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Superhero in a skirt: Psychological resilience of Ukrainian refugee women in Poland. A thematic analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the diverse experiences of Ukrainian refugee women in Poland amid the ongoing Russian war, employing a community-based participatory action research approach in collaboration with a Polish foundation aiding Ukrainian war refugees. With the practical aim of formulating recommendations for the third sector assisting refugees, 33 semi-structured interviews (M = 40.29; SD = 11.41) were conducted between December 2022 and February 2023, seeking to understand and identify factors building and hindering psychological resilience. Our study unveiled the complexity and diversity of refugees' situations, revealing various coping strategies and distinct resources coexisting with psychological distress. Despite this diversity, certain common and often unmet needs (stability and safety, basic needs) were identified. The study also highlights refugees' agency, the need to prioritize current needs. The findings emphasize the significance of natural social support and varied coping strategies for fostering psychological resilience. Ongoing research is recommended to track the evolving well-being of Ukrainian refugee women in post-2022 Poland.

Introduction

The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine since February 24, 2022, has led to more than 10,000 civilian war-time casualties (Statista Research Department, 2024), along with multifaceted adverse impacts on global aspects. This includes repercussions on food security (Hellegers, 2022), energy prices (Liadze, Macchiarelli, Mortimer-Lee & Juanino, 2022), the global economy, and both physical and mental health (Sheather, 2022). The crisis has forced more than 6.4 million Ukrainians to flee (UNHCR, 2024), creating the largest migration crisis since World War II (Anghel & Jones, 2022). Extensive devastation in Ukrainian regions has resulted in damage to residential buildings, healthcare facilities, and infrastructure (Anjum, Aziz & Hamid, 2023).

Ukrainians sought refuge in western Ukraine, neighboring countries, and beyond Europe. Poland, among other EU countries, for over a year has hosted the largest number of Ukrainian refugees. In the first month of the war, between 2.4 (Pacewicz, 2023) and over 3 million (Straż Graniczna, 2022) Ukrainian citizens, mainly women, children, and the elderly (Bukowski & Duszczyk, 2022), fled to Poland. This influx has significantly altered Poland's demographic landscape, transforming it from a predominantly culturally homogenous country (cf. Alesina, Devleeschauwer, Easterly, Kurlat & Wacziarg, 2003) into, at least, a bicultural society.

Polish society exhibited unprecedented mobilization to aid those fleeing Ukraine due to the Russian invasion. Volunteers, humanitarian institutions, and ordinary citizens rallied to provide support, including private homes for refugees. This grassroots effort gained widespread media attention, portraying a narrative of solidarity (cf. "volunteer country", Szlachetna Paczka, 2023; "society of solidarity", Arak, 2022; UNHCR, 2023).

This mobilization of social support is a common consequence of catastrophes (Kaniasty, 2012). However, as predicted by the social support deterioration model (Kaniasty, 2003), social support inevitably wanes, as witnessed in Poland. Throughout 2022, a discernible decline in overall support was documented (Długosz & Izdebska-Długosz, 2023). Altruistic endeavors were further overshadowed by concerns, hostility

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(Kubiciel-Lodzińska & Kownacka, 2023), antagonisms and conflicts (cf. Baran & Grzymała-Moszczyńska, 2022).

Moreover, the ad hoc assistance displayed inefficiencies, including overcrowded accommodations, organizational chaos, insufficient resources, and communication issues leading to problems with cooperation between humanitarian organizations and various levels of public administration. The idealized image of a "society of solidarity" was challenged, notably by insufficient support for various minority groups and individuals requiring additional aid, such as the elderly or those with illnesses (Woroniecka-Krzyżanowska & Urbańska, 2023). The overall situation is exacerbated by the psychologically challenging circumstances faced by refugees.

The literature on migrants' mental health, particularly forced migrants, often focuses on the disorders etiology, especially PTSD prevalence (Anczyk & Grzymała-Moszczyńska, 2021). This emphasis seems understandable, as refugees are frequently confronted with the aftermath of traumatic events associated with warfare and exile. As the stressors associated with finding a new host country and home persist, it becomes evident that the trauma resulting from war and its associated stressors remain unabated even after individuals cross the border (Anjum et al., 2023). Various challenges characterizing forced migration include uncertainty of the future (Posselt, Eaton, Ferguson, Keegan & Procter, 2018), a diminished sense of personal control, learned helplessness, stigma, unemployment, poverty. Refugees also suffer from symbolic poverty, being typically portrayed as vulnerable victims (Kortendiek & Oertel, 2023), which may have a negative impact on attitudes towards them (Liu, 2023). These challenges intersect with issues commonly linked to migration, irrespective of whether it is forced or voluntary, such as lack of social support, loneliness, status loss (Aycan & Berry, 1996), and discrimination.

The recovery process can pose substantial challenges for forced migrants, which may be aggravated by acculturative stress and exigencies of daily life. As isolation and lack of connection to the host community are among critical risk factors, the attitude of the host community becomes a question of paramount significance. An unwelcoming or hostile reception may exacerbate the challenges faced by the refugee population, leading to further exclusion and marginalization (Anjum et al., 2023).

