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# IMPOVERISHED MOTHERHOOD IN UKRAINE: LEARNING FROM WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF NAVIGATING THE CHALLENGES OF WARTIME

## ABSTRACT

Women play a critical role in wartime, bearing significant burdens while driving societal resilience and recovery. This policy brief examines the specific challenges faced by impoverished mothers in Ukraine amid the ongoing war, focusing on their economic, social, and emotional struggles. Even before the 2022 Russian invasion, single mothers and families with children experienced heightened poverty due to limited state support and entrenched systemic inequalities. The war has exacerbated these challenges, particularly for internally displaced persons with children, who face housing instability, unemployment, and reliance on humanitarian aid. Gendered expectations and the mobilisation of men place disproportionate caregiving responsibilities on women, who struggle under the weight of intersecting stigmas and inadequate resources. By addressing issues like employment, housing, reproductive labour, and mental health, this policy brief aims to inform inclusive policies that support vulnerable mothers and foster equitable recovery in Ukraine.



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## Introduction: Women at the forefront of war efforts and post-war recovery

Women play a pivotal role during wars, often serving as the backbone of not only their families but entire communities. While bearing a disproportionate share of the burdens caused by armed conflicts – such as displacement, economic insecurity and the loss of social safety nets – women also become essential drivers of societal resilience and play a key role in processes of future rebuilding. Their contributions not only as caregivers, economic actors and community organisers, but increasingly also as soldiers and decisionmakers are critical not only for the conduct of war efforts and surviving the immediate impact of atrocities, but also for fostering cohesion and laying the groundwork for post-war recovery. Understanding the specific challenges and opportunities faced by women during wartime is crucial for crafting inclusive and effective policies for relief and reconstruction.

As Ukraine grapples with the profound consequences of unprecedented, brutal war, it is imperative to analyse women's experiences and contributions within this context. Historically, women have been at the forefront of post-conflict recovery, assuming leadership roles in rebuilding shattered communities, reforming local economies and addressing societal inequalities. Their unique insights into the needs of vulnerable populations – particularly children, the elderly and other marginalised groups – position them as key stakeholders in shaping sustainable recovery strategies. A gender-sensitive analysis of Ukraine's housing, economic and social policies during this time is therefore necessary to build a more equitable and resilient future.

Mothers in today's Ukraine continue to face various problems, many of which had existed before the invasion and have only worsened since. Many mothers lack support and barely make ends meet while living in a country at war. This group has many needs and few resources and is often overlooked for complex reasons: mothers are mostly younger, so are of working age and expected to provide for themselves or be provided for by their partner (thus making mothers' problems an issue off the social radar); social stigma around poverty and lone motherhood; "mother-blaming" rooted in patriarchal social norms; the lack of a strong vocal lobby for mothers' rights; the dominance of liberal "lean-in" feminism and resilience narrative in the country; and more. These stigmas and obstacles, however, do not make the intersectionality-determined problems mothers face go away, but rather make them more acute under the conditions of war. **"Impoverished motherhood"** is the focus of this policy brief, which is aimed at better understanding the phenomenon itself and informing policymakers on the dimensions of the problem that need to be addressed.

Before the Russian full-scale invasion in 2022, there were over 5.5 million households with children. The majority of families have one child (80%), and their number below the poverty line before the war (25.6%[1]) was five times higher than among the general Ukrainian population (5.5%[2]). Families with many children and almost a million households that support children without one or both parents had even worse wellbeing. Most often, it is about single mothers.[3] Despite the increased risks of poverty for families with children, there has been a trend towards a reduction in state support over the past decade. For example, cuts in benefits for single mothers,[4] inadequately small maternity benefits and instability in the guarantee of mothers' labour rights due to market deregulation.[5]

Since the invasion, 1.3 million children have left Ukraine.[6] But most families with children remain. Given the previous data, it can be assumed that the sharp increase in poverty[7] due to the war has significantly affected them. Even more risky is the situation of internally displaced persons (IDPs) with children in the context of loss of homes,[8] unemployment[9] and cuts in state payments for displaced persons.[10] Given established gender roles, the mobilisation of men and a significant number of single parents, the burden of supporting children under these conditions falls squarely on mothers. Wartime conditions and the lack of **state support** have made many of them dependent on (and competing for) charity.

The analysis covers a set of challenges experienced by these women that emerged from secondary research and a series of interviews with **impoverished mothers reliant on humanitarian aid**. These women currently live in Ukraine (with relatives and in other various forms of temporary accommodation) and many of them are internally displaced, which adds layers of complexity and vulnerability to their condition amidst pre-existing and new systemic constraints for their support. Themes addressed here are employment issues, access to housing, increasing reproductive labour, access to humanitarian aid and mental health support.

## Methodology

The policy brief builds on the findings of a research project on the experiences of Ukrainian mothers during the war, as well as secondary data available from other studies and governmental sources. It deploys a mixed-methods analysis, where findings from primary qualitative evidence are triangulated with secondary data and analyses.

