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Every day is a rainy day: what impoverished motherhood in Ukraine is like

Saturday 30 December 2023, by [BUTS Oksana](#), [GU Olenka](#) (Date first published: 10 October 2023).

Women raising children in Ukraine had been a vulnerable group already before the war. Stuck at the rampless entrance, unable to get inside with a stroller. Denied promotion or fired because of pregnancy. Seen as an unreliable tenant because of the kids. The full-scale war, however, has reinforced the challenges mothers have always faced – and created new ones.

This article is based on 30 in-depth interviews [1] with mothers receiving humanitarian aid. The text analyses challenges related to mental health, employment, housing, financial situation and humanitarian assistance.

How to learn about mothers' problems?

This research is based on women's testimonies about their experiences of living in the war. Research participants are not a homogeneous group. They are mothers from different oblasts, from villages and big cities. Some of them live in frontline territories, while others were displaced to 'safer' areas. Some of the women work full-time or part-time, and some of them have lost their jobs during the invasion or earlier. They are mothers raising children totally on their own, as well as those relying on a partner's or family's support. Some have access to childcare institutions such as kindergartens, others do not. They differ in age, educational background and health status. At the same time, these mothers share what can be called economic vulnerability: when they were selected for interviews, all of them were in need of humanitarian aid, that is, they could not afford even the necessary food and hygiene products.

It is important that the topics discussed during the interviews were determined by research participants. The interviewers only asked several broad questions: about changes in one's life during the war, current challenges, and the visions of one's future. After a participant touched upon a certain topic, she was asked additional related questions. This approach makes it possible to outline the issues that are of most significance for a person, and not to propose hypotheses deriving from the researcher's knowledge and experience.

How to finally go to the therapy?

Mental health turned out to be one of the most important issues for mothers. Surprisingly, women openly talked about their difficult mental state, even though this topic is sensitive and or even taboo sometimes. The war, the general situation in the country, financial difficulties, housing issues, the separation of families, — all this creates tensions and uncertainties.

Lacking opportunities to receive emotional support, the women were happy to get invited to an

interview and emphasised that they could also benefit from such a conversation.

Participants would often cry during the interview. In such cases, we usually suggested ending the conversation or taking a break. One woman insisted on continuing the interview even though she could not hold back her tears — because she had no one else to talk to about her problems:

'No, I understand that I need this conversation. ... Somehow, I just cannot talk about such things with my husband 'cause he reacts to my tears... well, with helplessness, and then there's anger. Because there's nothing he can do about it, and so I feel bad and... well ...(pause)... At home, like, with my mum or sisters, I don't bring up such things either because ... well, I've got no one to talk to. I guess, this is the first such conversation after all that happened (sighs). If you can bear my tears, I will speak (laughs).'

— **Mother of a 2-year-old, Kyiv**

Since the beginning of the full-scale war, a lot of free psychological assistance programs have been offered — both by the state and non-governmental organisations. However, for the women in the focus of our research, such programmes were often ineffective. How so?

There is a widespread idea that Ukrainians do not seek psychological help because of their 'low level of psychological culture' or stereotypes about psychotherapy, lack of knowledge or unwillingness to admit their issues. However, the study of mothers' experiences shows that there are also a number of structural barriers on the way from realising the need for psychological support to finally getting it.

The cost of psychotherapy is obviously a barrier. But even free psychological support may be inaccessible because accessibility is not only about money. For example, free psychological sessions available for Ukrainian women often take place online. Research participants rarely had the opportunity to be alone in a room to talk with a psychologist — both because of inadequate living conditions when a lot of people share a relatively small flat, and because of the lack of childcare support:

'Unfortunately, there's no psychological help for mums. It's bad. Basically, there are some free psychologists for kids, but for mums — it's mostly online. It's not always convenient. It's bad that there's no option to come in person, and so that someone talks with the child and you also talk to a specialist. Because sometimes you just can't handle everything. I have nowhere to leave my child during online [sessions]. He won't let me sit, he needs my attention all the time.'

— **Mother of an 8-year-old, big city in the east**

If therapy sessions or support groups take place offline, the organisers do not always provide playrooms or a babysitter. Another challenge, especially in large cities, is the venue of such events. Often they are located in the city centre for 'maximum convenience' but this makes it difficult for mothers from remote areas to get there:

'If there was such an organisation here in the neighbourhood, where I could come with my children, for example: one child goes to his age group, and I and the younger child go

to his age group. There are groups where specialists see children and mothers, or sometimes even mothers alone. [...] There is such a thing, but only in the city centre.'

