

Policy Report

The Borders of Solidarity: War and Displacement of Ukrainian Roma Women Refugees in Poland

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SUMMARY

The repercussions of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 unleashed a humanitarian crisis across Europe. The significant presence of women and children among Ukrainian refugees—up to 90%—has posed challenges to the provision of education, childcare, employment, and health and psychological needs. The war has also exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities and gender disparities, making women, particularly those from marginalised communities such as Ukrainian Roma women, more susceptible to protection risks and gender-based violence. While Ukrainian refugees are reported to generally have favourable conditions for integration in European host countries, attributed to high educational backgrounds, established social networks, and ready access to employment opportunities,¹ our research found underexplored gendered dimensions of the war, particularly those impacting Ukrainian Roma refugee women.

As recorded by policy and research reports focusing on Ukrainian Roma refugees, central to their plight is the systemic discrimination and racial profiling they encounter throughout their forced migration journeys. From border crossings to life on the move, Ukrainian Roma refugees, particularly Roma women, face pervasive biases that hinder their access to critical services such as education, healthcare, employment, and housing. Logistical hurdles due to a dearth of official documentation, challenges in resettlement, language barriers and financial constraints compound difficulties in accessing healthcare, and employment opportunities while impeding socio-economic inclusion.

Amidst these adversities, the resilience of Ukrainian Roma women refugees is evident. Despite formidable obstacles, many exhibit resourcefulness in navigating their displacement experiences, particularly with the support of Roma and pro-Roma civil society. Indeed, the role of transnational advocacy efforts and the high engagement of civil society in aiding the situation of Ukrainian Roma refugees has been crucial. Importantly, our findings also point to the significance of familial networks as vital sources of security and mutual aid for the survival of Roma refugees.

In what follows, we first examine the situation of the Ukrainian Roma with a gender lens by focusing on the past to understand that discrimination has been a persistent issue, continuing into their current circumstances. Then we present the main findings of the research, including specific considerations under each of the following themes: education, health, housing and employment, identification documents, and civil society activism and solidarity. We concur that the voices and experiences of Ukrainian Roma women are invaluable in shaping policies and programs aimed at addressing the needs of all Ukrainian refugees seeking help abroad. Therefore, it is crucial to involve Roma women in the development of solutions that impact the lives of Ukrainian refugees in Poland and beyond. We hope that this report can serve as a reference point for practical solutions aiding the situation of Roma refugees as European countries consider more permanent steps towards the inclusion of Ukrainian refugees and facilitate post-war recovery.

1. INTRODUCTION: LEARNING FROM THE PAST

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has resulted in the largest refugee crisis in Europe since the Second World War.² By the end of 2023, there were an estimated 6.3 million Ukrainian refugees globally, including 5.9 million in Europe, while an additional 3.7 million people were displaced within Ukraine.³ In Poland, where this research took place, there were almost one million Ukrainian refugees by late 2023.⁴ Poland responded by offering various forms of assistance, including shelter, medical care, and transportation, demonstrating solidarity with its neighbour.⁵ Despite this widespread display of support, there were notable instances of discriminatory attitudes towards people of colour seeking refuge,⁶ with Ukrainian Roma facing challenges at border crossings and beyond.⁷ Reports of segregation and denial of essential aid to Ukrainian Roma refugees at borders and transit points revealed the inherent contradictions within the solidarity narrative.⁸

It is difficult to estimate how many of those displaced by the war, within Ukraine or internationally, are Roma, and precise figures are not available. In April 2022, the European Commission estimated that around 100,000 of those who had been displaced from Ukraine were from Roma communities.⁹ There is now a significant body of research and reporting documenting the discrimination and racial profiling experienced by Roma refugees as they have fled from Ukraine. This includes discrimination by service providers, aid workers, officials, volunteers, other refugees and members of host communities, at border crossings, along evacuation routes and in safe states, with implications for access to humanitarian assistance and basic services including education, housing and healthcare, and for access to employment.¹⁰ As the ERRC write, *"It soon became clear that not all refugees were equal, and for Roma, there was less solidarity and little respite from racism during wartime"*.¹¹ Indeed, reports illustrate that the Roma community in Ukraine has faced the most severe impacts on housing, employment, healthcare, and education. Even before the war, they were often neglected by national policies.¹²

Examining the historical background is essential to understanding the current situation of Roma refugees from Ukraine. The experience of Roma populations during the Kosovo conflict serves as a crucial lesson. History is being repeated as in the case of Roma refugees during the Kosovo war where large numbers of Roma were displaced and never returned.¹³ Moreover, this historical neglect continues, leaving Roma challenges unaddressed, even in severe cases such as lead poisoning in Roma refugee camps, despite a decade-long legal battle. To avoid a similar situation for Ukrainian Roma, it is crucial to address forced displacement and marginalisation of Roma communities, ensure timely and effective responses to human rights violations, and advocate for the inclusion of Roma in political and social frameworks.