Notably, despite psychologists' focus on PTSD and trauma, many, if not most refugees, demonstrate resilience (Bonanno, Romero & Klein, 2015) and engage adaptive strategies to cope with both: the adverse circumstances that they have left behind as well as new challenges in the host country (Oviedo et al., 2022). Psychological resilience may be conceptualized as a measure of stress coping ability (Connor & Davidson, 2003). This perspective, which emphasizes the capacity of individuals to adapt to disruptions by leveraging internal and external resources to overcome distress (Anjum et al., 2023), was adopted in this study.

As demonstrated by Kimhi et al. (2023), in the aftermath of the Russian full-scale invasion, the Ukrainian population simultaneously manifested elevated levels of both psychological distress and resilience. These findings are consistent with research on post-traumatic readaptation indicating that people experience both positive and negative changes following trauma (Zięba, Wiecheć, Biegańska-Banaś & Mieleszczenko-Kowszewicz, 2019). It is reasonable to anticipate a similar dynamic among Ukrainian refugees seeking refuge outside their country. Moreover, research findings indicate that amidst substantial adversity, strength factors are more reliable indicators of resilience than vulnerability factors. These outcomes robustly support Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick and Yehuda (2014) assertion that research on mental health should move beyond an exclusive focus on the adverse effects of trauma, which was the goal of our study.

Women constitute half of the world's refugee population (UN Women, 2024), yet migration is frequently treated as a "gender-free" phenomenon, with women being underrepresented among migrant groups, leading to scant data reflecting their experiences (Anczyk & Grzymała-Moszczyńska, 2021). The literature is particularly scarce concerning the psychological resilience of Ukrainian refugee women in the aftermath of the Russian invasion (Anjum et al., 2023). We aimed at addressing this research gap by exploring both vulnerability and strengths in the adaptation of these women to life in Poland.

Conducted within the *community-based participatory action research* paradigm, the study involved close collaboration with a foundation assisting refugees. Following principles outlined by Liamputtong (2007), the study aimed to contribute to improving the lives of socially vulnerable groups, including those with refugee experiences. The practical goal was to develop guidelines for NGOs and entities supporting Ukrainians in Poland, facilitating more effective assistance.

Accordingly, by conducting qualitative, exploratory research, we addressed the following research question: What factors potentially influence (support or undermine) psychological resilience of Ukrainian refugee women in Poland?

Method

Procedure

Addressing the needs of the Polish foundation Splot Spoleczny, which aimed to assess its prior initiatives supporting Ukrainian refugees, we conducted a qualitative study from December 2022 to February 2023. Our focus was on legitimizing the experiences of Ukrainian women in Poland, incorporating their voices into scholarly discourse. We organized 33 semi-structured, online and in-person, in-depth interviews, obtaining informed consent by email or orally. The interviews, conducted in Ukrainian, Russian, or a mixture of languages known as surzhyk, lasted 27 to 167 min ($M = 72.88$; $SD = 30.26$). We informed the participants about free support from a Ukrainian psychologist in Poland, with only one participant opting for it. Each participant received a 23 EUR (100 PLN) gift card to a drugstore chain, along with information about available helplines. Interviews were recorded (audio only), transcribed, and translated into Polish.

The research received approval from the SWPS University Faculty of Psychology Research Ethics Committee.

Sample

Given that Ukrainian refugees in Poland predominantly consist of women, children, and elderly individuals (Bukowski & Duszczyk, 2022), our study focused exclusively on adult Ukrainian women who arrived in Poland after February 24, 2022, due to the Russian aggression and had received humanitarian aid. The Foundation facilitated the recruitment process by providing an initial list of over 6500 individuals who had received support through its programs. From this list, participants were randomly selected; however, recruitment challenges—such as invalid contact details and some women declining participation—necessitated the use of a secondary list of over 750 individuals who had been successfully re-contacted during later phases of support and had expressed a willingness to share their experiences. In parallel, additional participants were identified through contacts with another humanitarian organization assisting refugees in Warsaw. Ultimately, 33 women, aged 21 to 70 years ($M = 40.29$; $SD = 11.41$), were recruited using a combination of random selection and convenience sampling, focusing on those who remained in contact with the Foundation and were willing to participate (for sociodemographic characteristics of study participants, see Supplementary Material, Table 1).

Researchers

The lead researchers are cross-cultural psychologists specializing in acculturation, including forced migration (MB, HGM). Additionally, the interviewing team included psychology students (IP, YO, VN, JN), a PhD student in cultural anthropology (LS). The students underwent training

in conducting psychological interviews, subsequently conducted the interviews, transcribed them, and translated the content into Polish (for interviewers positioning see Supplementary material). A researcher specializing in qualitative research (MB) reviewed the analysis.

Interview guide

The semi-structured interview and respondent contact scripts, including informed consent, were developed during team meetings. Protective measures to prevent secondary traumatization included avoiding direct inquiries about war-related or traumatic experiences. Interview topics encompassed emotional functioning, "home" understanding, coping strategies, challenges in Poland, stability perception, potential conflicts, and children's experiences, particularly in school, if applicable. This paper focuses on responses pertaining to psychological resilience and forms part of a larger study investigating the cultural adaptation of Ukrainian refugees in Poland. Therefore, certain answers, especially those concerning perceived cultural differences between Poland and Ukraine, as well as the specific challenges faced by refugee children in Polish schools, were not included in the analysis.