The research into mothers' experiences was an ethnographic study conducted in 2023 for "Tak. Shtab", a Ukrainian non-governmental organisation (NGO) supporting women, particularly mothers in need, since the beginning of Russia's invasion in 2022. During seven weeks in March-May 2023, 30 women living in different parts of Ukraine were interviewed. The interviews took place in person and online (24 and 6, respectively).[11] Unless clearly stipulated otherwise, quotes and references in this analysis are based on the aforementioned data.

The research participants' situation can be characterised as "**impoverished motherhood**" – the authors define this phenomenon as the combination of the feminisation of poverty[12] and the motherhood penalty[13] with abrupt, dramatic changes that exacerbate these phenomena. All 30 participants[14] were sampled via an online questionnaire that had been distributed among women applying for **humanitarian aid** (a box with some food and hygiene products).

The methodology of the primary component of this study is derived from grounded theory – a qualitative approach, within which data collection precedes theoretical assumptions. Grounded theory is justified for this study because existing theoretical models regarding mothers in wartime are limited, and its flexibility allows for analysis of the changing conditions of war and for better research on the marginalised, as it focuses on individual experiences and social context.[15] Therefore, the goal of the interview was to allow the participants to determine which topics and issues should be discussed. The interview guide contained only a few general questions about changes in one's life since the beginning of the full-scale war, current challenges being faced and ideas about one's future. After a participant mentioned a certain issue, the interviewers would ask additional questions to discuss the topic further. Thus, all the problems described in the following sections were brought up by the research participants – and not predetermined by a researcher.

In the following, the contextualised primary analysis is triangulated with secondary data and analyses, after which targeted policy recommendations are developed.

## Struggling during the war

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has predictably worsened the socio-economic situation of the population, which is reflected by various available statistics. In 2022, the proportion of Ukrainians living in poverty increased from 5.5% to 24.1%, according to the World Bank.[16] About 1.7 million Ukrainians (or 9.9% of the working-age population) were unemployed in 2021, and it is estimated that, with the invasion, the numbers doubled. Under wartime conditions, unemployment benefits are received for no more than three months.[17] At least 3.7 million are now internally displaced.[18] It has been estimated that "over 14.6 million people – about 40% of the Ukrainian population living in Ukraine – were to need humanitarian assistance in 2024"[19] (in spring 2023 – when the primary qualitative evidence was collected – nearly 18 million Ukrainians were in need of humanitarian assistance[20]). As of 31 October

2024, 8.5 million were targeted by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) humanitarian response, while 7.7 million (90%) of those were reached, with only 58% of all required funding received. Among those reached, 47% were adults, 18% were children, 34% were older people, 12% were people with disabilities and 59% were female.[21]

Women in Ukraine face additional challenges due to structural inequalities. Despite a higher level of education compared to men,[22] they are less represented in government and in high business positions, which is an expression of vertical segregation. However, the main influence on the gender pay gap, which is 18%,[23] is horizontal segregation, which is expressed, in particular, in employment: women are typically employed in worse-paid sectors, such as the service sector or textile industry, and even in such areas face vertical segregation, with men typically occupying more prestigious and better-paid positions within the same sector.[24] The average salary of a seamstress in 2024 is 15,000 Ukrainian hryvnia (UAH)[25] (about €350), as of 2022, before the significant devaluation of the UAH, for hotel and restaurant workers, it was 9,400 UAH (about €300); for medical staff, it was 13,500 UAH (about €400) and for educators, it was 11,500 UAH[26] (about €350). This is below the average salary, which is currently 20,900 UAH[27] (about €480), and it generally coincides with the gender pay gap mentioned above. Women are also in a disadvantaged position when it comes to parenting. Among the age group most typical for motherhood, women are less involved in the labour market.[28] However, compensation for these forced years of unemployment due to maternity leave is extremely low. In Ukraine, pregnant women are entitled to payments close to their salary for two months before and two months after childbirth. After that, all mothers can get state support for children. But it has not increased for more than ten years. It is 10,000 UAH (€230) in a lump sum immediately after birth and 860 UAH (€20) monthly for three years. In 2014 differentiation – when benefits for the second, and especially the third, child were significantly higher – was removed. This difference made sense since mothers of many children drop out of the labour market for a long time[29] due to the unavailability of the care sector.[30] Also, since 2016, the number of single parents (96% of them mothers[31]) who are entitled to state support has significantly decreased. If in 2016 550,000 single parents received assistance, then in 2021, it was fewer than 120,000. This state support gives benefits of no more than 3,200 UAH per child (€70).[32] So the actual subsistence minimum of 7,000 UAH[33] (€160) is unattainable solely due to state child support, and barely achievable if the mother has permanent employment with the typical "female" salary. For many, the war disrupted this shaky balance over the "poverty chasm". Unemployment and relocation exacerbate people's financial struggles, and women are disproportionately affected. In the research project conducted by Olena Gulenok (OG) mentioned in this analysis, the most precarious among them was being dealt with – women whose situation is termed **impoverished motherhood**. While all of them undergo significant financial difficulties, their experiences in that regard require a more nuanced description than simply "poverty".

