

# Ukraine: why we are closing our center for displaced women in Lviv

Monday 12 August 2024, by [Feminist Workshop](#), [LE TRÉHONDAT Patrick](#) (Date first published: 9 August 2024).

**In this month of August, we are celebrating exactly two and a half years since our Feminist Workshop opened its first shelter for internally displaced women. At the start of the invasion, we opened three shelters. Two of them stayed open for six months. Today, we would like to announce some important news for us: our largest center, which has been operating since June 2022, is closing its doors.**

In this publication, we'd like to summarise our work, tell you more about our experiences that we may not always have covered. And to answer the question of what we plan to do next.

## **Why is the refuge closing?**

To be honest, the closure of the refuge is a great sadness, not only for the crisis team that opened the refuge, but also for all the teams in our organisation. Visitors to our events will have realised that for two years, our organisation's office was a small room in the large refuge building. That's why, very often, lunches at the office took place in the communal kitchen with the refuge residents, over conversation and coffee. Our community events were held in the attic, where the children who lived in the shelter played at other times, outside of the events. So it's a very important place for our whole organisation. And it is very dear to us. We believe that the shelter has fulfilled its original function as a temporary 'home'.

We have also maintained this shelter entirely thanks to international donors, and it has now become impossible for the crisis team to raise the funds needed to continue its work.

It is important to stress that the issues of funding and the feasibility of continuing activities have come together to form the same situation: it has become more difficult for associations to find money for shelters, whereas municipal shelters have free space and the capacity to accommodate more people.

## **What can we say about our work with refugees?**

First of all, it certainly came at the right time! We opened such a large shelter when the temporary shelters set up in the kindergartens and schools of Lviv closed their doors. We received a lot of criticism about the fact that six months of large-scale war had already passed and the associations had only just started to do something about it. We didn't have the same resources as the state to launch a large-scale reception and shelter people in one day. We had no premises and no staff. We needed time to find funding, to plan and, finally, to carry out work that we had never done before. But we managed to meet the needs of the situation very quickly.



In particular, in June 2022, when a large number of temporary shelters were closed in schools and kindergartens. This is where the story of our shelter begins. We sent out announcements to various groups of displaced people. When the refuge opened on 1st June, just one family, the Kiselyovs, whom you have probably heard about in our articles, came to visit us. They liked the place and chose a room. Within half an hour, everyone started coming: the refuge was full from day one!

We think the same applies to the closure of the refuge. At the moment, the situation in the Lviv region, with the influx of people, with the number of people who intend to stay here, is fairly predictable, but not chaotic. Many people have been living here for years, there is a small influx of new people, and people always choose to stay, or to move to places close to home, so that they can at least get there.

That's why temporary shelters like ours are no longer an urgent need for the city at this time. We have fulfilled our function and the time has come to abandon the provision of accommodation services. However, if you are looking for somewhere to stay in Lviv and the surrounding area, please contact the Displaced Persons Assistance Center on +380505554461.

According to the national rules for social services, a social service such as a refuge has certain requirements for the organisation of space. For example, it specifies what a bed must look like and how many square metres must be available per person. The new Resolution 930 also clearly describes the requirements relating to the rules of residence and the behaviour of employees and residents. This means that there are general rules: no drinking, no smoking, no fighting, and so on. In fact, social work requires a much greater involvement of one person in the life of another. And that has its advantages and disadvantages. The main question we have been thinking about throughout our work is to what extent our help should have limits and to what extent these limits are objective in the current situation.

Let me give you an example that struck me during a conversation with another colleague. She was telling me about a family of elderly men and women that she had taken into her accommodation center. They arrived with no papers, just a bag of belongings: everything had been burnt. My colleagues welcomed them, gave them clothes and food, and helped them find their papers. Then the question arose as to whether they should find work. They helped the man in this family find a job on a building site. On his first day working on the site, he had an accident and died. The same social workers, employees and volunteers from the shelter helped to raise funds for the funeral ceremony. And they buried the man. This case often makes me think about these boundaries: do they need to exist in today's situation? These days, social assistance has already gone beyond any possible classification of social services, even in cases like this.

### **What did we do while the refuge was in operation that we didn't think of?**

We investigated the disappearance of Black Pearl cream from a bedroom, helped a 60-year-old woman learn to literally say "no" and stand up for her boundaries. We've helped her look for food, we've raised funds for her rehabilitation after a kidney transplant. We carried out repairs to a house where the residents of our refuge were about to move. We organised songs, parties and picnics. And we tried to figure out: how many kilos of food do you need for a picnic for 50 people?

We put an end to fights. We have developed methods to help people accept the help of a psychologist. For example, we asked two people at odds to cook borscht together. Together we produced a magazine about the lives of the residents of our home. We helped them find jobs, we listened to them... We placed a mentally handicapped person in supported housing, we helped her overcome an eating disorder, we tried to get someone out of a suicide attempt, we played with children, we taught a disabled woman how to write, we organised film clubs, we talked to support them... We didn't manage many things. Maybe we didn't know how to do it properly, maybe we were too busy with our own affairs to think about it. We're very proud of the crisis team who took responsibility for this work. Speaking of these people, I'd like to recall a quote from a cartoon where one character says to another, "Yeah, I like people who don't do stupid things": "Yes, what I like most are people who don't worry about things like reality". We had to find solutions on the fly. In some situations, there was no solution and the whole team got together for a glass of wine and a pizza. We attended many supervision meetings during which we cried like crazy and said "no, we'll never go back to that refuge".



And there were moments when we got together, hugged each other and told each other how cool we were, that we'd done an incredible job. That's why working in a refuge wasn't about living your own life or that of your family and friends. It was about living the lives of 20 people who lived in our refuge every day: with their problems, their joys. We rejoiced at their successes, we mourned their failures and we were angry when new restrictions appeared. To sum up, I would like to say that, given the fact that we met these people in such a situation, this work was marked by a great deal of tenderness and care.



If I had the opportunity to say something to all the people who lived with us during that period, I would say that it was very important to me. During the first two difficult years of the full-scale invasion, when I was separated from my family, who are now living under occupation, I wasn't able to help my family. It was very important for me to be able to help and be useful. It was a mutually beneficial relationship. We helped you as much as we could to keep going, and you helped us. I think we all needed each other to be able to survive this war and try to get on with life.

The shelter is closing, but we are continuing to help women in crisis. We plan to continue our digital literacy courses and recruit for the 'Moving On' retraining programme. The difficult but invaluable experience we have gained at the shelter will certainly lead to new social projects. We're working towards victory!

The text was prepared by Katya, crisis coordinator. With a lot of love!

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## **Feminist Workshop**

**Translation Patrick Le Tréhondat**

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### **P.S.**

Feminist Workshop, a feminist group based in Lviv.

Website

<https://femwork.org/en/category/fm-news/>

Facebook page

<https://www.facebook.com/feministworkshop>

On the refuge a Commons video - English subtitles available in the settings via the cogwheel.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=74v3N-F7rVs&embeds\\_referring\\_euri=https%3A%2F%2Fcommons.com.ua%2F&source\\_ve\\_path=OTY3MTQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=74v3N-F7rVs&embeds_referring_euri=https%3A%2F%2Fcommons.com.ua%2F&source_ve_path=OTY3MTQ)