Analyses

We employed reflexive Thematic Analysis (TA) following the systematic six-stage procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022), using MAXQDA software for data management. The stages included familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report, with reflexivity as a key component throughout.

The interviewers, of Ukrainian and Polish-Ukrainian backgrounds, contributed to the first two phases (familiarization with the data and generating initial codes). The first author, of Polish background (MB), served as the primary analyst, independently verifying all codes and developing the themes (steps 3, 4, and 5). All Authors participated in writing and editing the final report.

In line with Tracy's (2010) recommendations on member reflections and the community-based participatory action research approach, we invited feedback from the interviewers and the CEO of the Foundation to enhance the accuracy and credibility of our interpretations. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the process by reflecting on the positionality of the researchers and incorporating multiple perspectives. This collaborative process, along with regular discussions among the research team, aligned with the principles of reflexive TA, fostering a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of the data, and providing additional safeguards against bias.

Results

The analysis produced five intersecting themes:

1. Superheroines in the aftermath of trauma
2. Everything for the children
3. Basic needs
4. Tiny yet powerful acts of kindness
5. New patriotism

Superheroines in the aftermath of trauma

To prevent secondary traumatization, researchers refrained from inquiring about war experiences directly. Nevertheless, these topics were identified in nearly all interviews. Participants did report exposure to traumatic events or significant stressors, e.g., struggles for their own lives and those of their loved ones, substantial losses (of close individuals, homes, belongings, or symbolically—opportunities and future prospects, particularly concerning children), the necessity of sudden departure, challenges in meeting basic needs, adapting to the host country, maintaining ties with Ukraine, and associated suffering. Some refugees also reported symptoms of psychological distress, feelings of loneliness, lack of support, helplessness, and hopelessness.

Reconciling the war's impact with Poland's tranquility was challenging for many, creating a dissonance between their internal experiences and external surroundings:

> "[…] when we went to the Old Town in Warsaw for the first time, we went with our kids for a weekend. I walked around and felt that everything is very beautiful, but I am not able to enjoy it. And I have this tremor inside, and feel bad about it. There's a dissonance with the fact that you go into the city, and then you read-hear-see horrible things [about the war]; and here people are calm, drinking beer, coffee in a cafe, listening to music. And you understand that here, [is] good [place],it'ssafe! But you can't somehow 'try it on yourself,' you are here - [but] not here yet!" (P30_44)

Despite these challenges, most participants exhibited considerable psychological resilience, employing a wide and diverse range of coping strategies. Immediate coping strategies aimed at enhancing well-being included physical activity, meditation, prayer, and walks in nature. Many participants emphasized that small pleasures, such as reading, travel, cultural engagements, hobbies and self-care, contributed to feeling "almost normal" in Poland. Engaging in work and daily responsibilities provided distraction and helped establish daily routines and rituals that gave a sense of stability.

Given the ongoing war and its uncertain outcomes, a sense of temporariness was a recurring motive among the respondents. Participants were acutely aware of life's unpredictability, which led them to focus on the present rather than an uncertain future. According to the participants, it was not worthwhile to delay significant plans or immediate pleasures. This carpe diem approach emphasized appreciating everyday life and ordinary moments. This shift in perspective was also evident in refugees' economic decisions - they prioritized spending on sources of joy and personal items beyond essentials over saving for an uncertain future. This brought simple yet substantial joy:

> "You know, it's the holiday season now. My son really wanted a Christmas tree. What kind of a New Year [celebration] could be without a Christmas tree? Why can't we [buy it]? Well, we bought some garlands, decorated the apartment a bit, but we still lack a Christmas tree. Where else would we put the presents or just create a festive atmosphere? Turn on the lights for mood, yeah. But somehow, it's too expensive for a tree, ranging from 80 to 150–160 PLN, depending on the size. Well, we bought a small one, and you know what, at first, we thought, why do we need this tree, it's really expensive. With 80 PLN, you can buy a lot of food. (…) True. But then I thought, how much is this life worth? [she laughs] [finally] We went and bought that tree. I mean, now it happens that you save [money], save [it], and you think, well, in a week, well, maybe in a month [I will buy something]. And then you think, well, why am I saving [that money], do I know what will happen in a month? I'll buy it now." (P1_35)

Some refugees reported profound changes in self-perception, values, and relationships. The war prompted a shift towards prioritizing relationships over materialism, fostering gratitude, patience, and understanding. Many individuals reported deeper bonds and more time spent with loved ones.

