There was also work at night, where they didn't pay extra for these hours. But I can't work night shifts due to my health because if I work for a while, I don't know what the consequences will be for my body. Since I have a child, I'm looking for a job that won't worsen my physical condition.*

*Working on an irregular schedule: for example, today I have a day off, and I'm called to work due to force majeure circumstances that arose at work, and we need to find someone because almost all of our girls work at two jobs. Well, I'm working at one job for now because of a small child. I don't even have time to go to another job.*

- + **Very limited job choices arise due to the need to care for children alone.** Many women are forced to choose part-time or flexible work schedules in order to pick up their children from school or kindergarten, as well as provide them with proper care after classes. This significantly narrows the number of available vacancies and limits the possibility of working full-time, which affects their income.

*A job that can be found without knowledge of the Estonian language is low-paid, physically demanding work and involves a 12-hour workday. I have a child, and I cannot work 12 hours a day.*

**+ Uncertainty about documents and the future.** Many Ukrainian women face situations where they are directly asked during interviews about the availability of permanent documents for staying in Estonia. This creates an additional obstacle, as employers are often unwilling to hire people under temporary protection due to concerns that this status may not be extended.

All these factors lead to severe overload. Many Ukrainian women in Estonia find themselves in a situation where the need to provide for themselves and their families forces them to work multiple jobs or jobs with irregular schedules, while enduring the exhausting process of searching for work and opportunities. This creates a significant physical and emotional burden, leaving little time or resources for integration into local society, language learning, or further training. Constant overload also impacts childcare opportunities, especially if the woman is the sole breadwinner of the family. It makes it difficult to find stable, well-paid work, turning survival into a daily challenge.

**The gender** aspect in the employment of Ukrainian refugees in Estonia emerges in the fact that women who do not have a high level of Estonian are mostly forced to accept low-paid jobs, which are typically available to women. This creates additional barriers to financial independence and professional development.

Jobs available to women without a high level of language skills (and sometimes even with Estonian skills) are mostly in service, care, or physical labor. These jobs usually do not require high qualifications or advanced language skills but are also much lower paid. Such positions often include cleaning, caring for children or the elderly, and sorting or packaging, where the primary requirements are physical labor.

Men, even with a similar level of language skills, can often find work in industries such as construction, logistics, technical specialties, or as drivers, where salaries are higher and there are more opportunities for career growth than in women dominated jobs. Such jobs are not easily available for women. This creates a situation where women find themselves in a less advantageous position, as even with the same starting conditions, their ability to secure a high-paying job is limited.

The gendered division of labor reinforces economic inequality. Women, even with appropriate qualifications, are often forced to work in lower-paid positions due to a lack of opportunities for professional development or limited access to language practice. This further complicates their social and financial situation in the new country.

It is critical to highlight that **the lack of flexible childcare options further limits the opportunities for Ukrainian women**, especially single mothers, to work, pursue additional education, and take language courses.

It is also important to note that some Ukrainian women have to earn money not only for themselves and their children who are with them but also for their parents who left with them, and even for their husbands who stayed in Ukraine and lost their jobs. In these cases, a woman takes on the role of a provider for her entire family.



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING THE SITUATION

- 1 **Reducing language requirements** for employment, especially at the initial stage, to ensure access to a wider range of vacancies.
- 2 **Creating internship programs** for Ukrainian refugees that would allow them to gain experience working in Estonian teams without strict language requirements.
- 3 **Providing opportunities for language practice at workplaces**, particularly through language clubs or integration programs at enterprises, which would allow them to improve their language skills in real-world conditions.
- 4 **Expanding and facilitating access to higher-paying jobs for women**, particularly in areas where Ukrainian women can apply their professional skills, even with limited language proficiency.
- 5 **Introducing benefits for employers who hire Ukrainian women** – encouraging businesses to provide employment opportunities by reducing the tax burden or offering financial compensation for companies that invest in training their employees.
- 6 **Introducing a mentoring system in workplaces** to support new employees as they improve their language skills and adapt to local conditions.
- 7 **Supporting flexible work schedules for women with children**, which would allow them to combine work and language courses.
- 8 **Creating opportunities to support women who are principal carers of their children.** It could be implemented in different ways:
  - Creating a publicly paid nanny service to assist mothers with childcare.
  - Flexible kindergartens and daycare centers: organising kindergartens with adaptable schedules, including evening hours or weekends, to allow mothers to work, attend language courses, internships, or further education at convenient times.
  - Financial support for babysitters, nannies or other private childcare: introducing state or local programs that provide financial assistance for nanny services, particularly for single mothers.
  - Free children's groups during courses and educational programs: offering children's groups or mini-kindergartens at language courses, educational centers, or internships, where children can stay while their mothers study or work.
  - Supporting employers in creating children's rooms in the workplace: encouraging employers to establish children's rooms or play areas in workplaces, particularly in large companies employing many women with children. This would enable mothers to remain close to their children while working or studying.
- 9 **Providing access to training and employment in male-dominated fields where women are few.** These could include professions such as: city transport drivers, electricians, excavator and crane operators, installers of building insulation systems, operators of program-controlled machines, remote-controlled devices, and boiler rooms, locksmiths, carpenters, and related trades, specializations in the IT sector etc.

It is crucial not only to formally provide access to these opportunities but also to create conditions for training and employment which promote gender equality and take into account women's needs. Efforts should include countering stereotypes and adapting workplace conditions to support women who wish to develop careers in such fields.

