



Until we are all equal

Adolescent Girls in Crisis

Voices from Ukraine, Poland and Romania

Research Report

June 2024

Plan International

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All names used in this report are pseudonyms. No photographs were taken during the course of this research. Girls featured in images in the report are not the same as those who participated in the research.

Acronyms

AGiC	Adolescent Girls in Crisis
CSE	comprehensive sexuality education
CSO	civil society organisation
EU	European Union
FGDs	focus group discussions
GBV	gender-based violence
ICT	information and communication technology
IDPs	internally displaced persons
KII	key informant interview
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer +
MER	monitoring, evaluation and research
MHPSS	mental health and psychosocial support
I/NGO	international non-governmental organisation
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
PTSD	post-traumatic stress disorder
RGA	rapid gender analysis
SRHR	sexual and reproductive health and rights
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

1. Introduction

Understanding the ways in which adolescent girls experience and navigate the ongoing crisis in Ukraine provides a foundation for the humanitarian sector to partner with them in addressing their concerns and increasing their capacities. The following report seeks to promote this understanding, focusing not just on the areas of insecurity for adolescent girls, but also on the ways in which they respond to their circumstances – and in doing so, strive towards safer, more inclusive societies for themselves and those around them.



Katy, 16, at Bucharest train station as she waits to board train to Hungary.
Photo credit: George Calin © Plan International

1.1 The crisis context

In 2024, two years since the escalation of the war in Ukraine¹, the United Nations (UN) estimates² that 14.6 million people – that is 40 per cent of the country's population – require humanitarian assistance within its borders. Close to 4 million people in Ukraine have been internally displaced.

In February 2024, the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine reported 30,457 verified civilian casualties since February 2022³. This includes 1,885 child casualties of whom 587 have been killed and 1,298 injured.⁴

The escalation of the war has forced millions of Ukrainians to seek refuge in other countries, becoming the third largest refugee population in the world after refugees from Syria and Afghanistan.⁵ In 2022, many refugees from Ukraine sought refuge in neighbouring countries, including Poland, Moldova, Romania, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia.⁶ In 2023, the number of refugees from Ukraine registered in Europe increased – with more than 1 million residing in Germany.⁷ So too did numbers increase for refugees recorded outside Europe, mainly in Canada and the US.⁸ The majority of the refugees from Ukraine are women, girls and boys.⁹ Due to the enforcement of martial law, men aged 18 to 60 are restricted from leaving Ukraine.¹⁰

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, reported in January 2024 that 81 per cent of refugees from Ukraine are experiencing at least one key unmet need, including access to livelihoods, healthcare, accommodation and sufficient food.¹³ A combination of factors are contributing to these unmet needs, including a strain on the resources of local communities hosting refugees, as well

Plan International's Ukraine Response

Since 2022, Plan International has been working in Ukraine, Moldova, Poland and Romania in a partner-led response to the humanitarian crisis following the escalation of the war in Ukraine in February 2022. To date, Plan International has reached close to 650,000 participants, including 149,000 girls and 110,000 boys, and has worked with 49 local partners so far.

Registered refugees from Ukraine under temporary protection



as refugees' experiencing language barriers and limited access to information on support services.¹⁴ A mental health crisis is at the same time unfolding among those affected by the war, both in and outside Ukraine. Three-quarters (75 per cent) of children and young people report the need for psychosocial support due to prolonged exposure to violence and disruption to normality.¹⁵

Some 44 per cent of refugee households from Ukraine report at least one school-aged child not registered in the local education system in early 2024.

By September 2024, these children and adolescents face having their education disrupted for a fourth academic year, with the first two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁶ In Ukraine itself, 3,798 education buildings have been damaged and 365 completely destroyed.¹⁷ More than 2,300 schools remain closed for safety reasons. Almost half of school students rely on online or hybrid education,¹⁸ while an estimated 40,000 teachers need support to deliver this mode of education.¹⁹

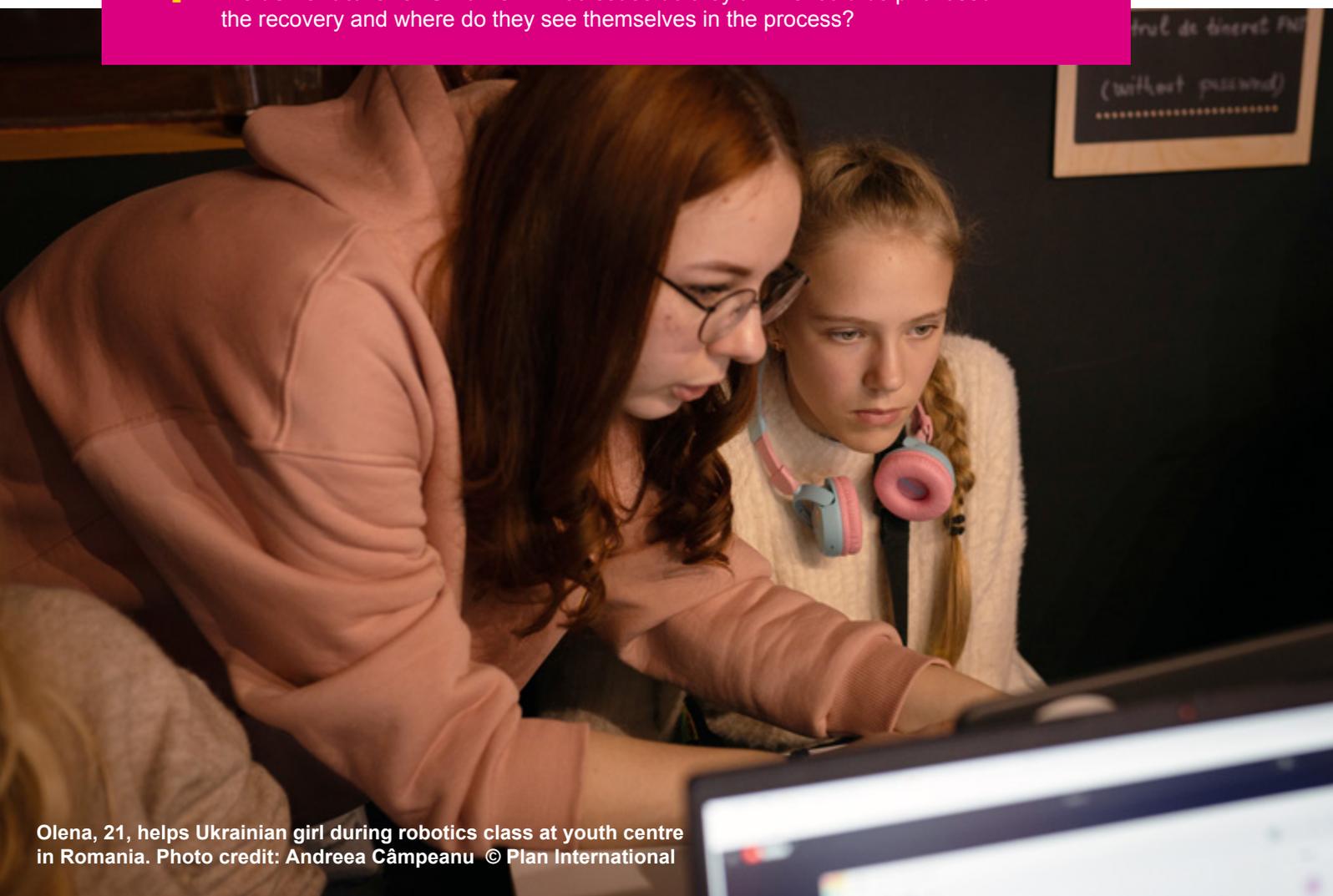
1.2 Research questions and objectives

This research sought to amplify the voices of adolescent girls and youth who are affected by the crisis in Ukraine. It sets out to present their perspectives on the issues that they think are most important, and to understand the nuances of how they are navigating the war during adolescence.

This report presents the research findings and recommendations for donors, practitioners and policy makers from adolescent girls themselves on what they think these key stakeholders need to take action on.

The following primary research questions were used to pursue these aims:

- 1 How have adolescent girls and youth aged 10 to 19 experienced insecurity in Ukraine, Poland and Romania since the escalation of the war?
- 2 How do adolescent girls and youth define and experience the life stage they are in and how do they feel the crisis they are living through has impacted this?
- 3 How are adolescent girls and youth participating and mobilising around the security, socio-economic, and cultural issues that are affecting their lives?
- 4 What are the visions of adolescent girls and youth for a peaceful and inclusive future for Ukraine? What issues do they think should be prioritised in the recovery and where do they see themselves in the process?



1.3 Research methodology

This research used a qualitative, participatory approach to explore the socio-ecological environment of adolescents who are experiencing this crisis as well as the gendered impacts of the war that are often overlooked in humanitarian responses.

Adolescent Girls in Crisis methodology

This Adolescent Girls in Crisis (AGiC) report is part of a larger [research series](#) that has studied situations in South Sudan, Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, Lake Chad, the Sahel region, Beirut, Central America and Mexico, and South America. The series explores the unique impact that crises have on adolescent girls; how girls experience and navigate insecurity; specific and unique needs of adolescents; and opportunities to support girls in crisis situations. This report builds on previous AGiC research that evidenced the specific vulnerabilities of adolescent girls in crises contexts and their resilience, coping strategies and capacities to respond to these crises.

1.3.1 Research design

A comprehensive desk review of the three research countries was carried out, with input from social science students at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy in Ukraine. Design workshops were facilitated with girls aged 15 to 19 in each research country, where participants provided feedback on and recommendations for the data collection tools. The final research approach was submitted for review to the Research Ethics Committee of ODI, a global affairs think tank. The primary data collection tools were translated and further contextualised during the training of local researchers in Ukraine, Poland and Romania.

1.3.2 Data collection

This report uses data collected through focus group discussions and interviews that took place between August and October 2023 with the following groups:

257

adolescent girls, boys, and their caregivers, and key stakeholders responding to the crisis

135 girls in and from Ukraine...

67 10 to 14 yrs 68 15 to 19 yrs

36 boys

18 10 to 14 yrs 18 15 to 19 yrs

30 caregivers of adolescents



32 reflective focus group discussions (FGDs)

56 semi-structured interviews (KIs) with a diverse group of stakeholders, including adolescent girls and boys, and 15 representatives from government bodies, various NGOs (both international and national), community and volunteer networks, and local civil society groups.

3 semi-structured interviews using a storytelling approach were also carried out with girls aged 10 to 19, presented in this report as case studies.



During data collection and analysis, adolescent girls and adolescent boys were divided into two age brackets: 10 to 14 and 15 to 19 years of age. The purpose of this was to analyse further the intersection of age and gender in the experiences of adolescents. Caregivers participated in mixed-gender groups through a variety of methods, including focus groups, in-depth interviews and storytelling activities.

1.3.3 Data analysis

Group discussions and interviews were transcribed, cleaned and anonymised. Data analysis was carried out in Ukrainian, Russian, Polish, Romanian and English. The analysis engaged the AGiC framework, which focuses on key themes: protection from violence, education, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), participation, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), and future aspirations, through a gendered lens. The data was coded using the qualitative analysis software Dedoose.

1.4 Ethics and safeguarding

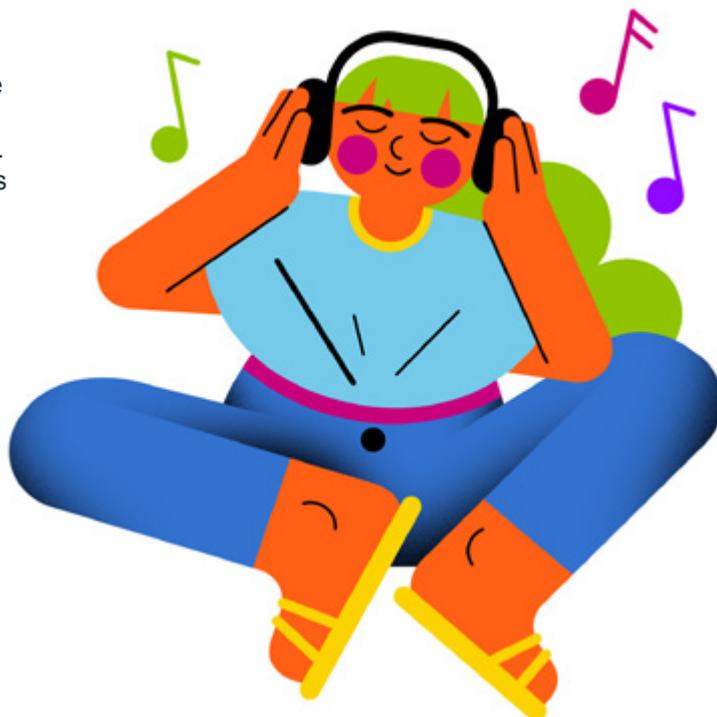
Plan International ensured that the research conducted in Ukraine, Romania and Poland was in line with its Child and Youth Safeguarding, and Ethical MER (monitoring, evaluation and research) policies. The research proposal was reviewed and approved by ODI's Research Ethics Committee. A "Do No Harm" approach was the key guiding principle of the research, which upheld the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability, along with its nine central commitments. All involvement in the research process was entirely voluntary, and informed consent and assent (for younger participants) was obtained from participants. Protocols were in place to ensure confidentiality, which included selecting suitable locations and modalities of data collection. Data collectors were trained on Plan International's Global Safeguarding Policy. Country safeguarding

teams were available throughout the data collection process, with referral mechanisms and processes in place for anyone requiring follow-up support.

1.5 Limitations to the data

Data collection was conducted in the relevant local language and transcripts were translated into Ukrainian and Russian and then into English. This process may have caused some nuance and meaning to be lost. All data collection in Ukraine was carried out online,²⁰ which presented challenges due to connectivity problems, particularly for participants in rural locations which disrupted their participation in some group activities. In these cases, the researchers provided flexible schedules for participants, rescheduling focus groups and interviews where needed.

Efforts were made to include a diverse cross-section of adolescent girls including Roma girls, LGBTIQ+ adolescents, and girls with disabilities. However, identifying girls from marginalised groups who were interested in participating in the research in Poland was particularly challenging,²¹ limiting the inclusion of a diversity of experiences of adolescents affected by the war. Some participants aged 13 to 14 felt that they should be grouped with 15 to 19-year-olds for discussions and were less engaged when participating in a group with 10 to 12-year-olds. There was some hesitancy to respond to questions that explored knowledge and attitudes around sexual and reproductive health and rights particularly among adolescent boys. While these questions were developed in consultation with adolescent girls aged 15 to 19, the design-phase consultations would have benefited by including all genders and ages.



2. Findings

The following sections present findings from this research on: safety and protection from violence, mental health, education, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and girls' participation and activism. The final section explores girls' vision for their future and the future of Ukraine.



