

Europe: “Sexualized Exploitation is the Main Risk”

Tuesday 9 April 2024, by [PODOROZHNYA Nastia](#), [POLOZKOVA Anastasia](#) (Date first published: 20 March 2024).

What difficulties do Ukrainian refugees face in conservative Poland? How to cope with the consequences of sexualized violence in a country where abortion is banned and “facilitating” the procedure can result in criminal prosecution? Why do international organizations ignore the problem of vulnerable groups? Nastia Podorozhnaya, founder of the organization “Martynka”, talks about supporting Ukrainian refugee women

At least [3.5 million people](#) from Ukraine fled to Poland in 2022 because of Russia’s military aggression. A huge number of people found themselves in a new country without support, confused and vulnerable. This is when a hotline to prevent crimes against refugee women was created. The initiative quickly developed into an organization that helps people make doctor’s appointments or get information about abortion and provides psychological and legal advice; a shelter for victims of violence was opened in Krakow. Now, however, [funding for Martynka](#) and other aid organizations is being cut because international funds do not consider the situation a crisis.

— The history of Martynka began almost two years ago with a chatbot to help Ukrainian refugees. What does the organization do now?

— Requests dealing with reproductive issues were among the most frequent last year: termination of pregnancy, emergency and conventional contraception, help in case of sexualized violence. 18 percent of all requests in 2023 were in this area. In order to help people with reproductive health issues, we have partnered with Women on Web (WOW), an organization that helps women with pharmaceutical abortions. Among other things, this organization provides pills for medical abortion upon request. There has been so much demand from Ukrainian women that WOW began to provide abortion pills to all Ukrainian women for free.

Feminoteka, an initiative helping women in situations of violence, had to expand its staff and hire a Ukrainian psychologist, only to discover that there was little demand for psychological aid among Ukrainian refugees. However, Martynka’s work shows a different picture: in just one month we did as many psychological aid sessions as Women on Web had done in eight months. In total, we provide about 200 hours of free psychotherapy every month. Among Martynka’s services, psychological counseling is in the highest demand.

Legal assistance is the second most popular demand. We provide about 15-20 hours per month of free legal counseling.

We also have a secret shelter in Krakow for refugee women who experienced violence. We receive help requests for survivors of human trafficking, sexualized violence and domestic abuse. Women, alone or with children, can spend a month in the shelter, provided with basic necessities, hygiene products, food; receive primary financial, legal and psychological aid and advice for finding work. We help the mothers to find kindergartens and schools for their children. After a month, women

usually leave the shelter having solved basic issues.

— Did the Polish authorities or NGOs help when Martynka's shelter was opened in 2022?

— We decided to open the shelter in the summer of 2022. There was a spike in cases of violence at the time and women started coming to us asking for shelter. We also needed shelter for survivors of war, because places where refugees are usually housed tend to be overcrowded, and such conditions are not conducive to a person's quick recovery from their experiences. Martynka started out by renting cheap and safe accommodation on Booking.com for those who needed it for a few nights. But it soon became clear that we needed our own place. Finding an apartment for a shelter proved to be a difficult task: nobody wants to rent out their property for such purposes. But we managed to find a shelter apartment in Krakow with the help of a real estate agent. The place has eight beds that are not currently completely filled. We aim to find safe housing for women in the city where they are, especially if they have a job there. For example, we receive requests from Gdansk, Warsaw and Wroclaw. If demand for shelter increases in the future, we will rent another apartment.

Polish authorities and NGOs did not participate in the opening of the shelter. We received financial support from the international feminist foundation [Urgent Action Fund](#), as well as from the international organization Global Fund for Children, because in 2022 many foundations were still ready to financially support organizations helping refugees from Ukraine.

— Do you often encounter situations in Martynka where survivors go back into the situations of systematic violence?

— Most often, a woman who comes to the shelter has decided to break with her past life. There are strict rules in the shelter: it is forbidden to share your whereabouts with those who can harm; to publish photographs that can lead to the discovery of the shelter; to invite guests. These rules help you get a fresh start. Of course, there are always risks of returning, especially if the woman stays in the same city as her former partner. In Martynka's practice there was only one case when a victim returned to her abuser after staying in the shelter, but in general it is quite common among people who receive other types of assistance in our organization.