An everyday challenge that befalls the mothers is their and their children's basic needs not being met ("The only difficulty [I experience] because of the war is that I found myself without means of existence, that's it."). They spoke a lot about how they deny themselves bread or milk, cannot buy nappies for their child (the unaffordability of nappies came up especially frequently in the interviews), or have huge arrears on utility bills.

Not only is the mothers' income low, but it is also often unstable. This means a state of precariousness and uncertainty described by one participant as living through a constant "black day" (Ukrainian expression for "a rainy day").

An additional challenge internally displaced[34] mothers face in terms of financial insecurity is unplanned expenses due to forced relocation. When relocating to a "safer" place in the winter-early spring of 2022, many were able to take only the most essential belongings. Therefore, when summer came, they had to buy a whole new seasonal wardrobe. Those who previously lived in a house

they owned now had to pay rent (which was rapidly increasing due to property owners taking advantage of the growing demand resulting from the influx of IDPs (in Lviv, rents increased by over 200%[35])) and furnish their new rented home. The participants moving from rural to urban areas complained about increased food expenses since they were no longer able to grow their own food.

Another issue intersecting with financial struggles is health, or the unaffordability of healthcare. Before the war, per capita healthcare spending in Ukraine was the lowest in Europe,[36] and patients paid half of the costs out of pocket.[37] So, when medical treatment or medication purchases are being discussed in an interview, it is either what the participant or a relative needs but is not getting due to high costs, or one of the reasons they struggle financially (that is, being in debt after expensive surgery).

Some of the mothers' economic hardship began with the full-scale invasion in February 2022, while others had already been struggling to make ends meet before this event. Those are two different groups – in terms of their perception of the situation, the opportunities to recover and the measures that might be taken to help them.

## Mothers' employment after the full-scale invasion

Over 70% of Ukrainians who registered as unemployed in 2023 were women. Even though the share of women among the unemployed had already been higher before the war, the gap increased significantly with the 2022 invasion. In April 2023, the State Employment Service reported[38] that 7,900 women and 3,200 men had registered as unemployed since the beginning of the year. Two issues should be considered. Firstly, the real numbers are significantly higher;[39] secondly, many men of conscription age might be avoiding official unemployment status, as employment centres are obliged to report to conscription centres. However, the full-scale invasion has exacerbated unequal access to the labour market for women with children, creating additional barriers and strengthening the "**motherhood penalty**". In sociological scholarship,[40] this term refers to disadvantages in wages and perceived competence of working mothers compared to female employees without children. Scholars have emphasised that being a "good mother" (unlike being a "good father") is seen as culturally incompatible with being a "good employee". Some studies have revealed a larger pay gap between mothers and non-mothers than that between women and men.

The Ukrainian labour market is not inclusive enough for a mother without access to significant childcare support to be able to combine her childcare duties with paid work. The war, and deregulation of the labour market justified by it, exacerbated this situation.[41] The participants spoke about needs such as adjustable working hours (being able to leave if a child gets sick etc.) and an opportunity to bring their child to the workplace. Some of the women had enjoyed such flexibility until they lost their job as a result of the invasion, and have since been unable to find employment meeting those needs. For example, seamstresses could take children to work,[42] or kindergarten teachers combined this work with caring for their own children.[43] Also, a significant number of women in Ukraine work in the public sector,[44] as they have guaranteed labour rights that allow them to combine work and motherhood. At the same time, these are often the lowest-paid areas, which also resonates with the concept of a "**motherhood penalty**". In contrast, the service sector, which makes up the largest part of the Ukrainian economy, often involves informal employment and overtime work,[45] which are often unacceptable to mothers.

Following the invasion, some of the women found themselves in a situation where the enterprises stopped providing them with work and/or wages without firing them. At the beginning of the war, giants such as Ukrzaliznytsia, Nova Poshta and Malyshev Plant, as well as several hospitals, government agencies and educational institutions, took advantage of the relevant changes in legislation. This seems to be a typical way for companies to overcome the consequences of the crisis[46] at the expense of employees. Workers' legal statuses in such cases differ, and an employer can

act both within the limits of the law and in violation of it. A mother in such a situation cannot tell when the employer will pay her; having children to look after, she is afraid to lose what seems to be secure, permanent employment, and thus, is not looking for a new job.

