

Intervention by Kateryna Levchenko
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at the Conference on “Work-life balance as a leverage for women’s empowerment and
promoting gender equality”
(Rome, 12 April 2022)

Dear participants! Dear colleagues!

Ukraine and the Ukrainian people now are living through dark times. On 24 February 2022, Russia began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Since then, the incessant and indiscriminate shelling of civilian infrastructure has left hundreds of cities uninhabitable. The destruction of residential neighbourhoods has forced people to flee, and the attacks on trains, buses, and cars evacuating civilians have led to the deaths of thousands of men, women, and children. We are witnessing the biggest migrant flow in Europe since the Second World War. More than 11.5 million Ukrainians have been displaced – over 7 million internally displaced within Ukraine’s borders and nearly 4.5 million across the borders into neighbouring countries. Women and children account for roughly 90% of these refugees. I would like to thank all the countries, governments, international and non-governmental organizations, communities, and all the people of Europe and the world, who have expressed their solidarity and provided support to Ukraine and the Ukrainians. Thank you for standing with us!

The war also illuminates the important role women play in maintaining the stability of Ukraine and their prospective role in restoring peace, strengthening Ukraine’s democracy, and bolstering the economy. We do not want Ukrainian refugees to be seen only as victims of Russian military aggression. They represent a positive human and economic potential which will prove to be a boon for host countries, creating a win-win situation for both the Ukrainian migrants and the receiving economies. I would like to emphasise a few points:

1. **For receiving countries, this crisis will be a litmus test for the efficacy of the Council Directive 2001/55/EC on minimum standards for granting temporary protection.** Because Ukrainian refugees are mostly directed to immigration offices upon arrival, it is important for host countries to offer them integrated services at their point of entry into the system. This requires close cooperation between immigration, employment, and social services. Integrated case management should be used, whereby immigration officers immediately schedule meetings for each immigrant woman with an employment counsellor/case manager. Employment services should include validation of competencies and an assessment of barriers to labour market integration, including language barriers and care responsibilities for minors accompanying them.
2. **It would be of benefit to create a one-stop-shop for migrants needing guidance on rules pertaining to different European Union member states.** A central repository of information regarding rules in various EU states could be updated regularly to reflect current information necessary for employment seekers, such as rules governing the recognition of professional and academic credentials.

3. **It is important to streamline the process of reissuing proof of qualifications and certification of academic degrees.** Many refugees will not be carrying with them documents to prove their qualifications and academic degrees. The establishment of a quick channel for reissuing such documents would be helpful. Both the Council of Europe and UNESCO have each developed Qualifications Passports for which refugees can apply, but this passport application process, mainly offered in refugee camps, involves many steps. The EU's Erasmus+ project (ARENA Toolkit 3) created to support access to higher education for refugees might also be useful in this context. According to the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (the Lisbon Recognition Convention), Member States should be flexible when documents are missing, but sometimes it might be linked to the "refugee" status. It must be stressed that the reissuing of documents proving qualifications is relevant in a wide range of situations and education levels, including vocational training.
4. **Some Erasmus+ projects are applicable to the verification of Ukrainian qualifications.** Diplomas awarded in Ukraine have already been included in the databases for some time now, so information about Ukraine's system of certification is generally available.
5. **The digital certification and authentication of qualification documents need to be addressed.** Existing certificates need to be digitized and checked for forgery so that they can be recognized in EU countries. Refugees may not have realized the importance of carrying their diplomas and certificates with them. If they were unaware of the benefit of safeguarding their documents as digitized copies, they may have carried original paper documents with them, subjecting them to loss. In such cases, documentation of credentials needs to be recovered and validated. Furthermore, refugees may lack knowledge about whether their educational credentials will be accepted in the countries of destination. The Ukraine office of the ILO offers extremely helpful support, by translating existing tools, disseminating information, and providing guidance through its web pages, apps, help desks, etc.
6. **Developing Skills for Employment.** The ILO has also a knowledge-sharing platform on Skills and lifelong learning that could be put to use, one of which is the europass (CV) – the EU project aimed at presenting professional skills, competencies, and qualifications in a form that is understandable in all EU countries. The Ukrainian language has not been part of the europass CV system, but this is an option to be explored. The europass CV template is readily accessible and free to use for anyone around the world.
7. **Access to schooling and early childhood education is critical.** There are nearly two million children among the Ukrainian refugees. To ensure the possibility for women to work it is important to also provide day care and schooling for the children. Expanding the care infrastructure will increase the labour participation rate of women, especially the younger women.

8. **Special attention must be paid to the threats of labour exploitation, trafficking, and child labour.** Because of language barriers and difficulty in applying previously acquired skills and competencies to a new situation, Ukrainian refugees might be pushed to take up employment in sectors of the host country's economy that are experiencing a labour shortage – such as the caretaking, hospitality, and subsector of the agricultural industries— and which often offer poor working conditions and low wages. The imbalance of power may also lead to situations where there is violence and harassment in the workplace, labour exploitation, trafficking, and child labour. Thus, there must be a recognised joint responsibility of the institutions, the social partners, employers, and civil society organisations to implement preventative approaches and monitor situations where the risk of exploitation may be high.

Finally, a word of appreciation for the solidarity with Ukraine and the extensive common effort to stop Russian aggression, which threatens not only Ukraine but Europe and its civilisation as well. Thank you for your attention.