In 2023, we initiated research to explore the experiences of Ukrainian Roma refugees in Poland. Our study examined the complex interplay of deservingness and solidarity, both overt and covert. Historically, Poland enforced strict migration policies towards refugees from conflict zones in Asia and Africa, particularly those at the Polish-Belarusian border. However, February 2022 marked a significant policy shift as these restrictions were lifted for all Ukrainian nationals, ushering in a new era of responsibility and redefining the boundaries of solidarity. This change created a new category of refugees considered deserving of support. Yet, this displacement has disproportionately affected women and children, with Ukrainian Roma women constituting a significant portion of the refugee population.

2. IMPACTS OF WAR AND DISPLACEMENT

The majority of refugees fleeing Ukraine consist of women, children, and the elderly. The Ukrainian Government has mandated that all men remain in the country to await conscription into the defence forces, including Roma military reservists who have also been summoned to participate in the conflict. Notably, they are Ukrainian citizens and have been involved in the war effort, with some participating since the 2014 invasion of Donbas and the annexation of Crimea.¹⁴ In Poland, for example, an estimated 63% of Ukrainian refugees are women and girls, and another 21% are boys under the age of 18.¹⁵ The picture is similar in other refugee-hosting countries. In general, however, there is very little reliable data on Roma communities in Ukraine, nonetheless, the Roma population is believed to be the most vulnerable minority group in the country.¹⁶ The last national census recorded 47,587 Roma individuals, around 1% of Ukraine's population, but the actual number is likely to be far higher (up to half a million).¹⁷ There are several reasons for the discrepancy between official and unofficial figures, including a reluctance to disclose ethnic origin because of a fear of discrimination, and the fact that in some areas, many Roma do not have identity documents.¹⁸ Importantly, Ukraine's Roma communities are highly diverse, with distinct and varied languages, dialects, cultures and histories, as well as different needs, situations and living conditions.¹⁹ Romani is the most common language spoken, with different dialects; some Roma also, or only, speak Ukrainian, Russian or Hungarian.

Prior to the war, it was estimated by NGOs and inter-governmental organisations that there were between 120,000 and 400,000 Roma individuals living in Ukraine, with the largest numbers in the Zakarpattia, Odesa and Kharkiv regions.²⁰ Over the centuries, Roma communities in this region, as elsewhere, have faced slavery, oppression, persecution and forced assimilation.²¹ Today they face widespread discrimination and high levels of poverty, disadvantaged access to healthcare, education and housing. In some areas, Roma communities live in segregated settlements with little access to basic services, including clean water, electricity and sanitation.²² The persistence of discrimination, prejudice and anti-Roma racism in Ukraine is exemplified by the lack of Roma representation in public life, and by the increasing prevalence of hate speech and violence by far-right groups in recent years, including violent attacks on Roma settlements and anti-Roma pogroms, committed with apparent impunity,²³ and, in some cases, in collusion with local authorities.²⁴ Attacks against Roma have often been preceded by anti-Roma hate speech in the media or by politicians.²⁵

With the onset of the war, Roma refugees continued to face numerous barriers to accessing education, healthcare, employment, housing and humanitarian assistance. In addition to anti-Roma racism, these include language differences, lack of identity documents, lower literacy levels, lack of prior experience of education and employment, and mistrust in state institutions and authorities because of long-standing discrimination,²⁶ as well as a lack of knowledge on the part of service providers about Roma cultures and languages, and their specific needs and challenges.²⁷

There is also a high incidence of family separation, leading to a significant proportion of single female-headed households.²⁸ This has drawn attention to specific, gendered needs, risks and inequities, including the risk of gender-based violence, labour exploitation and human trafficking, and to particular challenges, including accessing appropriate childcare services, flexible jobs and safe accommodation.²⁹ The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) notes that refugees have reported exploitation, harassment and abuse in access to public and private accommodation and other basic services. Refugees fleeing Ukraine have also reported risks of trafficking for sexual exploitation at border points and after arriving in host countries.³⁰ There are

often multiple barriers to accessing services for gender-based violence survivors, including language, lack of information and stigma.³¹ These barriers are exacerbated for those facing discrimination, such as Roma women.