“  
*It's not about money, like, 'Don't give me fish, give me a fishing rod.' I need a fishing rod. And I don't have a 'fishing rod' right now.*  
”

**The consequences of addressing the employment barrier** for Ukrainian women in Estonia could be highly positive, including:

- 1 Increased economic stability:** improved access to well-paid jobs and opportunities to engage in professional activities that align with their qualifications will lead to higher income and financial independence of Ukrainian women. This will also reduce the need to work multiple jobs simultaneously, contributing to greater stability in their lives.
- 2 Social integration:** better working conditions and employer support for language learning will accelerate the integration process into Estonian society. Learning the language in a workplace context will not only improve language proficiency but also foster a deeper understanding of cultural and social norms.
- 3 Professional development:** creation of internships programs would enable Ukrainian women to gain valuable work experience in Estonian companies. This would open access to better job opportunities and support their professional growth. It would also facilitate the recognition of their diplomas and qualifications in the local labor market.
- 4 Improving quality of life:** reducing physical and emotional strain through access to stable employment will give women more free time for leisure, family, personal development, and integration activities. This will positively affect their physical and mental health, reducing stress and exhaustion.
- 5 Strengthening gender equality:** eliminating discrimination in the labor market and ensuring equal access to employment and training opportunities will help improve gender balance in workplaces. This will also contribute to reducing the gender pay gap.
- 6 Contributing to the welfare of families:** addressing employment barriers will create more stable conditions for families, ensuring a steady income and security for the future. This is particularly crucial for single mothers, who are responsible for their families' well-being.

Thus, resolving work-related challenges could significantly enhance the quality of life for Ukrainian refugee women in Estonia, promoting their social, economic, and cultural integration.

### 3.1.5. PSYCHO-EMOTIONAL STATE AND PRESSURE

The psycho-emotional state of Ukrainian women who were forced to move to Estonia due to the war is a significant barrier to leading a full life. Constant anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, and difficulties with adaptation affect their ability to build a new life, work, integrate into society, and solve practical problems.

#### MANIFESTATIONS OF THE BARRIER:

- 1 **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic experience:** Many Ukrainian women have traumatic experiences related to the war, forced relocation, and health issues. PTSD symptoms, such as anxiety, fear of the future, emotional instability, complicate the process of integration and recovery. This requires specialised psychological support, which is often unavailable.

*When I arrived in Estonia having my diagnosis, I didn't even think that I needed to adapt in Estonia. My main goal was to start treatment and go through it. I've been here for 2.5 years, but about a year of my life was spent recovering and starting to take steps forward to get out of prolonged depression. There are still some consequences, but I don't give up and try to adapt to Estonia.*

- 2 **High level of psychological pressure:** Women often face increased responsibility for their own lives and the lives of their children, which creates additional pressure. The need to quickly adapt, find a job, support children, learn the language, and solve issues with documents leads to emotional exhaustion.
- 3 **Problems with self-identity and integration:** Changing countries and cultures raises the issue of self-identity: who are you in a new environment, will the connections to your old life become weaker? This can affect women's self-perception, especially when there is no opportunity for self-actualisation as it was available at home country.
- 4 **Emotional pressure and increased responsibility:** The feeling of emotional pressure due to the need to make decisions in uncertain situations, partly due to the lack of support and social networks in the new country. This is especially relevant for single mothers who have to bear responsibility for their children without proper support.
- 5 **Anxiety because the future is uncertain:** Uncertainty about the future causes significant stress. Constant anxiety about the status of documents and residence rights in Estonia affect their psycho-emotional state. This creates a sense of "deferred life" – a situation where one has to constantly wait, not knowing whether they will be able to stay, which greatly complicates planning for the future.

*This sense of temporality, uncertainty... It has a psychological and financial impact. It is just a deferred life. You are living in a constant state of waiting for something.*

- 6 **The impact of financial difficulties on emotional state:** An unstable financial situation, inability to support oneself independently, or dependence on a partner or social assistance can create feelings of helplessness and psychological pressure. This creates a sense of limited opportunities and dependence on external circumstances.
- 7 **The constant struggle for adaptation and internal balancing:** The need to perform multiple important tasks at once (work, childcare, learning the language) can cause feelings of overload and loss of balance. Women are forced to cope with this burden alone, which sometimes leads to emotional exhaustion. Constant waiting for better conditions or changes often prevents them from fully feeling like a member of the new society.
- 8 **Narrow planning horizon and lack of dreams:** Due to uncertainty about documents and the future, many women limit their plans to short-term goals. This reduces the ability to dream and plan for the long term, limiting opportunities for self-development and professional growth.
- 9 **Loneliness and social isolation:** Feelings of social isolation are common among Ukrainian women, especially during the early stages of adaptation. The lack of communication and support from the local community, especially in rural areas where Estonian-speaking people dominate, greatly intensifies feelings of loneliness. The severing of ties with loved ones and friends in Ukraine also creates a sense of a broken life, divided into «before» and «after,» which causes additional emotional difficulties.

*All my acquaintances remained in Ukraine, and some contacts were simply lost. Sometimes you don't even understand what you can talk about with these people at the moment, because **life has divided into before and after**. They don't understand me fully, and I might not understand something, too.*

*By now I have here acquaintances I can dial. But back then [after moving to Estonia], I had no friends, I felt very lonely. All my acquaintances remained in Ukraine, and some contacts were simply lost. Sometimes you don't even understand what you can talk about with these people at the moment, because life has divided into before and after. They don't understand me fully, and I might not understand something, too. I lived like that for a year, then I changed my place of residence, and now in this village where I live, there are many other Ukrainians. Communication started to improve. Now I feel that my social life is getting a little better. I started to feel like a human being again.*

- 10 **Limited access to psychological support and long-term care:**
  - Due to the language barrier, access to mental health services is limited. Many Ukrainian women do not have sufficient knowledge of Estonian or English to effectively express their feelings and experiences to specialists, which significantly complicates getting the necessary help.

- Lack of access to long-term therapy or counselling greatly complicates recovery from traumatic experiences and adaptation to new living conditions.
- A shortage of free services or lack of information about available resources.

*It would help if there were more hours in a day, because you just don't have enough time. You're sent homework from Estonian language courses, and when you open them, you realise you need a whole day or two of free time to sit and work through it. Plus, I was diagnosed with depression, and it really slows down the process. You just can't remember everything, and it feels like it's taking so long. You waste a lot of time just trying to remember, and you also spend energy on basic things.*

*Another barrier for me – and I hope it won't be permanent – is my compromised physical and mental health. The language barrier makes it worse because mental health specialists speak either English or Estonian. I don't speak either language well enough to describe my condition.*

*It's very difficult to find a psychologist who is right for me and can really help me.*

- 11 Feeling of shame and insecurity:** Women are often hesitant to seek help or defending their rights, thinking their problems are «minor» compared to others.