Many recognized the value of investing in personal development and experiences over material goods, discovering resilience and inner strength through challenging experiences. Some participants recounted extreme experiences associated with full mobilization in the face of danger, emphasizing coping when no other options were available: "You can't allow yourself to be simply weak because… you are responsible, you have a responsibility that no one else can take on." (P28) The overwhelming sense of responsibility for others diverted the refugees'

attention from negative thoughts, potentially minimizing psychological distress. However, immersing in tasks became a necessity not necessarily a choice, with refugees often juggling multiple responsibilities:

> "I don't have depression, I can't afford such luxuries. [she laughs] Depression is when you have to lie in bed. I can't afford that; I have a disabled child, and a dog, I have to pay rent, and function somehow (…). So when we go back home [to Ukraine], then we can allow ourselves to fall into depression, panic, and everything else." (P7_36)

One strategy mentioned in this context was engaging in any form of action or activity, even something as simple as getting out of bed and washing oneself. Many refugees expressed a sense of agency, defiance, and motivation to strive for a better future for themselves, their children, families, or Ukraine. Positive changes in self-perception were identified:

> "Well, as it turned out I can do everything. I can be [all in one] a mom, a dad, a carrier… [her voice breaks] some kind of conqueror. It seems to me that in a sense, how to say it… When something crisis-like happens, just thanks to certain personal traits, I can pull the whole family through. Yes, so that we will have stability, plenty, there won't be any critical needs that cannot be satisfied or restored. Well, like a superhero in a skirt." (P8_38)

Long-term planning seemed futile due to the temporariness and unpredictability of their situation. However, participants developed various ways to cope with it. Many noted a shift in perspective from long-term to short-term, positively impacting their sense of personal control. Daily decisions enhanced their sense of control and provided relief: "I myself decide whether to get to know these people or not; which school to send my children to. What will we cook? (…) Even such small things make a big difference." (P29_36) Psychological distress co-occured with psychological resilience and various coping strategies.

Everything for the children

Respondents emphasized that their daily functioning was bolstered by, inter alia, obligations related to their familial roles, responsibility towards others, and professional duties. Refugees' children-related obligations were identified as a fundamental driving force behind almost every decision made, from fleeing Ukraine to how they engaged in life in Poland. Many participants explicitly stated that, if not for their children, they would not have left Ukraine. Safeguarding their children's safety, well-being, and prospects—including a stable childhood, access to healthcare, development opportunities, and quality education—was the primary motivation for Ukrainian refugee women.

The theme *Everything for the children* reveals a certain two-way dependency: while refugees aimed to save their children, many stated that their children saved them, motivating caregivers towards action and a better future:

> "I can't sleep, I wake up, I sleep very little. I have these bruises under my eyes, I just… well, I live only for this purpose, my purpose, really - to give my child a better life, that's all. (…) It gives me motivation to live, like, I don't know, I would already… I don't know what would happen to me, really." (P10_34)

Caregivers made significant efforts to prioritize their children's needs, sometimes indulging them to compensate for past hardships, and shielding them from negative emotions: "I cannot express my negative emotions because I have my children with me, and they are with me all the time." (P17_29). Despite willingness to engage in free activities like yoga, they were either unable to participate due to a lack of childcare support or they often prioritized their children's needs: "I think more about my son, about who he will become, who he will grow up to be. (…) Honestly, I don't think much about myself. I forget about myself. Yes, I forget about myself." (P1_35). Mothers' dedication and sacrifice for children were further illustrated by their heightened sensitivity to children's psychological needs over their own—a fact evidenced by the readiness to consult a psychologist about their children, but not necessarily about themselves.

The focus on children was a source of strength and motivation in many caregivers' actions, but also represented a major area of concern associated with numerous challenges and risks.

Basic needs

Meeting refugees' fundamental needs for safety and stability was another significant source of resilience. Stability and security were primarily provided through housing and employment:

> "I think it has a huge influence, whether a person, this specific woman, found a job here [in Poland] and whether it is legal - [a type of employment matters] an employment contract or mandate contract, whether the child could go to school or kindergarden, whether a place [to live] was found - all of these factors have a very big impact." (P3_38)

Employment fostered independence, a sense of agency, and social connections, further enabling refugees to achieve a sense of stability and break free from the role of a "victim." These basic needs were essential milestones on the refugees' path to fulfilling any other crucial needs. Without meeting these basic needs, adaptation, integration, self-development, and similar objectives were not possible:

> "I think now [in my family] we see a positive trend towards adaptation because we don't have material difficulties, we have material stability. We have time for adaptation because we don't struggle with such problems as 'how to survive?' or 'what to eat?' People who have these [financial] problems don't understand many things and can't adapt, or they constantly have to solve urgent problems. Many of my acquaintances returned to Ukraine precisely because of financial difficulties." (P29_36)

High-quality childcare, access to healthcare, job security, and proximity to educational institutions were also identified as vital:

> "Sometimes children get sick, we go to the same school… so whoever can, helps [referring to residents of the hostel]. For example, when you are at work, someone can take care of your child, feed them, you know… It may seem like a small thing, but I'll tell you, it's not a small thing, it's very important." (P23_43)

Refugees' resources, circumstances, and needs varied considerably. Most participants relied on assistance from friends, family, and entities from both Ukrainian and Polish backgrounds. Despite immense gratitude towards volunteers, participants did notice many shortcomings in the aid received in Poland. They reported that assistance was often difficult to access, delayed, insufficient, and rarely covered essential needs, creating a sense of unfairness. Limited information about available support deterred seeking help. Organizational flaws in support programs, abrupt endings, changing procedures, and bureaucracy amplified refugees' uncertainty. Basic needs such as employment, housing, and healthcare remained unfulfilled, even after almost nine months spent in Poland.