— At the very beginning of the war, when there was a particularly large influx of people from Ukraine to Poland, a lot of information circulated about the cases of human trafficking. What are the main dangers Ukrainian refugees face?

— Sexualized exploitation is the main risk. A typical situation: a young woman was texting with a guy on Tinder before the war; she is displaced when hostilities break out; the guy offers to move in with him. So she gradually finds herself in a dependent situation, after which quite often the partners drag the refugee women into webcam and sex work industry and get them hooked on drugs. Quite often the women do not even realize that they are in serious trouble due to their dire psychological state. They justify the rapist's actions with financial problems. Which, of course, is never right.

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As for human trafficking, Ukrainian women already had Europe's highest rate of exploitation by human trafficking rings, and this rate increased with the war. We need to keep in mind that human trafficking isn't easy to recognize. In many cases, the victims cannot recognize that they were in

such a situation. Responses to refugee surveys and Martynka's internal data point to that. We dealt with five cases of human trafficking during 2023. However, the UN's migration agencies have [reported](#) no increase in human trafficking rates since the beginning of the war.

— What are the consequences of the UN releasing such reports?

— Aid organizations are losing funding. The offices of large foundations that used to provide substantial financial support have started to leave Poland. By 2023 we lost about 70% of organizations and donors who in 2022 were willing to help us. We have to deal with the fact that potential donors no longer want to help because they do not consider the situation a crisis. At the end of last year, we were forced to impose a cap on the number of free consultations for certain categories of requests. In addition, the reduction in funding poses a risk to the shelter and the people who stay in it.

— Where does the distorted view of the overall situation come from?

— Many foundations conduct their own surveys on the need for assistance, but refugees usually say they don't need anything. So, foundations switch to other projects. However, asking for humanitarian aid from organizations is not something that people willingly do. It is a matter of dignity. People refuse to admit the fact that they are refugees and seek help. For someone who used to have a decent salary it is really hard to find themselves in a vulnerable position.

Another barrier for humanitarian aid is bigotry. Refugees are reluctant to request aid because they do not want to be confronted with racism. These are the factors that official surveys do not take into account.

— What are some difficulties and risks that refugee women are now facing in Poland?

— For instance, it is now very difficult to rent an apartment because of the housing crisis. Some ads are being posted of cheap rooms for rent. A woman responds to this ad and comes to a showing only to discover that half of the rent must be paid in the form of providing sex services to the landlord.

Refugees have increasingly been facing discrimination. Ads saying "not for Ukrainians" were rarely seen until recently. Many refugees face labor exploitation or get cheated out of their wages. The unavailability of legal aid for workers exacerbates this latter problem.

— What are some of the most common ploys used by those who draw refugee women into various kinds of exploitation?

— Early in the war, when there was a large influx of refugees, some men were standing at the Polish border with [dubious] signs offering supposedly free accommodation to single women. We detected "volunteers" at the railway station in Krakow who could not say on whose behalf they were acting. There were cases of organized removal of refugees on buses from Krakow: people were promised accommodation in monasteries and boarding houses, but were asked about the quality of their teeth...

A typical case in Martynka's more recent practice involves a boyfriend who puts a refugee woman under sexual exploitation under varying pretexts. In some other cases, it is acquaintances who draw a woman into such activities: for instance, she does a photo shoot, people working with her gain her trust and gradually draw her into exploitation.

— Poland has very conservative legislation on abortion and emergency contraception. Does Martynka often face legislative restrictions in its work?

— The situation is such that if I were to give any woman an emergency contraception pill from my own stock, it would be a violation of the law for both parties. However, there is an organization in Poland that gives out such pills without a prescription. There is also a gynecologist, Jaroslaw Gurnicki, on whose website you can fill out [a form](#) and get a legal prescription to buy emergency contraception for 10 zlotys (2.5 euros).