2.1 Mental health and wellbeing

2.1.1 What are the mental health impacts of war and displacement on adolescents?

Adolescent girls and boys discussed how the ongoing war in Ukraine has had **devastating effects** on their mental health and psychosocial wellbeing. The **emotional upheaval** of displacement, loss of family members and friends, and interruptions in education and other social surroundings have all had a profound impact on adolescents across Ukraine, Poland and Romania.

Stress and anxiety driven by experiences of war

“I hear bombs in my dreams, and I wake up crying, not knowing where I am for a moment.”

Mykola, Girl, 10–14, Ukraine

“Sometimes, I feel everything goes okay. But sometimes I find myself in crisis emotionally. I experience these constant ups and downs.”

Yuriy, Boy, 15–19, Poland

Adolescent girls and boys in areas under attack or on the frontline such as Ukraine’s second city of Kharkiv, near the Russian border, are profoundly affected by the constant presence of danger, particularly their emotional stress and coping mechanisms. Staff from I/NGOs and local civil society organisations (CSOs) in Ukraine have marked a rise in anxiety among adolescents affected by the war. The persistent stress and worry, along with the anticipation of negative events, have significantly heightened levels of tension for adolescents in Ukraine. Service providers working with adolescents also reported a noticeable decrease in their self-confidence, their belief in their capabilities, and their hope for a brighter future.



With safety as a priority, adolescent girls’ and boys’ access to their regular social support systems is compromised. Online learning, limited social interactions, and heightened safety measures disrupt their routine and contribute to increased emotional distress. Coping in these circumstances often requires psychological assistance, as highlighted by the caregivers.

“We’re near the Kharkiv frontline, therefore, safety is a priority for us. However, our children are under constant stress. I really believe that psychosocial support is needed very much at this moment.”

Female caregiver, Ukraine

Many adolescent girls and boys in refugee-receiving countries reported feeling additional stress and pressure due to having family members left in Ukraine, particularly either caregivers conscripted or left in areas under attack or on the frontline.

“I was so sad and scared when we first arrived here. Because we left my dad in Ukraine. I am still so scared that something will happen to him anytime. I wish we would be together as we were before.”

Adriana, Girl, 10–14, Poland

Staff working with adolescents reported that stress and anxiety have resulted in observable challenges, with differences in how girls are affected based on their age group. Among adolescent girls aged 10 to 14 they noted particular difficulties in focusing on tasks, both academic and other types of activities. Older adolescents (15 to 19) additionally demonstrated signs that persistent states of tension and stress are impacting their mood, confidence and overall wellbeing.

“For girls aged 15 to 19, challenges with focus and concentration manifest in various ways, including struggles in gathering thoughts, engaging in activities or studies, and experiencing mood swings. This is often accompanied by a sense of apathy and a

lack of confidence. While 10 to 14-year-olds may adapt more easily, older girls might exhibit more pronounced mood fluctuations.”

Local CSO working with adolescents, female, Ukraine

Adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 expressed a profound sense of longing for their familiar surroundings and daily routines that have been disrupted by the escalation of the war. Girls also discussed how

displacement and interruption of their social life has made it hard to sustain friendships from a distance which further creates uncertainty about when life and these relationships will return to normal.

The escalation of the war has also placed additional stress on caregivers. This exacerbates their mental distress, which can make it more challenging for them to support the emotional and psychological needs of the adolescents in their care.

Case study 1: Olesya, Ukraine

Olesya is 16 years old and a member of the LGBTIQ+ community. She is living in Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital, having been displaced from her home. Her life, once filled with the routine of school and hobbies, has changed significantly due to the war in her country. Olesya described living in a state of constant uncertainty: **“Every day is unpredictable now. You never know when the next bomb will happen.”**

Prior to the war, Olesya’s days were structured and predictable: school, after-school classes, and leisure time with friends. But as the war intensified and bomb alerts became frequent, her life shifted to remote learning and part-time study. **“It’s hard to focus on school when you’re always listening for sirens,”** she admits. The war has not only brought physical danger but also psychological challenges. Olesya speaks of increased anxiety, a state heightened by the reality of bombs and the threats they bring. **“Sometimes, it feels like the war isn’t just outside, but inside my head too.”**

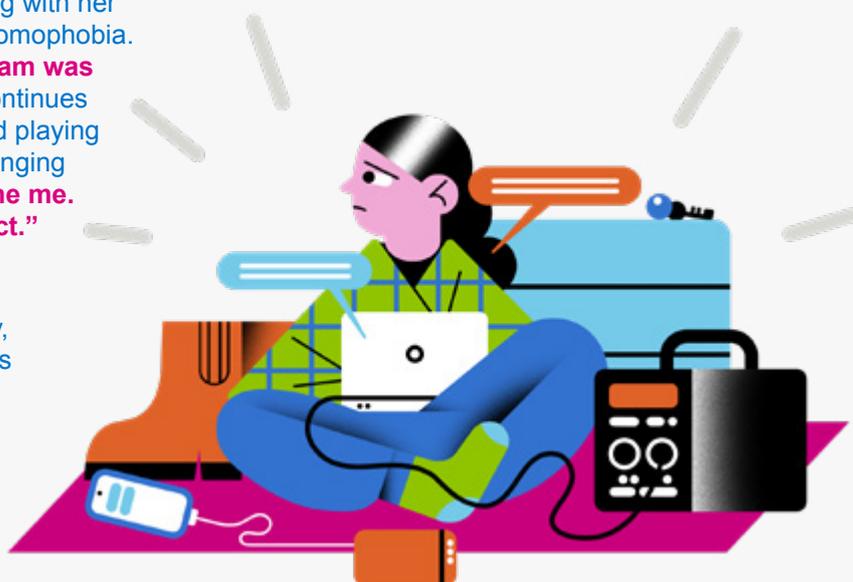
Olesya lives with her mother and grandmother and explained that she finds a sense of safety and support with them. However, she described a complex relationship another close family member that causes her anxiety and affects her identity and self-expression: **“It’s like walking on a tightrope, trying to balance who I am with what [my family member] expects.”** Olesya shared that societal pressures and traditional expectations in Ukraine weigh heavily on her. She spoke candidly about the sexism that pervades her society, and how the war has intensified traditional gender roles, with an impact on her life: **“In Ukraine, being a woman, especially an LGBTIQ+ woman, means fighting battles on many fronts.”**

Amid multiple challenges including risks to physical safety, disrupted learning, discrimination, stigma, and strained family dynamics, Olesya has found acceptance in a new circle of friends and her involvement with an NGO in Kyiv. This shift in her social environment has provided her with a space where she says that she feels more comfortable and understood, contrasting with her previous experiences of discrimination and homophobia.

“Finding people who accept me for who I am was like finding an oasis in the desert.” She continues to pursue her interests, such as forensics and playing the guitar, and finds ways to adapt to her changing circumstances. **“I refuse to let the war define me. I’m more than just a statistic in this conflict.”**

In this environment of change and challenge, Olesya actively participates in her community, supporting initiatives that align with her beliefs and values. Her vision for the future is driven by courage, adaptability, and the pursuit of societal transformation. **“I believe in a Ukraine where everyone can be themselves without fear.”**

“ Sometimes, it feels like the war isn’t just outside, but inside my head too. ”



Heightened anxiety among adolescents with disabilities

NGO staff working with adolescent girls with disabilities affected by this war explained that these girls face heightened levels of stress and anxiety due to pre-existing barriers such as social exclusion and limited institutional capacity to provide specialised support, including a lack of financial and human resources. According to one NGO representative, social isolation is a major concern during the war, as forming meaningful connections with peers can already be challenging for girls with disabilities who may face barriers to participating in social activities. The war-induced disruption of consistent support structures, social networks, and key services such as regular therapy sessions can all negatively affect girls' mental health.

“Adolescent girls with disabilities experience significant mental health issues such as higher levels of anxiety and stress due to the safety and security risks. They are mostly excluded from any social environment, resulting in isolation.”

Local CSO working with adolescents with disabilities, female, Ukraine

Staff working with adolescents with disabilities in Ukraine highlighted how the sounds of bombs and shelling can be particularly destabilising for adolescents with mental disabilities living in areas under attack or on the frontline – and in some cases can induce severe panic. For adolescents with physical disabilities, who struggle to access bomb shelters, there is a heightened sense of fear and vulnerability.

Experiences of LGBTIQ+ adolescents

Participants in this research described pre-existing homophobic and transphobic attitudes in Ukraine, reporting hearing discriminatory statements in schools, at home, and in the media.

“I have a good relationship with an English teacher, because I am like one of her favourite students. But she said one day that LGBTIQ+ people are mentally ill. She began to mention Sodom and Gomorrah. I think: cool, and what will happen when you find out that I belong to the community.”

Ksenia, LGBTIQ+ girl, 15–19, Ukraine

“I don't feel that it is a good idea to talk about my sexual orientation with everyone, such as classmates or teachers.”

Tanya, LGBTIQ+ girl, 15–19, Ukraine

Adolescents from the LGBTIQ+ community face specific psychosocial challenges during this crisis due to the hostility they experienced before the war began. Fear of stigma and discrimination can prevent adolescents from seeking out mental health support and can exacerbate feelings of isolation and negative coping strategies. According to CSO staff working with LGBTIQ+ adolescents, some may resort to self-harm, substance use, or self-isolation to cope with the compounded impacts arising from the stress of living in a society that is not accepting of them, internalised stigma, and the emotional toll of concealing one's identity. For lesbian girls in particular, their relative invisibility in society can mean that service providers struggle to identify girls who need support. Added to the resourcing and logistical barriers faced by service providers in Ukraine due to the war, this means that many lesbian girls are left to cope alone.

2.1.2 What are displaced adolescents' experiences of integration?

Language barriers were among the most common challenges reported by adolescent girls across Poland and Romania.

The challenges of language barriers

Language barriers were also reported in Ukraine as many internally displaced girls come from Russian-speaking areas and may not speak Ukrainian. For girls experiencing displacement, communication problems in their new host communities affect various aspects of their lives, including their social lives and overall wellbeing. For many, language barriers have contributed to feelings of isolation and lack of belonging. In some cases, language barriers are reported to have negatively affected their education. Cultural differences between Ukrainians and their host communities can also be amplified by limited communication:

“I've faced some challenges, particularly with the language, cultural differences and local customs in Poland that were unfamiliar to me. I lack knowledge of Poland's history and legends, which initially made it difficult for me to connect with the local girls in the community.”

Olena, girl, 10–14, Poland

Younger adolescents in Poland appeared to have fewer difficulties with learning Polish than their older counterparts. However, despite some similarities between Ukrainian and Polish, many adolescents have found learning a completely new language to be challenging. Girls reported some bullying and discrimination at school due to their limited fluency.

“Polish is a language I’m really good at, so learning it is fun for me. But my classmate, she found it tough to learn Polish quickly, and it wasn’t nice how others scolded her for it. I didn’t think that was fair at all. She wasn’t treated nicely by the Polish kids either. But now, things are looking up! The teachers and the other kids are super nice to me, and I’m liking everything a lot more.”

Kateryna, girl, 10–14, Poland

Among all the participants, including refugee and host community girls and professionals working with adolescents, the language barriers experienced by girls in Romania was reported as a critical issue affecting their integration and overall wellbeing. Older girls (15 to 19) particularly reported experiencing difficulties in learning Romanian, whereas younger adolescent girls appeared to have had a smoother and easier path to learning the new language – similar to patterns in Poland. For refugee girls in both Poland and Romania, the language gap is limiting meaningful interaction between refugee girls and their host community peers, affecting their social lives and mental wellbeing.

“At the beginning of the war, I have engaged with refugee adolescent girls from Ukraine. In my experiences, I have seen that younger girls were more frightened at the beginning, but they have adapted so quickly. However, older adolescent girls still try to integrate, as the language barrier seems to overwhelm them more.”

Iryna, Romanian girl, 15–19, Romania



Displaced adolescents experience harassment and bullying

Adolescent girls experiencing displacement in Romania and Poland reported being the target of hate speech and harassment based on their nationality. Often these incidents occurred in public spaces when girls were heard speaking in their native language.

“He came up and said, ‘In my country you will talk to me, speak Romanian’. He took off his T-shirt, he had a swastika drawn, apparently by hand. He was walking around with Nazi symbols, pointing in our faces, saying something in favour of Putin.”

Erika, girl, 15–19, Romania

Displaced adolescents from Ukraine who speak Russian also encounter harassment and bullying. For Miroslava in Poland, harassment has led her to change her behaviour as a protective measure:

“It is not always comfortable to speak Russian. When I was on the bus and talking to my mum, a Polish grandmother looked at me. She asked me if I was from Ukraine. She started swearing at me quietly. Now, if people look at me, I try to speak quieter. I think I shouldn’t be ashamed of it, but for my own safety it’s better to be quiet.”

Miroslava, girl, 15–19, Poland

Trixie also reported feeling unsafe in Poland due to witnessing the bullying and assault of a Ukrainian classmate by his peers, an incident which she believed was linked to him speaking Russian:

“I don’t feel safe. A Ukrainian boy in my senior class is constantly being humiliated by his classmates. They beat him in the toilet and called him Russian because he spoke Russian. I told the teacher about it. She reproached me for going into the boys’ toilet. In the end, no one did anything about it. I recently saw him with a bruise on his face and a gash above his lip.”

Trixie, girl, 10–14, Poland

Trixie’s experience also highlights how feelings of insecurity can be exacerbated by the failure of authority figures such as teachers to address these incidents.

Adolescent girls in both Romania and Poland perceived a certain level of hostility among some in their host communities. Viktoria in Romania

indicated that this is linked to a sense of resentment towards refugees who receive support and do not carry out paid work; and Angelina reported experiencing and witnessing aggression from city hall employees towards Ukrainians while volunteering.

“That’s what we’ve seen among our people [whom] we’ve helped. There are many cases where Romanians have complaints because we don’t go to work. And we have mums who for the first time in their lives are left alone with these children. No one helps. If they do, it’s not the help you need.”

Viktoria, girl, 15–19, Romania

“Speaking about institutions, we also volunteer at the city hall, where Ukrainians apply to get money for accommodation... I can say that we faced such situations even with the employees of the city hall... we translate there, we see a lot of aggression from their side, towards Ukrainians.”

Angelina, girl, 15–19, Romania

In Poland, Mariia reported a perception that the sudden arrival of refugees from Ukraine was not well received by some in the host community. She suggested that hostility can pose a threat to the security of refugees:

“I think it’s [Polish people] who are not accustomed to a change of scenery. [Polish people] were shocked by the arrival of so many Ukrainians. [Polish people] who have a negative attitude towards Ukrainians can be dangerous.”

Mariia, girl, 15–19, Poland

Girls in Romania also expressed feelings of “otherness” due to how they are received as refugees in a host country. This ranged from feeling that as Ukrainians they are less of a priority than their host counterparts, to the suggestion that Ukrainians are dehumanised in their status as refugees.

