



## Support for Workforce Inclusion of Ukrainian Women in Poland: Refugee Response Recommendations

### Introduction

The conflict in Ukraine has displaced more than 14 million people since the latest military offensive by the Russian Federation began in February 2022; close to 7 million<sup>1</sup> have been displaced outside the country, largely in neighboring Poland, Romania, and Hungary, with large numbers continuing to Germany, Italy, Czech Republic, the U.S., and Canada – countries that have large existing diaspora communities. The war in Ukraine does not seem to be headed for cease-fire anytime soon; even if it ended today, the rebuilding effort is projected to take 8 to 10 years, and some government partners anticipate that the professional labor economy would take even longer to rebound. Upwardly<sup>2</sup> Global is particularly concerned about workforce inclusion and employment opportunities for women, as their time in displacement extends and cash assistance ends. Most importantly, women need options and flexibility in types of employment. This document draws from a recent rapid needs assessment by Upwardly Global leadership to Warsaw in May 2022; it highlights some of the challenges and opportunities facing this population and offers recommendations for strategic programming.

**7 million+  
Ukrainians  
Displaced**



### Key Findings Impacting Ukrainian Women's Workforce Inclusion

#### State of displaced Ukrainians

Poland is hosting nearly 4 million displaced women, children, and elderly men who are currently unable to return to Ukraine. Before war, there was an unofficial estimate of 1 million Ukrainians working in the country, initially as guest workers in seasonal employment in construction, domestic work, agriculture, and the service industry. Guest workers often stayed permanently and worked without documentation. For the time being, and despite discouragement from the Ukrainian government, displaced individuals are regularly crossing the border to check on family and property, and to bring goods back to Poland. It is estimated that nearly half of Ukrainian refugees in Poland will remain there long-term. This number might grow if the conflict lengthens, and given the projected changes in benefits outlined below.

#### Public Support

Public support for Ukrainians in Poland is significant. There are visual reminders of the solidarity around Warsaw, and almost every government building is flying both the Polish and Ukrainian flags. Refugees are currently hosted in private Polish homes and individuals and companies are active with humanitarian efforts. There are many cultural similarities between the two countries. The languages are similar in spoken form, and many Ukrainians have already quickly started to learn Polish. Both in Poland and Ukraine, the cultural divide seems to be more rural-urban and post-Soviet-Western.

1) UNHCR Operational Data portal; 5/31/2022.

2) USAID-Ukraine contractor for Health Systems project



## The Polish economy

The Polish economy and labor market are strong. Unemployment was 3.28% pre-pandemic, 5.2% in April 2022, and is declining steadily.<sup>3</sup> Employers interviewed have a consistently high volume of job openings. Poland's economy largely supports shared services for European Union (EU)-based companies, and consequently has a booming technology and cybersecurity market, with 50,000 software-engineering companies alone. At the same time, Poland has difficulty retaining talent at home due to higher wages elsewhere in the EU. Post-Brexit, several Western companies, particularly those in the financial-services<sup>5</sup> sector, have moved their support service operations to Poland, creating a high demand for mid-level jobs. As a colleague from the American Chamber of Commerce highlighted, "[Candidates] don't need to be professionals; they just need a college degree and to be able to work in English or Polish."

## Assumptions about Ukrainian women's talent

There is an assumption about the skill level of Ukrainian women. While 60% of women from Ukraine have a college degree, many with professional backgrounds, many incorrectly believe that Ukrainians are happy to assume entry-level service industry roles, such as cleaning ladies and waitresses, which are also in high demand.

## Changes in benefits

Both cash assistance for refugees and housing stipends offered to Polish families, who house Ukrainian refugees, are planned to end in July 2022. This is anticipated to occur at the same time when parents will have to decide whether to enroll children in Polish schools, or continue with remote education via the Ukrainian school system. All of these factors will cause additional strain for refugees and the local communities that are supporting them.

## Impact on construction industry, and skills mismatch

The Polish construction industry, which historically employs Ukrainian male guest workers, has been negatively impacted by the war. Many of these men returned to Ukraine to join the military. It is unclear if Ukrainian women can fill these jobs.

## Key Challenges Facing Ukrainian Women's Employment

### Mental Health

The trauma of war, losing and/or leaving behind loved ones, having your home and community destroyed, supporting children through grief and needs, and food and housing insecurity, all while facing great uncertainty, are significant. Many of the refugee women interviewed said mental health must be addressed before refugees will be able to regain the confidence and capacity required to make and implement medium-term plans. While therapy and counseling are often taboo in Ukrainian culture, many partners report that resources are being utilized when offered. However, resources provided by the Polish health-care system and the NGO community are extremely limited.

### Child Care

Many newcomers are living in small spaces with multigenerational families. The majority of households include a grandmother, mother, and one or more children. Small spaces are challenging for children in remote schooling and mothers needing space to work remotely (if they were able to keep their jobs from Ukraine) or job-search. Child care is a major concern, because the Polish public services supports new mothers for the first three years, there are no day cares. Further, the benefits are not currently offered to refugees. The Polish school system lacks enough seats and Polish-as-second-language programming to absorb the increase.

3) [Registered unemployment rate during the COVID epidemic in Poland](#)

4) [Poland largest victim of brain drain in EU: report](#)

(5) Such as Goldman Sachs, JPMorgan Chase, and Standard Chartered.