Furthermore, the theme *Basic needs* also indicates that psychological assistance was not the most pressing need of refugees in Poland, nor was it a need for all refugees. Ukrainian women demonstrated reluctance and skepticism regarding seeking psychological assistance. Many believed that psychologists are primarily for individuals facing extreme challenges or mental disorders, not for those who are coping somehow:

> "We had a psychologist when I still lived in the office. (…) She came twice a week and gently [addressed us]… Well, we knew that the psychologist was coming to us. She said, 'Please, girls, you've just arrived, you need psychological help, come and talk.' (…) We didn't go [she laughs], well, why would we, everything is fine for us here, rockets are not flying, the ground is not shaking. (…) Why should we

fall apart? I mean, I'm speaking for myself, and I can even say it for my friends because we lived together there. No one sought help; everyone said, 'No, everything is fine. We've calmed down; everything is good now'." (P9_47)

Seeking psychological help was often seen as a last resort, with individuals reaching out only when they felt they could no longer cope on their own.

Thus, meeting basic needs was a fundamental and necessary (though not sufficient) factor in building psychological resilience. However, these needs often remained unmet, hindering opportunities for stability, adaptation, development, and engaging in life in Poland. Additionally, for many, the utilization of psychological services was considered a secondary, rather than urgent, need.

Tiny yet powerful acts of kindness

Tiny yet powerful acts of kindness encapsulates the significant strength of informal and organic social support. It focuses on personal relationships and acts of solidarity that refugees received spontaneously from Poles and Ukrainians. Participants expressed gratitude for kindness and various forms of aid—financial, material, housing—underscoring the pivotal role of emotional support. Small, seemingly insignificant acts, such as a warm tone of voice, smiles, and symbolic gestures, yielded enduring positive effects, fostering a sense of welcome in Poland. In certain cases, these small acts of kindness and support evolved into genuine friendships.

While linguistic similarities, nonverbal communication, and technology evidently facilitated mutual understanding between Poles and Ukrainians, the willingness of Poles to engage in communication despite potential obstacles was vital:

"From the very beginning, everyone treated her [my daughter] very positively. (…) Everyone in the class got along right away because what can I tell you, when a child from another country comes to a different class, to a different school, as they say, because I know this from my own experience when I went to school and someone [new] was transferred [to our class], they looked at that child askance. But she [my daughter] says, 'No, Mom, all the girls came up to me right away to get to know me.' They didn't understand each other yet [a language barrier], but they had phones, and they explained themselves to each other through phones. Poles asked her in Polish, her phone translated what it meant. She replied in Ukrainian, the phone translated it into Polish. And that's how they started communicating from the very beginning because when we arrived on February 28th [2022], we started going to school in March already." (P6_43)

Refugees also acknowledged the crucial role of individuals familiar with the Polish realities who assisted them with basic organizational matters. Both Poles and Ukrainians served as impromptu guides—local experts—offering support in translation, communication, and practical tasks like enrolling children in school or securing accommodation.

Many refugees appreciated free in-person courses and workshops, such as those on Polish language. However, the equally significant yet unforeseen value of these gatherings lay in their secondary effects, such as the opportunity to share their stories with empathetic individuals. These natural support groups among compatriots served as platforms for exchanging emotions and experiences, positively impacting refugees' perceived social support, solidarity, and sense of belonging: "Of course, I attended a [language] course, and there, a pleasant conversation also helped a lot. Basically, it allowed me now, from a certain perspective, to have hope for something better. Contact with other people, contact is above all." (P3_38).

Refugees' narratives abound with expressions of gratitude towards Poland and its people. However, respondents also, hesitantly, divulged challenging interpersonal experiences, such as instances of verbal aggression encountered when speaking Ukrainian in public. Discrimination was reported in various domains, including the housing market, workplaces, and schools. Participants' reactions to these incidents and their coping strategies varied greatly. It appears that individuals who experienced some meaningful acts of kindness and/or solidarity early in their stay were later more resilient to antagonistic attitudes.

Difficult situations with Poles included attempts to exploit advantages, such as inflating housing prices or leveraging Ukrainians as unpaid labor. Participants also observed a waning of support and increased antagonism, compared to the initial months following the Russian full-scale invasion. These negative encounters, spanning from seemingly minor incidents to overt lack of acceptance, prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination, significantly impacted refugees' overall well-being in Poland.

Participants disclosed that difficulties were not confined to Polish-Ukrainian relations. While compatriots provided crucial support, internal divisions and animosities also existed. Refugees in Poland faced judgment from other Ukrainians, particularly from families and relatives remaining in the country. Some encountered a lack of understanding, accusations, or direct allegations of betrayal due to their decision to flee. Refugees also mentioned a distorted perception of their displacement held by individuals in Ukraine, implying a life of affluence and comfort in Poland, which did not align with reality. This misperception presented a challenge, as refugees found it difficult to communicate their hardships, thereby straining relationships with loved ones in Ukraine.