In this context, the work of Roma-led NGOs, Roma activists and cultural mediators has been crucial. In Poland, for example, Roma activists and organisations have played a central role in supporting Roma refugee women. This has in some ways had a transformative effect on Roma organisations.³² However, this has also placed these organisations and activists under “enormous personal, financial, societal and cultural pressure”, and there is a clear and pressing need for greater support for Roma-led organisations and networks.³³

Research in Poland, Romania and Ukraine also found that securing employment is a major concern for displaced Roma women, with a lack of formal work experience and education, knowledge of the official language of the host country, and a lack of childcare, all posing significant barriers to accessing employment.³⁴ Roma women are particularly disadvantaged because of their responsibility for caring for larger families.³⁵ However, the research also notes that displacement has presented an opportunity to challenge traditional gender roles; for some women, this was their first time travelling alone, compelling them to take on new responsibilities and adapt to a complex and challenging situation.³⁶

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This report is based on qualitative fieldwork conducted between March and December 2023. To explore the experiences of displacement and the challenges faced by Roma refugees in Poland we conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with Roma refugees and service providers (7 women and 3 men) and 7 in-depth, open-ended interviews with Roma refugee women. Additionally, we facilitated a knowledge exchange workshop with 11 participants, including service providers, NGO workers, activists, volunteers, and researchers from the University of Warsaw. Two specialists in Roma women's rights were consulted during the research, offering valuable insights into the gender-specific vulnerabilities affecting Roma women refugees. This qualitative data was supplemented by participant observation in refugee centres and community support spaces across several cities, including Warsaw and Lublin.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Education

Discrimination significantly affects Roma women's access to essential services, particularly in education and employment opportunities. Roma children face structural and systemic barriers to accessing education, with girls particularly disadvantaged, and the percentage of Roma children completing secondary education is disproportionately lower than that of the rest of the population.³⁷ Reports suggest 37% of the Ukrainian Roma population has not completed compulsory education, and only 1% has higher education.³⁸ Segregation (with Roma children often studying in segregated and substandard schools), stigmatisation, prejudice and bullying, as well as poverty, a lack of personal documents and lack of access to preschool, all contribute to the challenges Roma children face in accessing education.³⁹ Ukrainian Roma women and girls face multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination, including in access to education. In a 2018 study, for example, 240 of 300 Ukrainian Roma women interviewed had not completed secondary education, in 90 cases due to early marriage.⁴⁰ The report notes that “young Roma mothers in particular are in a worse condition due to the lack of education, institutional discrimination, and lack of State's protection of their rights as minors.”⁴¹ The lack of educational opportunities places young Roma women in precarious positions, increasing their susceptibility to gender-based violence and limiting their capacity for economic independence.

At the time of our research in Poland, many Ukrainian Roma children remained outside the formal education system, severely limiting their prospects for inclusion. While some Roma children did not attend school, others were enrolled and actively participated in the available alternative modes of education or remote learning. Following the amendment to the special act for Ukrainians, social benefits (800+) are only accessible if children are enrolled in formal education. This poses a significant issue, particularly for families residing in remote areas. Overwhelmingly, many of our respondents shared that everyday survival takes precedence over education for many Roma families, as one Roma woman noted:

"My children do not go to school in Poland because our main focus is on survival...finding a place to sleep and something to eat is our priority".

Furthermore, the interviews highlighted the complexities and barriers faced by Roma refugee children in accessing education. One Roma woman shared that although her children had attended school previously and possessed all necessary school documentation from Ukraine, the displacement and uncertainty of their living situation made consistent school attendance challenging. This uncertainty of living arrangements directly impacted their ability to access

education effectively. Material deprivation, cultural attitudes, and systemic discrimination intersect and hinder Roma children's educational attainment, emphasising the need for targeted interventions to address these inequalities. One local professional noted:

"Many Roma families lack not only the basic material possessions, such as shoes and adequate clothing, to send their children to kindergarten or school but importantly, experience the educational system together with their children as discriminatory, where their children will most certainly face prejudice".

Another Roma woman described her relentless efforts to ensure continuity in her children's education despite the challenges posed by displacement and migration.