There are several factors behind the illegal circulation of emergency contraception pills and prescriptions to buy those. First, in Poland, doctors can refuse to write a prescription for such pills or a pharmacist can refuse to sell them on prescription on the grounds of religious and personal convictions. In a pharmacy it is often possible to get ahead by demanding a written refusal. With doctors, unfortunately, it is more difficult.

Secondly, not only performing an abortion is a criminal offense, but also assisting a woman who is going to terminate her pregnancy. This is punishable by up to three years of imprisonment. Martynka's activities remain legal, because according to Polish law, the dissemination of information about abortion, the pill, and even the organization Abortion Without Borders is still allowed. However, it is punishable by law, for example, to give a friend a ride to the post office to pick up a parcel of pills; to pay for an abortion; to take a woman to another country for an abortion; to give her your own pills. Friends, partners, husbands, and even mothers of women have been getting jail time for this. The first ever sentence for "abortion facilitation" has recently been [passed on](#) Justyna Wydrzyńska, an activist of the Polish organization [Aborcyjny Dream Team](#). She handed pills directly to a girl who requested help from Aborcyjny Dream Team [the court sentenced her to eight months of community service].

— Abortion in Poland is now permitted only in cases of rape and incest, and when the life or health of the mother is at risk. However, even in such cases it is not easy to terminate pregnancy, is it?

— In Martynka's experience, even survivors of rape can only terminate pregnancy illegally. Women have to produce a written confirmation from a public prosecutor that an investigation of rape has been opened. Acquiring this confirmation often proves to be a problem: survivors do not always report to the police, and, more importantly, not all cases are investigated.

Furthermore, doctors often refuse to perform. According to the current Polish law, doctors cannot refer a woman to another gynecologist once she has been refused a termination of pregnancy for reasons of conscience. This is not because all Polish citizens are so devout, but because doctors are afraid of losing their jobs or even going to jail for performing those abortions, which are in actual fact still legal. Gynecologists are afraid to perform the procedure, even if they have permission from the prosecutor. For example, a gynecologist from Szczecin who performed legal abortions was prosecuted. During the search, the police took her phone from her, where she kept information about her patients in messages. This is not just an isolated case, so the concerns of doctors are unfortunately real.

— You mentioned that rapes are not always investigated. Why is that so?

— This is the most frustrating and difficult topic of all. The problem is how rape itself is defined. For example, victims often go into a stupor at the time of the assault, unable to scream or resist. When this comes up, law enforcement may claim that what happened does not have the indicators of rape. At best, they will consider it a violation of physical integrity. In other cases, a woman in a clouded or shocked state of consciousness says that nothing happened to her, although the gynecologist providing medical care sees the obvious consequences of rape. The doctor and the police completely ignore the emotional, physical and mental state of the victim. It is especially common for them to

ignore rape allegations from women with severe mental illness or teenagers, even when all the evidence is there.

The problem of abortion, which we mentioned, is also often connected with rape, but this is hardly ever discussed. According to the Polish Foundation for Women and Family Planning FEDERA, about 150-200 thousand illegal abortions are performed in Poland every year. According to official statistics, in 2021 there were only 1-2 legal abortions due to rape. Only once did Martynka manage to bring a case of rape against a refugee to court. The rapist went to prison. But so many cases like this remain uninvestigated...

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— What advice does Martynka give to women who find it impossible to have a legal abortion?

— We do our best to give them all the information we can. For example, we tell them about Abortion Without Borders, a network of organizations in a number of European countries. They help with surgical abortion at any gestational age. We also explain to them that if you are 12 weeks pregnant, it is quicker and easier to get a medical abortion than a surgical one.

We have also often dealt with those suffering intense grief in cases of abortion due to abnormal embryo development. Such abnormalities are not usually until after week 17. In such cases, people turn to Abortion Without Borders because Polish doctors cannot perform surgery even for medical reasons at this stage. Abortion Without Borders helps with abortion abroad, but also provides financial assistance, as this procedure can cost anywhere from 700 to 1000 euros or even more. They help everyone, but especially refugees from Ukraine.

— You told in an interview about a case when Martynka helped to help a woman flee from Ukraine to Poland who had been systematically abused at home and needed a safe place to live. How did the war affect the situation of survivors in general?

