



SAFE AND DIGNIFIED:

Gender-sensitive
voluntary return
strategies for Ukraine,
anchored in Council of
Europe standards

Council of Europe Project
“Combating Violence against Women
in Ukraine – Phase III” (COVAW-III)

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Foreword

Today, in the twelfth year of the Russian Federation's armed aggression against Ukraine and the fourth year of full-scale invasion, our country is going through one of the most difficult trials in its modern history — a large-scale war that has posed unprecedented challenges for society. Millions of citizens, mostly women and children, have been forced to leave their homes and find themselves in new, often vulnerable circumstances, both abroad and within the country.

In these circumstances, there is not only a challenge for the state to respond appropriately, but also a strategic task — to formulate policies focused on the systematic, gender-responsive and long-term restoration of Ukraine as a democratic, inclusive and law-based state.

The central element of this transformation should be ensuring human rights in all spheres of society, with particular attention to compliance with the principles of gender equality. We must not only provide effective support mechanisms for those in need of protection, but also create the legal, institutional, and social conditions for their safe, voluntary, and dignified return.

This publication, prepared as part of the Council of Europe's "Combating Violence against Women in Ukraine - Phase III" (COVAW-III) project, is a comprehensive tool for shaping public policies that takes into account the gender aspects of return. It provides a comprehensive analysis of the key challenges faced by women and girls in the return process, including access to housing, healthcare, education, social protection, legal assistance, security, as well as issues of documentation, prevention and response to gender-based violence, in particular, sexual violence related to the Russian Federation's armed aggression against Ukraine. Particular attention is paid to a cross-sectoral approach to return planning, strengthening the role of communities, involving women in decision-making at all levels, and guaranteeing the full range of their rights upon return.

The recommendations set out in this publication meet the highest international standards and take into account national legal realities, the needs of the affected population, and the principles of non-discrimination, equality, and inclusion. They are an important guide for state authorities, local governments, international and civil society organisations, and all actors involved in the formulation and implementation of return and reintegration policies.

The issue of the voluntary return of internally displaced persons and persons who have left the country is not exclusively humanitarian. It is a strategic goal that directly affects the demographic situation, economic development, social cohesion, and national security of Ukraine. Without taking into account and adhering to the principles of gender equality, without supporting women and restoring their potential, it is impossible to achieve sustainable peace and reconstruction.

We are all building a Ukraine to which our citizens will return not because they are forced to, but because they trust it — because they feel safe, stable, and confident about the future. This publication is one of the steps on this path: through law, public policy, community support, and the solidarity of all those who work for a dignified return and equality. After all, those who return will take an active part in rebuilding the state, bringing with them strong labour and educational potential, experience of interacting with citizens of other countries, and new knowledge and skills. All this will open up new opportunities not only for them personally, but also for the development of Ukrainian society as a whole!

Kateryna Levchenko

*The Government Commissioner
for Gender Equality Policy*

Purpose of this guide to gender sensitive voluntary returns processes

Across the world, many displaced women and girls long to return to their home country following wars of aggression, conflict, political persecution or other causes. Returning women and girls may experience forms of gender-based violence, including migration-related violence against women or conflict-related sexual violence. This publication “Safe and dignified: gender-sensitive voluntary return strategies for Ukraine, anchored in Council of Europe standards” has been prepared in the context of Russia’s ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine, as Ukraine prepares to both encourage and receive voluntary returns from Europe and beyond.

Women often shoulder a disproportionate burden of care for children, the elderly, the injured and disabled persons. This is exacerbated in war and post conflict situations. They have specific needs in respect of violence against women and domestic violence. LBTI+, Roma, stateless and other women made vulnerable by circumstances may require particular provision in policy and budgeting. Social and economic considerations may negatively impact access to the labour and housing market. These and other gender specific issues should be taken into account to ensure voluntary returns are sustainable and can take place in safety and dignity.

The purpose of this guide is to provide general guidance for Ukraine as a **country of origin** in respect of the **voluntary return** of women and girls who were either nationals or otherwise formerly habitually resident in the country of origin. **It is not intended for states attempting to forcibly remove people to Ukraine nor should anything written herein be taken to indicate that forcible removal would be warranted at this time.**¹

The Guide is intended to complement existing general guidance and policies in respect of ensuring durable and sustainable returns that take place in dignity and safety and draws together best practice derived from existing standards,

jurisprudence and Council of Europe Committee of Ministers Recommendations in respect of all migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls. The publication in particular draws from the [Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence](#) (CETS No. 210) (hereafter the “Istanbul Convention”), and [Recommendation CM Rec\(2022\)17 on the protection of the rights of migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls](#), and further considers the Council of Europe Convention on action against trafficking in human beings (CETS No. 197) (hereafter ‘the trafficking convention’), and the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (CETS No. 201) (hereafter ‘the Lanzarote Convention’). The Guide seeks to assist in implementation of the [Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy 2024-2029](#) and the [Action Plan for Ukraine “Resilience, Recovery and Reconstruction” 2023-2026](#).

Voluntary return

In this guide ‘voluntary return’ means a decision taken by a migrant, refugee or asylum-seeking woman that she wishes to return to her country of origin. Forced return processes involve different considerations and may be of a fundamentally different character.

The right to return to one’s home state, ‘voluntary return’ is a fundamental human right (UNHCR 2023). The decision of refugees and others who wish to return should be respected so long as they are well-informed and return is fully voluntary.

Decisions regarding return or continued stay in countries of asylum are both complex and reflective of individual experiences of forced displacement, such as high levels of family separation, trauma, gender-based violence (including conflict related sexual violence), economic well-being and security risks (UNHCR, 2023).

All returns should be consistent with relevant human rights obligations including the right to family life and take into account any situations of vulnerability, such as pregnancy or disability.

Each section of this Guide is designed to present the basic principles of a gender-sensitive returns process and the actions required to embed those principles into practice. The sections in yellow provide information about the Ukrainian context. Some key terms are explained in blue boxes.