"I want my granddaughter to have a better chance than we have. We hope she does well in the Polish school system and prospers, better than we have done. I am worried about her because she is both a foreigner and Roma, and I know she feels that she is different".

Language barriers and illiteracy can also significantly hinder Roma refugee children's ability to access information, with young girls being particularly affected. As noted above, cultural pressures contribute to higher illiteracy rates among Roma women, who often leave school at an early age due to early marriage and other aspects of gender inequality. For Ukrainian Roma refugee women, pre-existing gender disparities in educational attainment further highlight the pervasive impact of cultural and gender biases. These disparities affect Roma women and girls' educational opportunities and this was confirmed by one woman who reflected on her own educational experience:

"I only have one year of primary school, whereas my husband has completed seven years of school. He can find work, I can't".

Roma women and girls face heightened discrimination in education, compounded by the additional burden of family caregiving. When crisis strikes, be it illness, conflict, displacement, or economic hardship, Roma women and girls, ranging from the elderly to the very young, are more likely to bear the responsibility of maintaining family and household cohesion.

Key Considerations:

- ***Enhance education access for Roma women and children, and ensure Roma families have necessities like food, clothing, and shelter, linked to educational opportunities.***
- ***Provide school supplies and appropriate clothing to eliminate material barriers to attendance.***
- ***Implement training for teachers and staff to raise awareness about Roma culture and challenges, reducing prejudice and fostering inclusion.***
- ***Establish systems to monitor enrolment and attendance, holding schools accountable for supportive and non-discriminatory environments.***
- ***Create programs for Roma girls and women to address gender disparities in education and target gender-based violence, including resources aimed at preventing early marriage.***
- ***Support Roma-led educational initiatives with funding and resources for community-based programs.***

- ***Establish peer support networks for Roma refugee children and their families to share experiences, resources, and strategies for overcoming educational barriers.***

Health

Understanding healthcare systems and adopting healthy behaviours can be significant challenges for Roma refugees. They are particularly susceptible due to issues with legal status, economic obstacles, language and cultural barriers, and sometimes the attitudes and the impact of new patients on healthcare providers. In Poland, all individuals registered with a personal number beginning with "UKR" are entitled to free healthcare. However, navigating the healthcare system remains challenging due to pervasive issues in accessing specialised treatment. Therefore, understanding how to navigate the complex network of general practitioners and specialists effectively is essential. Our interviews revealed that upon entering Poland, Roma refugees frequently experienced numerous acute and chronic health issues. These challenges are particularly significant for Roma women, who may also face racial discrimination and lower literacy, both of which influence health outcomes. In the words of one Roma woman who shared her experience of migrating to a new country under duress:

"I ran to Poland without my medication, only with the clothes on my back. I am diabetic and didn't have time to go to a pharmacy in Ukraine. My brother, who is also unwell but works in construction, has been paying for my medication here, but I don't know for how long".

Systemic neglect experienced in Ukraine has continued to impact their healthcare outcomes during displacement. Prior to the war, research conducted in Ukraine by the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) and Roma Fund Chiricli in 2018 documented the discriminatory treatment faced by Roma women in Ukraine when accessing reproductive healthcare, especially when giving birth, including clear violations of their reproductive rights. 95% of those interviewed lived in houses with poor conditions, without water, electricity or sewage, and there were cases where 15-20 people lived in homes with only two rooms.⁴² 60% had had their first child before reaching the age of 18 and around 90% of interviewees had been separated from non-Roma women when giving birth. In one location, for example, Roma women had to pay extra to be placed in the maternity ward or were left in the corridors. The women faced hostile and discriminatory attitudes from doctors and nurses, and 80% had limited access to medicines.⁴³

Additionally, COVID-19 significantly impacted our respondents. Poland, with higher vaccination rates than Ukraine, faced concerns about potential COVID-19 outbreaks as Ukrainian refugees arrived on overcrowded trains, buses, and shelters. Despite this, the Polish government abolished quarantine requirements for Ukrainian refugees and exempted them from SARS-CoV-2 testing before crossing the border.⁴⁴ Proof of vaccination was also not mandatory. Among the Roma refugees we interviewed, some were vaccinated while others were not, raising ongoing concerns about their COVID-19 status in their accommodations. In one of the largest refugee accommodations we visited in Poland, a non-Roma woman expressed concerns about the quality and safety of transitional healthcare facilities due to fears of contracting illnesses from Roma refugees, particularly during a measles outbreak observed during our visit.