“Some people might not treat me or Ukrainians in general very well because Ukrainians have moved in. Maybe they even feel as if we are not really human beings but just refugees.”

Zhanna, girl, 15–19, Romania

Diana also observed that the treatment of refugees is not always equal, depending on their nationality or race:

“I think that we are still very lucky as refugees within Europe because there are refugees, for example, from the Middle East, who are treated as badly as possible because of racial discrimination. So I think we are still somehow lucky because we are white-skinned.”

Diana, girl, 15–19, Romania

Contrasting cultures and perspectives affect integration

Adolescent girls in Poland expressed a particular distance from and lack of integration with their local community counterparts, notably more so than their male peers. The girls often linked this to language barriers and cultural differences, including contrasting interests and perspectives of their Polish peers, which girls from Ukraine sometimes criticised:

“From what I can see, the way Polish people think and act is so different than us. They have their own ways of doing things. Also, I always get mixed signals. They seem open to talk but also very cold when you try.”

Tamara, girl, 15–19, Poland

In a few cases, girls explained that they did not feel like they belong in Polish society due to the perception that they are not welcome or even that they were in danger due to their nationality:

“I don’t feel part of society because most [Polish people] don’t like Ukrainians.”

Liza, girl, 15–19, Poland

“I had an acquaintance who was beaten up. She and her company [friends] were walking, saying something loudly, and [some Polish people] harassed them about their nationality. In the end, they beat everyone up. I couldn’t understand how and why this could happen.”

Kamila, girl, 15–19, Poland

While many of the girls who participated in this research reported challenges related to social cohesion, it is also clear that the experiences of adolescents in Poland and Romania are not homogenous. Some girls reported both positive and negative experiences, while others disagreed with their fellow participants who critiqued the reception from host communities, instead describing how much better they feel since they left Ukraine:

“Some [Polish people] don’t like Ukrainians and discuss it in public places. I had a group of boys in my yard who were always saying ‘Glory to Putin’, ‘Glory to Russia’. Some, on the contrary, are very understanding, giving gifts. In Fundia there was a grandmother with whom we handed out biscuits together on New Year’s Eve. We became very friendly and gave each other gifts.”

Asya, girl, 10–14, Poland

“I have the opposite situation. I, for example, somehow feel calmer here. That is, even in the evening I can walk home by myself without any problems, and I am scared. Of course, there are strange people everywhere, but I was much more scared to walk in Ukraine.”

Liliya, girl, 15–19, Romania

2.1.3 What are adolescents’ coping mechanisms and what support can they access?

During these challenging times, adolescent girls and boys reported having adopted various coping mechanisms to **tackle their stress, fear and anxiety.**

Adolescents’ coping mechanisms

In Ukraine, girls aged 15 to 19 explained how they engage in specific activities to both distract from the harsh realities of war and create a sense of normalcy and calm. These activities include reading, listening to music, drawing, and walking with friends. Several girls aged 15 to 19 in Ukraine highlighted that the challenges they are experiencing had increased their resilience to prolonged stress, with some indicating that their self-confidence had improved through actively engaging in coping strategies to address daily challenges.

“Books helped me to cope with my anxiety. Whenever I feel anxious now, I start reading. Also, listening to music and walking with friends make me feel calmer and more in peace.”

Sonia, girl, 15–19, Ukraine

While both adolescent girls and boys showed similar levels of interest in engaging in these types of activities for their wellbeing, girls reported enjoying indoor activities just as much as outdoor ones, while boys expressed a stronger preference for outdoor activities. In Ukraine, boys aged 10 to 14 in particular demonstrated an inclination towards active participation in offline activities and have taken a more prominent role in creating and joining peer groups within their local communities. According to an I/NGO staff member, this tendency holds even when a boy has been internally displaced; observations suggest that boys find it somewhat easier to assimilate into a new community by establishing social connections than girls do. A representative from a local CSO working with adolescents in Ukraine indicated that this ease of integration is partly because boys are often encouraged to be outgoing and are expected to share and engage in common interests and hobbies with other boys their age.

While many refugee girls aged 10 to 14 in Poland and Romania showed signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), stress and anxiety, some girls actually reported facing comparatively lower levels of stress due to the less severe safety and security risks since they left Ukraine. Engagement in shared interests like drawing and writing emerged as a crucial stress management tool among refugee adolescent girls aged 10 to 14 in Poland and Romania.

“My emotions are no longer as vivid as before. Initially, it was difficult for me to cope following our move to Poland. However, building new friendships and engaging in social activities has improved my mood.”

Nika, girl, 15–19, Poland



According to caregivers, those aged 10 to 14 demonstrate more adaptive behaviour and a smoother transition into their new communities in Romania than their older peers aged 15 to 19. Despite experiencing a disruption in their daily routines – a change known to affect mental health negatively – refugee girls aged 10 to 14 appear to be managing to reinstate structured schedules since arriving in Romania. Caregivers reported seeing positive impacts from things like daily and weekly routines, regular school attendance, and participation in community events.

Caregivers highlighted in particular the benefits of structured physical activities such as dance, sports and cultural participation even with language obstacles and in unfamiliar settings, helping adolescents to channel their energy and sustain emotional stability.

These activities provide not only a sense of purpose but also facilitate improved Polish and Romanian language skills and adaptation to new social and cultural dynamics.

“Adolescents, both girls and boys, need more activities to socialise. It is already difficult due to the language barriers. At least, organisations should increase these activities for the sake of their wellbeing and integration.”

Female caregiver, Romania

The role of family and friends in reducing anxiety

Both girls and boys aged 10 to 14 particularly highlighted the importance of family members and friendships in helping them to reduce their levels of anxiety:

“When I am scared, I am running to my mum for a hug. Being with her always makes me feel safer and calmer.”

Tatiana, girl, 10–14, Ukraine

“Yes, I think it’s friends and family. Basically, that’s almost the best support.”

Vitaly, boy, 10–14, Romania

Many adolescents reported that being in a trusted social environment, whether with friends or family, creates a sense of emotional comfort. The support from mothers was repeatedly highlighted, with many young girls naming their mother as their biggest support. While family members can play

an important role in supporting an adolescent’s wellbeing, an NGO representative also highlighted that caregivers can have limited knowledge of mental health conditions, and also need to be supported to be able to recognise the needs of adolescents and to identify when they may need specialised psychosocial support.

Friends also play an essential role by providing information, helping deal with ongoing threats, and offering companionship, for both girls and boys aged 10 to 19. Moreover, boys reported finding humour and adapting to new situations while having loved ones nearby helps them to cope emotionally.

Negative coping mechanisms

According to some caregivers, adolescents are also engaging in negative coping mechanisms to deal with stress and anxiety. In Ukraine, caregivers reported a noticeable increase in the use of electronic cigarettes, which stands out as a common issue across genders. Easy access to these is contributing to their rise among adolescents, particularly those aged 15 to 19.

“Since [the escalation of war], adolescent girls and boys started to smoke electronic cigarettes. These products are legally sold by shops, causing sleeping disorders among adolescents.”

Male caregiver, Ukraine

Spending extended periods of time on the internet and smartphones during the night is reported as another negative coping mechanism that is affecting sleep quality. This is leading to sleeping disorders in some cases and exacerbating mental health-related difficulties that girls and boys face. Girls aged 15 to 19 also self-reported adopting some negative coping mechanisms, such as smoking and spending long hours on the internet.

“I have a problem with smoking. When I have a very stressful situation, I want to smoke very badly. I just really want to smoke. Lately, I’ve been trying to control myself. I realise it doesn’t help me, it may seem to make me feel better for a moment, but I even notice more anxiety because of it.”

Sofia, girl, 15–19, Romania

There is an indication that stress and anxiety driven by the war could be contributing to disordered eating among adolescent girls, and as Oleksandra shared, combined with social pressures based on body image, this can cause further stress and anxiety.

“Even though I feel like I’ve dealt with what I experienced during the war, they still heavily influence my thoughts. Then I start eating and constantly feel the pressure to lose weight afterwards. All these ups and downs affect me negatively. As I’m growing and experiencing hormonal changes, gaining even a small amount of weight becomes a big concern for me. It immediately triggers thoughts about needing to exercise more or eat less.”

Oleksandra, girl, 15–19, Romania

Gaps in mental health service provision

Adolescent girls and their caregivers highlighted a major gap in their access to psychosocial support services, and emphasised the crucial need for this support:

“I think what we need is support from a psychologist who can support us through individual or group counselling with our fears.”

Darya, girl, 10–14, Romania

“I think lecturing us about mental health is not helping. We need someone to listen to us and support us. Give us a guidance.”

Nastya, girl, 15–19, Poland

Very few adolescent girls who participated in this research reported receiving professional mental health support. Almost all refugee adolescent girls in Poland and Romania highlighted that they only received emotional support from their caregivers, siblings, other family members or friends, while none had received professional support, despite having identified a need for access to these services. Only a few of the girls who participated in the research were aware of the free mental health services available to them, with many believing that they would have to pay to access psychosocial support.

“Ever since the war began, stress has been affecting me with headaches and dizziness. My doctor attributes these symptoms to stress, but it’s still unclear how I should handle it. Additionally, seeing a psychologist isn’t an option for me due to financial constraints. It is too expensive to afford.”

Sonya, girl, 15–19, Poland

Many girls aged 10 to 19 in Poland and Romania acknowledged the importance of professional mental health support for young people, particularly individual counselling. Some reported being aware of the provision of services for adults and expressed the need for mental health support that targets adolescents.

“Perhaps what we’re discussing is largely related to mental wellbeing. It seems this issue isn’t getting as much attention lately since it’s been over a year and a half [since the war began]. I’m not sure if there has been specific mental health support for adolescent girls. While there have been initiatives for adults in some organisations, it’s important to remember that as adolescent girls, we have also faced significant emotional challenges, possibly even more due to the increased stress levels everyone is experiencing.”

Tanya, girl, 15–19, Romania

A representative from a local CSO in Poland that offers emergency psychosocial support to adolescent girls, noted that girls between the ages of 15 and 19 often choose to seek counselling late in the evening when their caregivers are asleep. This preference for late-night sessions indicates a desire for privacy and may also suggest that girls are avoiding sharing the challenges they are facing with their caregivers, as they choose to hide counselling sessions from them.

“Children often call me at night when their caregivers are asleep. Sometimes, caregivers wake up while we are having calls and argue with their daughters on the benefit of our sessions. I hear them while they discuss.”

Local CSO working with adolescents, female, Poland

For some adolescents, the internet enables them to access the professional support they need independently, without the input of caregivers. However, as a local CSO representative working with adolescents in Ukraine highlighted, for girls living in marginalised communities who do not have the same level of access to technology and the internet as their peers, this support is out of reach:

“I believe deeply in the importance of mental and psychosocial wellbeing for all, recognising that education on this matter is still lacking. The trauma from the war – the missiles, the occupation – has left many with PTSD, highlighting the urgent need for accessible psychological support. It’s a subject that needs to be advocated, yet this essential support remains out of reach for the Roma community, who are often illiterate and without the necessary technology to benefit from these services.”

Local CSO working with adolescents, female, Ukraine

Case study 2: Mikayla, Romania

Mikayla is a 19-year-old girl from Kharkiv, Ukraine, who sought refuge in Iași, Romania. Mikayla described how her life has been drastically altered due to the escalation of the war. Before the war, Mikayla was very sociable and liked to study, socialise with her friends and explore her passion for drawing. She vividly remembers the times when she could freely walk and talk with friends, in stark contrast to her current situation where fear and uncertainty are a daily reality.

Insecurity in Ukraine forced her to flee from her friends, social life and surroundings. Although moving to Romania meant safety, Mikayla explained that it has also brought new challenges, including limited communication and therefore limited relationships with her peers in her new community. She finds that the language barrier is the main reason preventing her from making new friends and engaging in her new social environment, which makes her feel isolated:

“ I feel alone. I don’t know the language... I don’t have friends here in Romania...”

“I feel alone. I don’t know the language... I don’t have friends here in Romania... I only talk to my mother, my grandmother, and my father.” Mikayla said that she spends time thinking back to her previous life and friendships: **“I miss my friends. We used to walk, talk.”**

Mikayla described how a typical day for her is spent either with her family or on her own. She starts her mornings helping her mother, walking the dog, and watching TV. The afternoons, though, bring a small respite where she dives into her love for drawing. Drawing is a crucial outlet for her, and acts as a coping mechanism to help deal with the changes and the stress of her new life. **“I draw... That’s my only hobby.”**

The support of her mother, father and grandmother is important to Mikayla, who finds spending time with her family helps to distract her: **“Spending quality time with my caregivers helps me to forget the impacts of war. I feel less lonely when I am having conversations with them.”** However, the lack of a social circle in Romania seriously affects her mental wellbeing. **“But I still feel lonely. It is difficult not to have any friends.”**

Looking to the future, Mikayla is uncertain. The war has not just disrupted her daily life but also brings an uncertainty over her long-term plans and dreams. The choice of returning home remains her deepest desire. **“I want to go back to Ukraine,”** she says. As Mikayla tries to establish a new life in Romania, her story underscores the profound impact of the war on adolescents, altering their lives and dreams in often deeply felt ways. **“It’s hard... Everything is changed.”**



2.2 Safety and protection from violence



2.2.1 What are the key protection risks facing adolescents?

Adolescent girls, boys, and their caregivers across the three research countries discussed how the escalation of the war has **impacted on their sense of safety**. The child protection concerns raised by participants differ between those residing in Ukraine and those in Poland and Romania.

Key protection risks in Ukraine

In Ukraine, the dominant concern highlighted by participants was the risk to personal safety posed by bombs and violence directly linked to the war.

“Safety is the first priority for us.”

Female caregiver, Ukraine

Prioritisation of safety above all else was highlighted by caregivers, particularly in cities close to the frontlines such as Kharkiv. Caregivers across locations in Ukraine explained that the risks posed by bombs to adolescents’ physical and psychological wellbeing end up limiting adolescents’ movement more generally. The insecurity created by the escalation of the war has in this way significantly impacted on the freedom of movement for both adolescent girls and boys.

Adolescent girls and boys shared their fears of bombs and the impact of war on their sense of safety, often describing states of panic and anxiety. Their concerns focused on the unpredictability of attacks and the adequacy of shelters.

“Our family was thinking that maybe my mum, my younger brother, and I could go abroad. To provide some security for ourselves. Because in Ukraine right now, it’s very difficult due to the state of war, and it’s very scary. Even my younger brother has

started talking about it often. Like, when there’s an alarm, he often starts asking, ‘Mum, are there rockets flying? Should we go to the shelter now?’ Well, it’s something like that, that makes me feel not very safe in Ukraine.”

Sofia, girl, 10–14, Ukraine

“It was really scary. In our village, a rocket went through the window. I try not to worry and tell myself that it should be on the news channels with a warning, informing us about when and from where they are coming from...”