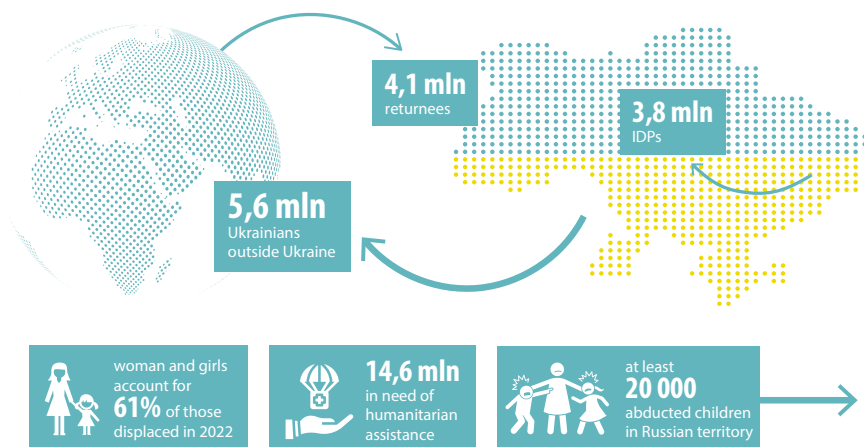
Ukraine

As a consequence of the large-scale military aggression launched by the Russian Federation against Ukraine, millions of people fled Ukraine in 2022. Women and children formed a large majority of those who left. Many countries of destination permitted visa free travel (with some exceptions) and, in general, forms of temporary protection were granted which may have provided beneficiaries with significant rights including some or all of the following: a legal residence permit, access to employment, accommodation or housing, social welfare, medical care, education for persons under 18, family reunification, banking services and, at least within the EU Temporary Protection regime, a degree of free movement in EU countries.²

As of February 2026, data from UNHCR shows 5 374 780 refugees from Ukraine recorded in Europe and another 549 090 outside Europe. These figures also note an additional 1.2 million Ukrainians recorded in the Russian Federation as of mid-June 2023, but as these figures have not been updated, they can no longer be included in official statistics (IOM Operational Data Portal). The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) reports 3 395 570 internally displaced people. IOM also reported 4 534 000 returnees as of October 2025.

Leading Ukrainian officials and independent experts agree that a mass return will only be possible if the country can meet three basic conditions: work, housing and security (People in Need, 2024).

UKRAINIAN DISPLACEMENT AND RETURN



Data sources: IOM 2025a, IOM 2025b, UNWOMEN 2022

Definitions

In this guide, **country of origin** is used to indicate both the country of origin and the country of return, **country of destination** to indicate the country where the migrant, refugee or asylum-seeker is residing and will return from and **country of transit** to include any country the refugee has or will travel through. **Community of return** is used to indicate the resident community in the places to which returning women and girls 'return' to live. Where a returnee returns to a place that was not her former habitual residence she will be "internally displaced".

Gender-based violence against women is violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately (Article 3(d), Istanbul Convention). In other words, gender-based violence against women is both the cause and the result of unequal power relations, based on perceived differences between women and men that lead to women's subordinate status in both the private and public spheres. Underlying most aspects of gender-based violence against women are inequality and discrimination. Other identified factors include male-dominated power and control structures and social and cultural attitudes about women (Explanatory Report to the Istanbul Convention at paragraph 44).

An **internally displaced person (IDP)** is a person who has been forced or obliged to flee or leave their home or place of habitual residence as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognised state border (CM/Rec(2006), UNESCO 1998).

A **refugee** is a person who is outside their country of nationality or former habitual residence owing to a well-founded fear of persecution (Article 1, Refugee Convention).

A **returnee** is any person who was displaced internally or across an international border but is returning or has returned to his/her place of former habitual residence (UNHCR 2024b).

Temporary Protection. In many European states a system of granting temporary protection exists enabling destination states to exceptionally provide immediate and temporary protection in the event of a mass influx or imminent mass influx of displaced persons. In the EU this may be through the Temporary Protection Directive of 20 July 2001 (EU Directive 2001/55/EC).³ Various non-EU countries have implemented similar protection programs. Temporary protection can be granted to those who are refugees and also those who do not meet the technical definition of a refugee in the Refugee Convention, for example those fleeing indiscriminate warfare.

Victims and survivors. This guide uses the term ‘victim’ to refer to those who survived violence against women and is used in recognition of the technical legal status afforded to ‘victims’ under domestic laws and international law. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that the term “survivor” more accurately captures the agency, autonomy and resilience of individuals who have been subjected to violence against women, including sexual violence.

A **gendered approach** recognises the differences in status, power, roles, and needs between men, women, and non-binary people, and the impact of gender or perceived gender on people’s opportunities and interactions. This could include taking into account differences in income and employment opportunities, childcare and domestic responsibilities, access to public space and societal norms governing perceived notions of ‘acceptable’ behaviours. (See for example, Istanbul Convention at Articles 18 and 49, Explanatory Report to the Istanbul Convention at paragraph 43).

A **victim-centred approach** requires a systematic focus on the needs and concerns of the victim to ensure a compassionate and sensitive delivery of services in a non-judgmental manner. Safety is paramount. The victims’ concerns, requirements, safety and well-being should be a priority in all matters and procedures. This means providing the support of victim advocate and service providers, empowering survivors as engaged participants in the process. It promotes empowerment, understanding, accountability, as well as healing and recovery. (Istanbul Convention at Articles 7 and 12).

Introduction

Women who wish to return voluntarily to their country of origin may have been victims of gender-based violence in the form of rape or other forms of sexual abuse, trafficking in human beings, exploitation, harassment or domestic violence in their countries of origin, transit, destination, and during the return process. This is a result of intersecting and multiple forms of discrimination compounded by structural and gender inequality (UNHCR 2021). Some will have unidentified or ongoing needs that must be met to ensure their successful reintegration.

Obstacles faced by returnee women and girls

access to
information and
documents

presence of
children

shame and
stigma

access to
financial and
social support



socio-economic
barriers

rejection
by local
community

stereotypes
and gender
discrimination

access to
healthcare

Conflict-related sexual violence in Ukraine

In April 2022, concerns were raised of sexual violence – and particularly rape – being used as a weapon of war by Russia, as growing evidence of sexual violence emerged from areas retaken from retreating Russian forces. In a joint statement released in June 2022, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, and the UN Special Rapporteur for Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict, Pramila Patten, expressed grave concerns “about the harrowing personal testimonies and mounting allegations of sexual violence”. It is believed that the scale of sexual violence being committed in Ukraine during the most recent and ongoing iteration of the conflict is significantly underreported. Natalia Karbowska, Co-founder and Director of Strategic Development for the Ukrainian Women’s Fund, also speaking to the UN Security Council in June 2022, described sexual violence as “the most hidden crime” and noted that for every girl or woman who is willing to tell her story, there are many others who will be silent for years (Council of Europe 2022b, p.11).

Forms of sexual violence include but are not limited to rape, attempted rape, forced prostitution, trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation, sexual slavery, forced marriage, forced pregnancy, forced abortion and forced public nudity. In addition to being a crime in most national legal systems, sexual violence is a serious violation of human rights and, depending on the context in which it takes place, may be a constituent act of genocide and/or a violation of international humanitarian law (Council of Europe 2022b).