Local authority representatives and volunteer staff at transition centres highlighted that healthcare and social service providers often lacked the capacity or willingness to serve Roma communities. In an overwhelmed healthcare system, healthcare providers frequently faced high patient loads, limited resources, and insufficient training to address the needs of Roma refugee

populations. Our research encountered several health issues among Roma refugees, including diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease; in addition to worsened psychological conditions due to resettlement stress, exacerbated by the need to secure housing, transportation, finances, social security, and immigration status. Despite some mechanisms in place for healthcare and education access, employment and housing remained pressing issues. Financial constraints emerged as a critical theme, with one Roma woman recounting:

"My nerves have made everything worse when I came here from Ukraine. The stress I am going through made my teeth break, and a new tooth costs 400-2000zł. I can't eat, sleep, anything".

Moreover, the dynamic of family relationships changed due to the war, with many newly arrived Roma families, now being headed by women. This role shift, coupled with grief from loss or separation, and constant fear for the safety of relatives left behind, heightened their vulnerability to mental health deterioration. As one woman poignantly expressed:

"I haven't slept properly for months. I am worried about what will happen tomorrow. Where we will be. We may have had little in Ukraine, but at least there was something to hang on to. Here we only have the pain we carry with us, and this makes me sick in my heart and my entire body".

Key Considerations:

- ***Ensure equitable healthcare access for Roma refugee women, irrespective of legal status or economic background, by minimising barriers such as out-of-pocket payments and expanding comprehensive coverage.***
- ***Train healthcare providers on cultural sensitivities to combat discrimination and enhance care quality for marginalised communities, including Roma women refugees.***
- ***Prioritise reproductive health initiatives for Roma women refugees to address historical neglect and ensure access to maternal and child health services, thereby combating discrimination.***
- ***Provide essential medications upon refugee arrival to prevent health deterioration, particularly for chronic conditions like diabetes and hypertension.***
- ***Tailor mental health support for Roma women refugees to mitigate long-term psychological impacts of displacement and family separation.***
- ***Integrate healthcare services with social support systems to improve health outcomes by addressing issues related to housing, employment, and financial stability.***

Employment and Housing

In our research, employment and housing were the most frequently cited challenges for Roma refugees. While some of our Roma respondents experienced positive social interactions and solidarity from local communities, significant challenges in employment and housing persisted. The initial wave of refugee support in Poland was marked by an impressive display of communal solidarity and empathy. As many of our interviewees noted, communities across several provinces demonstrated a remarkable willingness to assist, with many individuals offering their private housing free of charge. However, the prolonged nature of the crisis has led to resource saturation, economic pressures, and psychological fatigue among the local population. These

factors have collectively contributed to a significant decrease in the availability of both free and affordable housing for refugees.

Since their arrival in Poland, the accommodation of larger Roma families has been a significant challenge for aid providers, as expressed also by the professionals interviewed by our research team. Often seeking safety in familial networks, Roma remain in larger groups, a fact often misunderstood as a cultural issue rather than a safety mechanism. This misunderstanding has caused problems at border crossings and refugee reception centres. Our respondents conveyed that staying close to their families provided the only sense of security in the face of forced migration and loss of livelihoods. As one woman in her fifties expressed:

"I stick with my family. Who else can I trust? I am foreign, dark, and don't speak the language. It is my family, my children whom I trust, no one else".

Remaining with close and extended family members serves as a protective mechanism against discrimination, allowing family members, including the elderly and young children, to care for one another. Nevertheless, this coping mechanism of relying on kinship networks for security and support was sometimes interpreted as a subverting Roma cultural trait and as deceptive behaviour by local officials and volunteers rather than a legitimate safety mechanism. The commonly held stereotypes in mainstream depictions portraying Roma as perpetual wanderers, as 'bogus asylum seekers',⁴⁵ and leading to exclusion and justifications of state policies, affected our interviewees. Indeed, the Roma refugees we met tended to remain in relatively large groups, mainly consisting of women and children, who otherwise would be deemed vulnerable due to heightened risks of physical harm, exploitation, and violence, including trafficking and sexual abuse.