*I would like to add something about the psychological problems that arise from this temporarility. You really try to cope on your own. I know, for example, that if you're feeling very bad, you can call someone. But the difficulty is that you think it may not be that bad yet... Thanks to the Mondo project and others, the doctors actually diagnosed me with depression, but I realise that to treat it I need money which I don't have. I haven't found accessible long-term therapy or permanent support. I know where I can call if something critical happens. But I would need some continuous support to live my life normally.*

#### CONSEQUENCES:

- **Decreased productivity and activity:** Women find it harder to work, study, or participate in community initiatives.
- **Worsening physical health:** Chronic stress may exacerbate other illnesses.
- **Social isolation and depression:** Without support from society, this condition only worsens.

## STRATEGIES CURRENTLY USED TO OVERCOME THE BARRIER

Ukrainian women who moved to Estonia due to the war use various strategies to overcome psycho-emotional difficulties. At the same time, these strategies are often individual and depend on personal resources, access to help, and support.

### Seeking social support:

- ✓ Participating in local refugee communities, volunteer or women's organizations where women can share their stories, get advice, or simply feel that they are not alone (including participation in our PAR project).
- ✓ Building new connections with locals or other Ukrainian women.

### Turning to psychologists and therapists:

- ✓ Women seek access to free or low-cost support programs (if available).
- ✓ Some turn to online resources, including Ukrainian psychologists who provide remote assistance.
- ✓ The Mondo resource (<https://documental.ee/uk/>) has been very helpful, offering not only psychological consultation but also prescriptions for medications, such as antidepressants, which are valid in Estonia.

### Self-help practices:

- ✓ Using techniques such as meditation, physical exercises, or journaling to reduce anxiety.
- ✓ Actively engaging in creativity (drawing, music, etc.) to relieve stress.

### Work and engagement:

- ✓ Some women try to keep themselves occupied with work, study, or other activities to distract themselves from anxious thoughts.

### Seeking information and support online:

- ✓ Reading others' experiences to understand how to cope with similar situations.

### Belief in human kindness:

- ✓ Despite all the challenges, many women still hope for help and support from communities, organizations, and others. Belief in kindness and the willingness to ask for help often help women not give up, even in difficult conditions. Numerous examples of kindness and help from the local population support this belief.

“  
*I help myself by being in therapy for two years now – psychological therapy, energy therapy – where I ask myself many questions and find answers to them.*

*Currently, I simply live here and now, and I am ready for some spontaneous changes. It's difficult in terms of mental well-being, because it feels like emotional swings. Meditation calms me down. I do various energy practices that support me. When I arrived in Estonia, I was diagnosed with acute depression. For almost a year I had been on contact with a Ukrainian psychologist, who helped me out of this state. She brought me back to life.*  
”

“  
*Never give up, believe that people are kind. Most people are kind. And never be afraid to ask for help. We think it's a sign of weakness, but actually, the ability to ask for help is a strength.*  
”

## WHAT IS MISSING

- **Systematic approach:** Currently, most available resources do not take into account the specific experiences of refugees.
- **Awareness of own rights:** Due to insufficient information, many women do not know where and how to get help.
- **Long-term support:** Single consultations or short programs cannot solve deep psychological trauma.

Women mostly cope with problems on their own or with support from their community. However, without systematic assistance from the government, NGOs, or professional services, their efforts remain limited. To effectively address this barrier, individual work is needed as well as structural changes in the approach to providing psychological assistance and integrating refugees.

## WHAT IS NEEDED

- 1 Access to psychological support:** Creating special therapy programs for female refugees in Ukrainian.
- 2 Support groups:** Communities where women can share their problems, receive help, and understanding.
- 3 Information about rights and opportunities:** Programs that explain how to get help, legalise their stay, or defend their rights.
- 4 Educational projects on mental health:** Teaching self-help techniques, overcoming anxiety, and relieving stress.

Overcoming this barrier requires a comprehensive approach, considering both individual and systemic factors affecting the psycho-emotional state of women, as well as integrating a gender-sensitive approach that addresses these challenges.

The psycho-emotional barrier is closely linked to **gender issues**, as women, especially those in vulnerable situations, often face additional challenges affecting their emotional state. These challenges are related to social expectations, inequality, gender stereotypes, and the burden of invisible labor.

- 1 **Stereotypes and expectations:** Women feel pressure due to gender stereotypes that make them be “strong” and “adaptable” in any circumstances, fulfilling the role of mother, wife, employee, etc. In forced emigration, this leads to exhaustion, isolation, and inner conflict. Often, these stereotypes are very contradictory and are reinforced by various media and society when they talk about characteristics of Ukrainian women like “the most beautiful,” “hardworking,” “don’t want to work,” “Ukrainian wife,” “living off benefits,” etc.
- 2 **Double standards:** Women often face double standards, through which their actions, choices, or even life circumstances are judged with double bias. The problem is that a woman, regardless of what she does, almost always faces condemnation, and these judgments are based on stereotypes rather than real actions or motivations. This creates constant psychological pressure, forming a sense of guilt, anxiety, and the feeling of being unable to meet social expectations, which leads to low self-esteem and limits the ability to make decisions freely in one’s own interests.
- 3 **Invisible labor and responsibility:** In many cases, women bear a larger share of responsibility for children, elderly family members, and organising the household. This intensifies stress and creates barriers to a full social or professional life, limiting opportunities for self-realisation.
- 4 **Gender discrimination and harassment:** The vulnerability of women in the refugee status is often exacerbated by gender discrimination. This can manifest as the belittling of their experiences, ignoring their needs, or even psychological violence at work or in society.
- 5 **Psycho-emotional pressure due to gender inequality:** The lack of equal opportunities in the labor market or access to resources forces women to feel a constant struggle for their place, which affects their self-esteem and emotional well-being.