Legal and Policy Framework

Key measures for addressing violence against women and girls:

- ensure the legal and policy framework covers all forms of violence against women and domestic violence;
- effectively apply the framework to ensure protection and redress in practice;
- adopt a gender mainstreaming approach to law and policy making in all fields;
- ensure all policy is non-discriminatory and takes an intersectional approach (see below);
- enable women leaders' involvement in law and policy making and ensure the voices of women and girls are taken into consideration (UN Women Ukraine 2025).

Gender mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming means integrating a gender equality perspective at all stages and levels of policies, programmes and projects. Women and men have different needs and living conditions and circumstances, including unequal access to and control over power, resources, human rights and institutions, including the justice system. The situations of women and men also differ according to a country, region, age, ethnic or social origin, sexual orientation, gender expression and sex characteristics or other factors. The aim of gender mainstreaming is to take into account these differences when designing, implementing and evaluating policies, programmes and projects, so that they benefit both women and men and do not increase inequality but enhance gender equality. Gender mainstreaming, being a tool for achieving gender equality, aims also at solving gender inequalities, which are not always evident (Council of Europe webpage n.d.a 'What is gender mainstreaming?').

As a group particularly vulnerable to violence against women and domestic violence as a result of their migration experiences, returning women and girls are likely to require access to services and support to ensure their return is safe and sustainable. “The integration of gender considerations into procurement processes has the potential to generate greater inclusivity and benefits for different gender groups in planning and executing publicly funded projects.” (International Institute for Sustainable Development 2023). UN Women defines gender-responsive procurement as “the sustainable selection of services, goods or civil works that considers the impact on gender equality and women’s empowerment”. (UN Women 2020). UN Women has developed an Essential Services Package for women and girls subject to violence which provides technical guidance designed to ensure the delivery of high-quality services covering health, justice and policing, social services, coordination and governance (UN Women 2015). This includes guidance on estimating resource requirements for a minimum package of services (UN Women 2015, Module 7). Gender-responsive budgeting and procurement processes not only support the allocation of public resources to benefit all, but they also serve to improve the working conditions and participation of women and women-owned businesses in supply chains.

The following legal and policy measures will assist in ensuring the legal and policy framework is gender sensitive:

- ratify and implement international and regional instruments relevant to combating and preventing gender-based violence against women and girls;
- integrate gender considerations into budgeting, procurement practices and processes to generate greater inclusivity;
- include provision for both returnees and communities of return within the national and local strategies.

Ratification of the Istanbul Convention

On 18 July 2022, Ukraine ratified the Istanbul Convention and has since undertaken a programme of legislative reform and training of relevant personnel. The Istanbul Convention sets out important standards in combatting violence against women and domestic violence by addressing the 4 Pillars: Prevention, Protection, Prosecution and Co-ordinated Policies.

” I commend the step taken by the Ukrainian authorities to ratify the Istanbul Convention despite extremely difficult circumstances. This demonstrates their commitment not only to ensure protection and support for victims but also to ensure much-needed accountability for perpetrators. (Council of Europe 2022c).

*Marija Pejčinović Burić,
Council of Europe Secretary General (2019-2024)*

Gender sensitive budgeting and procurement in Ukraine

The [Budget Code of Ukraine](#), the Law of Ukraine No.2866-IV “[On Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities of Women and Men](#)”, the Strategy for Reforming the State Finance Management System for 2022-2025 and the Action Plan for its Implementation serve as the basis for implementing measures to apply a gender approach in the budget process. As a result of the 2017-2020 strategy, 43 budget programmes of the main managers of state budget funds and 1075 passports of budget programmes of local budgets contain a gender aspect. This is said to be the world's largest project on the implementation of a gender-oriented approach to state and local budgeting. In January 2025 the Budget Code was amended to explicitly include a gender-oriented budgeting approach and to ensure that performance indicators to assess the effectiveness of the budget programme include gender aspects.⁴

Guidance in respect of [gender policy](#) in the Ukrainian administrative system and [gender responsive budgeting](#) has been produced by the Ukrainian authorities (Centre for the Adaptation of the Civil Service, 2024a and 2024b).

The “[Alliance for Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Recovery](#)” (UN Women Ukraine, 2024) was launched at the Ukraine Recovery Conference on 12 June 2024 in Berlin. The Alliance aims to ensure that gender equality and women's empowerment are central to Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction efforts. At present it brings together fifteen governments, major International Financial Institutions, UN agencies, the EU, numerous partners from civil society and the private sector.

Developing a gender sensitive national returns strategy

Where there has been a large-scale migration out of the country, a general assessment of likely needs of the population of returnee women and girls should be conducted to identify the services, staffing levels and resource allocation required to enable gender sensitive budgeting and service provision for both returnees and the communities to which they return. This should cover not simply the existing needs of populations in exile or displacement but the likely additional challenges they will experience upon return, including reintegration and the needs of the communities to which they will return (“communities of return”).

To prepare for the return of refugee and migrant women and girls in Ukraine, it is important to develop a gender-sensitive national strategy which identifies and ensures provision for the gender-based needs of returnee women and girls. This strategy should:

- clearly define the roles and responsibilities of all relevant institutions at the government and municipal level at each stage of the returns process to women and girls;

- ensure relevant coordinating bodies for the trafficking convention and Istanbul Convention should take part or be consulted about the returns strategy to ensure the needs of victims of trafficking in human beings and gender-based violence against women and domestic violence are properly taken into account to ensure returns take place in safety and dignity;

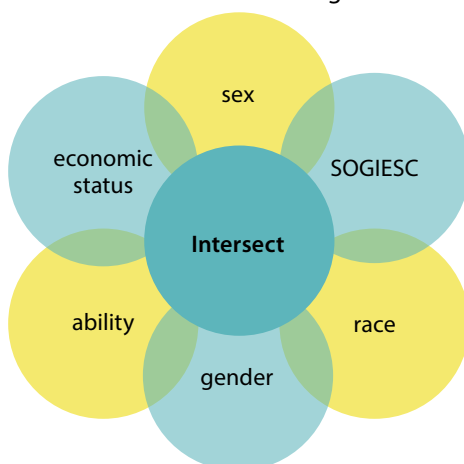
- consult with women’s organisations and civil society and ensure the voices of both women who left and those who stayed are included when developing policy to strengthen women’s agency and ensure their needs are met.

Ukraine had a [State Migration Policy Strategy](#) for the period until 2025 which was initiated in 2017 but amended in January 2024 (Order of the Cabinet Ministers of Ukraine No. 482). This policy clearly sees the return of Ukrainians as not just a right but essential to the recovery and rebuilding of the state. It recognises that a large proportion of those who left were women and children, however, it does not explicitly adopt a gender sensitive approach to the issue of returns.

Non-discrimination, intersectional approach and elimination of stereotypes

Multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination (Council of Europe 2022a) not only result in migrant women being more susceptible to harm but they can also prevent their effective return and reintegration.