The mothers interviewed have also been facing downward mobility. That is particularly relevant to the internally displaced participants. After moving to a different area (especially a smaller town or village), the participants struggled to find employment matching their skills and experience and were forced to accept lower-paid and less prestigious jobs:

> *Everything has changed. [...] I have two degrees, but I can't find a job. Well, [apart from] cleaning. Yesterday was my last day as a cleaner in the office. [...] And a year ago, I communicated only with managers of schools and kindergartens, but now... [...] I have no choice because I need to feed [my child].*

## Housing: Displaced by war and rent

Research participants discussed numerous problems (and feelings) revolving around the housing issue. These were mostly brought up by the interviewees who had experienced displacement during the full-scale war.

Discrimination in the rental market is one of the main problems. "Discrimination" means unequal treatment based on one's status, and for the women in this study, such statuses were motherhood, pet ownership and region of origin (this mostly refers to those from Donbas, but sometimes simply being from a different region/oblast). Some of the participants reported being denied tenancy based on each of the three statuses – a different one with each potential landlord. Participants also repeatedly mentioned having conflicts with their landlord, in particular, because the landlord would break agreements (which were usually oral/unofficial) or increase the rent every few months. At the same time, 70-90% of the housing rental market operates in the shadows, which makes it difficult to regulate or settle disputes should there be political or individual will.[47]

If the participants who had been displaced managed to find free housing for themselves and their families, they were usually hosted by relatives or acquaintances. Some of them spoke about long-term cohabitation with others as a negative experience. Conflicts would arise between people who had never spent much time together and were now stuck under one roof (which should not come as a surprise, especially given the stress brought by the war). One participant explained her family had to leave a friend's house suddenly (and go back to their hometown, which Russia had already occupied), as the friend who offered them a room began expressing "pro-Russian sentiments". In other cases, participants mentioned conflicts over financial issues, splitting utility bills, sharing food and so forth (in other words, conflicts deriving from difficult economic conditions). Sexual harassment is also a common reason for leaving indicated by IDPs[48] in the country, but the respondents to this study did not indicate such cases.

Another experience of displaced women interviewed is the deterioration of housing conditions. Research participants would compare the flat they moved into when relocating with their place back home, describing the latter as much more comfortable, spacious, newer, better equipped and so forth. The comparisons evoked memories of the happy life that was disrupted by the war, as well as feelings of injustice and anger about the stereotypes that IDPs "come [to other cities] in search for a better life" ("But it was great there [where we came from]!").

The unaffordability of housing has forced people to relocate repeatedly. Some of the research participants had moved three or more times – because of the housing option being initially temporary and/or due to the unexpectedly increasing rent, among other issues. While relocating repeatedly every several

months is already exhausting, for displaced women with kids there are additional challenges: IDPs have to re-register when changing their place of residence, and their children have to enrol in a new school or kindergarten – bureaucracy that adds to the reproductive labour the women perform and to their time poverty. The concept of **time or temporal poverty** is also crucial for understanding the situation of the respondents. It describes the constant lack of time caused by either "working poverty"[49] or care labour, which "can be seen as a 'subsidy' to the business sector"[50] or public sectors.[51] This is discussed in more detail below. But if we talk about temporal poverty in the context of housing, one issue is the separation of family members. Because of the need to "look after" their flat or house (often the only property they own, and the most valuable asset), several family members would stay in frontline areas, while others flee to somewhere "safer". Some of the research participants who relocated had relatives (usually the kids' grandparents) who used to help them with the children and household but are unable to do so now, as they did not flee with the rest of the family. Such separation from family, deriving from the need to look after a house, results in an additional burden of reproductive labour for displaced women raising children.

All the issues described above make the fear of ending up without housing a recurring topic in interviews. Besides this fear, the participants discuss the idea of going back to where they have come from – to finally live in their own house again. While this brief was being written, some of the displaced women interviewed in relatively "safe" regions have, despite safety concerns, already returned "home", that is, to where they are homeowners.

At the beginning of 2024, housing remained one of the main problems internally displaced Ukrainians faced. It has been reported by officials that, in two years of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, as few as 46,000 IDPs (or less than 1% of IDPs) have received temporary housing.[52] The government representative who shared the data emphasised in the same interview that such a lack of state support, particularly in terms of housing policy, is one of the reasons why many displaced citizens have returned to frontline areas or occupied territories. The exact number of such cases is unknown, but the figures range from 130,000 to 150,000 people.[53] In total, after staying abroad or in other regions of Ukraine, according to IOM, about 4.5 million Ukrainians have already returned,[54] 58% and 29% of them being women and children (aged 1-17 years), respectively.

## Caring during the war: The increasing burden of reproductive labour

Reproductive labour (which includes housework and childcare, as well as looking after elderly or sick relatives) is labour mostly performed by women. A 2023 study showed that only in 1% of Ukrainian families with a child under 3 years old was it mostly the father who looked after the child; it was mostly the mother in 69% of such families. [55] While the same study claims the situation regarding fathers' input in childcare has somewhat improved (compared to the results of a similar 2020 survey), Ukrainian households are still far from having a gender-balanced division of reproductive labour.