— Mother of two, 2 and 10 years old, IDP, big city in the east

Another problem is that free psychological help involves a limited number of sessions (normally one or two). The research participants find this ineffective: just a few conversations 'won't help.' The women do not want to try free therapy as they have no money to continue it anyway. Often, organisations that help vulnerable groups try to reach as many beneficiaries as possible — and therefore the help each person receives is small. It happens this way because NGOs rely on funding from donors who want to see large numbers and indicators that can be easily calculated. From the perspective of mothers, though, a better solution would be to focus on a smaller group of women, but thoroughly and for a long period.

Today, there is a popular narrative that 'we will all have to heal for a long time after the war,' and this is about mental health issues. However, there are many people who will not be able to afford private treatment — nor will they be able to participate in free programmes. These, among others, are mothers in poverty. In order for them to receive psychological support, it is not enough to just fund the programmes. One must take into account how accessible these programmes are to women with children. This means considering the lack of resources such as time and private space.

Facing poverty

When financial instability is constantly preventing one from making ends meet, life turns into a continuous rainy day. Denying themselves basic necessities, unable to pay medical bills, and constantly in debt — this is the reality for some Ukrainian mothers.

'Before [the full-scale war] I had to plan for about a year so that I know I've got enough saved up in case I'm fired or something — I will have a plan for a rainy day. But now, when I'm living in this rainy day, I'm like, "Okay, now I have this and that, and what's next? Lord, a whole month ahead!" We'll see when the month passes, if we don't have something, we'll think about what we're doing next.'

— Mother of a 3-month-old, IDP, Kyiv

'My only struggle as a result of the war is that I ended up without means of existence, that's it. That's the main difficulty. I mean, I can't afford to even buy milk for my child. We aren't able to buy bread every day. We buy a loaf of bread once a week and eat a bit every day. My child loves milk. I used to get him a litre every day, but now we have a litre of milk per week. And that's thanks to the grandma who receives a pension of 3,200 [UAH] and gives us some money once in a while...'

— Mother of an 8-year-old, big city in the east

Some of the women were in difficulties already when the war began, but the Russian invasion deepened their financial problems. Others had been in a much better situation, which worsened after 24 February 2022. The main factors affecting the research participants' financial situation were job loss and forced displacement.

'The war a little... Not a little — it reinforced these problems a lot because... It all started when I got pregnant and stopped working. Well, I had been working till I was seven months pregnant, even seven and a half. But there were problems anyway because my husband had surgery, he lost his job, it didn't work out with another job, and the problems accumulated... we were in debt and so on, and the war just aggravated everything.'

— Mother of a 2-year-old, Kyiv

According to the [Ministry of Social Policy](#), since 2014, 4.9 million internally displaced persons have been registered in Ukraine. The actual number of people who were forcibly displaced, [according to international organisations](#), reached 6.9 million in August 2022. Many left their homes with only the bare essentials, that is, significant unplanned expenses awaited them after relocation. It was especially difficult for people moving from rural areas to cities as they lost the opportunity to run a household plot, which provided them with products, and sometimes additional income, too.

'The first difficulty was, when we were moving into a rented flat, that we had to buy everything. That flat was empty, we had to buy even spoons and forks. Blankets, pillows — everything. And when we arrived here, we received help from foreign charities, and all that money, and even more — all was spent on new household items, plates, pots and pans. Plus clothes. The kids are growing. The younger one needs new clothes every three months. The older child is growing, too. And we all needed winter clothes, winter shoes. We left all our stuff at home as we were mowing in summer.'

— Mother of two, 2 and 10 years old, IDP, big city in the east

The mothers' pre-war financial situation affects their visions of the future. Those whose situation worsened after 24 February have a more positive view of their future after the end of the war. They anticipate that they will be able to return to their former level of income and comfort. Those who barely made ends meet even before the invasion think of their own future after the victory more pessimistically. However, now both 'groups' are living one day at a time trying to stay afloat.

'Everything has changed': mothers looking for jobs

Employment is another issue mothers struggle with the most. Many women reported that they or their partners had recently become unemployed, particularly as a direct result of the war.

Some enterprises in different regions of Ukraine were destroyed in hostilities; many went bankrupt or temporarily suspended their activities. For workers, however, this has one consequence — the loss of workplace and income. Participants also told us about cases when they remained officially employed but did not receive a salary for the work performed.

This also happened to women Oksana Buts spoke with when studying [precarious employment](#) during the war. Some employers, for instance, did not pay the workers claiming that they gave their profits to the army. 'Helping the army' has become another excuse employers use to justify salary cuts:

R: Yes, we were notified, we were told that we would be working 'for an idea,' that is, for free, but later we would be paid for all these months for sure. Maybe, in summer, they said. We were told those who go to the office will get 90% of their wages. And those

working from home, [...] they will get 60%.

I: But why not 100%?

R: Well, they said they need to pay rent and everything, so it'll be this way... At least something... And the director said he will give something to the Armed Forces...