Vadym, boy, 15–19, Ukraine

The war has made the geography of safety a daily consideration for adolescents in Ukraine. They expressed concerns about the lack of bomb shelters in their communities, particularly on the outskirts of towns and villages where the distance to shelters can be greater.

“We have only three bomb shelters, and two of them are in the city centre... let’s say that missiles are flying at us and there is no bomb shelter.”

Vasyl, boy, 10–14, Ukraine

Security risks affect adolescents’ education in Ukraine

Adolescents and their caregivers in Ukraine discussed how the constant disruption due to the need to seek shelter affects adolescents’ ability to attend school in Ukraine and get a consistent education. Adolescents in Ukraine explained that they feel it is safer at home than at school due to the risks posed by bombs. Adolescent girls described a chaotic educational setting where students *“will constantly run from the classroom to the basement. It is like this all day long”* (Oksana, girl, 10–14, Ukraine). The reality of living through war, with frequent bombs and the need to move to shelters,

interrupts adolescents' education and reinforces the feeling of insecurity in the school space.²²

Girls and their caregivers in Ukraine vocalised a preference for remote educational modalities due to these security concerns, underscoring the priority of safeguarding physical wellbeing.

“At school, for example, when bomb sirens start, the teachers just say, ‘Kids, you need to go to the basement!’ And we just sit there in the basement all the time. That’s why my caregivers are even in favour of distance learning, so that girls and boys study remotely and don’t go to school. They are afraid that we will have in-person classes and go to the basement.”

Sofia, girl, 10–14, Ukraine

Risks heightened by less supervision at home

Adolescents' sense of safety in Ukraine is not only jeopardised by bombs, but also by the increased burdens on their caregivers, particularly single female parents, due to the war. Caregivers may have to prioritise providing for the basic needs for adolescents over supervision of them, which can increase certain child protection risks. During interviews, several I/NGO and local CSO representatives raised concerns that adolescents in these households engage in dangerous activities, such as cooking with gas or handling chemicals. Reduced adult supervision increases the danger of accidents and exposes adolescents to risks that they may be unable to manage independently.

“Single caregivers have difficulties in responding to all the needs and responsibilities they are given. Many of them work during the day, away from the house. Meanwhile, this situation leaves adolescents [to] take care of their younger siblings or do household chores that could create serious child protection risks.”

International NGO representative, female, Ukraine

Child protection risks worse for vulnerable groups

Representatives from I/NGOs and local CSOs working with adolescents in Ukraine emphasised the heightened vulnerability of certain groups: unaccompanied minors, adolescent girls and boys with disabilities, adolescents transferred from institutions in Ukraine to Romania or Poland, and

girls from ethnic minorities such as Roma. These adolescents face multiple layers of risks – from the disruption of their support systems to their exposure to potential abuse – because the war is exacerbating existing vulnerabilities.

NGO staff discussed the key protection concerns for adolescents with disabilities arising because of the war, such as difficulties in accessing safe accommodation and participating in evacuations necessary for their physical safety. According to local CSO representatives, girls and boys with disabilities often depend on their caregivers and other family members, alongside external support, to meet their needs. That family support has been eroded as the war disrupts household structures and economic situations, while external service providers face challenges in identifying girls and boys with disabilities as they can often be isolated.

Adolescent girls and boys with disabilities living in institutional care face further difficulties, according to NGO staff. Many adolescents in institutional care were already exposed to distressing conditions and treatment, including restraint, neglect, and lack of resources, prior to the war. NGO staff highlighted that many adolescent girls and boys with disabilities in institutional care, especially in the conflict-affected areas in eastern Ukraine, were evacuated to safer areas and many crossed over borders into other countries. However, they also raised the concern that there are adolescents who require more comprehensive support that remain in remote areas of Ukraine.

“Some of these girls and boys are tied down or left in beds without any activity, kept in the dark, poorly ventilated rooms with insufficient staff, resulting in unpleasant odours... The staff members working in institutional care lack the necessary resources and knowledge to address this behaviour, leading them to restrain the girls and boys for most of the day. Immediate action is needed to locate and ensure the safety of girls and boys in remote facilities.”

Local CSO working with adolescents, female, Ukraine

Homophobia and transphobia increase protection risks for adolescents

Adolescent girls and boys aged 15 to 19 from Ukraine discussed the compounded forms of discrimination that LGBTIQ+ individuals often face when their identities intersect with other marginalised situations, such as racial and ethnic



Dominika, 16, and her friend look at their phone together in Ukraine.
Photo credit: Mishchenko Mikhailo © Plan International

minorities, or social class. This intersectionality can result in multifaceted vulnerabilities, making their safety needs complex and unique. Participants said that they have noted less homophobia among young people compared to previous generations in Ukraine; however, both adolescents and CSO staff indicated that stigma and discrimination towards members of the LGBTIQ+ community and hostility in many spaces remain prevalent in many areas of society – both before and since the escalation of the war.²³ One CSO representative noted that the visibility of the LGBTIQ+ community has increased to some extent through participation in army service, which they say may have decreased stigma and discrimination towards the community in some urban areas – however, negative attitudes still persist, particularly in rural areas of Ukraine.²⁴

“It is quite dangerous at school, at work, and in other educational institutions. Now our level of homophobia is gradually decreasing. This is work for many more years, but it is dangerous.”

Yana, girl, 15–19, Ukraine

The escalation of the war has exacerbated the existing vulnerabilities of members of the LGBTIQ+ community in Ukraine. Where individuals may feel hesitant to disclose their gender identity or sexual orientation due to the fear of experiencing stigma and discrimination, they can face difficulties in finding safe shelter and accessing their basic needs where personal information is requested.²⁵ This can be a key challenge for transgender individuals in particular, if their documents do not match their gender identity. A local CSO representative in Ukraine raised an alarming concern that members of the LGBTIQ+ community, particularly women, trans women and trans girls have been exposed to violence in bomb shelters.

“Some of the adolescent girls who were subjected to gender-based violence approached shelters. However, many of them got rejected the moment shelter management realised that they are LGBTIQ+. Unfortunately, this discrimination puts LGBTIQ+ adolescents at greater risk.”

Local CSO working with LGBTIQ+ adolescents, female, Ukraine

Access to accurate and affirming information about identities and health can be lifesaving for LGBTIQ+ adolescents, and the internet can help adolescents to navigate challenges, access services, and build resilience against negative societal messages.

“LGBTIQ+ adolescents [aged] 10 to 14 are in the period of self-discovery. Therefore, they constantly seek information through various resources, particularly online, allowing them to gain the information that enables them to understand their ongoing experiences and connect with their peers who experience similar biological, behavioural, and emotional challenges. As a channel, the internet is lifesaving for these adolescents.”

Local CSO working with LGBTIQ+ adolescents, female, Ukraine

However, the same CSO representative explained that while the internet can offer a lifeline for LGBTIQ+ adolescents to find a community and information, it also poses risks of exposure to violence, exploitation, and misinformation. They also reported that adolescents they work with can be fearful and reluctant to speak about their experiences of violence, underscoring the need for supportive environments where individuals can safely share their experiences and receive the help they need.

2.2.2 How are adolescents affected by sexual and gender-based violence?

Adolescent girls in Ukraine, Poland and Romania reported exposure to multiple, compounded protection risks, including **gender-based violence** at home, online, and in public spaces. In Romania and Poland, girls reported an alarming rate of exposure to **sexual harassment** both in person and online, to the extent that these experiences appear to be normalised by many, as is the burden of safety measures that they take to protect themselves.

Fear of sexual violence

Adolescent girls in all three research countries expressed strong fears of experiencing sexual violence. When asked about their feelings of safety and security, concerns about rape and other forms of sexual assault were reported by girls in both early and mid-to-late adolescence (ages 10 to 19). In some cases girls in Ukraine expressed greater concern of sexual violence than of the insecurity posed by the war itself.

“I’m worried about it because I’ve already had an experience in Ukraine. There was a guy who followed me and tried to kiss me. I hit him and quickly ran home... now my biggest nightmare is rape.”

Rico, girl, 10–14, Poland

For girls like Rico, who is currently living in Poland, these fears impact on her daily life as feelings of insecurity lead her to be hypervigilant:

“I suspect every passerby who looks at me to be plotting against me. And when someone stares at me for a long time, I think that he will follow me to my house, he might take me round a corner, kill me or even rape me.”

Girls’ recommendations for how to make their communities safer also indicate a sense of insecurity in their homes, with some suggesting that guards be placed outside houses, as well as hidden cameras and “locks that can’t be broken” (Jisu, girl, 10–14, Poland).

Adolescent girls in Ukraine also reported feeling unsafe because they believe there is a prevalence of perpetrators of sexual violence and other crimes, alongside a lack of police protection and justice for survivors:

“ I’m afraid to walk alone because of the stories about attacks. ”

“I feel 80 per cent safe, because there are rapists everywhere who do not give me peace of mind and do not allow me to feel comfortable in the environment where I am.”

Olena, girl, 15–19, Ukraine

Girls reported changing their behaviours due to the fear of being attacked, in particular avoiding going out at night and walking alone. There was particular concern in both Ukraine and Romania about streets being unlit and therefore even more dangerous for girls – in Ukraine this was linked to blackouts related to the war. In some cases, feelings of insecurity stemmed from personal experiences of sexual harassment and assault. However, girls also indicated that their fears had developed since hearing stories about others experiencing violence:

“I’m afraid to walk alone because of the stories about attacks.”

Jisu, girl, 10–14, Poland

“I had an acquaintance, a bit older than me, who was raped when she was returning home... I felt very sorry for her. After that there was a period when I didn’t want to go out anywhere. I didn’t go out at all. All my thoughts were only: ‘school-home, school-home, school-home, school-home’. We tried to keep company [be accompanied] just in case.”

Marie, girl, 10–14, Poland

Marie in Poland also explained that girls are exposed to these stories on social media which can have negative psychological effects:

“I think social media can be intimidating, because I’ve seen stories like that. The girls might have heard something unnecessary and now they are afraid and so they feel unsafe.”

Sexual harassment and sexual assault in public spaces

Adolescent girls in Romania and Poland in particular reported an alarming rate of cases of both sexual harassment and sexual assault in public spaces. This includes witnessing public masturbation by adult men, catcalling, being filmed in public without consent, as well as sexual assault which they often do not report to caregivers.

“I’ve had such situations when I can wear a short skirt, some tops, I can be honked at from a car. It happened a lot of times. I remember, I was filmed on video. It’s unpleasant, of course, but what can you do. It’s like that everywhere.”

Larysa, girl, 15–19, Poland

“When you walk around, men start shouting or harassing us. This happens quite often. Sometimes they also slow down the cars. [It] makes me afraid. That’s why I don’t feel so comfortable to walk around alone.”

Danya, girl, 15–19, Romania

For Anna in Romania, her experience of sexual harassment has led her to “try not to have contact with men” (Anna, girl, 15–19, Romania). Similarly, Marie in Poland said that since being sexually assaulted, “I don’t let boys touch me”, demonstrating the lasting impacts that these crimes have on girls’ psychological as well as social wellbeing:

“Some man with a baby in his arms was touching my buttocks, then my stomach, then even higher. I turned to this man and he was looking at me with a smile on his face. I told my friends later and they said it was horrible. I never told my parents.”

Clara, girl, 15–19, Poland

Girls in Poland and Romania reported experiencing harassment from boys and men due to their nationality, demonstrating how their visibility as refugees can make them a target for predatory boys and men.

“Maybe it’s the increased attention from Romanians, as well as guys, because it’s a curiosity to them. If Ukrainians come to the Romanian class, everyone becomes interested, because we are other girls.”

Anastasia, girl, 15–19, Romania



“Polish boys often hit on Ukrainian girls at school... When a Ukrainian girl arrives who cannot find a common language with anyone, she is even more helpless than he is. The boy feels comfortable here and harassment happens. It happens anyway, but because of a situation where someone comes alone, they automatically become more defenceless.”

Christie, girl, 15–19, Poland

Because adolescent refugees often lack social support systems in their host countries, when they do seek new relationships, they can be a target for perpetrators of violence. In Romania, Daniela described a case of rape where a girl met the perpetrator through a dating app after arriving in the country from Ukraine. She reported that the police did not take action due to the perpetrator's nationality. Such stories demonstrate the heightened vulnerability of refugee adolescent girls, and contribute to girls' reluctance to report sexual violence.

“I have a situation: I know a girl from my acquaintance [who] came to Bucharest. Because of the fact that she has no friends, no acquaintances, she went on the site ‘Daivincic’.²⁶ She met a boy there. He was an adequate guy, but when they met, he raped her. They went to the police and they said that he was not a citizen of this country, they would not deal with him.”

Daniela, girl, 15–19, Romania

Prevalence of victim-blaming attitudes

Across the three research countries, girls reported a particular awareness of victim-blaming attitudes, in some cases linking to a reluctance in reporting crimes to the police:

“Because if you go to the police in Romania, they tell you that you did it [caused it] yourself.”

Inna, girl, 15–19, Romania.

“You provoked him. I shot a man because he wasn't wearing a bulletproof vest. I raped because she was dressed like that.”

Alina, girl, 15–19, Romania

On why she didn't report experiencing sexual assault to her parents, Marie explained that they would blame her for provoking the assault or for not fighting back:

“Because mum would definitely say: ‘You dressed too openly’. Dad would say: ‘Why didn't you tell me right away? I would have punched him in the face’. My dad taught me how to hit and because of that he would probably say ‘Why didn't you fight back?’”

Marie, girl, 10–14, Poland

Some girls themselves reiterated victim-blaming attitudes. This could suggest that girls are internalising narratives that do not recognise the role of the perpetrator as the cause of sexual violence:

“The girls in my city who wear, you know, such tops or short skirts, they are not afraid of anything, you know, they are so protected and that's it. And some of them dress like that on purpose and walk around, looking around to make sure that no one is following them, looking for someone to steal or rape them.”

Antonina, 10–14, Ukraine

Girls turn to self-defence

When asked what needs to happen to make girls feel safer, a common response was to train and equip girls to protect themselves from violence. Girls reported wanting to be provided with pepper spray and other self-defence equipment.

“I think you need to buy a self-defence kit. It is available on Aliexpress, it costs only 50 PLN and it includes: a lipstick stun gun, a butterfly knife, special rings that turns into a killing machine, a cross that opens into a sharp knife, a key chain that turns into a rebar, a big long stick.”

Rico, girl, 10–14, Poland

In some cases, such as that of Marie, the recommendation to enable girls to defend themselves was connected to her experience of the war while still in Ukraine, when the threat of violence led her family to arm themselves:

“I would like to add that as a minimum, girls should be given pepper spray and taught self-defence. I had a situation in my town in Ukraine, that they went to flats and kill[ed] people. That's the kind of massacre we had... So my dad gave me a gas can and let me sleep with a knife. And my dad and mum slept with my dad's gun. That's how dangerous things were with us.”