For most women interviewed in the project during 2023, childcare or housework were not among the greatest problems they wanted to discuss. Because we first asked each woman what issues she was facing, and then followed up with more questions on whatever problems she brought up, in some interviews, what we call reproductive labour was not mentioned at all. Some women would briefly mention, for example, having to look after a sick relative – without describing it as a difficulty. However, it is unlikely that care and housework are not a challenge at all for those participants who did not describe it as such. Rather, they did not perceive it as a particularly new issue, a problem created by the war; they might have also prioritised other problems due to the notion of care and housework being "naturally" a female domain.

There was, however, one woman, Alina,[56] from Kharkiv, who spoke about care and housework as being particularly challenging and clearly war-related issues. She talked about it right away when OG asked her the first question:

“

*OG: […] Tell me about yourself, and about changes in your life after 24th February [2022].*
*A: About myself?... Well, after 24th February everything changed, of course. I began to pay more attention to the child – this is the most important thing that has changed. And I started spending more time on housework. That's basically it, nothing else [has changed].*

”

Alina is a low-level state employee who, at the time of the interview, worked for free on a promise of getting paid later that year; before the war, she received slightly more than the minimum wage, however, she was rather happy about her salary, as it was considerably higher than what she had received at her previous workplace.

As the invasion began, Alina, with her husband and child, moved to a safer place to live with distant family members. After having spent several months there, they returned to Kharkiv due to numerous conflicts with the hosts. As Alina recalls, they repeatedly argued over rather trivial things, such as how many eggs she could take from the relatives' fridge when baking a pie. The most serious one was perhaps the accusation that she had stolen their money. While telling me this story, Alina says, as they stayed there, it was mostly her who cleaned the house. It is not uncommon for displaced people to be expected to do housework for those giving them “free” accommodation – even if they pay the utility bills, as Alina did. From what Alina said in the interview, it was clear to OG that the conflicts derived from poverty: the relatives were older people who had recently lost their jobs due to the war and struggled to make ends meet – while having to look after a big house and animals. The arrival of another struggling family did not ease their burden; two families who found themselves in the situation of war, financial insecurity and forced cohabitation ended up hating each other, and eventually Alina, her husband and daughter returned to Kharkiv.

Upon return, they moved to a “safer” neighbourhood – to Alina's cousin's place. Husband's grandma, in turn, moved to the flat belonging to Alina and her husband; and Alina's mum, whose flat in Kharkiv was partially damaged, relocated abroad. As a result, Alina now had to look after three homes – hers, her husband's grandma's and her mother's:

“

*A: […] My mum's flat, it's in disrepair. Every time it rains, I have to go there to drain the water off – otherwise, it'll flood the neighbours. Everything leaks there. That's the biggest, biggest difficulty for me during the war – that I have to look after the flat on [a street in Kharkiv], and the flat where I live, and also the one on [another street in Kharkiv]. I do this all alone.*
*OG: Is this what you meant [when you said earlier] that there is more housework now?*
*A: Yes, yes. Because my mother left for [another country], and now everything is my responsibility. […] It's hard, physically hard to keep up with everything.*

”

Her husband works long hours at a factory, so Alina cares for his 90-year-old grandmother, commuting to her place almost daily. At the same time, Alina's mother in law sometimes looks after her child, and this support – described by Alina as crucial to her mental health – is the only help with childcare she can rely on. The war also made childcare more difficult and time-consuming, as the child's mental and physical health worsened due to stress; that added the search for doctors and treatment to Alina's

everyday troubles. (Other research participants also mentioned stress-related health issues in children, as well as a female relative being the only or primary source of childcare support – regardless of the father's presence.)

The burden of reproductive labour has also increased for Ukrainian women due to the destruction of infrastructure, such as schools and kindergartens. As much as 13% of educational facilities – which is thousands of buildings – have been damaged or destroyed in Ukraine as a result of hostilities.[57] Many schools switched to online learning due to a lack of shelters, meaning more women have to stay at home with children.

In addition to children and elderly relatives, Ukrainian women also look after wounded soldiers. As a 2024 report by the NGO Pryncyp states,

*[female] caregivers most often take care of the entire range of needs of a wounded or sick [soldier]: physical care, emotional care, control of treatment, search for [healthcare] specialists and hospitals, communication with the military unit and state services, etc.*[58]

The burden of reproductive labour mostly performed by women is increasing during the war due to several factors, including forced displacement; damage to housing; relocation of other family members with whom duties had been shared; destruction of educational infrastructure and additional care work, such as looking after the wounded. These issues are closely linked to temporal poverty and employment opportunities.

## Humanitarian aid and a quest for it

Millions of Ukrainians have relied on humanitarian aid since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. It is difficult to clearly define the populations receiving humanitarian assistance in the country. The aid is provided by various actors – local authorities, international institutions, NGOs, religious organisations, grassroots volunteer initiatives and so forth – which may have different approaches to defining vulnerable populations. In total, more than 14 million people in Ukraine need humanitarian assistance but only half of those receive it.[59] Among the groups receiving aid in Ukraine are "individuals in difficult life circumstances", single parents, people with disabilities, relatives of those killed or missing in action or prisoners of war, IDPs, and people living in frontline areas.