## Trust and accessing the community

Given historical patterns of human trafficking of Ukrainian women, there is a strong sense of self-protection and guardedness among this population. Building trust is critical to ensuring services are implemented and utilized effectively. The many platforms designed to support job services or other services for Ukrainians are largely unused and mistrusted.

## Language Access

While there are similarities between spoken Ukrainian and Polish, the alphabets are different, making reading and writing fluency challenging. Language education and access are limited. With regard to employment, it appears that professional jobs largely require English or Polish proficiency.



**~160,000  
Ukrainians  
Working in Poland**

## Underemployment and data

The government has announced that 160,000 Ukrainian refugees are working; however, little is known about whether the employment is seasonal, temporary, or dignified. Of those who are employed, our partners estimate that at least half are underemployed. In addition, there is no data on the skills, education, or professional background of Ukrainian refugees, making it hard to match talent with employer interests.

## Job Readiness

Ukrainian refugees need support in identifying jobs they are qualified for, creating resumes, and applying for positions, all while managing significant trauma that can impact their ability to focus. Some have not had to apply for work in decades. For some, digital literacy and time-management skills are needed.

## Key Stakeholders

There are several entities looking to support Ukrainian refugees. Most of these are humanitarian aid and international development organizations, of which over 100 have registered in Poland since the war began; the business community is also taking part. It seems that many plan to provide significant support for the next six months, followed by more limited engagement for up to three years after that. USAID, UNHCR, and UNICEF are the major groups involved.

The **central government** does not have existing refugee-resettlement infrastructure, nor is it likely to actively design a centralized system. It has significantly opened the border and granted Temporary Protected Status to Ukrainians, which comes with the associated benefits of work authorization and access to education and health care. However, to date the national government has not enhanced or funded additional capacity and infrastructure to serve the surge, delegating decisions to local municipalities.

## Local civil society

There are a number of Polish NGOs that support smaller-capacity needs of different populations (Polish citizens, undocumented Ukrainians, etc.). Currently, there are no organizations specifically focused on refugee workforce inclusion at scale, with the exception of one or two groups that serve 10 to 15 job seekers annually.

Organizations with potential to incorporate workforce programming include Blue Dots Hubs (a joint initiative of UNHCR and UNICEF), Our Choice Foundation (also known as Ukrainian House), and Information Society Development Foundation (FRSI)



## Refugee women leaders

Many women are organizing to create trusted channels for communication and support. Facebook and Telegram are key platforms for sharing information, and networks are being created to support remote learning for children, grief and stress management, and adult language education. Most classes in Poland are extended beyond capacity and turn away learners. Undoubtedly, this community will be a key in outreach and building trust moving into the future.

## Private Sector

Private sector partners are beginning to mobilize around hiring and/or skilling programs for temporary or permanent positions, in person. Many are open to offering language classes, supporting housing stipends, etc. There is a real opportunity to coordinate efforts and to share best practices.

## Recommendations for Programming

1. Employers, government, and civil society need to start **investing now in job readiness**, skilling, and access to employment opportunities for Ukrainian women. With humanitarian assistance winding down, and indications that refugees will need to stay longer in host countries, access to economic opportunity must be equally prioritized. Women need to be **offered options**: remote work, contract/project-based, temporary, permanent, or in person. **Flexibility** is important to allow women to continue to use skills and stabilize their livelihoods.
2. Mental health and **trauma-informed care** need to be prioritized to ensure that women can engage in and complete skilling opportunities, job-search, and maintain steady employment. Employers should adopt a trauma-informed lens, without placing stigma or “othering” employees. Implementing partners should also invest in **peer group** settings for training and skilling, so that women can build connections in a safe and supportive space.

3. Coordinate and pursue **partnerships with local organizations** and both formal and informal refugee women leaders. Implementers should leverage local expertise to co-create and coordinate with local actors and to strengthen Ukrainian leadership.

4. Extend **cash assistance and parallel with livelihood programming**. Cash assistance is a critical stabilizer, and can free women up to invest in skilling and the job search ensuring they find work that is skills aligned. This offers women a transition from cash assistance to employment.

5. Invest in **automating** the resume and job search process whenever possible. Trauma can make it difficult for job seekers to focus. In addition, the ability to match skills against jobs they qualify for helps employers quickly identify talent, and helps refugees understand their career destination in the host country market.

6. Ensure programs and employment opportunities are extended to all refugees, not only Ukrainians, and to the Polish community. Although unemployment is low in Poland, re/upskilling opportunities are relevant to all communities, and building connections between communities facilitates inclusion and reduces bias.

7. Invest in **wrap-around services**, such as Polish-language learning, offering child care facilities or support finding child care for new hires, and case management support.

8. Establish a **business working group** with the companies that are interested in hiring or skilling programs for displaced Ukrainians to support best practices and leverage existing infrastructure.

## About Upwardly Global

*Founded in 1999, Upwardly Global is the longest-serving nonprofit that focuses on eliminating barriers for refugee and immigrant professionals and advancing the inclusion of their skills into the economy. For more information, please contact Rebecca Fishman, [rfishman@upwardlyglobal.org](mailto:rfishman@upwardlyglobal.org). Thanks to S&P Global for funding this initiative.*