*I was never dependent on my husband in Ukraine, I always had my own money, and now I have some, but it's quite scarce. But I can't fully support myself with this money. That means that even in a relationship everything is fine, but psychologically, it's very stressful because if something happens, you have to ask for money. You don't have your own, and that's very oppressive.*

*I was never dependent on my husband in Ukraine, I always had my own money, and now I have some, but it's quite scarce. But I can't fully support myself with this money. That means that even in a relationship everything is fine, but psychologically, it's very stressful because if something happens, you have to ask for money. You don't have your own, and that's very oppressive. Although, from the outside, it seems like everything is fine and okay. But when you can't influence your life the way you want, it can be overwhelming.*



All of this shows how important mental health is for a full life and integration, and it emphasises the need for decisions regarding accessible, multilingual, and long-term psychosocial support services for Ukrainian women in Estonia.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING THE SITUATION

- 1 Long-term psychological support**
  - **Creating affordable psychological support centers** where women can come to not only in crisis situations but also for long-term support and guidance. It is important to ensure the possibility of receiving help in Ukrainian or the language the client speaks. Such long-term support will allow for the gradual resolution of psychological issues that affect the quality of life and integration.
  - **Including support for women with signs of PTSD or other trauma related to relocation or war experiences** in social assistance programs. This support can include not only psychological services but also funding for self-development, education, and therapy.
- 2 Involvement of Ukrainian-speaking specialists**
  - Active involvement of Ukrainian-speaking specialists in various fields of support and integration: psychological help, education and professional training, legal and social support. This can be an important step in creating a safe and supportive environment for assistance and the possibility to seek help.
- 3 Specialised rehabilitation programs for women**
  - **Launching rehabilitation programs** for women who have faced psycho-emotional difficulties related to forced relocation and adaptation. The programs may include group therapy, individual consultations, relaxation practices, creative workshops, and self-development training. A special focus should be placed on restoring emotional balance and developing effective stress-coping skills.
- 4 Financial support for sports activities and relaxation**
  - **Introducing payments or vouchers** that cover expenses for sports activities, attending sports sections, yoga, massages, or other procedures aimed at reducing stress and supporting physical and mental health. This will help women find time for self-restoration, increase energy levels, and improve mental well-being.
  - **Special programs for accessibility**, such as bike rentals.
  - Allocation of a monthly sum via Stebby to access various opportunities to support one's well-being.
- 5 Focus on creating a well-being environment in educational programs, courses, and various services**
  - **Basic training on trauma-informed approaches** for instructors and course staff to better understand participants' needs and consider their experiences in interactions.
  - **An empathetic and supportive atmosphere** that takes into account individual needs and experiences of the participants.

- 6 Creation of safe spaces for social interaction and mutual support**
  - **Supporting the establishment of women's clubs or communities** where women can share experiences, support each other, discuss problems, and search for solutions. Such initiatives will contribute to the creation of a sense of community and belonging, helping reduce social isolation and emotional stress.
- 7 Creation of a unified information space** on available psychological support and assistance – this will help reduce barriers to seeking help and improve service accessibility.
- 8 Development and implementation of programs** at different levels, including those accessible to Ukrainian women, for **recognising and combating psychological violence**. These programs should include educational components that help identify signs of violence, training modules on effective responses and seeking help, as well as access to safe platforms for consultation and support. This will increase awareness, confidence, and women's ability to resist psychological violence and protect their rights.
- 9 Support and addressing other barriers.**

*The psycho-emotional issues include my documents, rights, work, personal matters, and feelings of safety. A person starts thinking about the fact that time is running out with documents, starts worrying, choosing between learning the language or working because you need to make a living. It all piles up. I need to find balance in my life today, which I can't seem to find. I have a job, a child, and a personal life. How do I cope with all of this? I also have other pending tasks causing constant background stress, for I have to find the resources to deal with them too while I haven't sorted out the current ones yet. And to top the things, I'm alone here. It's really difficult to find a balance*

*I try to restore my psycho-emotional wellness. I go to a psychologist and attend special events, but I am not fully restored yet. The situations related to finding a job and learning the language are really knocking the ground out from under my feet.*

As we can see, the psycho-emotional barrier is not only an independent challenge but also a focal point for other barriers faced by Ukrainian refugee women in Estonia. The traumatic experience of war, difficulties in finding work, discrimination, language learning problems, double standards, and the lack of a stable legal status create constant pressure that undermines emotional well-being. Therefore, addressing this barrier requires a comprehensive approach, which includes not only ensuring accessible psychological support but also actively addressing the issues that themselves become sources of stress.

### 3.1.6. VIOLATIONS OF RIGHTS AND DISCRIMINATION

Throughout our research, we have found that Ukrainian women who are forced migrants face a number of obstacles in securing their rights and equal opportunities in Estonian society. This is manifested in:

- 1 **Violations of labor rights:** For example, the use of temporary contracts for permanent work deprives women workers of basic guarantees such as medical insurance, paid leave, and other social benefits.

*Yes, work is the main issue, which includes many aspects. There is discrimination when looking for a job – they try to hire locals. At the same time, I agree with the idea that ‘we fill all the gaps.’ /.../ In general, the conditions are such that they expect Ukrainians to accept any work. That’s what they rely on.*

- 2 **Exploitation of women workers:** Ukrainian refugee women often find themselves in situations where employers take advantage of their vulnerable position. They are forced to work extra hours, for example, 36 hours without adequate rest, or to urgently go on shift under pressure. Women are afraid of losing their jobs and being left without means of subsistence, which forces them to accept such conditions.

- 3 **Lack of accessible information about the rights and legal remedies:** Often Ukrainian refugee women are not fully aware of their rights in Estonia, which makes it harder for them to protect themselves from unfair treatment or discrimination. Often, in their specific situation, the woman remained isolated, not understanding what can be done to protect herself or her children, or where to turn for help or advice.

*They (social service workers) spoke broken Russian and English. They could be understood. They understood what I was asking. It seemed like they didn’t want to provide help. It felt like they were taking it away from themselves and their hearts. It was very difficult at first. Especially without information.*

- 4 **Restricted rights to purchase housing:** The inability to obtain a housing loan with one-year temporary protection and the lack of legal opportunities to acquire permanent residence status or buy property under temporary protection create a sense of instability and uncertainty.
- 5 **Discrimination:** Ukrainian women often face stereotypes that devalue their human dignity as an individual (e.g. being labelled as “Ukrainian woman”), as well as discrimination based on nationality, refugee status, language, or gender.
- 6 **Bullying and pressure:** Ukrainian refugee women feel that it is a common belief that they are “guests,” and therefore have no right to defend themselves or express disagreement, even when faced with injustice or violations, including bullying situations involving children at school.