Marie, girl, 10–14, Poland

The role of gender norms and education

In addition to calling for teaching on self-defence and opening up conversations about dangerous situations and how to avoid them, girls pointed to the influence of gender socialisation and recommended that boys and men be educated to respect girls and women.

“Boys need to be told from an early age that women are not sexual objects.”

Christie, girl, 15–19, Poland

Kalyna in Romania indicated that men and boys commit violence against women because they don't view them as human beings, and she explains that they need to be told:

“...Guys, look, there are such types of violence you can't do, that a woman is a human being, you can't touch her.”

Kalyna, girl, 15–19, Romania

Marina in Poland also discussed the importance of education in tackling gender-based violence. However, in this case she wanted to be taught about what to do when exposed to violence:

“I think that schools should teach about behaviour in dangerous situations. I, for example, have no idea how to behave in case of assault or rape.”

Marina, girl, 15–19, Poland

Online sexual harassment

Particularly in Poland, girls reported numerous cases of sexual harassment online. This included experiencing “catfishing” from adult men who pretend to be adolescents, receiving unsolicited nude images from boys and men – both strangers and individuals that the girls knew in real life, requests for intimate photos of girls, and the sharing of intimate photos of girls online without their consent, which is also considered a child pornography offence.

“A situation happened to me. An adult man sent me intimate photos. It was very uncomfortable. A boy a little bit older than me also wrote to me and offered me intimate things. We knew each other in real life, but he found my profile and started writing these things.”

Mariia, girl, 15–19, Poland

“...schools should teach about behaviour in dangerous situations.”

Some of the cases that girls discussed demonstrated the fine line between online and real-life harassment and risks:

“On Telegram, you can see people who are close to you.”

Nastya, girl, 15–19, Poland

“I think this feature in Telegram should be removed because many times I've been found out because of it. I noticed a boy sitting opposite me on the bus and looking at me strangely. The next day he sent me strange messages and I blocked him.”

Sonia, girl, 15–19, Poland

Girls reported that the online application daivinichik is used by both children and adults ranging in age from 12 to 30.

“I also had a situation connected with 'daivinichik'. I met with some boy, we communicated for a week and then he suddenly starts writing to me with requests to send my location... He started sending me videos from my neighbourhood and said that he had already arrived, asking me about my location, and in the end I blocked him.”

Lada, girl, 10–14, Poland

In key informant interviews, CSO representatives in Ukraine also highlighted the risk factors of low parental control over adolescents often linked to the impacts of the war (as discussed above) and overall limited knowledge among caregivers about cybersecurity – both these contribute to adolescents' vulnerability to cybercrimes. Without adequate supervision and internet safety education, adolescent girls can be at a heightened risk of exposure to sexual exploitation and abuse, money fraud schemes, and other types of internet-based exploitation.

“Caregivers do not have adequate information and control over the cybersecurity. Therefore, girls are more open to sexual exploitation and abuse, without getting any supervision on how they should use [the] internet in a safe manner.”

Local CSO working with adolescents, female, Ukraine

2.3 Education

2.3.1 How has the escalation of the war affected adolescents' education in Ukraine?

Adolescents in Ukraine, Poland, and Romania have had their education disrupted since the escalation of the war in February 2022. Many experienced disrupted education in the years before that due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the first shift to online learning.

Navigating in-person education in wartime

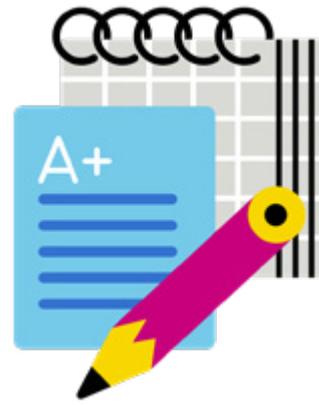
For many adolescents on or close to the frontline in Ukraine, the risks to their physical safety, in addition to the destruction or repurposing of school buildings has made online education the only option. Schools in the western and central parts of Ukraine have reopened with additional safety and security precautions in place, such as building new or strengthening existing bomb shelters. Yet, schools still struggle to provide safe in-person classes, often due to the limited capacity of bomb shelters.

Adolescent girls in Ukraine explained how the risks to their physical safety caused by the immediate threat of shelling overshadow their educational experiences. International NGO and local CSO representatives in Ukraine suggested that the biggest risk to education for adolescents in these areas is the constant fear of shelling:

"Girls and boys who are learning in person have to go to bomb shelters and spend two to five hours learning there... In the future months or years to come, they could be at risk [because] their mental health state will push them to drop out."

UN agency representative, male, Ukraine

Both younger and older adolescent girls expressed concerns about the risks of in-person education. Girls aged 15 to 19 were more concerned than their younger counterparts over the complexities of online education amid the war and considered it detrimental to the quality of their learning. These girls indicated a preference for in-person education



in what they considered to be relatively "safer" cities like Kyiv and Lviv. They emphasised in particular the importance of direct interaction for learning and socialisation.

"... if distance education is introduced, at least in cities like Kyiv and Lviv, where it is safer, it can somehow make the quality of education even worse. Because when you could be in such relative safety, it is better to introduce face-to-face education and have the practice of communicating live with teachers and students, or students if it is a college or university. You can feel safer and have quality education."

Solomia, girl, 15–19, Ukraine

Across ages, genders and countries, adolescents affected by the war expressed a longing for the moment when they can return to their schools, reconnect with their classmates, and experience "normality" once again.

"I just want to go back to Ukraine. Go back to my school and my friends."

Nadiya, girl, 10–14, Romania

Challenges with online education

Adolescents in Ukraine explained how the shift to online learning with the escalation of the war had a major impact on both their learning and their social connections.

"Of course, education has changed since [the escalation of the war]. We used to go to school, we all had some kind of school friends, and then we switched to distance learning. There has been much less communication between us."

Daria, girl, 10–14, Ukraine

CSO staff working with adolescents highlighted a key concern that the lack of regular, face-to-face school interaction due to the need for online

education is depriving adolescents in Ukraine of critical socialisation opportunities. Younger adolescents (10 to 14 years) were thought to be at particular risk of losing vital communication skills and community connections.

For girls on or close to the frontline in Ukraine, online education may be safer than in-person classes; however, they reported that their learning is greatly affected by the constant anxiety and fear of bombs, which they said disrupts their attention and can be demotivating. Girls also discussed the practical difficulties they face in learning, particularly when they experience periods of time without electricity at home.

“It is really hard to study when you have anxiety every day and run to the basement with the whole school every day.”

Alyona, girl, 10–14, Ukraine

“It became very difficult to do even our homework. In our house, all lights went off in the evening and there was no electricity for a long time. This happens still [from] time to time. In these circumstances, there is also no communication opportunity with anyone.”

Myroslava, girl, 10–14, Ukraine

Girls reported feeling demotivated easily as online learning requires a high level of self-discipline and organisational skills. They also reported that Ukraine’s national online education platform has limited communication and collaboration tools needed for high-quality distance learning and mainly relies on email and chat for communication with teachers and peers. Girls said that the use of whiteboards and virtual classrooms were not very effective. Due to these limitations, many described communication with their teachers as challenging.

“I noticed a big lack of clarity during online learning; it often felt like the education I received in person was much better. Being able to interact with my teachers directly made a significant difference, helping me grasp my lessons much more effectively. I also don’t think our teachers are able to present the education material as it was previously.”

Tatyana, girl, 10–14, Ukraine

NGO and Cluster representatives working with adolescents with disabilities noted how limited communication options via online learning can be difficult for girls and boys with disabilities.

“Adolescent girls with disabilities, particularly with mental disabilities, have significant difficulties in engaging in online classes or even using the devices or online platforms. Teachers are not able to engage these children through online platforms compared to face-to-face interaction.”

Local CSO working with adolescents, female, Ukraine

CSO staff working with adolescents in Ukraine highlighted a concern about the long-term effects of the continued disruption to education for adolescents that could impact on their transition to higher education and careers. This is a concern for older adolescents in particular, as they reach critical education milestones that are likely to influence their professional opportunities.

“I don’t have any research data, but according to the subjective opinion of our experts, the academic performance and quality of education probably dropped by 50 per cent.”

CSO representative working with adolescents, Ukraine

Socio-economic and intersectional barriers to education

Online education heavily relies on having access to devices, power and internet connectivity. Where students do not have consistent access, a more flexible approach by teachers in terms of deadlines for completing tasks is often required. Adolescent girls discussed the access challenges they face due to having been displaced and their families’ loss of livelihoods.

“I wasn’t able to participate in school for months when we were displaced. I didn’t have [a] laptop or [the] internet. We left everything behind. There was nothing left.”

Hanna, girl, 15–19, Ukraine

Many families in these situations prioritised immediate needs over purchasing new technological devices such as laptops or tablets with their limited financial resources. Access to essential technology and a stable internet connection are reported as particularly hard for adolescents from households with low socio-economic means. A CSO staff member working with adolescents from the Roma community highlighted how limited access combined with prevalent norms that deprioritise girls’ education, create multi-layered barriers to learning.



Lea, 16 year-old internally displaced girl talking to her grandmother in Ukraine.
Photo credit: Mishchenko Mikhailo, © Plan International

“75 per cent of Roma families... don’t have any gadgets like laptops or computers in their homes. Combined with the traditional perspective on the education of girls, how can a Roma girl access school under these circumstances?”

Local CSO working with Roma adolescents, female, Ukraine

2.3.2 How has displacement affected adolescents’ education?

Refugee girls in Poland and Romania described the challenge of switching to a new education system, including **adapting to a different language, curriculum, and levels of academic support provided**. However, adolescent girls and boys also reported advantages to following their host-country education systems.

Challenges and opportunities in joining a new education system

Adolescent girls in Poland consistently reported difficulties with the language barrier, which impacts on their integration into the Polish education system and their academic attainment.

“I had bad grades because I didn’t understand Polish. I studied Polish hard, but I still got F [grades]. I was happy when I got F. Only my English teacher was kind to me.”

Yuliia, girl, 10–14, Poland

“I have very bad grades since I arrived to Poland. Although I study so hard, particularly Polish, all my grades are still F.”

Alexandra, girl, 10–14, Poland

Adolescents also reported that differences between the Polish and Ukrainian school systems have made their integration difficult.

Both systems have three stages: primary, secondary and high school. But the Polish system has performance requirements in order to move on to the next stage. Adolescent girls from Ukraine reported that they often struggle to meet the required academic results, so they are unable move up to the next school stage.

Refugee girls in Poland also reported that textbooks and materials are not designed to facilitate Ukrainian students’ access.

Some also reported feeling pressured and stressed by having to meet the Polish system requirements by teachers, rather than being supported to do so.

“I don’t understand the topics, and we have strict teachers that I can’t go to for help. I can’t go up to them at recess and ask them to explain the topic again because I am very emotional. If they raise their voice at me, I get hysterical. We went through five maths topics and I didn’t understand any of them.”

Daria, girl, 10–14, Poland

“Some teachers, they... just don’t treat me very well. For example, the teacher was rude to me, so I learned to respond to be able to defend my boundaries and myself.”

Polina, girl, 10–14, Poland

Similar challenges were reported by refugee girls in Romania. Government regulations have mandated that as of 1 May 2023, refugee adolescent girls and boys from Ukraine must be registered in the national education system in order to be eligible for financial aid.²⁷ However, without adequate language skills and government support to improve, refugee girls reported that they are unable to follow the classes. Many reported continuing with distance learning from Ukraine, which can further isolate them from regular social interactions in their host community. In order to ensure the education of their children is not interrupted and eligibility criteria for financial support is met, some caregivers reported having enrolled their children in both the Ukrainian government’s online learning platform and Romania’s national education system.

“My mum wants me to be enrolled in [the] Romanian education system. But I don’t want to go to school here. I don’t understand anything because of the language.”

Elina, girl, 10–14, Romania

In contrast to the difficulties in adapting to the Romanian language, many adolescents participating in this research in Romania highlighted the advantages of being able to access high-quality English language programmes through the Romanian education system.

“The language was a barrier, but my determination to learn English bridged that gap. It was a challenge at first, interacting in a new environment, but it soon became an opportunity to improve my language skills and adapt to a new educational culture.”

Katerina, girl, 10–14, Romania

Caregivers fear long-term effects on adolescents’ education

Caregivers in Poland and Romania also expressed their concerns about the impacts on adolescents’ learning of switching between education systems, anticipating difficulties in the eventuality that they revert back to the Ukrainian system.

“First, our girls and boys went to distance learning. Then we switched to Ukrainian schools in Poland. Now, they started to go to Polish schools. Their language skills are not developed enough but the number of Ukrainian schools are getting fewer and fewer every day. My children changed the curriculum and schools three times in [the] last one and half years. We don’t know what they learn or if they do learn. If we go back to Ukraine one day, I am not sure if they can keep up in the system as well.”

Female caregiver, Poland

Caregivers in Romania also worried that adolescents may be caught between the two systems; putting their efforts into attaining qualifications and certifications that may not be recognised by one or the other system.

“There are hubs providing Romanian language classes without any certification which is not accepted by either Ukrainian or Romanian schools. To get a language certificate, girls and boys have to be enrolled in Ukrainian classes but the number of these hubs and schools are also decreasing every day. So how will our children learn the language and integrate to the education system?”

Female caregiver, Romania

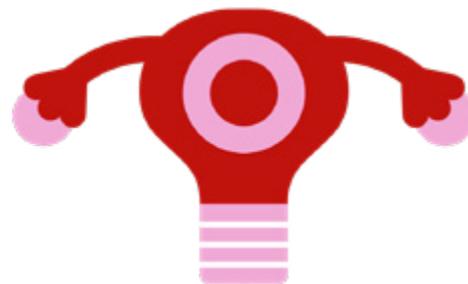
Caregivers were particularly concerned that older adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 will fall significantly behind academically due to what they regard as lower-quality education in host communities. This they fear will impact negatively on their chances for higher education and career prospects.

However, some caregivers in Romania believed that adolescents’ participation in the new education system was important, given both the uncertainty about the future, and the potential positive impact on their wellbeing, including peer-to-peer communication and socialisation skills.

“Our children don’t see learning Romanian [as] necessary. My daughter says ‘what will I do with Romanian? Won’t we go back to Ukraine? I want to go to school in Ukraine’. I understand her. But we don’t know what the future will bring. It is difficult to tell them that we might not be able to go back. So they need to learn the language and integrate.”

Female caregiver, Romania

2.4 Sexual and reproductive health and rights



2.4.1 How has the war affected adolescents' sexual and reproductive health?

Adolescent girls across age groups reported challenges in accessing information and services for their sexual and reproductive health. This included receiving **limited sexual education** and experiencing **restricted dialogue on SRHR issues at home**. Many of the problems have existed since before the escalation of the war, which has limited their access even further.