According to a 2023 survey, Ukrainians aged 60 and older receive humanitarian aid more often than those of other age groups; 58.5% of respondents from eastern and southern parts of the country reported having received humanitarian aid at least once since 24 February 2022 (compared to 12% in the western region).

The women interviewed had received various aid/ assistance from the state and local authorities, who mainly perform functions of receiving and distributing humanitarian aid;[60] charities; NGOs and individuals. The research participants spoke mainly about their needs for humanitarian aid, such as food, clothing or hygiene products (and how those needs were or were not met). They also mentioned receiving benefits, psychological assistance, and free or "subsidised"[61] housing. One thing the women's experiences with aid have in common is the irregularity and unpredictability of humanitarian (and other) support.

Acquiring humanitarian aid is characterised by what the authors have decided to call "commuting for aid" – an analogy with regular movements between one's home and workplace. This illustrates well how much this process takes up women's time resources. The women spend many hours commuting to receive humanitarian aid from different sources (mainly

NGOs or charities), as well as searching for such sources online and filling in questionnaires for potential aid recipients, which feeds into the growing time poverty of the recipient women.

Because receiving humanitarian aid often involves several bureaucratic procedures and eligibility criteria, the research participants would often avoid those by resorting to informal practices and arrangements. One example would be relying on friends or relatives based in other cities to receive aid (which they are eligible for but do not need) and send it to the woman who might not be able to acquire similar aid because it is not distributed where she lives, or because she does not meet the eligibility criteria. This can and does lead to complex forms of dependency, and thus, potential vulnerability, and exposes women to potential exploitation and/or abuse.

Both IDPs and those who have not relocated (or have already returned) among the mothers interviewed have experienced the need for humanitarian aid and similar challenges regarding access to it. However, other studies have demonstrated a significant gap between IDPs and other groups in terms of humanitarian needs. For instance, a survey conducted by IOM[62] at the end of 2023 found that 30% of IDPs were in need of clothes and blankets and 29% needed hygiene products (compared to 11% and 10%, respectively, among those who have not relocated). At the same time, the share of those in need of psychological counselling does not differ significantly between the two groups (22% and 19%). Therefore, we can assume that displaced women are disproportionately affected by the difficulties related to receiving humanitarian aid.

The primary research has also uncovered deep feelings of injustice regarding humanitarian aid distribution. Not only is the aid difficult to acquire, as described above, but also – from the perspective of the research participants – it is being distributed unequally among the different socio-demographic groups. (It is hard to tell the extent to which this is true, as no data is available on the total amounts of aid different populations have received from the many existing sources.) Participants complained that the support they had been receiving (both from the government and non-governmental sources) had declined since the beginning of the full-scale war. Women tended to explain the decline by the fact that they did not have a certain status, such as IDPs, large families, residents of a particular area or the employed: "Usually, NGOs refuse [to help us] because we are not IDPs."/"People who leave Kharkiv no longer receive any help, except for those whose housing was destroyed, that's it. Now they help only those from the suburbs of Kharkiv." This opposition of oneself to "the other" – in this case, a (perceivably) more privileged sociodemographic category – reflects feelings of injustice and abandonment experienced by different "groups" of impoverished mothers forced to compete for access to the very basic resources. Here, a phenomenon such as **othering** can be observed, which is a typical form of social segregation and injustice under conditions of a lack of resources and the struggle for them,[63] especially during armed conflicts.

## Mental health: Barriers to accessing support

Discussions about mental health in Ukraine often revolve around the concept of a "culture" of caring for one's own mental health – and the assumption that Ukrainian society lacks such a "culture".[64] This assumption has not come out of nowhere: for years, surveys (including those conducted during the full-scale invasion, when attention to the issue of mental wellbeing seems to have increased) have shown that Ukrainians rarely seek professional psychological support. In a 2023 poll,[65] only 2% of respondents reported visiting a psychologist regularly, and 9% occasionally, "when having a problem". In the same survey, 42% indicated that they had felt the need for psychological help in 2023. One of the most common reasons for not seeking professional support, according to the study, was its high cost.

A more recent 2024 survey showed an increase in the proportion of those responding that "all Ukrainians" do need psychological support: 46% compared to 16% in 2023 and 14% in 2022.[66] One explanation for such an increase may be that mental health needs are becoming more normalised in

Ukrainian society. An all-Ukrainian mental health program was introduced at the initiative of the First Lady,[67] and businesses use this topic to create a positive image.[68] At the same time, the WHO notes that there are significantly fewer mental health specialists in Ukraine per capita than in the EU, and 26% of vacancies for psychiatrists are unfilled.[69] Responding to the need, the state has delegated the provision of psychological care to family doctors.[70] Also, school nurses can receive higher salaries for taking a course in psychological support.[71] However, the extremely low salaries of medics, especially in the field of education,[72] and the great workload[73] cast doubt on whether staff resources will be sufficient for the psychological support of patients.