*After being hospitalised in a psychiatric hospital due to a trigger from military equipment [being put on display] in the Old Town, I faced constant discrimination based on language and nationality. Hospital staff, particularly caregivers, refused to speak with me in any language other than Russian and bullied me for refusing to speak Russian.*

*After being hospitalised in a psychiatric hospital due to a trigger from military equipment [being put on display] in the Old Town, I faced constant discrimination based on language and nationality. Hospital staff, particularly caregivers, refused to speak with me in any language other than Russian and bullied me for refusing to speak Russian. One of them even restricted my basic needs, like the ability to wash my clothes, saying, 'If you don't speak Russian, then you won't wash your clothes.' When I tried to protect myself by recording the situation on a voice recorder, they forced me to delete the recording, threatening consequences. None of the staff protected me, and the nurses advised me to 'deal with it myself.'*

*My stepfather, my mother's ex-husband, is Estonian and speaks Russian. He has been sending me all sorts of pro-Russian trash since the beginning of the war. But our last messages were absolutely crazy. Since I had traveled to various countries for an exchange, including Germany and Italy, he saw it on my Facebook. And he started writing to me, asking me to speak Russian with him, even though he knows Ukrainian. I told him that I wouldn't speak Russian with him. Then he started writing in Estonian with mistakes... Then he began threatening me that he would go to the police and file a report to have me deported.*

- 7 High level of Russian propaganda** among the local population, creating an unpleasant informational background. This affects not only the general atmosphere but also provokes specific cases of bullying Ukrainian women and children in various situations, both at work and in public spaces. The consequences of bullying can vary from emotional exhaustion to refusal of service or cooperation. This not only creates barriers for Ukrainian women to live a fulfilling life in Estonia, but also poses a societal threat: increasing tensions, social division, and the formation of biased attitudes toward Ukrainians as a whole, making their integration more difficult. It also has long-term consequences for Estonian society in general, particularly in terms of social unity and trust.

*There's a small point about the pro-Russian environment and the level of propaganda. It seems like we face a lot of it because I have local Russian-speaking friends here, and they're kind of normal, but then there are those who are not normal. And when you hear them, you don't know how to react because you know. There's the issue of discrimination, propaganda, and this psychological adaptation here. On the one hand, I tell myself 'what can you say, what can you complain about? You're a guest here.' So, you're not supposed to be dissatisfied when you're a guest.*

*But on the other hand, they shouldn't be saying offensive things to you either. And it shouldn't be in the media. I get really angry when I go to the gym and hear people loudly discussing politics in the context of how bad Kaja Kallas is, how bad Estonia is, and it's disgusting to hear. But I can't say anything to them because I myself am here, as we say, 'on bird rights.' I don't feel like I have the right to say anything to them because they're locals, they can talk about whatever they want, but I can't. But maybe that's a bit wrong too, because we should respect each other. But you can't educate these people, especially when they're already adults.*

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Thus, barriers related to discrimination and the violation of rights significantly complicate integration, create a sense of insecurity, and prevent equal opportunities for Ukrainian women refugees in Estonia.

What is important is that many situations in which the rights of Ukrainian refugee women in Estonia are violated are not even identified by them as violations. Instead, they are often perceived as a personal problem that needs to be "endured" or solved on their own. This creates a dangerous "gray zone," where violations remain invisible to society, organizations, or institutions that could provide help.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING THE SITUATION

This situation requires special attention, efforts for informing and educating, as well as the creation of genuine support for women. It is necessary to create conditions where:

- ✓ **Violations of rights can be identified** – by raising awareness among women about their rights and legal remedies and teaching them how to recognize violations.
- ✓ **Violations are documented** – by creating safe mechanisms for reporting violations.
- ✓ **Violations are addressed** – by ensuring legal, psychological, and social support for women who have been victims of discrimination or violations.

Currently, most women face the risk of even greater negative consequences for themselves if they start speaking openly about their problems. This may include losing their jobs, social condemnation, disrespect, or isolation. That is why it is necessary to create a safe environment where women can talk about their problems without fear, receive support, and be confident that their rights will be protected.

**Further possible solutions** to the barrier of rights violations and discrimination of Ukrainian women in Estonia:

- 1 Addressing structural issues:**
  - Reviewing labor law concerning refugees, which will help avoid situations of violations and exploitation (e.g., contracts that are constantly renewed without full rights).
  - Implementing oversight of labor conditions for vulnerable groups to prevent abuse.
  - Developing additional support mechanisms for women in crisis situations and vulnerable circumstances related to work and discrimination.
- 2 Strengthening support and legal protection:**
  - Developing educational programs for Ukrainians that explain their rights in Estonia, as well as step-by-step guides for addressing legal, social, and labor issues, based on real-life situations and examples. The programs should include analysis of typical cases faced by Ukrainian refugees and provide practical recommendations for resolving them. This approach will not only inform but also give women the ability to apply knowledge to real-life circumstances.
  - Creating a hotline for anonymous inquiries regarding discrimination or rights violations.
  - Practical training on how to defend one's rights.
- 3 Inclusivity and respect:**
  - Informing local employers about the rights of refugees and creating training sessions on tolerance, non-discrimination and inclusivity.
- 4 Informational and media counteraction to propaganda:**
  - Organising regular seminars, campaigns, and actions that explain how propaganda works and its consequences. Engaging both Ukrainian experts and Estonian activists in a joint effort to counter disinformation.
  - Involving youth in this work through schools, universities, and social platforms to foster critical thinking in future generations.
  - Publishing real stories of Ukrainians who face discrimination to demonstrate the consequences of propaganda and build empathy among the local population.
- 5 Working with the local population:**
  - Creating dialogue platforms between local residents (including Russian-speaking communities) and Ukrainians to foster understanding, break down stereotypes, and prevent conflicts.
  - Supporting joint projects that bring together different communities, such as those in the fields of ecology, education, and social assistance.
  - It is important not only to focus on practical measures but also to build a society that supports the ideas of solidarity, equality, and mutual respect. For this, all levels of society must be involved – from government institutions to civil society organisations, schools, and the media.

3.1.7.