Another issue stemmed from divisions over the use of the Russian language—not all Ukrainians communicated in Ukrainian, resulting in shame for some following the escalation of war. Those using Russian faced adverse reactions and ostracism from the Ukrainian-speaking compatriots.

New patriotism

New patriotism illustrates the expressions of refugees' patriotic attitudes, the consolidation, and the development of a strong group identity, which, in the context of the ongoing war, are crucial elements of Ukrainians' psychological resilience. The term "new" emphasizes the refugees' reflections that their stance toward their own nation has evolved under the influence of Russian aggression. Love for their homeland (sometimes rekindled), belief in a strong Ukraine, as well as hope for victory and a better future for the country, frequently featured in the participants' discourse.

Some participants recognized flaws of their own country, expressing hope that after the war, Ukraine could be rebuilt into a stronger, better version, free from these deficiencies. Many expressed the idea that thinking about home and Ukraine motivates refugees to invest in their own development in Poland, with the intention of contributing these competencies, knowledge, and skills to Ukraine after its victory:

"Well… I like it [the life] here, I would like to live here [in Poland]. I just want my children to learn what needs to be learned, and I think we will live the way they [the Poles] live. We won't lag behind them. And when everything calms down, and if the children want to go back home [to Ukraine], they can come back as professionals." (P22_70)

The participants unequivocally condemned Russia and Putin. Some Ukrainian women mentioned a change in their attitude toward the Ukrainian language, and although some of them did not speak Ukrainian before, now they either feel ashamed of this unfamiliarity and tried to learn Ukrainian or have already learned it, making it their primary language of communication:

"We are from Kharkiv, and we never thought that there was anything wrong with the Russian language. Now we have started to understand the value of our native [Ukrainian] language, we are learning it, [and] trying to speak it. There has been a newfound respect for Ukrainian culture. I remember in childhood, we thought that it [the Ukrainian culture] was only [attributed to] villages or something

similar, but then we started to value it normally. And after what we have now [the war] - there is respect for both the [Ukrainian] language and the culture." (P24_35)

Pride, self-assurance, and an internal refusal to adopt a "victim mentality" were commonly observed in the narratives of the refugees. Ukrainian women often recounted how directly they confronted individuals attempting to deceive or discriminate against them.

Discussion

Driven by practical considerations, we aimed to comprehend and identify the sources of psychological resilience among Ukrainian refugee women, with the objective of formulating recommendations for the third-sector organizations supporting Ukrainians fleeing the war to Poland (see Supplementary material, Table 2).

The main conclusion of our study is that Ukrainian refugee women, after experiencing potentially traumatic events and numerous stressors on their way to—and already in—Poland, demonstrated considerable psychological resilience. Refugees independently employed a range of coping strategies, such as planning even the smallest things to gain a modicum of personal control, engaging in activities like prayer, physical exercise, meditation, yoga, and connecting with nature. Some refugees emphasized the positive role of daily routines and rituals, involving repeated small pleasures—often simple yet beneficial practices. Some were also able to recognize positive aspects of their situation (*positive reframing*) or even experienced post-traumatic growth.

Study participants varied greatly in terms of their available resources, coping strategies, and circumstances of arrival in Poland, leading to different needs during their stay in the country. This diversity defies the prevailing stereotype portraying refugees as traumatized and helpless victims (Janusz et al., 2023). Our findings support the argument of Anczyk and Moszczyńska (2021) that the portrayal of refugee women as passive victims in need of protection is overly simplistic. Instead, scholars should recognize their resilience and adopt a strengths-based perspective for understanding and supporting this group.

As a result of the study, five main sources of resilience were identified: 1) many diverse coping strategies (*Superheroines in the aftermath of trauma*), 2) motivation stemming from responsibility for children (*Everything for the children*), 3) meeting basic needs (*Basic needs*), 4) the role of social relationships, especially kindness and acts of solidarity (*Tiny yet powerful acts of kindness*), 5) building a strong national identity (*New patriotism*).

Refugee women experienced psychological distress and, concurrently, actively employed coping strategies. Analyzing the sources of resilience in isolation from the difficulties and challenges they faced would be impractical, as these areas were intertwined within each theme. For instance, coping strategies were identified in response to various difficulties (*Superheroines in the aftermath of trauma*); concern for children, although it mobilized action, often de-prioritized refugees' personal needs (*Everything for the children*); basic needs provided a foundation upon which life in Poland could be built, yet frequently remained unmet, preventing the fulfillment of any needs beyond the essential ones (*Basic needs*); small acts of kindness allowed for a sense of acceptance, but hostility could also undermine that self-assurance (*Tiny yet powerful acts of kindness*); a strong national identity, although positive, was a direct result of Russia's attack on Ukraine (*New patriotism*).

Our findings corroborate the results of Kimhi et al. (2023), who observed that in the wake of the Russian invasion, the Ukrainian population exhibited heightened levels of both psychological distress and resilience. This dual response is consistent with established research on post-traumatic readaptation (Zięba et al., 2019). Therefore, when considering support for refugees, it is important to address both preventive actions, such as facilitating the creation of social support networks (Layne, Ruzek & Dixon, 2021), and interventions aimed at problems that have already arisen.