Consequently, due to difficulties in securing permanent housing, Roma refugees are more likely to remain in temporary reception facilities, for longer than three months and frequently move between Ukraine and Poland. At one reception centre outside Warsaw, Roma refugee women were the predominant group, with many staying for three to four months despite the centre's design for temporary stays of two or three days. The closure of large reception centres poses a serious risk of homelessness for Ukrainian Roma, who are often relocated to smaller towns.⁴⁶ While some Roma adapt, the majority face challenges accessing jobs, education, and combating prevalent racism in these local communities.

Research in Ukraine recorded that Roma are discriminated against in access to employment, and although there are no comprehensive figures, estimates suggest that levels of unemployment amongst Roma communities are significantly high,⁴⁷ due to pervasive discrimination, as well as lack of access to education and personal documentation.⁴⁸ Roma women are particularly disadvantaged in access to employment, facing discrimination based on both ethnicity and gender.⁴⁹ It is important to highlight that there is an expectation for all displaced individuals from Ukraine to become economically self-reliant. However, this is particularly difficult for vulnerable groups, such as Roma women with children who are located in remote areas with no kindergartens, commuting difficulties, and limited economic opportunities. Many choose to return to Ukraine, but some have nowhere to go, especially if they came from the occupied territories. Most of our respondents found that once they left the temporary accommodation, finding a job was an insurmountable obstacle. One of many impediments was the proof of qualifications necessary to work in Poland. An NGO representative closely working with Roma refugees shared:

“We need to work on qualifications recognition when helping refugees to find employment. This is a huge problem”.

Available accommodation was often in distant localities and menial and hospitality jobs located in more central urban locations. A Roma woman shared:

“I had a temporary job as a cleaner in an office. I found it difficult to look after my children and work far away in the centre of the city. Still, I want my children to go to school, so I can go to work, earn money, rent an apartment and just live”.

Our research found that the integration of Ukrainian Roma women refugees into Polish society was challenging, due to specific discriminative preconceptions. Stereotypes regarding “typical Roma features” or Roma women’s distinct appearance often led to immediate recognition, sometimes misidentification, cultural biases and subsequent discrimination. A professional working with Ukrainian refugees shared the following:

“We recognise them [Roma women] because they look and behave like the stereotypical Gypsy families. These are large families, with more children than adults [...] Unfortunately, there are often difficult conflict situations, so volunteers do not doubt that they are Roma [...] Dark complexion, dark hair, slightly shorter. Women in long skirts. This is how they are recognised”.

Shared cultural traits, such as strong family bonds and a sense of community, coexisted with differences in appearance and self-identification. For example, some Ukrainian Roma did not identify as Roma but were perceived as such by others, adding complexity to their integration and treatment in Polish society.

Due to a long history of discrimination, Roma women themselves also distrusted those outside their immediate community. Many preferred insularity and steering away from public services. This, however, complicated efforts to provide assistance and facilitate employment, as Roma women were more likely to rely on close-knit family members rather than external support. The Roma refugees we interviewed were not only stigmatised by others but also internalised this stigma, affecting their self-perception and willingness to seek help. This, on the other hand, was often interpreted as an unwillingness to integrate as a local authority professional working with volunteers shared:

“We do not know how to communicate well with them and we come away thinking they just don’t want to learn the language or be part of society”.

There was a consensus among professionals interviewed that specialised support programs were necessary to aid the integration of Roma refugees, particularly Roma women. These programs needed to address the unique cultural and socioeconomic challenges faced by Roma populations. As one Roma woman shared:

“I want to have my normal life back. I was never without a job back in Ukraine. I had my own business selling curtains. I would do anything, including learning the language, anything really, to be able to earn a decent living through honest work and live a life in peace with everyone around me”.

Key Considerations:

- ***Include Roma refugees in housing programmes (rent subsidies, affordable housing and relocation support), addressing the specific needs of larger, multigenerational families to prevent prolonged stays in temporary shelters.***
- ***Provide vocational training and focus on transferrable skills recognition pathways for Roma refugees, particularly women, to overcome barriers to employment.***
- ***Improve access to flexible childcare options in areas where Roma women reside to enable their participation in employment and education.***
- ***Expand anti-discrimination initiatives in housing and employment sectors, including community outreach campaigns and employer engagement, to challenge stereotypes and combat systemic bias.***
- ***Support Roma refugees in accessing job opportunities by facilitating language training, transport subsidies, and partnerships with local employers.***
- ***Employ Roma mediators and community leaders to build trust and address communication barriers with local authorities, volunteers, and employers.***