Challenges in accessing SRHR services

In Ukraine, CSO staff reported that everyone's access to state SRHR services has been limited due to the destruction of hospitals and clinics, resourcing constraints and disruptions to the wider healthcare system in the war. They noted a particular impact on people's access to contraception and family planning services. Problems were also reported in delivering emergency contraception and accessing clinical management for rape survivors in areas close to or on the frontlines, due to pharmacy closures, damaged facilities, and disrupted supply chains. In areas where SRHR services are provided free of charge by state hospitals and clinics, many women and girls still face significant barriers to access, including lengthy waiting times for appointments.²⁸

Marginalised groups including girls from the Roma community find that financial constraints present an extra barrier to SRHR services. A CSO representative working with adolescent girls from the Roma community highlighted that they were especially vulnerable to missing out on already limited SRHR services because of a lack of knowledge around the free services available to them. Adolescent girls from the Roma community can have lower school attendance than their peers, so they also miss opportunities in school to receive more information around SRHR and where to access services, according to the CSO representative.

Restricted sexual and reproductive health rights in Poland and Romania

In Poland, recent rollbacks²⁹ of sexual and reproductive rights, including access to contraception and abortion, were reported by local CSO and I/NGO representatives as the main barriers to accessing these services for both refugee and host community girls. While there are indications that it will soon be reformed, Poland's abortion law is currently one of the most restrictive in the EU.³⁰

Many girls across age groups in Poland said they received no information on free SRHR services, either from the state or non-governmental organisations. Only a few adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 in Poland expressed awareness of SRHR services. However, they highlighted the difficulties they experience in accessing these services due to long waiting times for appointments and unaffordable prices of private clinics.

"I have no idea about the services related to sexual and reproductive health and rights. I have not received any information about this until now."

Tanya, girl, 10–14, Poland

"The consultation services on SRHR alone cost from 200 PLN. How can I get [a] consultation while we barely have money for our basic needs."

Maria, girl, 15–19, Poland

In Romania, abortion is only legal up to 14 weeks. From 2021, sexual and reproductive health rights and services have also faced setbacks, as the Government of Romania stopped funding contraceptive subsidies and sex education, leading to the closure of clinics.³¹

Impacts of the war on menstrual health

Girls described the impact that living through a crisis and displacement have had on their physical health, including their menstrual health:

“At the same time, my menstruation stopped for a few months, adding to the stress. All these changes, along with having to flee with just a small suitcase of clothes that no longer fit, made everything so much more challenging.”

Nastya, girl, 15–19, Ukraine

Navigating menstruation during a crisis, the stress of which may itself affect the regularity and intensity of their periods, can have a profound impact on girls' daily lives and wellbeing.

“I usually have a terrible ache before my period starts... I can't even understand when it will start due to irregularities I experience, which makes me not able to plan anything in my life during my period.”

Ivana, girl, 15–19, Ukraine

Girls' locations and financial resources were the major factors reported to be affecting their access to menstrual health products and services in Ukraine since the escalation of the war. Concerns about physical safety were also cited as barriers to access, particularly for girls in frontline areas. NGO staff working with adolescents in Ukraine reported that girls who are internally displaced, and those in rural areas also faced problems accessing SRHR services.

“After the escalation of the war, the girls living in the areas under shelling or on the frontline, there was not even running water or hot water. Pharmacies were closed. They were not able to access to menstrual hygiene products at all. Many of them used some apps to see how they can make their own menstrual hygiene products by using old bed linens or curtains.”

Local CSO working with adolescents, female, Ukraine

For girls living in institutional care, there is little to no choice regarding the menstrual products they can have, reportedly because staff do not consult them. CSO staff working with vulnerable adolescents in Ukraine noted a gap in the knowledge and awareness of institution staff and management on SRHR more generally, with traditional views and taboos often prevailing.

“Girls in institutional care have access to whatever menstrual hygiene products the institution provides. These girls don't have any pocket money of their own to choose whatever product they prefer. Some directors of these institutions have misinformed views on using tampons. Most of them have been working in the same institution for more

than 30 to 40 years, so they maintain these old stereotypes. Therefore, they provide girls [with] sanitary pads in general, for instance.”

Local CSO working with adolescents, female, Ukraine

Similarly, CSO staff in Ukraine reported that stereotypes and misinformation regarding the use of menstrual products are also prevalent among caregivers. Older adolescent girls in Ukraine also highlighted a lack of awareness among their caregivers of products such as menstrual cups and period underwear, as well as the persistence of misinformation such as a belief among their caregivers that using tampons could affect their virginity.

“I just remembered that we had a similar question in our sexual education survey, and some of the girls stated that they would specifically prefer pads because they've heard their mothers told them that using a tampon while you're still a virgin is not okay, that it will have some bad consequences on your health, and that before you have any kind of sexual intercourse that you are not allowed to use [a] tampon.”

Local CSO working with adolescents, Ukraine

Girls in Poland and Romania also reported experiencing difficulties in accessing menstrual products due to a lack of variety in products, particularly the ones they have used in Ukraine, as well as language barriers and financial constraints.

“It is more difficult for girls who are just starting to menstruate to ask for help. For example, if it happens at school, it can be difficult for them because of the language barrier. In Poland, access to hygiene products is not as open as in Ukraine. There is paper in the school toilet, but unfortunately not pads and tampons.”

Christie, girl, 15–19, Poland



2.4.2 How has the war affected adolescents' access to comprehensive information on SRHR?



According to adolescent girls aged 10 to 19 and representatives of international NGOs and local CSOs, there are **problems with sexual and reproductive healthcare and the realisation of sexual and reproductive rights** across the three countries, Poland, Romania and Ukraine.

Persistent taboos limit access to SRHR information

Discussions about SRHR during focus groups and interviews was often met with hesitancy by adolescents and caregivers in all three research countries. Girls explained how taboos around the topic can constrain adolescents' access to comprehensive information on SRHR, and can enable harmful myths to persist. Many also reported that the subject of sex is often avoided at home. They said that they find it difficult to discuss sexual health with their caregivers.

The role of caregivers and the family environment in enabling access to accurate SRHR information and quality services can be key. However, CSO staff working with displaced families also highlighted that caregivers may avoid seeking professional help for girls in particular, due to negative attitudes associated with sexual and reproductive health services. Such attitudes are driven by social norms and misinformation that can stigmatise adolescents' use of these services.

“Social workers of our partners wanted to take family members for a routine doctor check-up, including an adolescent girl aged 14, to a gynaecologist. However, her mother strongly refused to give her consent... We believe that the mother was afraid of other people thinking her daughter was raped, if she goes to a gynaecologist.”

Local CSO working with adolescents, female, Ukraine

Adolescents receive limited comprehensive sexuality education

“In my school, they haven't given us any sexual education yet.”

Tamara, girl, 10–14, Ukraine

Many girls aged 10 to 14 in Ukraine reported not having received any comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) at school, indicating a gap in the national education system. NGO and CSO staff working with adolescents in Ukraine highlighted that this gap in CSE existed before the escalation of the war, and it has since got worse. This is in large part because of the difficulties with providing quality online sexual education. In addition to the barriers faced by adolescents following education online in general, there is also a reluctance to address this sensitive topic, and thus it may be deprioritised in the curriculum.

“The sexual education was always limited. But it was more about the content before. Now, girls and boys having difficulties in accessing online education experience the same difficulties for accessing sexual education as well. So [it] gets even worse.”

Local CSO working with adolescents, female, Ukraine

Some adolescent girls in Ukraine reported learning about SRHR during a course called “Health, Safety and Wellbeing”. Yet girls like Katalina felt that this course did not provide enough information:

“We had a school lesson on Health, Safety and Wellbeing, which included some information about menstruation, but it was very limited.”

Katalina, girl, 10–14, Ukraine

According to adolescent girls aged 10 to 19 in Ukraine, and those in Poland and Romania who are following the national online education system of

Ukraine, sexual education, though present in school curriculums, is introduced late, towards the eighth grade when students are aged 13 to 14, in biology classes.

“We had SRHR as one of the topics in our biology class. However, our teacher simply decided to skip this topic. Most of [the] teachers even avoid giving very limited information during biology classes.”

Yuliya, girl, 15–19, Ukraine

Girls aged 15 to 19 added that SRHR information is often either skipped, very limited, or presented in a biased and traditional manner. Girls reported some instances of textbooks including harmful content that uses blaming language for survivors of rape.

“There was a whole section in the textbooks blaming survivors while also justifying the perpetrator. Nothing about how to educate girls and boys for the responses when they come across violence or avoid using violence against someone.”

Klaudia, girl, 15–19, Ukraine

Local CSO representatives raise concerns that adolescents' health and wellbeing may be negatively affected by current sexual education that only promotes harmful stereotypes and norms about sex and sexuality.

“There are still certain stereotypes in Ukrainian society regarding sexual education. These stereotypes hinder access for adolescent girls, especially when caregivers are not open to discuss these issues due to deep-rooted taboos. Moreover, teachers and even sometimes psychologists do not want to discuss these issues and provide information to adolescent girls.”

Local CSO working with adolescents, female, Ukraine

In Poland, refugee girls also reported limitations on the provision of CSE, with older adolescents stating that they had not received any classes on SRHR since they shifted to the Polish education system.

Adolescents' sources of SRHR information

The primary sources of SRHR information reported by girls aged 10 to 14 were their mothers or female caregivers, followed by their peers. Some adolescent girls reported experiencing silence on the topic at home and not feeling comfortable initiating these conversations. Others explained how female caregivers have less time to discuss these issues due to shouldering more responsibilities because

of the crisis. Girls instead turn to their peers for information. By contrast, older adolescent girls age reported that they mainly access information online through social networks and online platforms. There was little discussion of whether these sources of information had changed since the escalation of the war.

“I gained my knowledge on SRHR through social networks and books. In social networks, there are actually really cool sexologists, providing information.”

Svitlana, girl, 15–19, Ukraine

“I mostly look at online resources, such as websites or social media, and books sometimes, to learn more about the changes that I experience in my body.”

Maria, girl, 15–19, Poland

Responses from boys aged 10 to 14 in Ukraine also indicated a lack of access to sufficient information on SRHR. Some reported receiving information anecdotally, rather than through any formal channels, reflecting a lack of structured and comprehensive sexuality education, or communication.

“Here and there. I learn information about SRHR here and there if other people talk about it at all. Nothing else.”

Octavian, boy, 10–14, Ukraine

Meanwhile, some older adolescent boys expressed experiencing difficulties in identifying misinformation in online resources:

“Finding information on SRHR is not difficult at all. But understanding what [is] right information and what is wrong is often confusing.”

Vlad, boy, 15–19, Ukraine

Similarly, adolescent boys in Romania reported that they seek out information on the internet. They also mentioned speaking to caregivers, but explained that this is dependent on the closeness of their relationship and if they feel that they are able to communicate openly without shame:

“We need to have these lessons because, probably, this topic isn't discussed in most families, and it's just awkward for a child to approach and ask. So, I think if we consider it from a systemic point of view, at least in the tenth grade, at least in the ninth grade, there should be lessons like that so that they [girls and boys] understand.”

Ivan, boy, 15–19, Romania

Moreover, boys aged 15 to 19 in Romania reported feeling more comfortable talking to their fathers or other male figures within the family or close circle than female ones. However, many boys reported losing their primary information resources in cases where male caregivers and family members have been conscripted as a result of martial law, leaving boys more vulnerable to misinformation as well.

“I can’t just go to my mum at any moment and say, ‘Tell me about this, that, and the other’. But again, it looks quite strange from the outside for guys. Asking something of their parents, especially their mums. It’s another thing with dad because it’s a man talking to a man.”

Oleg, boy, 15–19, Romania



2.5 Adolescence and gender norms

2.5.1 How is the crisis affecting girls' and boys' experiences of adolescence?

Participants in focus group discussions across the three countries discussed how their experiences of the **key life phase of adolescence** have been impacted by the escalation of the war. They and other stakeholders highlighted the ways in which **gender norms shape their experiences** – and how these norms have shifted as a result of the crisis.

Increased adult responsibilities

Many adolescent girls across age groups in Ukraine, Poland and Romania reported an increase in their responsibilities for household chores as a result of changed household structures and dynamics since the escalation of the war. As a result of martial law and conscription into the army, fathers and other adult male family members are absent from many households. The burden of additional domestic and adult responsibilities appears to have fallen more heavily on girls than boys, who reported often carrying out tasks traditionally assigned to their gender like cooking, cleaning, and looking after younger siblings, to support their female caregivers.

“I also do the cleaning and cooking. My mum works all day and my sister is too little to do these. So I help my mum.”

Natalie, girl, 15–19, Ukraine

Girls in single-caregiver households, particularly those led by single working mothers, reported shouldering the burden of caring for younger siblings and engaging in domestic chores. For adolescent girls in Poland and Romania, similar to their peers in Ukraine, more adult responsibilities, including caregiving roles, have become a key part of their daily realities. Caregivers also reported that some refugee girls are engaging in part-time work to contribute to their family's income.

“I am used to helping my mother for housework. Since my dad is not with us, there is only my mum and me left. I clean and cook when she is working.”

Olya, girl, 10–14, Poland

Adolescent boys aged 10 to 14 also described how the escalation of the war has impacted on their time-use and role within the household. They described experiencing a stark transition from childhood to taking on adult roles that are strongly gendered – with some discussing feeling a sense of duty to take care of their families in the absence of fathers or older brothers.

“It's like the war took our childhood away and replaced it with this scary adult world.”

Dmytro, boy, 10–14, Ukraine

Shifting perceptions of traditional gender roles

While the escalation of the war has led to adolescents experiencing a reinforcement of traditional gender roles, as well as an expectation and need to take on more adult responsibilities during a time of crisis, there are also indications that the disruption to 'normal' life has contributed to some shifts in gender roles and attitudes. As Emiliya described, the absence of men in daily life has required women to take on additional roles traditionally assigned to men by gender norms.

In this way, Emiliya indicated how this has demonstrated to broader society and to women themselves that gender norms and roles are socially constructed and not a true reflection of women's capabilities, but rather they are a restriction of their potential.

“... now many men have gone to the frontline, so civilian life is now largely on women... And I think this helps women realise their own independence, their ability to act.”

Emiliya, girl, 15-19, Ukraine

Angelina also described how the escalation of the war has forced women to take on responsibilities that do not align with traditional gender roles. However, she added that this additional burden also brought challenges for many women.

“A lot of women in Ukraine used to be housewives... when everything suddenly changes and you are thrown off track: you are 40 years old and for the first time going to work, it is very difficult for you. It's a

challenge. It's one side. And in our society, the man is the protector. The man protects you, and here... you have to be the protector and the mum and all the other things. I think it's very hard."