Most importantly, meeting basic needs proved to be essential for any improvement in the refugees' condition (Hobfoll et al., 2007). Research also shows that employed refugees tend to have a wider range of coping strategies than those who are unemployed (Al-Smadi et al., 2016), and that unemployment negatively impacts both psychological well-being and the ability to cope (Roberts & Browne, 2011). As some respondents explicitly stated, integration is impossible without stable employment or a roof over one's head. It is also unrealistic to expect individuals in such uncertain situations to have the time and comfort to address their psychological needs. However, basic needs of refugees were often unmet, which implies that the Polish government has not adequately assumed responsibility for refugees (Jarosz & Klaus, 2023). Addressing these systemic gaps and implementing comprehensive solutions is essential to ensure that refugees' basic needs are met, thereby facilitating better coping and integration.

Support for refugees in Poland originated from grassroots efforts involving volunteers, foundations, and citizens. This citizen-led aid received praise, but criticism targeted the state and foundations for delayed responsibility and insufficient or inadequate assistance (Jarosz & Klaus, 2023; Woroniecka-Krzyżanowska & Urbańska, 2023). Declining assistance coupled with certain foundations prioritizing their own existence over beneficiaries' well-being, resulted in inefficient fund allocation and competition instead of collaboration, leading to persistent challenges.

Avoidance strategies, such as focusing on work, caring for children, or engaging in hobbies and small pleasures, can promote short-term resilience by providing immediate relief from distress (Suls & Fletcher, 1985). However, while effective in the short term, these strategies have been widely discussed in the literature as potentially leading to negative psychological outcomes when used over extended periods (Frey et al., 2021; Thompson, 1981).

Research indicates that the prolonged use of avoidance strategies can become maladaptive, being associated with increased depressive symptoms (Dempsey, 2002; Scarpa, Haden & Hurley, 2006), anxiety and even PTSD (Blalock & Joiner, 2000; Pineles et al., 2011). While avoidance may protect individuals from overwhelming stress in the early stages of displacement, continued reliance can complicate long-term psychological adjustment (Scarpa et al., 2006).

It is important to emphasize that the transition from adaptive to maladaptive coping is not only time-dependent but also context-dependent. In situations where individuals have little control over their circumstances—such as in situations of loss, terminal illness or forced displacement due to war—problem-focused strategies are often unfeasible. Ignoring this situational factor might risk oversimplifying the complexity of coping under extreme conditions and raises ethical considerations when addressing coping strategies in such contexts. The women in our study did not have the means to employ problem-solving strategies aimed at resolving the conflict or returning home, as their circumstances were beyond their control. Instead, they focused on securing housing, finding employment, and caring for their children. Despite this, they still demonstrated flexibility by employing a variety of coping strategies, which may help mitigate the risks of over-reliance on avoidance (also see Khawaja, White, Schweitzer & Greenslade, 2008). Therefore, we recommend interventions that introduce refugees to a broader range of coping strategies and promote flexibility in their application.

Due to the numerous and diverse coping strategies and the overall mobilization of refugee women, it is important to emphasize that psychological assistance was not the most important, urgent, or universal need of the respondents. The notion that all refugees should be regarded as suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a misconception. While psychological aid is crucial for some (those suffering from anxiety, depression and/or PTSD symptoms), our findings suggest that not all refugees require psychological assistance, just like not every individual who has experienced trauma will develop PTSD (cf. Bonanno et al., 2012; Hoppen & Morina, 2019). In 2022, Central Statistical Office

(GUS, 2023) in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO) conducted a survey concerning the health of Ukrainian refugees in Poland. The resulting report highlighted that approximately 10 % of refugees experienced difficulties with mental health (daily functioning). The research is ongoing and conducted on a regular basis. The most recent data (Refugee health in Poland, 2024) indicates a slight decrease (9,5 %) in problems with daily functioning compared to previous period, while 87 % of respondents report no problems related to mental health. It is plausible that, due to various coping mechanisms, some refugees function relatively well without additional psychological support. This observation is important as NGOs were keen to allocate funds for the professional psychological assistance of refugees, which, especially in the first six months after the Russian full-scale invasion, proved not necessary. Possibly, other preventing actions (e.g., facilitating development of natural social support) could have safeguarded refugees' mental health more effectively.

The skepticism toward psychological assistance observed among Ukrainian women in our study appears to stem from several cultural and historical factors. A key issue is the widespread belief that psychologists only work with individuals experiencing severe mental health issues, such as psychiatric disorders or deep crises. This highlights a significant lack of awareness about the broader role of psychological support, including who can benefit from it and how it works (Romaniuk & Semigina, 2018).

This skepticism is further compounded by the absence of a "psychological culture" in Ukraine, where seeking psychological help is often associated with stigma, shame, and the fear of being labeled mentally ill. Concerns about public records also discourage many from seeking assistance (World Bank Group, 2017; Yale Institute for Global Health, 2021).