Identity Documents

A lack of documentation poses major challenges to accessing education, healthcare, employment, social security and housing.⁵⁰ Our research uncovered the pivotal role of citizenship in fostering inclusivity and combating marginalisation, particularly for Roma refugee children and adults lacking official documentation such as birth certificates, passports, and identity cards. The pre-war challenges in obtaining identity documents were exacerbated by the conflict, making it even more difficult for Roma refugees to establish their legal status. Before the war, the lack of access to identity documents was widely recognised as a major issue preventing Ukrainian Roma from accessing services and securing basic rights in Ukraine.⁵¹ There is no clear data on this, but estimates by the Ukrainian Ombudsman and Roma rights NGOs suggest that around 10-20% of Roma in Ukraine are undocumented.⁵² In one study, 83% of Roma respondents had a passport or other identity document, while 17% were undocumented.⁵³ Another estimate suggests that 4-8% of the Roma population in Ukraine lack identity documents confirming Ukrainian citizenship, while many more lack other documents important for accessing services.⁵⁴

We encountered displaced Roma communities that lack identity documents, including passports and birth certificates, which subsequently undermines access to basic services and humanitarian assistance in Ukraine and refugee-hosting countries.⁵⁵ Alongside their roles as primary caregivers, Roma women often bear the crucial responsibility of safeguarding their children's identity documents. However, many are unable to provide birth certificates upon their arrival in Poland due to a long-standing lack of access to identification documents resulting from systemic exclusion and poverty issues in Ukraine, illiteracy or simply because they have lost their documents as a direct consequence of conflict and displacement.⁵⁶

Key Considerations:

- ***Implement targeted programs to assist Roma women refugees in obtaining identity documents, such as passports and birth certificates, to enhance accessibility and facilitate their inclusion into Polish society.***
- ***Integrate documentation assistance into broader resettlement and integration programs, including housing, healthcare, education, and employment services, to offer comprehensive support.***

- ***Improve data collection to better understand and address the documentation status of Roma refugees, including gender-disaggregated data to address the challenges faced by Roma women.***
- ***Advocate for standardisation of documentation requirements to ensure universal recognition of identity documents obtained in Ukraine.***
- ***Develop long-term strategies to support Roma refugees in maintaining and renewing their identity documents over time.***

The Solidarity of Civil Society

In 2013, Ukraine approved a ‘Strategy for the Protection and Integration of the Roma National Minority into Ukrainian Society by 2020’,⁵⁷ alongside an Action Plan, although implementation was hindered by insufficient budgetary allocation and limited involvement of Roma rights NGOs in its development.⁵⁸ Despite these challenges, Ukraine signalled a renewed commitment to Roma inclusion by adopting a new strategy extending to 2030, against the backdrop of ongoing conflict.⁵⁹ The NGO sector has been crucial in necessitating this progress.

Recent research underscores the pivotal role played by both Roma and non-Roma activists in supporting Ukrainian Roma refugees, crucial for shaping inclusive policies and fostering social cohesion.⁶⁰ Our findings also underscore the indispensable role of the NGO sector in supporting Ukrainian Roma refugees, with significant engagement from Roma-led NGOs in Poland and internationally. Transnational advocacy efforts and collaboration with support networks have been instrumental in safeguarding refugee rights and resilience, despite challenges such as economic constraints, housing shortages, and donor fatigue.

Our Roma respondents expressed gratitude for the kindness and acceptance extended by local communities, especially the solidarity of NGO workers and volunteers. However, they continued to face persistent barriers in securing stable employment and adequate housing. Addressing these challenges points to the necessity for comprehensive support systems tailored to the socioeconomic circumstances of Roma refugees, with a particular focus on Roma women. Moving beyond emergency relief, sustained efforts toward long-term inclusion will require coordinated actions involving governmental bodies, major NGOs, and international organisations.