Multiple discrimination occurs when a person suffers discrimination based on different grounds on different occasions or on the same occasion but on two grounds. For example, a woman may experience discrimination as a woman on one occasion and as a person with disabilities on another. She may also experience discrimination on both grounds at the same time.



Intersectional discrimination describes the situation where a person faces discrimination on two or more grounds, such as race and gender, or gender and sexual orientation and gender identity. The unequal positioning of individuals and groups relates to the categories used to distinguish and differentiate between them (Crenshaw, 1991). Taken together they produce distinct and specific forms of discrimination and oppression. This can lead to the impact of the discrimination being greater than the sum of its parts.

To combat discrimination and reduce the risk of harm as a result of stereotyping:

- ensure no discrimination is faced by returnee women and girls on any grounds including their migration status, whether that is a returnee, IDP or other;

- apply an intersectional approach to return and reintegration measures taking into account the different situations and characteristics of women and girls in all of their diversity. For example, Roma women returnees, trans women or lesbian parents may have specific challenges in respect of documentation, women with disabilities may struggle with access to services and women victims of gender-based violence may have more difficulties with integration and recovery than other returnees;

- pay special attention to measures aimed at dismantling all forms of stereotypes which have a negative impact on the rights of returning women and girls, for example social stigma and ostracism of victims of rape during conflict or throughout the migration experience. This could include running awareness raising campaigns and working with local communities and affected groups.

Women and girls from some countries may experience greater equality, freedom and autonomy in their country of destination than their country of origin. For example, they may experience greater economic independence. Lesbian, bisexual and transgender women and girls in particular may have resided in a country where they experienced greater degrees of equality or respect for their human rights. Where women are unable to continue the full enjoyment of their rights upon return, this can be a source of immense distress and in some cases cause conflict and increase the risk of violence from the partners, families and extended community to which they return.

Roma women and girls in Ukraine

Roma women and girls are often likely to experience multiple forms of discrimination. Roma who left Ukraine often experienced discrimination in countries of destination because of their ethnic origin, gender, undocumented or stateless status or displacement. The impact is not simply an 'addition' of one factor with another but an effect of the intersection of all of the factors.

Monitoring of the situation of Roma displaced because of the war has revealed systemic problems. Roma women and children often do not have documents confirming legal status including birth registration, property rights, residence registration, etc. For displaced community members, this has serious consequences: those who left at the beginning of the war cannot return, those who stayed in Ukraine cannot obtain documents and do not have access to social benefits and humanitarian assistance as IDPs. Approximately 20 percent of Ukraine's Roma population are also either stateless or at risk of statelessness, which results in additional vulnerabilities (Edwards, A. Zúñiga, A. and Yayboke, E. 2023).

Documentation

Women and girls who are outside the country of origin owing to persecution, war or humanitarian emergencies very often lack essential documentation such as birth certificates, travel documents, national identity cards or evidence of their tax, pension or other social security contributions or qualifications. These may have been damaged, lost, stolen or simply misplaced. Children born overseas may never have been registered in the country of their parent's origin. These problems are particularly exacerbated for stateless women and girls.

To assist those women and girls who wish to return to obtain or renew documentation:

- ensure women and children, including those children born outside the country and those where the identity of the father is unknown or the parents are of the same sex or gender, are able to obtain birth registration, and any other relevant national identify documents or civil registration documents;

- remove barriers to re-issuing of documentation for potential returnees while outside the country;

- recognise and grant adequate protection to the relationship of same sex couples including where the marriage or legal partnership of the couple was contracted abroad. (See *Maymulakhin and Markiv v Ukraine*, Appln no. 755135/14 (2023))

- assist potential returnees to obtain travel documents;

- following return, assist returnees with the re-issuing of documents. Provide outreach services to remote locations where necessary;

- as far as possible remove financial barriers to replacing the documents;
- enable and assist stateless individuals and their children to obtain documents to enable return to their place of former habitual residence;
- ensure stateless determination procedures allow for stateless persons to obtain a nationality.

The **Ukrainian State Migration Strategy** identifies the need to restore identity documents and confirmation of citizenship to Ukrainian citizens abroad and the lack of capacity within the foreign diplomatic institutions of Ukraine to deal with requests for passports and certificates to return. The Resolution of the Cabinet Ministers of Ukraine No 678 of 10 June 2022 approved an experimental procedure that allows citizens of Ukraine and Stateless persons normally permanently resident in Ukraine to receive documents whilst abroad via a separate branch of a state enterprise 'Dokument' under the management of the State Migration Service. (Ukraine Inform webpage 2024)⁵

Men aged 18-60 were excluded from this process and their passports had to be obtained within Ukraine. This was amended by Resolution No. 443 of 23 April 2024 to enable groups of men with disabilities; guardians of persons with disabilities; parents of children with disabilities; persons in need of constant care; and those accompanying seriously ill children to be able to obtain passport documents abroad upon presentation of the relevant supporting documents.

IDPs within Ukraine are strongly encouraged to obtain a certificate of registration as an internally displaced person. There is a possibility for legal advice and assistance to register, recover lost documents and access social benefits, receive counselling from social welfare workers or assistance with compensation for damaged or destroyed property (Charitable Fund Stabilization Support Services 2024).

There is no clear statement on the return and reintegration of former habitual residents who were stateless in the migration strategy, however some provisions have been made in the experimental procedures to enable access to documents. It is estimated that there were approximately 82 500 stateless persons living in Ukraine in 2018 of whom only around 6000 had legal residence. Clear guidance for stateless women and girls who were formerly resident in and wish to return to Ukraine should be issued.

Family unity

Protection of the right to family life is critical during return and reintegration. For women and girls who have lost contact with their families, facilitation of family tracing and family reunification may promote safe and durable return and reintegration. Some women and girls may not wish to be reunited with their family owing to previous violence, potential violence or for other reasons including having different experiences of gender and/or sexuality in their countries of destination and therefore this should always be a matter of choice. It should never be assumed that women and girls will be safer or better protected in the family. Girls should be asked whether there are any reasons why they would not wish to be reunited with their family or former carer and if their answers raise safeguarding questions these should be addressed according to national child welfare procedures. Ideally, obtaining the child's views should be done in a multidisciplinary manner.

To protect family unity during and after return:

- support and implement of family reunification measures particularly targeting children, older women and women with disabilities;

- provide family tracing opportunities without discrimination on any grounds at the earliest opportunity;

- where women or girls have expressed a wish not to be reunited with former partners or caregivers consider making use of cross border co-operation measures to ensure any protection measures issued outside the country of origin are maintained.