Angelina, girl, 15-19, Ukraine

Across the three research countries, adolescent girls showed a significant awareness of the gendered expectations of society, and of how these impact on the choices and experiences available to both girls and boys. Participants discussed how the prevalence of traditional stereotypes of femininity and masculinity affects transgender and non-binary individuals who can feel pressured into adhering to traditional roles and responsibilities that do not align with their gender identity.

"Well, in our country... actually, there is still sexism in the society and there is quite a lot, actually. We're still used to the fact that nobody dictates anything to boys, so they live as they want... it's not always possible for a woman to decide for herself what she wants, because in reality, let's say, there is a lot of pressure on women. Especially young women or girls, they are forced to fit into this pattern. It's very strong."

Daryna, girl, 15-19, Ukraine



Adolescents from Ukraine living in Warsaw, Poland attending an animation workshop. Photo credit: TKaczor © Plan International

Case study 3: Inna, Ukraine

Inna is a 15-year-old girl living near Kyiv, Ukraine. She is part of the Roma community and has a passion for music, which she pursued at her local music school before the escalation of the war. Inna described her life before February 2022 as filled with joy. She enjoyed attending school, spending time with close friends, and exploring her hobbies, and her love for music.

However, with the escalation of the war, Inna's life changed drastically. **"Every day is unpredictable now. The sound of sirens is like a scary soundtrack to our lives,"** she said, reflecting on the constant fear of bombs that is now a part of her daily routine. At home, the situation is equally challenging. Inna described the constant state of alertness that her family experiences. **"Even in our own house, we don't feel safe anymore. The night is the hardest, with the endless sound of sirens."**

The war has also taken a toll on her social life. **"I used to laugh and play with my friends after school. Now, many have left, and I miss them every day,"** she shared. Although Inna and her friends try to maintain their friendship via social media platforms, it doesn't replace the quality time they spent together.

Despite these challenges, Inna said that she finds a temporary escape in music. **"When I play piano and sing, I forget the war for a moment. It's my little world of peace."** Yet, the demanding nature of her school schedule and her responsibilities at home leave little time for music. **"I wish I had more time for my piano. But now, school and home duties consume all my time."**

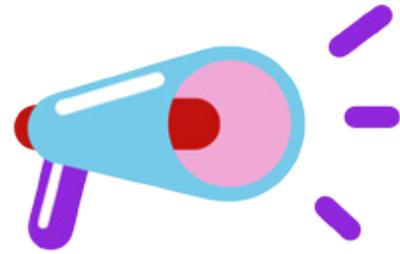
Inna also discussed how this new reality has significantly affected her education and sense of safety. **"I miss the balance of online and in-person classes. Now, going to school feels like a risky journey every day,"** she said of the shift from a hybrid learning model to exclusively in-person classes. Looking to the future, Inna's aspirations have shifted: she now wants to play a key role in the future of Ukraine. **"I wanted to be a singer, but now I dream of being a lawyer, to make a change in my country."** It is an ambition that she says her family supports.

The war in Ukraine has shaped Inna's life in profound ways. **"I used to be a carefree teenager. Now, I long for the day when life will be normal again."**

"I wanted to be a singer, but now I dream of being a lawyer, to make a change in my country."



2.6 Adolescent participation



2.6.1 How are adolescents participating in decision-making?

Adolescents were asked how they participate in decision-making, how they get involved in their communities, and how this has changed since the escalation of the war. Their responses underscored the importance of facilitating the inclusion of adolescents' voices across all levels of decision-making that affect their lives.

At the household level

Adolescent girls and boys reported feeling detached from family decision-making. While some caregivers indicated that they consult adolescents, that was not the case on serious issues such as the decision to relocate due to the crisis. Adolescents are generally not included in the decision-making process in those instances.

“In some decisions, they listen to me. For example, I tell them to have borsch for dinner and they do. But for some, my mum and dad make the decisions.”

Yevgen, boy, 10–14, Ukraine

While some adolescents reported that they consider certain issues to be beyond their concern or responsibility, girls in particular discussed issues with communication with caregivers and expressed that they frequently do not feel understood or heard. Girls in Ukraine reported that they are mainly consulted by caregivers on their schedule, which could be tied to caregivers' dependence on older siblings' availability to take care of younger children while caregivers are working.

Similarly, in Poland, while girls aged 15 to 19 reported having a say in certain family decisions, these were mainly those relating to everyday life. They reported that they are often asked for their preferences regarding meals and leisure activities.

However, their involvement is much less frequent regarding major decisions, such as the decision to leave Ukraine.

“Generally, I am asked for decisions such as meals or having a cat in the house. However, I am not asked in some situations, such as our relocation to Poland.”

Aleksandra, girl, 10–14, Poland

Due to the pressure, stress, and anxiety of war, NGO staff working with families reported that caregivers often have to make rapid decisions for the welfare of their family. This can mean that key decisions are made without consulting adolescents as action is prioritised over participation.

“Many caregivers are forced to make immediate critical decisions which left no room for consulting with their children. For instance, during evacuations, you have very limited time. You need to be quick to save your family. No consultations on these topics which is understandable I think.”

Local CSO representative working with adolescents, female, Ukraine

Factors influencing participation in decision-making

Pre-existing social norms, biases and discrimination also play a role in adolescents' participation in decision-making. For marginalised groups in particular, prevailing practices that normalise the exclusion of adolescents from decision-making can be exacerbated during periods of crisis. For example, a CSO staff member working with the Roma community in Ukraine explained how patriarchal attitudes and traditions shape decision-making:

“In our culture, as a patriarchal community, family decisions are solely made by men or elderly women. This is not unique; many cultures and minorities have similar structures.”

Local CSO working with Roma adolescents, female, Ukraine

For adolescents living in institutions, exclusion from decision-making about their own lives was the norm prior to the escalation of the war. Environments that ignore adolescents' voices are a major barrier to their active participation.

“These girls and boys aspire to become doctors or builders, yet they’re told they will attend a vocational school for hairdressing. Due to their institutionalisation, they’re deprived of the opportunity to influence decisions about their futures.”

Local CSO working with adolescents, female, Ukraine

Marginalised adolescents who often face stereotypes and prejudices, such as members of the LGBTIQ+ community, can be excluded from decision-making in some cases due to their invisibility in society and fear of repercussions from speaking out in public. CSOs working with LGBTIQ+ adolescents highlighted the importance of facilitating channels and spaces for adolescents to participate in decision-making without fear.

“LGBTIQ+ adolescents are very invisible in the community. Most of them aged 15 to 19 are afraid of sharing who truly they are due to the stigma and discrimination. However, they are pretty active in here, in our hubs for LGBTIQ+ adolescents. They actively participate in decision-making, not only through mechanisms, but personally they also come up with a lot of suggestions every day.”

Local CSO working with LGBTIQ+ adolescents, female, Ukraine

In Romania, older adolescent boys described a key factor that they feel has strengthened their ability to take part in decision-making: namely, the local labour laws that allow them to work from the age of 16.³² As well as greater independence, they linked earning money with authority and therefore access to decision-making.



2.6.2 How are adolescents participating in volunteering and activism since the escalation of the war?

This research revealed that the level of volunteering varies among adolescent girls in Ukraine. In Ukraine, younger adolescent girls reported an **increase in their participation** in volunteering since the escalation of the war, while in Poland and Romania, girls face limitations on their participation such as **language barriers, peer pressure and lack of motivation.**

Girls' engagement in volunteering and activism in Ukraine

Girls in Ukraine reported participating in volunteering activities since the escalation of the war, including fundraising for the armed forces through selling handmade bracelets and fortune cookies, and volunteering in communities to support older people and animals. Some reported experiencing barriers to participation, such as restrictions on their age:

"Because of my age, I didn't have much of an opportunity to do this because often, to volunteer, they ask you to be an adult."

Natasha, girl, 15–19, Ukraine

Others explained how a fear of bullying by their peers makes them reluctant to participate:

"I think that nowadays, because of the same bullying, girls and boys are very insecure, and they constantly think that they will be laughed at for doing something they want to do. And because of this insecurity, many of them keep silent and don't take part in anything."

Anichka, girl, 15–19, Ukraine

CSO staff working with adolescents noted a gender difference in adolescents' levels of participation, with girls generally being more active in volunteering activities compared to boys.

"We usually see a lot of participation from girls and very little participation from boys... Boys usually ignore some of these things."

Local CSO working with adolescents, female, Ukraine

Older LGBTIQ+ adolescents reported being active and engaged in volunteering and community actions within their LGBTIQ+ communities in Ukraine, where they find a sense of safety and acceptance.

"I see they are pretty active in the community ...that's the safe place. So that's why I think it's so important for them to feel this sense of belonging to this place. It's not even the place. Yeah, that's just people who are there."

Local CSO working with adolescents, female, Ukraine

Girls' engagement in volunteering and activism in Poland and Romania

Younger adolescent girls in Poland demonstrated relatively lower levels of engagement in volunteer work despite their interest in getting involved. They indicated that this was often influenced by a lack of support from caregivers to take part in extracurricular activities, and language barriers. Those who do participate in volunteering often focus on assisting Ukrainian communities by generating funds through the sale of handmade goods.

"I want to volunteer. I've been asking my mum for a long time. I met a girl at school, she is Tatar. We agreed with her that we would draw and sell drawings...My mum says that no one will buy anything from us. I've withdrawn into myself, and I don't draw anymore. Now I think I draw badly myself."

Asya, girl, 10–14, Poland

In contrast, girls aged 15 to 19 in Poland and Romania demonstrated overall less enthusiasm for engaging in volunteering and activism than their younger counterparts. Some girls explained that they had other priorities, while others like Nataliia expressed a sense of burnout, and a loss of morale when efforts do not lead to change.

"In most cases, when you become a volunteer, what motivates you to work is to get some kind of response. Often people take it for granted. When you don't get some kind of response, the motivation goes away."

Nataliia, girl, 15–19, Romania

2.7 Visions for the future



2.7.1 What are adolescents' visions for their future and the future of Ukraine?

During this research, adolescent girls and boys were asked about their visions of a post-war future. Their responses demonstrated a determination not only to rebuild, but to create a **more equal and inclusive Ukraine**. As experts in the key challenges faced by adolescents in this war, their perspectives on what is needed to realise a better future for Ukraine should be **central** to recovery efforts.

“As youth, we are the future of Ukraine. We are very knowledgeable in many areas which will make our country much more advanced. I improve myself and people around me by showing a positive attitude every day to ensure I represent my country well in Ukraine and in all of Europe.”

Katerina, girl, 15–19, Ukraine

The initial priority expressed by girls in all three countries was to urgently reconstruct what has been lost in Ukraine, with both adolescent girls and boys seeing themselves as integral participants in Ukraine's recovery:

“We will need to rebuild everything at first... Then somehow maybe solve problems with education.”

Tatiana, girl, 10–14, Ukraine

“Many people lost their homes and businesses. It will take a long time to rebuild and compensate. I mean the development of Ukraine should be our priority.”

Svitlana, girl, 10–14, Ukraine

“We will rebuild our country and make it even better.”

Vadym, boy, 10–14, Ukraine

Prominent in girls' visions for the future of Ukraine was a determination not just to rebuild but to improve society – including obtaining equal rights and opportunities, tackling corruption, and shifting mindsets and harmful

norms, particularly for marginalised groups:

“I wish a future where there is more societal acceptance and fewer prejudices against each other.”

Oleksa, girl, 15–19, Romania

“People with disabilities are always invisible in Ukraine... In the future, I believe that Ukraine will be much more inclusive and understanding [in] all these matters... Maybe it is still slow but I know we will have high standards in inclusivity in the future.”

Olga, girl, 15–19, Ukraine

Girls underscored the need for the provision of MHPSS as central to Ukraine's recovery from the war:

“I chose emotional wellbeing. I think each of us needs a psychologist and increased communication after the war, so that everyone can talk to someone about their experiences there.”

Solomiya, girl, 10–14, Ukraine

For refugee girls in Poland and Romania, their visions of the future call into question where they envisage themselves living. Many expressed a strong desire to go back to Ukraine, describing how they miss their families, friends and lives before the escalation of the war.

“I will go back to Kyiv. When the war is over, I will go back there and work there.”

Oksana, girl, 10–14, Romania

Some instead explained that they seek to remain in their host country to build a future for themselves, even though they have faced challenges with integration. This aspiration often related to associating Poland and Romania with Europe or the European Union, which girls regarded as an advantage for their access to opportunities.

“Although I don't consider myself a part of society here, I don't see my future in Ukraine. I want to continue my life in Poland.”

Zhenya, girl, 15–19, Poland

“I want to stay in Europe, not planning to go back to Ukraine. I think I have a better quality education and livelihood opportunities in Europe.”

Irina, girl, 10–14, Romania

Similarly, some refugee boys in Romania explained that they prefer studying and working in Romania or other European countries due to better opportunities and higher salaries. However, they also wish to eventually return to Ukraine, their homeland.

“I think, there is a chance for many people. The doors of Europe are open now. So you can live and work here. Or get your education in Europe and go back to Ukraine. A European diploma would already be a plus.”