— For some women subjected to domestic violence the war actually provided a window of opportunity. They realized that they could leave the perpetrator of violence by leaving the country. Martynka helped several women with children who left abroad.

Educational work is an important aspect of Martynka's activities. We share on our social media information on various kinds of violence so that everyone could recognize it in their own relationships. We receive a lot of feedback from our subscribers who found our posts useful. And more people who have experienced violence have contacted us.

— What change in the attitude of victims of domestic violence do you observe when dealing with aid requests?

Regarding domestic violence in Ukraine, I am not in a position to say, as I did not work in this field before the war. However, requests for support from women who have burned out as moms often end up becoming requests for domestic violence support. In most cases we find out about abusive family relationships while providing other basic support. I think that the war exacerbated existing conflicts while also putting women, who were already in a vulnerable position, into further economic and emotional dependency.

One case that we had was of a young woman whose background included every kind of violence: she had been through an abusive relationship, drawn into human trafficking when the war began, survived rape and got pregnant. Not until all of this happened did she request help from Martynka. I believe these cycles of violence are linked. Being in a helpless position with a history of systematic domestic violence, women are vulnerable to falling victims to human traffickers when they are fleeing the war in Ukraine. The recent increase in cases of violence received by Martynka can be attributed to the fact that women only find the strength to seek help after a year.

— In Russia, there is also an increase in cases of domestic violence associated with war, although we do not have any hard data yet. Men returning from the war play a major part in it. How does the wartime situation affect the lives of women in Ukraine? What is the difference between the victims in Ukraine and in Russia?

— It is very difficult to have the conversation about the consequences of the war trauma. Ukraine has a rehabilitation program for personnel returning from zones of combat. In spite of this, women continue to face the consequences of war at home. It is difficult to work with the problem of domestic violence, which is exacerbated by PTSD, in a situation where Ukraine continues to defend itself from Russia's military aggression. It is difficult even to publicly raise the issue. There are air raids and curfews during wartime. Victims cannot easily escape their homes because of potential danger all around. There is no such problem in Russia, of course. If a Russian veteran who came back from the war beats his wife and children, the woman has at least a hypothetical opportunity to leave. Ukrainian women do not.

At the same time, funding for organizations in Ukraine working with the problem of [domestic] violence has been cut, because the UN has recorded a decrease in domestic violence in Ukraine. This led to organizations leaving the region, even though problems remain. I find it hard to understand how the problem of domestic violence can be ignored in a country at war. It makes me question the principles on which large international organizations work.

— How does the increasing conservatism of Polish politics affect aid to women?

— The parliamentary election in 2023 was a relative success. However, the results may have a negative impact on women's reproductive rights. This time, the democratic opposition won seats in parliament, but the majority of seats were still taken by the conservative party, which promotes anti-abortion legislation. And although the new Prime Minister Donald Tusk has promised that legal abortions up to 12 weeks of pregnancy will be introduced in the first hundred days after taking office, there may be a referendum on abortion in Poland. It seems to me that this is a wrong way: human rights are not a matter to be decided by a referendum.

As for the problem of non-recognition of the facts of rape, this issue is also being raised in Parliament. It is necessary to change the criteria by which the police establish the fact of rape. As for the work of feminists and activists, that still carries risks, from arrests and searches to systematic bullying, including in the media.

— How have you changed as a person because of Martynka?

— Helping those who request aid from Martynka is something that gives me inspiration. Talking to these people makes me change myself and change the world around me. For example, it has become impossible for me to tolerate disrespect and rudeness that we all have to face. Working in Martynka makes you learn how to respond to challenges and keep your personal boundaries. I have also come to enjoy working with women. Our team is seven women and one non-binary person.

Working in Martynka has changed my overall perspective of women's labor. When I see a mom with children on the street, I realize how much invisible effort she has put into their upbringing and arranging their lives, which is also life in emigration in many cases. When I started helping women, I didn't plan to create Martynka as an organization, but at some point the workload increased and I was appointed director. I needed to learn how to effectively manage the organization and the team, because I wanted Martynka to be able to help everyone who needed support.

Anastasia Polozkova

Nastia Podorozhnaya

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