The [International Committee for the Red Cross' Central Tracing Agency Bureau for the International Armed Conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine](#) works closely with the Red Cross and Red Crescent to support families wherever they are to get answers about the fate and whereabouts of their missing family members. (ICRC, 2024)

Risk identification and needs assessment

Opportunities arise for screening and identifying risk and needs of victims of violence against women at various points in the process including prior to return, at the point of accessing reintegration assistance and when interacting with other services. Vulnerability and needs can change over time and should be monitored and reassessed at appropriate intervals to ensure risks and needs are identified.

To ensure appropriate risk identification and needs assessments are undertaken:

- develop guidelines and protocols for all relevant agencies to follow. This should include protocols for the voluntary provision of information by the returnee prior to arrival, screening, procedures for referral to specialised services and signposting and best practice on multi-agency working;

- ensure sufficient training of professionals on the use and benefits of the guidelines and protocols;

- identify and offer more intensive support to communities at risk, e.g. LGBTI, single mothers, elderly women, women with disabilities, women living in rural areas and members of minority communities.

Go-and-see visits

This type of programme contributes to creating the conditions for voluntary return in safety and dignity. Displaced people and refugees are able to visit their previous homes to assess for themselves the damage to their property and belongings, security, available services, infrastructure, livelihood and protection services in the area. Where available, these programmes are intended to enable displaced people to make a free and informed choice in respect of whether to return to their country of origin or seek to integrate in the place of displacement.

If go-and-see visits are provided it is very important that women are able to make an informed decision about return that is respected.

As refugees and those with other forms of protection risk losing that status if they return to their country of origin they should be provided with access to objective and up-to-date information on the potential impact of return on their legal status and access to rights and assistance in the country of destination prior to undertaking a visit.

Ukrainian returnees

Challenges in destination countries relating to both work opportunities and legal status are leading Ukrainians outside the country to feel like they may be compelled to return despite the prevailing insecurity and ongoing war of aggression by Russia against Ukraine. Many displaced persons have engaged in short term visits to Ukraine primarily to visit family members, retrieve documents, check on property and the overall security situation (UNHCR 2024a).

In February 2024, UNHCR Regional Director for Europe, Philippe LeClerc urged States to maintain a flexible approach to short-term visits to Ukraine and ensure that legal status and associated rights in a destination country are not affected by visits lasting less than three months.⁶

Multi-stakeholder work

Good practice examples in the field of violence against women and domestic violence show results are enhanced when law enforcement agencies, the judiciary, women's NGOs, child protection agencies and other relevant parties join forces to carry out accurate risk assessments and/or devise safety plans. Specialised women's organisations can be particularly important in ensuring a good long-term outcome. Moreover, NGOs and civil society organisations have a good track record of successful programmes aimed at providing shelter, legal advice, medical and psychological counselling as well as running hotlines and other essential services. Their important contribution should be recognised and their expertise incorporated as partners in multi-agency cooperation or implementing policy related to returns.

To develop good practice in multi-stakeholder work, it is important to:

- develop protocols for multi-agency working to include signposting to relevant support services;
- ensure appropriate allocation of financial and human resources to include women's organisations and civil society.

Various interagency working groups dedicated to combatting violence against women exist in Ukraine. These include the Interagency Working Group on Combating Sexual Violence related to Russia's Armed Aggression against Ukraine and an Interagency Working Group on Combatting Conflict Related Sexual Violence (UNFPA 2023). The interaction of entities engaged in combatting violence against women and domestic violence is defined and regulated by the Cabinet Ministers of Ukraine resolution "On approval of the Procedure for interaction between entities implementing measures in the field of prevention and counteraction to domestic violence and gender-based violence" (22 August, 2018 No, 658 as amended by No. 129 of 02/16/2022 and No. 36 of 01/16/2024).

Reception, care and reintegration of girls

Girls returning either alone or with parents, relatives or caregivers may have specific reception and reintegration needs relating to their status as children. Whilst all the measures set out in this Guide also apply to girls, adaptations may be necessary to take into account the best interests of the child and the views of the child in accordance with their age and evolving capacities. [The Consultation Group on the Children of Ukraine \(CGU\)](#) is preparing a checklist on child-rights compliant returns for host states (countries of destination). States should adopt a **child rights-based approach** to returning girls which centres the best interests of the child. This should take account of the girl's age and any specific vulnerable situations and needs whether she is visibly unaccompanied, travelling with another family or married. Girls who spent their formative years outside the country of return may find it less easy to adapt to their life after return.

To ensure a child rights approach is taken by all relevant agencies in the country of origin, it is important to ensure the **best interests of the child** is a primary consideration in all laws, policies and actions relating to returning children. Best practice would also require:

- effective implementation of the provisions of the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (CETS No. 201) ('the Lanzarote Convention');
- full participation in cross border cooperation with the authorities in the country from where the child is returning;
- the **specific gendered needs of girls** are properly taken into account;
- a protocol for interagency work is in place;

■ **formal procedures are in place to transfer care and guardianship responsibilities** of unaccompanied or separated children to the person, family member or authority exercising responsibility in the country of return. Child protection measures should be implemented without discrimination based on migration status⁷;

■ **initial reception systems for returnees** are appropriate to the sex and age of unaccompanied and separated girls and include suitable and safe alternative care arrangements for example, emergency foster care;

■ where it is known that a girl was a victim or at risk of sex or gender-based violence or exploitation, child abuse or domestic violence either prior to leaving the country or during displacement, measures should be in place to ensure, as far as possible, **continuity of any protection or rehabilitation measures**. It will be necessary to **coordinate with child protection services** in the sending country to determine the best interests and needs of the returning child. It is important to remember that the return itself may constitute a violation of the child's rights if they were subject to violence or maltreatment prior to leaving (X v Latvia, 2013⁸);

■ unaccompanied and separated children should promptly be assigned an **independent and adequately trained guardian**. The guardian should be trained in how to access general and specific support services, including mechanisms enabling access to protection and justice, for returnee child victims of sex and gender-based violence;

■ assess and monitor the risks of violence against girls and general suitability of the care setting;

■ where there are significant doubts about a previous age assessment or the redocumentation process has demonstrated that the country of destination erred in their age assessment this should be remedied and the true age of the child recognised.

Child-friendly justice in Ukraine

In Ukraine, the [Inter-Agency Coordination Council on Justice for Children](#) is an inter-agency platform set up by the Cabinet of Ministers to resolve the problem issues related to the development of juvenile justice and the formation of a child-friendly juvenile system.⁹

A pilot project on best practices and child friendly justice was implemented in 12 regions of Ukraine.¹⁰ It focuses on child victims and children who have committed criminal offences. It requires the best interests of the child to be considered from the perspective of age, gender, state of health, developmental characteristics, life experience, family, cultural and ethnic affiliation and take into account the opinion of the child, if they have reached such age and level of development that can express it.¹¹

The Centre for Social and Psychological Support in Justice for Children who have been victims or witnessed violence provides comprehensive social, psychological, legal, medical and other support and services to children whether victims or witnesses in proceedings of violence-related offences. This is based on the [Barnahus model](#), which is promoted by the [Council of Europe](#) to support protection of children against sexual abuse and sexual exploitation, along with the [Lanzarote Convention](#), the only international treaty criminalising child sexual abuse and exploitation, which provides the legal basis for Barnahus implementation (Council of Europe 2023, UNICEF n.d. webpage: 'The Barnahus model: General description and implementation in Ukraine.').