The mothers we interviewed in spring 2023 would often bring up psychological wellbeing and mental health issues, sharing their experiences and thoughts. Despite the popular narrative that Ukrainians lack an understanding of the importance of mental health and avoid professional help, the women interviewed (those of various backgrounds, ages, professions etc.) demonstrated the opposite attitude. They openly spoke about their problems and the need for support.

However, being aware of one's need for psychological support is not enough to start getting help. Ukrainian women face various barriers to receiving professional psychological support. One barrier is the high cost of psychological counselling. But even when free options exist, there are still factors that make them inaccessible to the research participants.

Firstly, the free counselling one can find in Ukraine (usually provided by NGOs and grassroots initiatives) normally involves online meetings with a psychologist.[74] For a woman who is alone with a child, this is not an option if there is no one to babysit the child while the mother is seeing a specialist. Online therapy is also not suitable for those sharing their living space with many other people (this is particularly relevant for IDPs), as they lack the privacy needed for attending online sessions.

Secondly, free counselling options often involve one or two meetings with a specialist.[75] In some places, such initiatives are seen as a step towards further involvement in commercial cooperation. Participants complained that such short-term therapy was/would not be enough for it to be "helpful". Some participants also perceived online sessions as less "effective" compared to offline ones.

The third issue has to do with logistics/commuting: several participants complained that, while they are aware of certain options to receive free counselling or attend group therapy sessions in their town, they cannot attend those due to inconvenient locations. Mothers already have to commute a lot – to take children to school, receive humanitarian aid and so forth. Therefore, if a psychologist's office is located in the city centre, while the woman lives on the outskirts of the city (which is often the case, especially for IDPs who settle where rent is the lowest), there is no time left to commute there.

While discussing barriers to receiving professional support, the interviewees also highlighted the importance of psychological self-help. For them, such practices included creative hobbies and spending time with other mothers: "I met another mum here. [...] We support each other. If it wasn't for her, I don't know, it would be very difficult for me. We're one another's psychologists."

Thus, it is crucial that – in the situation of limited access to professional psychological help – one has a space where they can relax and socialise.

## Policy response

This policy brief highlights various challenges women with children face while living in Ukraine under the conditions of war and poverty, which have made them dependent on **humanitarian aid**. The range of problems associated with the feminisation of poverty and exacerbated by the Russian invasion (finance, employment, housing, mental health) can be characterised as "**impoverished motherhood**".

At the same time, the state's social policy has a reverse trajectory from their systemic support, which is sometimes directly proclaimed.[76] The lack of indexation of maternity benefits, cuts in benefits to single mothers and IDPs under the

pretext of targeting, combined with the course towards deregulation of the labour market, the lack of regulation of the housing market, and significant gaps in the state care and healthcare systems, lead to mothers having to rely on humanitarian aid and support from NGOs.

This unstable and time-consuming "work" of seeking help increases anxiety and drains mothers' resources. Such "subsidisation" of their time and energy to cover up the imperfections of the state system is extremely irrational, both from the point of view of the wellbeing of mothers and from the perspective of the development of the state.

Under the conditions of war and the post-war period, it is necessary to abandon neoliberal policies and a targeted approach, since the majority of the population of Ukraine, especially women with children, need support. Payments of "Zelenskyi's thousand"[77] or the introduction of free meals in schools for all children[78] are certain markers of the transition to this path. But they are not yet sufficient.

Below is a summary of the issues that progressive policies have to address to improve mothers' living conditions, some of which can be accomplished by NGOs, but the main task should fall on the state.

### Finance and employment

- Enable wider access to basic services and benefits for all mothers in need;
- improve the support for mothers with insufficient and/or unstable incomes; and
- provide financial and employment assistance for women with children experiencing forced relocation.

Because under wartime conditions mothers in need are the majority, **child benefits** should be provided for the widest possible category and until the children come of age. Similar systems exist in Germany, Poland, Austria and others. Such a step would be progressive for Ukraine and **go beyond its previous social commitments**. At the same time, many other changes in the interests of mothers can be considered a restoration or expansion of previous guarantees. For example, to support mothers with insufficient and/or unstable incomes, it makes sense to increase the circle of single mothers who can receive support, as well as increase benefits for families with many children and maternity benefits for the period when women drop out of the labour market. To support women with children experiencing forced relocation, a mechanism available until 2024 was payments for IDPs, but they were cancelled for most IDPs, despite the lack of improvement in the economic situation.

- Ensure gender-sensitive measures to decrease poverty and unemployment reinforced by the full-scale war; and
- provide support to women undergoing downward mobility, particularly as a result of war and relocation.