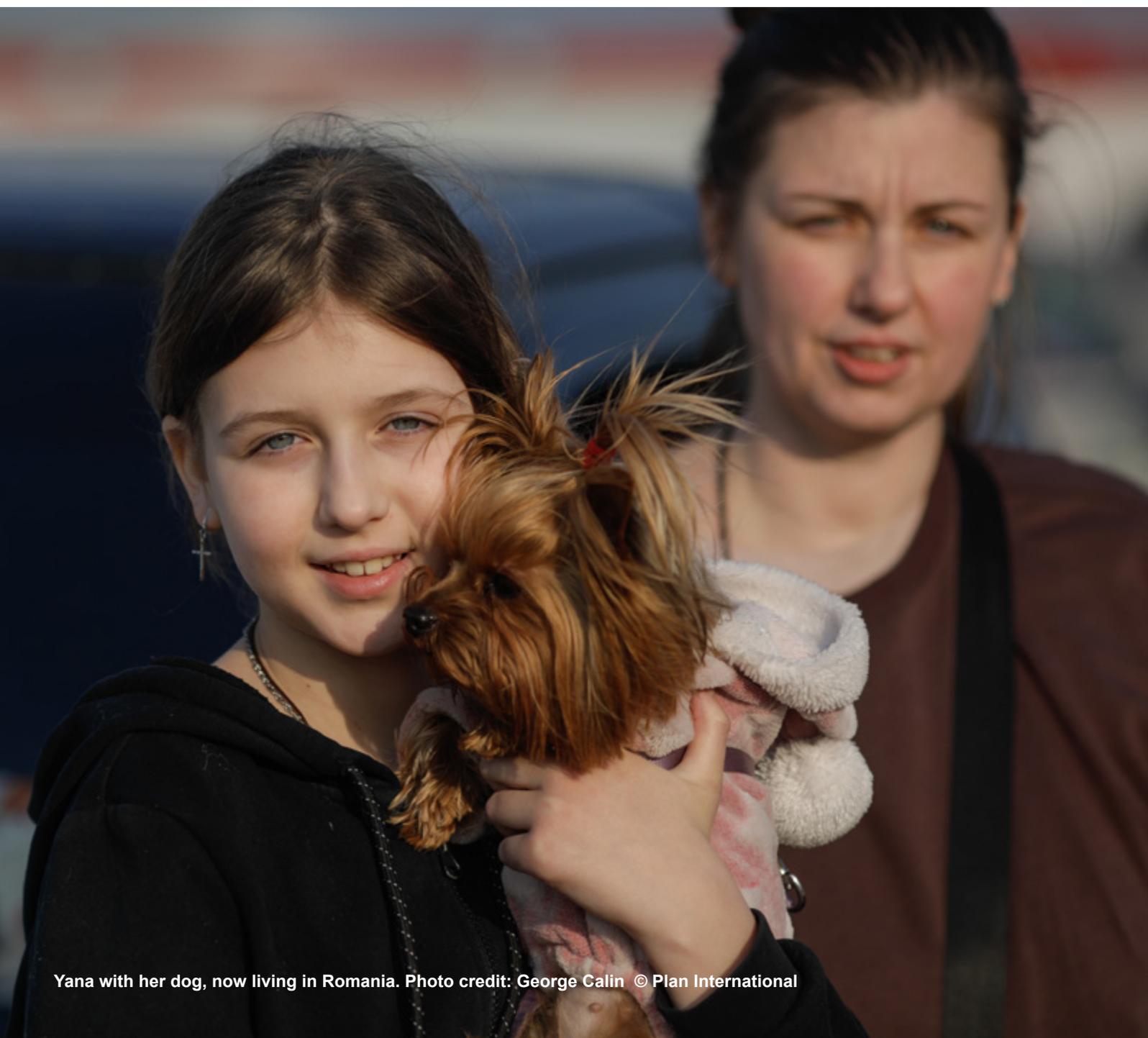
Mykhailo, boy, 15–19, Romania

Some girls like Daniela in Ukraine also indicated that their vision of the future is as part of Europe:

“We will celebrate for weeks. Maybe two, even three weeks. It will be all holidays. There will be no bomb sounds. We will not be afraid and everyone will celebrate the victory of Ukraine that day. We will be celebrating as modern European countries.”

Daniela, girl, 10–14, Ukraine

Meanwhile, stakeholders anticipate declining interest and financial support for Ukrainian refugees in neighbouring countries. They expect that there will be increased challenges for refugee families living in Europe, particularly in terms of finding employment and accessing educational opportunities.



3. Conclusion and recommendations

3.1 Concluding comments

The war in Ukraine is affecting adolescent girls and boys across all areas of their lives.

Faced with numerous new challenges since the escalation of the war in February 2022 as well as the exacerbation of existing issues including gender inequality and the lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, adolescents in Ukraine, Poland and Romania are nonetheless navigating this unique and complex phase in their life with determination and resilience. The gendered impacts of the war, particularly on adolescents and young women in all their diversity, continue to be overlooked, as much of the international community focuses on military aid. Despite the extensive initial media coverage and international response to the war in Ukraine, the war and its impact risk becoming yet another forgotten humanitarian crisis as attention to the long-term humanitarian impact on internally displaced and refugee populations decreases.

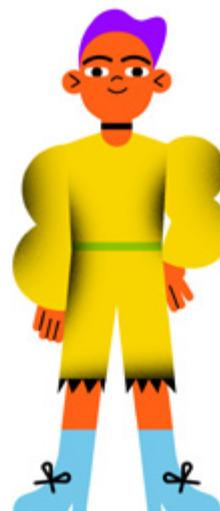
So often excluded from decision-making about their own lives and the policies that shape their experiences and access to opportunities, the adolescent girls involved in this research demonstrated their awareness of how the crisis is impacting on young people. **Only by centring the voices and perspectives of adolescent girls and boys, in all their diversity, in decision-making for the future of Ukraine will recovery lead to a peaceful, more gender-equal and inclusive society for all.**



3.2 Recommendations

The recommendations that follow are drawn from the key issues raised by adolescent girls, boys, their caregivers, and the key stakeholders working to support them who took part in this research.

They also draw from the recommendations developed by adolescent girls in Ukraine, Poland and Romania who participated in validation workshops where they discussed the findings of the research. The recommendations seek to highlight the priorities raised by the participants in this research and to incorporate their suggestions and directions for change.



Durable Solutions

In Ukraine, Poland, and Romania:

- To address and reverse the dire consequences of the war, including impacts on adolescent girls, both **long-term and localised solutions are needed**. This includes donors working with national and local authorities to strengthen the resilience of child protection, education and health systems including through initiatives aimed at supporting social services, social workers and teachers.

targeted outreach and long-term MHPSS interventions both towards adolescent girls and adolescent boys, especially as adolescent boys are engaging in different negative coping mechanisms and exposed to other forms of online violence and risks than adolescent girls are.

- National health authorities, in consultation with youth-focused organisations, should implement **a widespread information social media campaign** in Ukrainian, Russian, Polish and Romanian to increase public awareness on MHPSS services and to destigmatise seeking mental health help among adolescents.

Mental health and wellbeing



In Ukraine, Poland, and Romania:

- National and local governments, with donor support, should **urgently scale up freely available MHPSS services** for adolescents and their parents while ensuring these services are also available in Ukrainian and Russian. Required MHPSS services include: individual and group counselling services; programs providing parents and their children with coping and parenting under pressure strategies; child, adolescent and youth friendly spaces; mobile units to reach remote rural areas; community based social cohesion activities and online or phone based counselling services which adolescents can access confidentially.
- National and local governments, with donor support, should fund and implement

Education and social cohesion



In Ukraine

- The **return to face-to-face learning** in Ukraine, where it is safe to do so must be prioritised by the Ukrainian Ministry of Education and Science and local administrations, as well as by the education authorities in host countries including in Poland and Romania.
- Bilateral, multilateral, and private sector donor support is needed for the **reconstruction and refurbishment of damaged schools** with certified bomb shelters and access to drinking water. All refurbished or reconstructed schools should be accessible to children with disabilities, with specific reintegration strategies targeting those children.

In Poland and Romania:

- Education authorities should enhance education policies to provide **additional language and accelerated learning classes**, as well as support to strengthen teachers' capacity to teach in multi-lingual and cultural classes.

In Ukraine, Poland, and Romania:

- Local authorities, in particular those in charge of child protection, in consultation with local service providers and NGOs working with affected youth populations should undertake **targeted outreach towards adolescents** not engaged in any face-to-face learning or recreational activities.
- Local education authorities, with guidance from the national education ministries and local education service providers, need to develop **localised strategies to address significant learning losses**, which are particularly acute in remote areas, and to provide in-person activities to improve socialisation skills and social cohesion among adolescents. This includes identifying transition pathways to allow school aged children from Ukraine to reintegrate into the formal education system once they go back to Ukraine.
- **Enhanced collaboration is needed** between the national education ministries to recognise cross border learning and align national curriculums based on competence.
- International donors and national authorities need to **continue supporting education programming**, as a key platform for social cohesion within Ukraine and in host countries and via which to enhance integration efforts in host countries.

Protection from violence

In Ukraine, Poland, and Romania:

- In consultation with women's organisations, local authorities need to **increase their capacity on survivor-centred responses** to gender-based violence including the capacity of service providers, police and the judiciary. In



Ukraine, this includes authorities at all levels implementing at national and local levels the recently ratified Istanbul Convention.

- As part of their commitment to address GBV, national authorities must **extend GBV prevention to online safety awareness programmes** to keep adolescent girls safe from growing risks of online and in person sexual exploitation and abuse and trafficking.

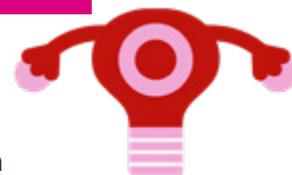
In Poland and Romania:

- **GBV services** funded by national authorities and implemented by service providers need to be made **available in multiple languages** and with clear communication that reporting cases will not impact refugees' protection status.

Access to sexual and reproductive health and rights

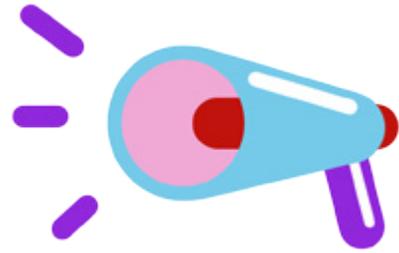
In Ukraine, Poland, and Romania:

- National health and education authorities should support and initiate projects that **expand access to comprehensive sexuality education** in multiple languages, as well as free and confidential online, via phone, social media and in person access to SRHR information.
- Education authorities should **mandate comprehensive sexuality education**, respectful relationships and the prevention of gender-based violence from a young age as standard elements of the school curriculum.
- Education authorities should ensure that comprehensive sexuality education should also **address sexual orientation and gender identity**, to enable LGBTIQ+ students to learn important sexual health information to stay healthy, but to also promote inclusion and respectful conversations as well on gender equality, gender identity and sexual orientation. Comprehensive sexuality education classes are an opportunity to also provide adolescents, especially adolescent girls, with information on how to protect themselves from risks of sexual exploitation and abuse both online and in person.



Supporting the participation of adolescent girls in decision making processes

- International donors, national and local authorities, and international and national civil society should provide young people impacted by the war in Ukraine, including adolescent girls and young women in all of their diversity, with **formal and informal opportunities to influence their own futures** and be connected to all decision-making processes relating to Ukraine including at the local, national and international levels.
- International donors, national and local authorities, and international and national civil society should **regularly seek out the views of young people**, including adolescent girls and young women in all their diversity, and refugees currently living in host countries, including through the development of online platforms which invite inputs of young refugees on issues relating to the future of Ukraine.
- Within Ukraine, local authorities should ensure that **localised participatory processes are accessible to young people with disabilities** and are open to internally displaced and non-displaced youth, including adolescent girls.
- International donors and national authorities should promote the **direct participation of adolescent girls and young women in all of their diversity** across all decision-making fora, including through the establishment of dedicated consultative mechanisms aimed at hearing the perspectives of women and young people, especially adolescent girls. The participation of those most marginalised including from the Roma community, LGBTIQ+ individuals and young people with disabilities must also be ensured.



Endnotes

- 1 'Since the escalation of the war in Ukraine' refers to the period since February 2022 when the existing war in Ukraine, that began in 2014, escalated.
- 2 OCHA, UNHCR (2024). Ukraine: Summary of the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan and the Regional Refugee Response Plan (January 2024) - Ukraine | ReliefWeb
- 3 OHCHR (2024). Two-year update. Protection of civilians: impact of hostilities on civilians since 24 February 2022
- 4 OHCHR (2024). Two-year update. Protection of civilians: impact of hostilities on civilians since 24 February 2022
- 5 UNHCR (2023). "Refugee Population Statistics Database", 24 October 2023, accessed 24 April 2024
- 6 UNHCR (2023). "Refugee Population Statistics Database", 24 October 2023, accessed 24 April 2024
- 7 UNHCR (2024). "Situation Ukraine Refugee Situation" (unhcr.org), accessed 24 April 2024
- 8 UNHCR (2024). "Ukraine Refugee Situation Population Movements, Factsheet #1"
- 9 Save The Children (2022). The Experiences and Wellbeing of Children Fleeing Ukraine, November 2022
- 10 Men between the ages of 18 and 60 might be called upon for military service and are not allowed to leave the country. However, there are certain circumstances in which these individuals can still leave Ukraine. Men who have been removed from the military service or are temporarily unfit for service due to health problems, as well as those with disabilities, are permitted to leave as long as they possess the necessary documentation. VisitUkraine.today (2023). "Departure of men abroad in 2023: what has changed for military servicemen"
- 11 UNHCR (2024). "Ukraine Refugee Situation: Poland", accessed 24 April 2024
- 12 Since the escalation of the war, Romania has been used as a transit point for many of the people fleeing Ukraine before settling in other European countries such as Hungary or Germany, with more than 3 million refugees crossing its border at some point since February 2022. Around 149,800 refugees from Ukraine have registered under temporary protection in Romania.
- 13 UNHCR (2024). Regional Refugee Response for the Ukraine Situation
- 14 UNHCR (2024). Regional Refugee Response for the Ukraine Situation
- 15 UNICEF (2024). "Ukraine - Frontline children: battling mental trauma, underground", press briefing, 23 February 2024
- 16 UNHCR (2024). Regional Refugee Response for the Ukraine Situation
- 17 Education in emergency: Save Schools website. Education in emergency (saveschools.in.ua), accessed 6 May 2024.
- 18 Plan International advocacy messages.
- 19 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan – Plan International advocacy messages.
- 20 This was due to a combination of factors including challenges with recruiting participants that meant in some cases that participants did not live in the same geographical areas, and security concerns that in-person data collection could pose a risk for both participants and researchers in certain locations.
- 21 Recruitment of participants in Poland was difficult overall, in part due to research fatigue among adolescent girls and their caregivers
- 22 In areas in the south and east of Ukraine, closest to the frontline, all schools remain closed – school-aged children living in these areas only have access to on-line learning.
- 23 Disability Rights International (2023). "Addressing the situation of children with disabilities in residential care as part of the Ukraine response"
- 24 The Government of Ukraine has made a commitment to, and has started reforming the care system and prioritising family-based care: Government of Ukraine official portal (2023). "Ministry of Social Policy: Protection of the rights of Ukrainian children is a priority in cooperation between Ukraine and the European Union | Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine", (kmu.gov.ua)
- 25 CARE International (2023). Rapid Gender Analysis: Ukraine. October, 2023.
- 26 Social media application
- 27 This regards the 50/20 Program: Dopomoha.ro (2023). "Conditions of the new program"
- 28 CARE International (2023). Rapid Gender Analysis: Ukraine. October, 2023.
- 29 Human Rights Watch (2022). "Poland's Constitutional Tribunal rolls back reproductive rights", 22 October 2022
- 30 Aljazeera.com (2024). "Poland lawmakers take steps towards liberalising abortion laws", 12 April 2024
- 31 The Wire (2022). "In Romania, Hard-Won Abortion Rights Are Being Systematically Undermined", 20 January 2022.
- 32 According to Romanian labour law, a natural person shall acquire the legal capacity to work at the age of 16. International Labour Organization, Labour code of Romania, <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/travail/docs/1630/>



Until we are all equal

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Cover photo: Two sisters and a friend who are living in an accommodation centre for internally displaced families in Ukraine. Photo credit: Albina Vinar © Plan International

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Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organisation that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child but know this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected.

Working together with children, young people, supporters and partners, we strive for a just world, tackling the root causes of the challenges that girls and vulnerable children face. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and we enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge.

For more than 85 years, we have rallied other determined optimists to transform the lives of all children in more than 80 countries.

We won't stop until we are all equal.

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