A potential explanation of this reluctance is rooted in Ukraine's Soviet past and the historical misuse of psychiatry in the former USSR. Many Ukrainian refugees, or their families, remember psychiatric practices being manipulated for political repression, leading to mistreatment and imprisonment (van Voren, 2016). Repressive psychiatry, including reports of rape and torture in psychiatric institutions, has left a deep-seated mistrust of the mental health system (Gluzman, 2013; Vysoven, 2019; Zaitsev, 2017).

This historical context contributes to the pervasive stereotype among Ukrainians that psychologists are only necessary for severe conditions. Seeking psychological support is often viewed as a precursor to psychiatric hospitalization, closely associated with involuntary treatment in closed institutions. As a result, many Ukrainians express a belief that they are "strong enough to cope on their own."

The deeply embedded mistrust and cultural stigma surrounding mental health are likely significant factors contributing to the skepticism observed in our study. Addressing this will require comprehensive psychoeducation to raise awareness about the role of psychological services, available forms of support, and patients' rights.

Our research suggests that natural social support, especially interactions with others in similar situations, is a potent resource for psychological well-being. The study underscores the vital role of social relationships in bolstering psychological resilience (Hobfoll et al., 2007). Informal support networks, often arising incidentally during courses or workshops for refugees, proved significant.

Our study emphasizes the need for more than mere "support"; refugees seek the "support of a human being." Many interviewees fondly recalled aid from Polish families, where they felt "at home," "like family," or experienced humane, warm treatment. These relationships, along with individual acts of kindness, significantly impacted their well-being and adaptation in Poland. In certain instances, these positive interactions served as a protective factor, mitigating the impact of subsequent negative experiences with Poles.

Our results corroborate Kaniasty and Urbańska's (2024) recommendations that routine social interactions are the most effective forums for sharing experiences, emotions, and information. Furthermore, empowering refugees to support one another is crucial; therefore, it is imperative to aid local communities in establishing sustainable mutual social support systems that persist beyond the initial, often transient, phase.

In summary, our study unveiled the complexity and diversity of refugees' situations, highlighting various coping strategies and distinct resources coexisting with psychological distress. Despite this diversity, certain common and often unmet needs, such as stability, safety, and basic necessities, were identified. While most refugees expressed appreciation for the assistance received from both Poles and Ukrainians, emphasizing the value of positive interpersonal relationships, it is important to note that this aid was not devoid of inefficiencies and vulnerabilities.

Our findings suggest that facilitating natural social support and coping strategies among refugees can play a significant preventive role against various disorders by fostering psychological resilience. This presents a crucial alternative to allocating the majority of resources to professional psychological assistance, especially given the limited number of specialists available. Furthermore, it also underscores the importance of questioning ethnocentric assumptions and actively consulting refugees about their actual needs. Including Ukrainian experts in the development of aid strategies is also essential for creating effective and relevant support programs.

Despite its strengths in generating culturally sensitive recommendations for those assisting Ukrainian refugees, this study has several limitations. The exclusive focus on women limits the generalizability of the findings to men, children, or older individuals. While the qualitative approach allows for rich, unique narratives, it also introduces challenges such as subjectivity and potential gaps in capturing the full range of refugees' problems and coping strategies. Additionally, the study was conducted during a period of high social support and early stages of displacement, which may not reflect the current situation in Poland, where a decline in assistance, societal engagement, and increased hostility, conflicts, and compassion fatigue have been observed. These factors may have replaced the initial altruism shown towards refugees, and the current state of refugees' well-being may differ from that observed during the study. We recognize the need for further investigation into the long-term effects of displacement. Moreover, based on studies by Kimhi et al. (2023) and Zięba et al. (2019), which highlight the coexistence of psychological distress and resilience, it is essential that future longitudinal research on refugee well-being and post-traumatic readaptation addresses both phenomena to assess the current well-being of Ukrainian refugee women.

Conclusions

This qualitative research addresses the urgent social situation stemming from the substantial influx of refugees into Poland due to the war in Ukraine. It examines the initial phase of the migration crisis, emphasizing effective resource allocation and understanding the vulnerabilities and strengths of refugees. The value of the collected materials lies in amplifying the voices of refugees, accentuating remarkable psychological resources, and challenging the widespread stereotype of refugees as passive victims. Our study advocates for a personalized support approach, recognizing refugees' agency in determining their needs, including access to information, housing, education, employment, and healthcare. The findings suggest nurturing natural social support from both Ukrainians and Poles along with acknowledging refugees' coping strategies can foster psychological resilience. This provides a more cost-effective and pragmatic alternative to overreliance on professional psychological assistance, given the limited availability of specialists. Despite diverse coping strategies and resources, common unmet needs for stability and safety, as well as inefficiencies in aid, were identified. Recognizing refugees as competent decision-makers and prioritizing their current needs are crucial for effective support.

Notes

During the preparation of this work the authors used ChatGPT-4o in order to assist in the interviewees' translations and for the purpose of language corrections. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Ethical approval

The research received approval of the SWPS University Faculty of Psychology Research Ethics Committee.

Data availability

The data is available from the corresponding author upon request.

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Declaration of competing interest

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, author- ship, and/or publication of this article.

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Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.ijchp.2024.100506.

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