Such issues should be handled by employment centres. Since currently the officially unemployed are mostly women, one such way could be to increase the amount, and especially the duration, of unemployment benefits. To prevent downward mobility, employment centres should ensure the search for a job or retraining is adequate for the skills. But instead, it more often offer grants for self-employment, which is unstable and risky in times of war and economic stagnation.

- Ensure employers fulfil their legal responsibilities towards working mothers and strive to create suitable working conditions for them; and
- create more workplaces suitable for women with children across different sectors of the economy.

The Labour Code of Ukraine already contains a number of norms that are designed to help combine motherhood and work. But their observance requires women to be aware of their rights (which NGOs and trade unions can undertake) and to monitor compliance with laws (which is the prerogative of the state and from which it recuses itself, especially in times of war). However, the dominant state discourse envisages deregulation of the labor market, which contributes to issues with

adequate working hours and safety, especially in critical infrastructure facilities[79]. And this becomes especially problematic in the context of mothers' rights, as there are now efforts to recruit women into industry during wartime.

## Housing

- Ensure measures to tackle discrimination in the rental market, particularly against women/ families with children;
- provide mothers with housing opportunities that meet their diverse needs; and
- ensure access to long-term housing opportunities for internally displaced women with children.

All of these demands require government intervention to regulate the housing market. According to the researchers, the focus now should be on rent regulation,[80] as building social housing will take years. They see wartime as an opportunity to introduce laws[81] on fair and non-discriminatory rents.

## Humanitarian aid

- Provide regular and stable humanitarian aid for economically disadvantaged women with children;
- create mechanisms of humanitarian aid provision that would account for mothers' everyday challenges, such as a lack of time;
- address geographical differences/inequalities in access to humanitarian aid; and
- ensure balanced humanitarian aid distribution between different groups of mothers in need.

To ensure these requirements, aid providers must not only set requirements for recipients but also better manage distribution, which requires much less effort when a wide range of people are eligible for humanitarian assistance. (Otherwise, there is a high probability that those who need it will not receive it. In Ukraine, this is actually half of the needy.) These functions can be partially assumed by the state through local authorities. But in any case, for sustainable development, such aid can only be a supplement to stable financial state support for mothers, not a replacement for it.

## Mental health support

- Online psychological help provided by NGOs should be designed for longer interactions with mothers for adequate therapy; and
- creating safe spaces for women with children will help solve the issue of in-person communication between mothers and can be a place of solitude for online therapy.

Such initiatives can be implemented by NGOs, and it would be good if they had state support.

- Introduce accessible psychological support for adults and children in public health and education institutions.

This approach is the most universal and is already being implemented by the state through additional training for family doctors and health workers in schools. However, this requires an increase in medical spending to expand the staff and raise the salaries of medical personnel, who are sorely lacking in the field of mental health and care.

In conclusion, addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by women with children in Ukraine, especially in the context of war and poverty, requires a comprehensive approach that prioritises state intervention and systemic support. While NGOs can play a critical role, it is essential that the government takes a central role in ensuring that financial, employment, housing, humanitarian and mental health needs are met. Reversing neoliberal policies, expanding social safety nets, and regulating critical sectors such as housing and labour are necessary steps to alleviate the burdens mothers face. The implementation of these progressive policies will not only improve the wellbeing of mothers and children, but also foster the long-term stability and development of Ukraine's society as a whole.

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January 2025

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MAPPING CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES IN SOCIAL POLICY

*Nataliia Lomonosova*

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Edited by Giovanni Grevi

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February 2023

**TERRA INCOGNITA**

EXPLORING THE LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

SUMMARY

The war in Ukraine carries extensive implications that intersect with multiple long-term trends and variables shaping international affairs. What lies ahead is *terra incognita* – a strategic landscape that eludes ready historical analogies. Strategic foresight is essential to be able to explore this territory, make sense of potential developments, and guide action.

This policy brief argues that the war in Ukraine affects the future in different ways. For one, it has accelerated patterns of change that predated it, including great power competition, middle power activism, and the crisis of multilateralism. For another, Russia's aggression has introduced major discontinuities, such as triggering a global energy crisis, fracturing the European security order, and sparking nuclear threats by Russia. In addition, the war has diverted focus from critical challenges, such as sustainable development and climate change, while aggravating these challenges both directly and indirectly.

The war in Ukraine has compounded the drift towards a fragmenting and polarised international (dis)order, but the future is not preordained. Long-term developments will at least in part depend on the outcome of the conflict, which cannot be predicted. This policy brief outlines some of the factors that will drive change alongside the ongoing war. They include the evolution of the rivalry between the US and China and of the partnership between China and Russia, the risks facing the global economy, the prospects for the clean energy transition and its strategic implications, and the rising costs of failure to address shared challenges through cooperation. By tackling geopolitical challenges and managing multi-dimensional competition, while seeking to advance a rules-based international order, leadership can make a decisive difference in shaping distinct pathways to the future.

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