– Mother of a 7-year-old, big city in the east

Mothers struggle to find a new job more than other workers as the labour market is not inclusive for women who are forced to combine paid work with reproductive labour at home. So what can the State Employment Agency offer women who cannot dedicate 12 hours a day to work? A research participant recalls one of their suggestions:

'I need part-time employment. But no one offers me such a job. All the options that are there involve working from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. or even worse. That's it. I have nowhere to leave my child — I have no mothers, no grannies or grandpas, no one. I'm alone with the child and can't leave him anywhere. They told me at the State Employment Agency, "Find other mums, bring your children, one mum will go to work and earn money while the other looks after the children, and then you can split the salary." That's the option they've got.'

– Mother of an 8-year-old, big city in the east

However humiliating this advice from a state representative sounds, often mothers have no other choice but to resort to [informal practices of mutual assistance](#). However, many do not have this opportunity, because relocation often leads to the disruption of social ties.

During the war, combining paid work with caregiving became even more difficult as many schools have gone online. In the case of primary school students, this means that someone must be at home with them. Most often, it is the mother whose chances of finding any kind of work reduce even further.

Another problem in the context of employment is downward mobility. Often, women who have lost their jobs due to the war and displacement, manage to get a job only with significantly lower pay and status than they used to have.

'Everything has changed. First, despite having two degrees, I cannot find a job ... but cleaning. Yesterday was my last day as a cleaner in an office. I have no choice because I need to feed [my child] somehow, buy clothes, toys, sweets, and I ... I don't wanna restrict him — he's already facing so much. [...] The problem is I don't have relatives. I'm alone in this town. Back at home, I knew many people, had many opportunities, but here I'm nobody, a no-name. I am just a cleaner no one says hi to.'

– Mother of a 9-year-old, IDP, a small town in the west

Change places three times in six months: what is it like — to be constantly afraid of losing a home?

Housing is one of the key issues for mothers who have experienced displacement. Their housing conditions have significantly deteriorated.

'We have a three-room flat back at home. Well-maintained, in a nice area. We only just bought it, we put our heart and soul into it. [...] And, well... our flat is a 'Soviet' one, but my brother, he'd just repaired his and hasn't even lived there since repairs. Not for a day!'

— Mother of a 3-year-old, IDP, Kyiv

Mothers are often forced to relocate more than once. There may be different reasons: high cost of rent, uncomfortable conditions for a long stay, cohabitation of several families in a small space, or conflicts with landlords. The level of anxiety and uncertainty in such cases only increases.

'Well, we've changed placed three times in half a year. First, we stayed at my brother's, then rented a flat, and then another one. There was a possibility that we would have to move again. Thanks God, the owner... He said, "I don't know, whatever my brother decides, maybe he'll want to sell [the flat]." And I thought, "Heck no, the fourth time in a year!.." (laughs)

— Mother of two, 2 and 10 years old, IDP, big city in the east

Because the Ukrainian rental housing market is not regulated, tenants often end up having no contract with the landlord. And when there is some sort of a written contract, they are rarely a guarantee because in order for a tenant to protect their rights, they have to go to court and pay for legal assistance. Therefore, there is often abuse on the part of the landlord: they might change the rent without reason or warning, or simply evict the tenant.

'Our flat in [city in Donetsk Oblast] is completely destroyed. Totally. There's no flat anymore — only ruins. With all our belongings... My parents' house, thank goodness, is fine. [...] I couldn't stand [the landlord's] behaviour anymore, I was even thinking about going back, to the parents. [...] I used to pay 4,500 [UAH]. Then, after two months, [the landlord] began, "I'm gonna raise the rent." Even though we had a contract. I said, "Why? Have you improved anything? Has anything changed?" — "No. Or I will evict you and my relatives will live here."

— Mother of a 9-year-old, IDP, big city in the west

Mothers suffer from discrimination in the housing market due to various factors from the region of origin, which is especially relevant in the case of IDPs, to the presence of children.

'The woman who rented out her flat to us, she was at the hospital, and then when she was being discharged, she needed her flat back. [...] There were five of us, I am

pregnant, and two cats. We started looking for housing... The most interesting part: "We don't consider people from Donetsk Oblast." This is so ... unpleasant. Then, no pets, of course, [...] and families with kids they don't consider, too. I say, "But we're having the baby only in December!" In the first six months, she won't do anything..."

— **Mother of a 3-month-old, IDP, Kyiv**

The study results suggest the role of housing as a 'foundation' during war. Now, housing is what mothers build long-term plans around; it is what they derive from when making important decisions. And what they are most afraid to lose. However, the unregulated rental housing market and the [lack of social housing](#) make this 'foundation' even more shaky for vulnerable Ukrainian mothers.