### LACK OF AWARENESS (OF ACCESSIBLE KNOWLEDGE AND INFORMATION)

One of the significant barriers affecting the quality of life for Ukrainian refugee women, and one that intertwines with all other barriers, is the inaccessibility or fragmentation of information.

During our research, we discovered that although **there is a substantial amount of useful information, support opportunities, services and rights available, for many of us, these remain unknown.** Information is often scattered, unstructured, and difficult to find. We are forced to «Google» on our own, but often it's unclear what exactly to search for, especially in Estonian.

*I also tried to hear something from someone, read some news somewhere. I searched for information myself at various Ukrainian events, asked other Ukrainian women, heard bits and pieces somewhere, clarified, like you're saying. Because here in Tallinn there are more Russian speakers and more Ukrainians, but in a village, in an Estonian-speaking village, you don't know who to ask because you don't even know what you need to ask.*

This creates a feeling of living in a bubble, cut off from essential information. As a result, many important opportunities remain inaccessible, even if they theoretically exist, such as free camps for children or social programs.

*I can't say that I lived, I survived.*

*I can't say that I lived, I survived. There was a period in my life when I didn't even have money to buy a piece of bread, and I didn't ask for help. I was ashamed. I didn't know about food assistance. Actually, in the village where we lived, they didn't tell us about Toidupank [The Estonian Food Bank], that we could turn to it. It seemed to me that they were even hiding this information. I learned about this bank from Ukrainians.*

**Isolation from information** critically impacts psychological well-being, often requiring significant effort and resources to solve seemingly simple issues. The lack of access to essential information amplifies feelings of helplessness and uncertainty, worsening the emotional state and potentially leading to further difficulties in adaptation.

Only when certain issues were raised during group discussions did other participants, who had already encountered similar challenges, share information about available services or opportunities.

On the one hand, this highlights **the importance of having a space where people can exchange both problems and experiences**. On the other hand, it underscores the **inequality of access to information**, with vital resources often failing to reach those who truly need them.

“  
*It seemed to me that this is a particular feature of Estonia. You must have the information. I even remember when I was at Niine 2, back when the refugee center was still there, and I had a list of questions to ask. But no one would tell you anything. You had to know in advance what to ask. So, I sat near the queue, listened to people asking questions, and thought, ‘Oh, I need to know that too.*”

This underscores the importance of **creating more accessible and transparent channels of communication** to support Ukrainian women in their daily challenges.

All issues converge here once again: the problem of not knowing what to do when documents are delayed and everything collapses as a result, the lack of awareness about opportunities for professional development and social support, legal issues and defending one’s rights, psychological assistance, and more.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING THE SITUATION

Currently, one of the main sources of accessible information is Telegram channels and Facebook groups created by Ukrainians.

However, it is crucial **to have an official source that provides all necessary information** for refugees while also offering general information accessible to the entire population of the host country in an easily understandable language or with translation options. Such an approach would help reduce the level of isolation and confusion about rights and opportunities.

Furthermore, a simple **method for addressing questions needs to be established**, ensuring that every individual can easily receive answers and feel confident in knowing how to act in various situations and what resources they can rely on. This would significantly reduce psychological stress and foster greater adaptation and integration of Ukrainian women into their new environment.



### 3.1.8. THE ABSENCE OF A WOMEN'S TRACK

The issue of the lack of a women's track in the adaptation system for Ukrainian women in Estonia lies in the fact that **services and officials fail to consider the specific experiences, needs, and challenges women face during the integration process.** The absence of a gender-sensitive approach in adaptation programs often renders women's experiences invisible or inadequately addressed within relevant structures. The system does not emphasise that women, particularly single mothers or primary family caregivers, may have different needs compared to men, and their experiences are unique.

Women often encounter various barriers, such as the lack of spaces for social gatherings and development, as well as insufficient support in building social connections, which hinders their adaptation. Most of them do not receive the necessary information or have the opportunity to consult specialists, especially in refugee centers, which lack a focus on their specific needs. The diverse reasons for migration also contribute to misunderstandings among women in the community, and the lack of proper understanding often leads to internal struggles and misogyny, negatively impacting their psycho-emotional well-being.

*You're alone. I know I'm alone. I'm a single mom raising my child on my own. I need to find balance in my life today, but I just can't. I have a job, I have a child, and I have a personal life. How can I juggle all of this? And I'm both a mom and a dad in one person. I don't know how to balance it.*

This underscores the importance of providing support in the adaptation processes and creating conditions where women can access the necessary information and assistance in all aspects of life.

Failure to consider women's needs and gender aspects in the adaptation system fosters feelings of isolation and inadequacy, complicating integration and adaptation in a new country. Women find themselves in situations where standard solutions do not work for them, leading to the perception that something is wrong with them.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING THE SITUATION

To address the barrier of the absence of a women's track in the adaptation system, several key measures should be implemented:

- 1 **Development of gender-sensitive adaptation programs:** Adaptation programs must account for the specific needs of women, particularly single mothers, family breadwinners, those with experiences of psychological abuse, or those in challenging socio-economic conditions.
- 2 **Integration of a gender perspective in counseling services:** Refugee centers and adaptation services should provide professional counseling that considers gender aspects, such as limited employment opportunities for women, unequal access to information, and social isolation.

- 3 Provision of access to psychological support and social networks:** It is crucial to create conditions that support women's psycho-emotional well-being through psychotherapy programs, peer support groups, and resilience training. This will help women feel supported and find balance in their lives.
- 4 Expanding opportunities for socialisation and professional development:** Dedicated spaces should be established where women can share experiences and access information about professional development, education, and support opportunities. This will reduce isolation and promote better integration into society.
- 5 Gender sensitisation education for adaptation service staff:** Training sessions should be held for employees of organisations working with migrants to enhance their understanding of gender-specific needs and enable them to provide tailored support to women during their adaptation.
- 6 Inclusion of women's rights information in adaptation programs:** Adaptation courses should incorporate materials on women's rights, access to social assistance, and resources for those in difficult situations. This will empower women to understand their rights and utilise them effectively.
- 7 Support for women's independence:** Programs aimed at supporting women's economic independence are essential. These should include opportunities for professional development, access to affordable or free training, and employment programs, thereby fostering greater economic autonomy for women.