Children who have suffered from sexual violence during the conflict may receive a special status as a 'child of war'. To obtain the status they require:

- ▶ documents showing the child has suffered conflict related sexual violence;
- ▶ criminal proceedings should have been opened in respect of this.

Although there are no current state benefits flowing from this status, individual territorial units may provide local benefits (Inter-Agency Coordination Council 2024).

Access to information about rights and related services

The first obstacle for returning women and girls is knowing what support is available and where to find it. Reintegration assistance may be provided by a mixture of state and NGO organisations working together. Returning women should be informed about and have access to legal, social and financial support necessary to ensure the exercise of their rights.

Countries of origin can facilitate access to rights and services through:

■ ensuring information in relevant languages and formats is available and provided to returnee women and girls notifying them of their rights to reintegration assistance and related services. This information should cover the following:

- ▶ access to accommodation;
- ▶ employment and education opportunities and assistance;
- ▶ welfare or other social service assistance;
- ▶ protection and support services for those at risk of or victims of violence against women and domestic violence or trafficking in human beings and exploitation;
- ▶ available public services;
- ▶ healthcare including mental, physical, sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights;
- ▶ conflict related sexual violence and the compensation mechanisms.

■ Where information or services are provided mainly online or in digital formats, ensure measures are taken to reach the digitally excluded, for example outreach work in isolated communities, television or radio campaigns.

Facilitate and support access to relevant services and support including cash assistance where necessary to meet basic rights and needs including onward travel.

Ukraine: Action Centres

[Ukraine Action Centres](#) are described as a 'network of places where you can get all the administrative services you need throughout your life. No queues. No fuss. Without further ado.' (DIIA portal website n.d.) They cover a wide range of administrative governmental services including (re)documentation and access to assistance. Ukraine Action Centres include consultations for online services, places for self-service and business consultations, free legal assistance, mail, banking, payment of utility services, reception of citizens by the head of the territorial community, co-working area and a coffee shop or machine.

The [Ukraine is Home](#) initiative began as a collaboration between Ukraine's Ministry for Restoration and the UNHCR helping people to access support to repair damaged or destroyed houses. It now provides access to information for displaced families to help them make well informed decisions about whether to return. It is available in Ukrainian and English and includes information about required documentation, available services and security.¹²

Ukraine is Home

Providing refugees and internally displaced Ukrainians with information about their rights and continued stay in host countries or host communities, addressing questions and explaining opportunities regarding voluntary return home, and promoting access to the support needed to recover and rebuild.

[Learn more](#)



Access to protection mechanisms and justice

It is of primary importance that returnees are safe and protected from existing sources of violence and potential perpetrators. Returning women and girls may also be more vulnerable to violence against women, exploitation or domestic violence owing to the socio-economic circumstances to which they return.

Some returning women and girls will already have identified protection needs owing to their experiences of violence against women. In some cases, detailed risk assessments and ongoing risk management programmes and support programmes will be in place in the country of destination prior to return. There may be existing criminal, civil or family court proceedings against perpetrators in either the country of origin, a country of transit or the destination country. Furthermore, some women and girls may wish and be eligible to bring claims in respect of war crimes or losses suffered as a consequence of war. Care must be taken to ensure the continuation of relevant protection measures and any proceedings on return.

For access to protection mechanisms and justice to be effective, women and girls may need legal advice and assistance, access to legal aid, interpreters including sign language interpreters and consideration given to some of the additional barriers women may face if required to travel long distances or wait for extended periods of time with children or where there are economic barriers to access to justice. Some women may lack the technology or expertise to access justice online.

Women and girls with mental or physical disabilities, including post-traumatic stress disorder, may require adjustments to the justice process or physical environment to ensure their stories are heard and believed. It will be necessary to adopt a gendered and victim-centred approach.

Returnee women and girls require **practical access to effective justice and reparation for gender-based harm**. In particular:

■ Returning women and girls should have access to national and international civil, administrative and criminal remedies. These should include the possibility of seeking reparation for gender-based violence against women, trafficking in human beings and conflict related violence against women.

■ Develop law, policy and other measures to combat violence against women, including sexual violence and exploitation of returnee women and girls taking into account their socio-economic vulnerability.

■ Ensure no penalty for the period of absence affects the availability of legal advice and free legal aid under conditions provided for in internal law.

■ Female interpreters should be provided where necessary.

■ Ensure relevant professionals in the police and judicial system are trained to apply a gender sensitive approach to obtaining evidence and supporting victims through the justice system.

Legal Aid in Ukraine

The Law of Ukraine No. 3460-VI on Free Legal Aid has a system of free primary and secondary legal aid. Primary legal aid covers provision of legal information, consultations and drawing up statements and complaints. Secondary legal aid is available to specific groups to represent their interests before courts and other state and local bodies and before other persons. Those specific groups include: people with low income, IDPs, victims of the war, participants in hostilities and military personnel, family members of fallen defenders, residents of temporarily occupied territories, children, victims of domestic violence, criminal cases, stateless individuals, victims of ill-treatment, torture or sexual violence during hostilities.

The Register of Damage for Ukraine

[The Register](#) is designed to function as a record of all eligible claims seeking compensation for the damages, losses, and injuries inflicted by the Russian aggression in Ukraine since 24 February 2022. It will also contain the supporting evidence for these claims.

For the claims to be recorded in the Register, they need to meet three straightforward eligibility criteria contained in the Register's Statute. The claims must be in relation to the damage, loss or injury that:

- ▶ occurred on or after 24 February 2022;
- ▶ occurred in the territory of Ukraine, within its internationally recognised borders, including territorial waters;
- ▶ was caused by the internationally wrongful acts of the Russian Federation in or against Ukraine.

Among other claim categories impacting women and girls, the Register of Damage began accepting claims in 2025 regarding sexual violence (under Category A2.4). Victims can submit claims for both mental pain/anguish and serious personal injuries (including medical treatment costs) if the violence occurred within Ukraine's internationally recognised borders or was directly linked to events in Ukraine. For more information, see the [Frequently Asked Questions](#) for Category A2.4 claims on the Register website.

The Register is committed to taking a gender sensitive and victim-centred approach.