Key Considerations:

- ***Plan and implement long-term support projects acknowledging that not all refugees will return to Ukraine after the conflict. This involves creating sustainable pathways for integration of Roma women, including access to education, vocational training, and language acquisition programs.***
- ***Develop and implement support systems creating safe spaces, providing targeted healthcare and social services, and ensuring Roma women’s active participation in decision-making processes.***
- ***Strengthen support for NGOs working with and for Roma communities to enhance their role in advocating for and supporting Ukrainian Roma women refugees. This includes financial assistance, capacity-building programs, and opportunities for these organisations to participate in policy-making processes.***

- ***Extend the duration of support projects beyond short-term relief efforts to ensure sustained assistance and address the evolving needs of Roma refugees over time, with a focus on long-term stability.***
- ***Establish robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of support programs, particularly reflective of gender-based disparities.***

4. CONCLUSION

The invasion of Ukraine by Russia has triggered significant displacement, with Poland demonstrating overwhelming solidarity through substantial support for Ukrainian refugees. However, this support has revealed inconsistencies, particularly in the treatment of Ukrainian Roma refugees who confront pervasive discrimination and marginalisation. The war in Ukraine has profoundly impacted Roma women refugees, exacerbating their existing vulnerabilities and exposing them to heightened risks and challenges. Ukrainian women form the larger contingent of the refugees migrating from Ukraine. The displacement has led to numerous single female-headed households, increasing vulnerabilities to gender-based violence, labour exploitation, and human trafficking. Amongst these women are Roma women, alongside children and the elderly, who constitute a significant segment, encountering barriers across education, healthcare, employment, housing, and humanitarian aid due to entrenched discrimination and systemic inequalities. Additionally, language barriers, lack of identity documents, and lower literacy levels further impede their access to essential services.

Our research stresses the severe impact of discrimination on Roma women's access to essential services. Back in Ukraine, Roma children, especially girls, face multifaceted structural barriers, including segregation in substandard schools, stigma, prejudice, bullying, poverty, lack of personal documents, and limited access to preschool. Consequently, a markedly lower percentage of Roma girls complete secondary education compared to their peers in the general population. Once they arrive in Poland, this trajectory continues. The disruption caused by the conflict has left many Roma children excluded from formal education systems, whose parents understandably prioritise immediate survival over education. Language barriers further hinder access to information, leading to more gender disparities. Importantly, the added responsibilities of family caregiving in times of displacement disproportionately affect Roma women and girls, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage.

Upon arrival in Poland, our informants reported acute and chronic health issues compounded by barriers such as language differences, limited healthcare access, and unfamiliarity with the host culture. Roma women, in particular, experienced significant disparities in reproductive health and are subject to discriminatory practices, often compounded by societal stereotypes related to having larger families. Our research, conducted towards the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, revealed that the pandemic significantly strained healthcare resources in Poland, exacerbated vulnerabilities among refugees, and raised critical concerns regarding vaccination efforts and the potential for disease outbreaks in overcrowded living conditions. Moreover, financial constraints further contributed to health challenges such as deteriorating mental and physical well-being among Roma women, who often assume newfound roles as heads of households amidst the stress of displacement.

Local communities in Poland demonstrated an outpouring response of solidarity. While initial community support was robust, sustained resource limitations and solidarity fatigue have

started to emerge. In the case of Roma refugees, they continued to face challenges in accessing stable employment and adequate housing. Most of our interviewees relied on temporary housing arrangements, confronting ongoing instability in securing permanent residence, often exacerbated by providers' reluctance to accommodate larger family sizes. Identity documentation, certification proofs, and other paperwork emerged as critical barriers hindering the inclusion and access of Roma refugees. Pre-existing challenges in obtaining documentation also worsened due to the conflict, leaving a significant portion of Roma without essential identification such as birth certificates and passports. Despite these obstacles, our interviewees emphasised their aspirations for dignified livelihoods and harmonious coexistence in Poland. Many also expressed a desire to return to their homes in Ukraine.

Our research highlights the crucial role of familial networks for survival, particularly as lifelines for Roma women refugees, providing essential security and mutual aid amid forced migration and loss. Roma women, children and extended family often “stick together” as a protective mechanism against discrimination and exploitation, finding support within close-knit family structures. In a similar vein, Roma and pro-Roma NGO activists collaborate in shaping inclusive policies and providing practical support for Ukrainian Roma refugees. Looking ahead, sustained efforts are essential from governmental bodies, major NGOs, and international organisations to ensure long-term systemic inclusion of all Ukrainian refugees, including Roma, extending beyond emergency relief measures.

Importantly, Roma women face unique challenges during displacement; their participation and voices in decision-making processes often remain limited, and they are frequently overlooked in both humanitarian responses and policy discussions. Empowering Roma women through inclusive participation and recognising their agency in refugee support networks can help combat the systemic marginalisation they experience. Ensuring that Roma women are actively involved in shaping solutions that affect their lives is essential to addressing their specific needs, particularly around access to healthcare, education, and legal support.

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