These measures will help create a more inclusive environment for Ukrainian women, addressing their specific needs and enabling them to overcome the challenges of adaptation and integration into a new society.

## 3.2. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

### A SENSE OF SECURITY AND STABILITY AS THE FOUNDATION FOR ADAPTATION AND A FULL LIFE

From the outset of this study—through discussions, debates, and analysis—it became evident that Ukrainian women in Estonia face a multitude of daily challenges: a lack of stability and confidence in the future, the need to start life anew under significant obligations and traumatic experiences, ongoing financial pressure, language barriers, dependency on external factors, physical and mental health issues, informational isolation, and instances of discrimination. All these factors create a tense backdrop for adaptation.

Although over two years have passed since the onset of forced migration from Ukraine due to Russia's full-scale invasion, many problems have drifted into a «gray zone,» remaining invisible to a society that often assumes the adaptation process has already been completed. However, we are left alone to contend with less visible but no less painful challenges.

Against this backdrop, a gender perspective initially seemed secondary. Yet, a deeper and more informed approach has revealed that it is precisely through the lens of gender that these issues must be addressed. We are convinced that this focus will enable more effective problem-solving on individual, institutional, and societal levels.

A sense of security, as identified in our research, is composed of several interrelated key aspects:

- 1 **Financial stability:** Having steady employment with adequate pay that ensures the fulfillment of basic needs and the ability to plan for the future.
- 2 **Access to information:** Awareness of one's rights and opportunities, along with clear mechanisms for obtaining assistance or resolving issues.
- 3 **Psychological support:** Access to quality psychological services and the creation of environments where individuals can share experiences and receive support.
- 4 **Confidence in legal status:** This includes assurance during potential delays in obtaining new documents and during the transition to updated documentation in 2025 and 2026.
- 5 **Freedom from discrimination:** Ensuring equal treatment in the workplace and social life, regardless of nationality, gender, or language.
- 6 **Physical and social safety:** Confidence in the availability of medical care and protection from violence or biased attitudes.
- 7 **Gender sensitivity:** Recognition of women's specific needs within systems of adaptation, employment, and social support.
- 8 **Community and support:** Availability of spaces for gatherings and knowledge exchange, fostering a sense of belonging to a community that understands and supports its members.

These components form the foundation for stability, self-confidence, and the ability to build a new life, even under the challenging circumstances of forced migration.

## 4. REFLECTIONS ON THE PAR PROCESS

### 4.1.

### WHAT PARTICIPANTS GAINED FROM TAKING PART IN THE PROJECT

#### 1 Formation of a new women's community and support network

- Participants created a women's circle, which became a sort of «family.» Meetings were perceived as personal time, almost like meditation.
- Interaction fostered a sense of belonging to a community, strengthened by shared activities such as a trip to Jaanipäev in Kasepää and singing Ukrainian songs together.
- A sense of support, belonging, and the reassurance of «I am not alone» emerged.

#### 2 Personal growth

- Participants learned to show more empathy and address personal issues, which helped with self-reflection about their own lives.
- Some women noted that the project changed them, teaching them to view life through a feminist perspective.
- Co-researchers developed a sense of resilience, readiness to move forward, and a new approach to life's challenges—viewing them as “tasks, not problems.”
- Co-researchers became more open to communication, tolerant, loyal, and focused on what truly matters.

#### 3 Valuable interaction experience

- The project provided insights into women's interactions with each other, introducing a new communication experience.
- Participants realized that, despite individual differences, there are shared problems that unite everyone.
- They worked through conflict situations and understood the importance of agreements and confidentiality.
- They learned to listen to others and respect differing opinions, even those they disagreed with.

#### 4 Emotional support and inspiration

- Meetings became an «island of Ukraine,» a chance to feel «at home.»
- They offered emotional relief, a space to share thoughts among like-minded women.
- The project evoked a wide range of emotions, from challenging to joyful, and was an inspiring example of cooperation.

- Participants noted gaining inspiration to find solutions together, with many new ideas emerging.
- Opportunities: Conversations in Ukrainian, the feeling of being heard, and reflections on their journey, acknowledging the significant progress they've already made under challenging circumstances.

#### **5 Practical knowledge and skills**

- Participants learned to apply a gender perspective and understand the principles of gender equality.
- Gained knowledge about participatory action research.
- Acquired data collection skills: interviews, surveys, photovoice, journalling.
- Developed data analysis skills, including coding and grouping.
- Became more active in events, advocacy, and knowledge-sharing.

#### **6 Positive impact on daily life**

- Participants noticed positive changes in their interactions in other projects and situations, including better identification of stereotypes and clearer communication.
- Built a more stable sense of self in a foreign environment (a non-native country).
- In the group, they received answers to important questions, solutions, shared experiences, and achieved tangible results in their personal situations.

#### **7 Final reflections**

- Participants experienced a sense of resonance with others, synchronisation within the group, and the feeling that they touched something greater. They expressed gratitude for the experience and a wish to continue the project.

## **4.2.**

## **CHALLENGES OF THE PROCESS**

### **! Initial sense of uncertainty:**

- Participants felt anxious due to uncertainty, unfamiliar group rules, and not knowing what could be discussed.
- Fear of how their words might be perceived by others.

### **! Conflict situation:**

- Tensions arose from breaches of group agreements, particularly around confidentiality, leading to feelings of vulnerability.







- ❗ **Fear and insecurity in a new environment:**
  - Participating outside their usual comfort zone triggered stress and required adaptation to new conditions.
- ❗ **Emotional burden:**
  - The project was emotionally challenging due to deep engagement with topics and personal experiences that surfaced during the process.
- ❗ **Physical discomfort:**
  - Minor inconveniences like hunger during long meetings or small annoyances such as remembering to wear socks.
- ❗ **Limited participation due to physical absence:**
  - Some participants faced difficulties attending in-person meetings due to work, family obligations, or health issues, risking missing key group moments.
- ❗ **Language barriers across different process levels:**
  - Communication challenges arose between different participants and project organizers.
- ❗ **“How can we talk about problems here, as we are grateful to Estonia for everything?”:**
  - Participants felt an internal conflict when discussing issues, as they didn’t want to seem ungrateful to the country that had provided them shelter.
- ❗ **Insufficient understanding of the gender perspective and the presence of urgent issues that seemed more important than gender issues:**
  - It was initially difficult to focus on the gendered aspects in research due to seemingly more pressing issues such as housing, safety, and adapting to new conditions. Co-researchers often had to deal with practical and urgent matters, which diverted their attention from the opportunity to deeply explore gender aspects. Additionally, the lack of experience in discussing gender issues in a new environment and uncertainty about the role of gender in specific situations also made it harder to focus on gender in the analysis. As a result, gender aspects often took a back seat and did not always receive enough attention during the process.
- ❗ **It really takes time to start voicing and analyzing situations from a place of empowerment and confidence:**
  - It took time for everyone to feel confident enough to openly discuss problems and analyze situations.