The Register allows the victims and survivors of the war to directly participate in the reparation process. The Register will give victims/survivors a voice by having them tell their stories through the submission of claims – including their statements and other evidence – in the hope of helping them restore a sense of control that may have been lost due to the trauma they experienced and putting them on a tangible road to recovery.

Victims/survivors often have unique needs and preferences that require tailored and responsive solutions, and the Register is committed to taking this into account when developing its rules and regulations for the claims' submission process, including evidentiary standards.

Avoiding re-traumatisation is essential for protecting the well-being and dignity of victims/survivors who have experienced trauma, and the Register

is committed to ensuring that its work and processes are designed to avoid forcing the victims/survivors to relive the horrors that they had gone through, to the greatest extent possible.

It includes active cooperation with law enforcement authorities and other organisation with the aim of relying on statements, testimonies other and evidence already given by victims/survivors in the context of other investigations.

While the Register cannot provide other forms of reparation, such as measures for physical and psychological recovery, psychosocial support and rehabilitation, it is committed to working with organisations to coordinate and provide information on access to such services.

- Forms and detailed information are available at: <https://rd4u.coe.int/en/>

Cross border protection and cooperation

In some cases women and girls will have protection orders in the country of destination against the risks of domestic violence, stalking or other forms of gender-based violence. To the greatest extent possible these should be transferred and implemented in the country of return.

Digital dimensions of gender based violence such as online sexual harassment, online and technology facilitated stalking and the digital dimensions of psychological violence, including economic violence, easily cross borders and care should be taken to ensure protection from new forms of abuse that can arise where the parties are geographically separated (GREVIO 2021).

To ensure protection is continued where a woman or girl returns to her country of origin:

- ensure the possibility of cross border protection and cooperation mechanisms in law and practice including the maintenance or transfer of relevant protection and barring orders;

- provide protocols, training and guidance to judicial and law enforcement bodies on the effective management of cases involving cross border jurisdiction or mechanisms;

- raise awareness and build the capacity of women's organisations to combat cross border digital dimensions of domestic violence.

The Istanbul Convention (CETS no. 210) provides a general set of principles governing international co-operation covering all aspects of preventing, combating and prosecuting all forms of violence covered by the scope of the convention (article 62) encourages parties to the convention to enhance the exchange of information in particular where there are reasonable grounds that an immediate risk of violence exists. This information includes details on protection orders taken for the benefit of the persons at risk (article 63).

The Budapest Convention (CETS no. 185) offers a set of legally binding standards to criminalise aspects of cyberviolence, secure evidence and engage in cross-border and international co-operation to investigate and also prosecute online violence against women.

Within the EU, Directive 2011/299/EU on the European Protection Order sets up a mechanism allowing for the recognition of protection orders issued as a criminal law measure between Member States. Similarly, direct recognition of a civil protection order within EU member states is governed by Regulation (EU) No 606/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 June 2013 on mutual recognition of protection measures in civil matters.

Ukrainian police cross border response to exploitation and trafficking

To respond to the risk of exploitation and trafficking of Ukrainian women outside the national territory, the Ukrainian police reported that they had built good cooperation with EU agencies including Europol and Frontex and established a task force mainly consisting of countries bordering Ukraine to focus on the prevention and countering trafficking in human beings. It focuses specifically on Ukrainian nationals who had to leave Ukraine because of the war of aggression. Encrypted messaging services are used to enable co-operation between different law enforcement agencies in different countries.

Within the Council of Europe, the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings has issued a [Guidance Note](#) on addressing the risks of trafficking in human beings related to the war in Ukraine and the ensuing humanitarian crisis. Most recently, the Council of Europe opened for signature a new protocol (the Valletta protocol) to its [Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters](#). It modernises mutual assistance procedures, introduces new types of requests and embraces digital tools to make cooperation faster, more efficient, and better suited to today's challenges – all while safeguarding human rights.

Access to support and services

Access to psycho-social assistance and healthcare

Migrant women and girls may return with health problems that they did not previously have, either owing to the events that caused them to leave, harm during the journey or treatment in the country of destination (IOM 2024b). Returning women and girls may have specific healthcare needs owing to their experience of violence against women or domestic violence. LBTI women and girls may have specific support needs as they are more likely to experience isolation from family and community and victimisation on return.

To reduce barriers to accessing healthcare and ensure returning women and girls receive appropriate treatment to enable their re-integration:

- ensure identification of and offer assistance and support to women victims of gender-based violence whether as a consequence of conflict, migration journey or domestic violence wherever the violence has taken place;
- train staff operating national helplines in issues specific to returnee women;
- equip mobile teams to enable women in hard to reach or rural areas to have access to support;
- foster coordination and continuity of care across countries through developing links with embassies, consulates and civil society organisations;
- national information and awareness raising campaigns should be in place to address stigma and in communities of return and education.

Women victims of rape may have children born as a result of this crime. Some women in this situation may struggle to parent, and for others the child is a protective factor in their recovery. Some common challenges include dealing with post-traumatic stress and depression and its impact on the child-parent relationship (Immaculate, C. 2023).

To improve outcomes for returning women victims of rape and their children:

- ensure child protection services and social workers are trained in this area;
- provide specialist support for women and children in these circumstances.

Ukraine has 875 specialised services focused on meeting the needs of victims of violence against women, operating across the country. This includes shelters, crisis rooms, day centres, counselling services, mobile teams and hotlines. Staffing of these services remains an issue and there is a 23% deficit in staffing of service managers, psychologists, social workers and other administrative and legal staff (World Bank 2024). There do not appear to be any specific rape or sexual violence crisis centres as required by Article 25 of the Istanbul Convention.

12 Rescue centres (UNFPA 2024) in Ukraine provide free and confidential social and psychological assistance to war victims including:

- ▶ **Social:** Workers provide information on medical and humanitarian aid, government benefits, temporary shelter, support centres for internally displaced persons, etc.
- ▶ **Psychological:** Specialists provide consultations to normalise the psycho-emotional state of the victims. Child psychologists also work in the Centres.
- ▶ **Legal:** Specialists provide legal advice on various issues.
- ▶ **Specialised:** Professionals provide comprehensive support to victims of war-related sexual violence.

These include three mobile centres providing psychological, social and legal support to the de-occupied territories and frontline regions of Ukraine (State website of Ukraine 2024).

La Strada maintains a list of support services and contact details for women and girls on its website (La Strada 2024).

Access to accommodation, economic and financial reintegration assistance or support

Lack of accommodation or economic independence leaves women and girls particularly vulnerable to violence and exploitation. Returnees may have difficulty accessing previous accommodation. It may have been damaged, destroyed or occupied during their absence. In the case of women, property may have been owned by their husband or other male family member.