War is a time when part of the population is in a state of reasonable fear of losing their home: both due to physical destruction and the inability to pay rent or debts. However, having a roof over your head is everyone's right, and that is why it is important for the state to [expand social housing funds](#) right now.

Humanitarian aid quest

The research participants expressed gratitude for the humanitarian aid they were given. However, there are several issues that make the process of receiving the aid more complicated. First of all, it is the situational nature and irregularity of the provision of aid. As in the case of psychological help, organisations often provide little support to large numbers of women, rather than the other way around.

'In Lviv, there is, I think, [name of an organisation]. [...] My God, they must have given us diapers four times or so, and I'm very grateful. I'm very grateful to everyone who was able to help with food and diapers because, you know, sometimes I was just crying, really ...(pause)... That was the only regular help, and the rest... In autumn, I would often search for help, fill in many different forms, and sometimes... Just recently, Caritas gave us food and hygiene. [...] There is no regular, steady support.'

— **Mother of a 2-year-old, Kyiv**

Thus, mothers are not able to predict how much aid they will receive, which makes it difficult to plan expenses. So women, although they receive support, remain in a constant state of uncertainty.

Having to 'collect' the aid in different places, women spend additional time commuting, and that is part of the increasing burden of reproductive labour. When one has to pick up hygiene products, food and household items at three different locations (sometimes, while being with a child), a search for humanitarian aid turns into a quest. But mothers relying on the aid have no other choice. This is especially relevant for IDPs: in order to settle in a new place, they often need many household items which they cannot afford to buy.

'Relatives sent us a stroller from [city in the Donetsk region]. And at a humanitarian warehouse, they gave us a cot, for which we are very grateful! [...] We came, they were giving out diapers there, and clothes. And we had a chat with a volunteer. [...] I told him earlier that we needed a cot. And when we were just about to leave, people brought this cot, it wasn't even registered yet. And he called us, "Guys, is this what you need?" We

were like, “Yes, that’s it!” And we took it and left. Only there was no mattress in the cot. I started searching online for, you know, the cheapest option. And we went to a mattress factory (laughing), there was such a nice dude — he made our mattress right in front of us.’

— Mother of a 3-months-old, IDP, Kyiv

Sometimes, mothers tend to compare the help they receive with what is granted to other categories of people. For instance, those who did not relocate may complain that they receive less support than IDPs. Those with one or two kids argue that some aid is given only to large families.

‘UNICEF gave financial aid, 2,200 [UAH] a month, for three months. That’s all. Also, I once received a food supply set from our city council at the beginning of the war. Recently, I filled out a form for [charity name], and they also sent me a food supply set. Usually, NGOs refuse to help because I am not an IDP.’

— Mother of a 12-year-old, big city in the centre

‘And now the aid is mostly going to large families, moreover, I’ve read, only to those with four or more children. We have two children, so the aid has kind of ended, and standing in lines with a kid...’

— Mother of two, 2 and 10 years old, IDP, big city in the east

Even though mothers receive certain support, they can still feel abandoned and unfairly deprived. Such practices of [othering](#) can be explained as a reaction to the lack of support from the government under the conditions of extremely limited resources.

Who will help the mothers?

In today’s Ukraine, there are numerous NGOs and other initiatives whose activity is focused on overcoming the consequences of the war, in particular helping certain groups that are disproportionately affected by the Russian invasion. Such organisations often commission sociological research to understand how they can make the support as effective as possible. This research, too, was done for an NGO.

When researching social issues for the non-governmental sector, we reveal the often non-obvious experiences and contexts that organisations should consider in their activities. As researchers, we explain the need to take into account all the complexity of everyday challenges that the NGO’s beneficiaries face. After reading a research report, they see, for example, that free online therapy for a woman in a tough situation makes little sense if the woman shares a small flat with her parents and children and has no private space. They see that the value of a box with humanitarian aid decreases significantly if the woman spends all her ‘free’ time commuting and queuing for the box. And thus does not spend that time working, having rest, learning or getting therapy.

However, even if the non-governmental sector carefully studies the results of research and follows all the recommendations, it will not be able to replace the state in performing its social functions. Supporting people who are experiencing the difficulties mentioned in this text — often all at the

same time, as a result of the war or regardless of it — is primarily a function of the state. The targeted support that NGOs can provide will never be effective enough: mothers' problems are interrelated, and only programmes working simultaneously at different levels will give sufficient results. Such projects — given their systematic nature, complexity and costs — [must be implemented by the state](#). Women who raise children during the war, lose jobs, get relocated three times in six months and have no one to talk to about their problems except a long-burned-out researcher need a functioning social policy.

Oksana Buts

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P.S.

Commons

<https://commons.com.ua/en/problemi-materiv/#footnote-marker-1-1>

Footnotes

[1] Interviews were conducted by Olenka Gu and Yulia Vorotnyak in March-May 2023, offline and online