## 4.3. STRENGTHS OF THE PROCESS

- ✓ **Well-formed group:**
  - Selecting participants who interacted well created a foundation of trust and open dialogue.
- ✓ **Equal coordination and facilitation:**
  - The process was organised on principles of equality, making participants feel engaged and heard.
  - Professional facilitation skills, combined with the facilitator's shared experiences as a Ukrainian immigrant in Estonia, strengthened trust and relatability.
- ✓ **Hybrid participation options:**
  - Meetings allowed for online attendance when participants could not join in person, ensuring inclusivity and minimising information loss.
  - Online participation was especially valuable for women balancing multiple roles (e.g., caregiving, work) or facing other difficulties (health issues, long commutes).
- ✓ **Conflict resolution:**
  - While conflicts arose, they were leveraged as opportunities to deepen understanding of agreements, confidentiality, and creating a safe space.
- ✓ **Support and collaboration:**
  - The group's ability to work together, discuss challenging moments, and overcome difficulties fostered openness and unity.
- ✓ **Emotional growth:**
  - The process helped participants manage and process various emotions, including difficult ones, building resilience and readiness for change.
- ✓ **Comfort and belonging:**
  - Despite initial challenges, the meetings gradually became a "home-like island," creating a warm and welcoming environment.
- ✓ **Adaptation to language challenges:**
  - Co-researchers could work in their native language, while Praxis representatives communicated with the group and coordinator in English, making the process more accessible than if Estonian had been required.
- ✓ **Shared female experience:**
  - All project participants were women, creating a common understanding and level of connection

- ✓ **Professional support:**
  - Expert guidance in gender issues and participatory action research (PAR) strengthened the process.
- ✓ **Ease of bureaucratic processes:**
  - Administrative tasks, such as signing agreements, processing payments, and expense reimbursements, were handled efficiently.
- ✓ **Offsite session in the summer:**
  - A change of environment allowed for deeper bonding, practical learning, and relaxation.

## 4.4. CONCLUSION: LESSONS LEARNED

-  **Value of a safe space**
  - Having a group where one can express themselves, feel heard, and receive support without fear of judgment is crucial.
-  **Power of communication and agreements**
  - Learning to resolve conflicts, adhere to agreements, and maintain confidentiality was a valuable experience.
-  **Gender Perspective**
  - Co-researchers deeply reflected on gender aspects of their lives and society for the first time, helping them better understand their own experiences.
-  **Importance of flexibility and inclusivity**
  - Allowing online participation for those unable to attend in person preserved group cohesion and ensured everyone's involvement.
-  **Emotional resilience and adaptation**
  - Participants found that challenging emotional moments (e.g., conflicts, fear, uncertainty) became opportunities for growth and learning.
-  **Benefits of collaboration and problem-solving**
  - Skills in teamwork, empathy, experience sharing, and collective problem-solving proved critical for personal and professional development.



## 4.5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE PAR PROJECTS

- ★ **Ensure a safe environment for all participants**
  - From the start, establish clear group rules on confidentiality, agreements, and responses to violations.
  - Allocate time for gradual and deeper introductions and mutual adaptation.
- ★ **Focus on empathy and openness**
  - Involve facilitators capable of creating a space for discussing complex topics without bias or fear.
- ★ **Flexible participation formats**
  - Implement hybrid participation formats (offline and online) to accommodate those with limitations on physical presence.
  - Adapt activities (including energizers) to be inclusive of both online and offline participants.
- ★ **Create conditions for maximum engagement and accessibility**
  - Pay attention to working languages to ensure inclusivity.
- ★ **Invest in long-term participant support**
  - Ensure all stakeholders are genuinely committed to supporting the group and its members.
- ★ **Focus on practical knowledge and skills**
  - Provide participants with methods and resources (e.g., training on gender perspectives, communication, conflict resolution) applicable to future projects or personal life.
- ★ **Allocate time for reflection**
  - Include opportunities for individual and group reflection at each stage, allowing participants to process their emotions and experiences.
- ★ **Plan for adequate time in the project**
  - Acknowledge that building group safety, trust, and openness takes significant time.
  - Each subsequent stage of the project will also require time for reflection and integration.
- ★ **Organise changes in the working environment and shared experiences**
  - Multi-day offsite trips together can foster deeper group bonding and progress.
- ★ **Plan next steps**
  - Allow participants to develop strategies for continuing collaboration or advancing the project if they wish.
  - Secure resources to support project continuation.

★ **Preserve the project's legacy**

- Ensure that methodological materials, practices, and outcomes remain accessible to all participants for future use

★ If necessary, **focusing on a more precise selection of participants** oriented toward similar experiences or challenges will allow the research to concentrate on more specific issues, deepening the analysis.

- This will contribute to the development of concrete conclusions and recommendations that can serve as a foundation for real changes in the relevant areas.

## PROSPECTS FOR CONTINUING THE WORK

During the research process, it became evident that our group is only at the initial stage of deeply understanding and analysing the challenges faced by Ukrainian women forcibly displaced to Estonia. We created a space of trust where participants were able to collectively identify barriers and begin communicating them. This was an important achievement, as the group laid the groundwork for further in-depth analysis.

We believe that this work can be continued, as most issues remain unresolved. The research not only identified key challenges but also highlighted the need for longer and more comprehensive discussions, particularly with a focus on systematically addressing the identified problems. We are convinced that the group has the potential to continue this work, refine its approaches, and create even more visible changes.

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