Access to decent work should be a priority of return and reintegration plans. This should take into account levels of educational attainment recognising that women may have obtained qualification, skills and experience in the country of destination including those derived directly from their experiences of migration.

Women may also find it more difficult to access reintegration assistance and employment opportunities owing to structural inequalities or as a consequence of their experiences during conflict. Cash based interventions¹³ can help foster self-reliance and build resilience. They enable women and girls to meet their basic needs and reduce vulnerability to sexual exploitation, stigma and negative coping strategies such as transactional sex or child marriage (Interagency Standing Committee 2018).

The provision of assistance to returnees, unless carefully managed, may contribute to perceptions of preferential treatment from the broader community, particularly in vulnerable contexts (IOM 2019).

To assist re-integration and economic stability of returning women and girls:

- ensure women have access to property dispute mechanisms and reconstruction assistance;

- ensure sufficient capacity of shelters for victims of domestic violence to cater for returnee women and their children;

- economic support measures should take into account women's household care duties, transport and ease of movement, women's access to financial institutions and familiarity with technology, such as mobile phones, any additional barriers faced by older women, LGBTI women, national minorities and women with disabilities;

- collaborate with national and local job centres, social partners, efficient labour matching schemes and the private sector;

■ provide training and support to women and girls to develop economic capacity;

■ provide entrepreneurship opportunities through technical and financial support mechanisms;

■ collect disaggregated data and conduct a comprehensive gender analysis of the socio-economic programmes.

Employment and welfare for returnee women and girls in Ukraine

A study by the World Bank (World Bank 2024) found that as of April 2023, 72% of those registered as unemployed were women. More women than men depend on social security and the total income per capita was 20% higher in male headed households than female-headed households. Female headed households are disproportionately involved in care work and more likely to experience unstable work. Women spend over 16 hours a week more than men on unpaid domestic work. Although there has been a noticeable increase in fathers' participation in childcare women still have primary responsibility for domestic and care work.

[Resolution of the Cabinet Ministers of Ukraine No. 94](#) passed in Ukraine on 26 January 2024 enables support to be given to families that return and IDPs who have not paid a single social contribution for 3 months before requesting assistance. Six months of cash assistance is available for low-income families that returned from abroad, had been abroad over 90 days and where unemployed is available even if their family members are able to work. It is also available for IDPs. Able-bodied recipients are required to register with the Employment Centre or find work within 2 months after receiving cash assistance (UNHCR website 'Ukraine is Home' n.d.b).

Portability of social protection and qualifications

Returns should ideally be accompanied by sustainable reintegration and assistance measures in the states of return. Although migrants may not have paid into the relevant schemes in their home countries while absent, they might have paid into health, social security, employment or pension schemes in the country of destination.

For the benefit of both the returning women and girls and the receiving country steps should be taken to:

- develop portability agreements with destination countries to ensure returned migrants remain able to benefit from health, unemployment and pension schemes;

- enable access to local and national social protection schemes without penalty.

Women and girls may also have obtained qualifications in their country of destination. Recognition of these qualifications could enable not just reintegration but also re-entry to the job market to provide what may be much-needed skills to the country of return.

This can be achieved through:

- recognising refugees' academic qualifications and work experience through initiatives such as the Council of Europe's European Qualifications Passport (Council of Europe webpage n.d.b);

- enable recognition of diplomas or qualifications obtained in the country of destination for all migrants and refugees (CM/Rec (2022)17, para 108).

Ukraine provides a [recognition procedure for foreign qualifications](#) including professional qualifications. It can be accessed online (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine 2024).

Monitoring and evaluation

In the context of returns, policies and practices aimed at supporting returnee victims of violence against women including sexual violence should be monitored and evaluated to ensure they are reaching the target groups and appropriately responding to their needs. Article 11 of the Istanbul Convention requires parties to collect administrative data, conduct research and collect survey data in respect of violence against women and domestic violence (Council of Europe 2016).

Principles relevant to effective monitoring and evaluation include:

- ensuring that data collection, particularly when dealing with sensitive personal data, accords with the principles of the right to privacy and data protection and security. (Istanbul Convention, Article 65);

- ensuring that data collection is disaggregated by sex, age, ethnicity, migration status and where relevant relationship between perpetrator and victim;

- using data to develop evidence-based gender-sensitive responses and policies directed to the sustainable, safe and durable voluntary return of citizens and other former habitual residents.

In principle, evaluation should be a separate process to and independent from monitoring. Sample criteria include relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability. A gender lens should be applied to these criteria to assess whether the needs and priorities of women in all their diversity are met and that the intervention contributed to advanced gender equality (e.g. OECD 2021).

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UKRAINE LAW AND POLICY

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Endnotes

1. “Although UNHCR is not promoting returns to Ukraine at the current time due to the ongoing international armed conflict, this does not preclude some refugees from taking personal decisions to return” ([UNHCR Position on voluntary return to Ukraine](#)). In addition, the European Union considered that “temporary protection for the categories of displaced persons referred to in [Implementing Decision \(EU\) 2022/382](#) should be extended until 4 March 2027” ([Council Implementing Decision \(EU\) 2025/1460 of 15 July 2025](#)).
2. Different temporary protection regimes exist in different countries and not all provide the same rights. This broad list is taken from Council Directive 2001/55/EC (the 2001 Temporary Protection Directive) and may have less relevance under non-EU countries’ protection regimes.
3. On 13 June 2025 the EU member states agreed to extend temporary protection for refugees from Ukraine until 4 March 2027.
4. Paragraph 42 of Part one Article 2 and Paragraph one of part five of Article 20 as amended by Law No. 4225-IX of January 16, 2025.
5. A list of ‘Dokument’ centres is maintained at <https://pasport.org.ua/en/centres>
6. According to UNHCR, “The protection and needs of refugees must be ensured until they can voluntarily and sustainably return home, in safety and dignity.” ([UNHCR 2024](#)).
7. See CM/Rec(2019)11
8. X v Latvia [GC] Appln. 27853/09 (2013)
9. Interdepartmental Juvenile Justice Coordination Council 2024
10. Order of the Cabinet Ministers of Ukraine No. 150/445/2077/5/187
11. Order of the Cabinet Ministers of Ukraine No. 150/445/2077/5/187
12. UNHCR website ‘Ukraine is home’ n.d.a
13. Cash based interventions are where people are given cash directly rather than support in kind.

The guide “Safe and dignified: Gender-sensitive voluntary return strategies for Ukraine, anchored in Council of Europe standards” aims to support Ukraine to design and implement gender-sensitive voluntary returns processes that take into account the needs of returning women and girls who have been or risk becoming victims of violence against women, domestic violence or conflict-related sexual violence. The guide is based on Council of Europe and other international standards relevant to preventing and combatting violence against women as well as standards pertaining to migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls.

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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.

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