



**HIAS**

# Serving Ukrainian Newcomers

**A Practical Guide to Cultural and Gender-Aware Considerations**

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HIAS supports women, girls, and LGBTQIA+ communities to access their full potential and live free from violence by supporting survivors, mitigating risks, and transforming beliefs that perpetuate gender-based violence.



## Purpose of this Toolkit

This toolkit is designed to enhance service providers' understandings of gender awareness and specific cultural considerations when supporting **Ukrainian Newcomers**. It is intended to support person-centered, trauma informed care. The information contained in this toolkit was generated from cultural advisors who recommended areas of attention that service providers should bear in mind to ensure culturally and linguistically responsive services. The United States and Ukraine share many commonalities and yet have different social and cultural norms, along with differing gender dynamics, role expectations, and expectations of behavior.

## Key Concepts

**Culture** is a set of shared values, beliefs, and norms in a given society. Culture is dynamic and changes as societies adapt to new information, challenges, and circumstances. Although culture can form from group characteristics, even within the same cultures, individuals can have different social positions, ages, incomes, health statuses, class positions, and migration journeys.

**Gender roles** refer to the socially constructed expectations, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for individuals based on gender identity. As gender is socially constructed, gender expectations change over time. Gender, like culture, is dynamic. While gender identity and presentation is prolific and multifaceted, many cultures view gender on a binary of men/women and boys/girls and dictate roles based on this limited binary.<sup>1</sup>

**Gender-sensitive** describes an approach in which the different needs, abilities, and opportunities of all individuals – regardless of their gender identity – are identified, considered, and acknowledged.

**Gender awareness** describes being conscious that individuals experience their culture,

environment, opportunities, and setbacks differently based on their gendered experience moving through the world.

**Survivor** describes an individual who has experienced violence or harm (this may include physical, emotional, economic, and other forms of harm). In the context of GBV, 'survivor' is used as short-hand for a survivor of gender-based violence. While some survivors may prefer other terms to self-identify (such as 'victim'), best practice suggests using the term survivor rather than victim when addressing an impacted person or individual. In this toolkit, we use survivor-centering principles and survivor-led care to inform best practice and recommendations.<sup>2</sup>

## Gender-Based Violence Programming Tips

### How might you ensure that any GBV programming is culturally appropriate and responsive?

- Ask women and girls what they are experiencing and then develop ways to listen for cultural communities.
- Develop promotional materials that are culturally sensitive and adapted to be relevant within the culture.
- Use specific materials and means, such as storytelling (a common cultural practice) or sharing videos of Ukrainians who have experienced similar challenges and successes.

### What are important considerations when communicating about GBV to refugees, asylees, and immigrants?

- **Message appropriately.** Facilitate clear and timely exchanges of messages within groups.
- **Use terminology carefully.** Terminology should be accompanied by key messaging, culturally appropriate meanings, and specific examples.

- **Don't stigmatize.** Foster more inclusivity by embracing diversity, challenging stereotypes, and treating others with empathy instead of stigmatizing them based on their differences.

### How can you make GBV support inclusive to all?

Advocate for women's rights and services by fostering equality, inclusivity, and shared opportunities for all genders. Offering services and resources to all people should be done with sensitivity, but awareness of socially ascribed gender expectations.

## Important Reminders

### Gender-Based Violence (GBV) affects all people.

- Gender-based violence is prevalent globally, Gender-based violence is prevalent globally, in all societies in the world.
- In the United States, 1 in 4 women and 1 in 10 men experience intimate partner violence (IPV).<sup>3</sup>
- We must be led by the survivor's choices and consent as to who the survivor wants to know what is happening in the survivor's life.
- We follow GBV guiding principles of the survivor's right to confidentiality, safety, self-determination and respect and non-discrimination in all our actions.

Reports indicate that gender-based violence was "already widespread and increasing in Ukraine and highly prevalent in the region" before February 2022. A 2018 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe survey found that 75% of women in Ukraine had experienced some form of violence by age 15, and 35% had experienced physical and/or sexual violence.<sup>4</sup>

The Russian war of aggression in Ukraine has increased the risks of gender-based and sexual violence against women. Displaced Ukrainian women and girls seeking refuge in neighboring countries face a greater risk of trafficking and exploitation due to compounded vulnerabilities such as isolation, economic insecurity, language barriers, and lack of knowledge of local resources. Additionally, when men remain in active combat and spouses are separated, reunited families face a higher rate of domestic violence and GBV as a result of the trauma experienced in combat and the lack of MHPSS support available in war zones.

According to a 2022 assessment conducted by VOICES and HIAS, Ukrainian women and girls interviewed in Romanian and Moldovan refugee centers reported heightened fears of DV and IPV upon reunification with male family members.<sup>5</sup>

## Survivor-Centered Care

While this guide may be written to support our knowledge about working with individuals from **Ukraine**, it is important to remember that **each survivor is unique and is the expert of their own life.**

We aim to provide empowering, survivor-centered services by truly listening to each survivor's desires, presenting options but not advice, allowing the survivor to make their own decisions and determine all courses of action and support.

# Human Trafficking

Trafficking can happen to individuals of any age, gender, sexual orientation, race, and ethnic background. Women and girls seeking freedom from conflict and financial hardship are at higher risk for trafficking. LGBTQI populations and individuals with other vulnerabilities – such as disabilities of any kind – are also more at risk.

Ukraine is a source as well as a transit and destination location for human trafficking. Care providers should consider signs of trafficking when supporting clients and be prepared to offer resources and referrals.

## Cultural Considerations

Culture is not static or universal—it is constantly changing over time. In many cultures, age and gender may influence an individual's power, status, or expected role and authority in society. Cultural factors, including attitudes and beliefs, can determine the type of support an individual can anticipate receiving from their family, community, and society when it comes to experiencing violence in the family or community. The following aspects of culture influence how someone is expected to think, behave, and act. These may influence how someone experiences gender-based violence (GBV), and their expectations of how persons may respond.

**Cultural Adjustment:** Ukrainians come from a society with deep-rooted traditional views on identity roles, family dynamics, and religious and social norms. Ukrainian refugees may have difficulties interacting with people from different ethnic or racial backgrounds. For instance, homophobic or transphobic perceptions still exist, particularly in rural areas. Individuals may not know how to engage in a culturally sensitive manner, or they may be resistant

to collaboration with a representative of the LGBTQIA+ community. They also may not want to participate in certain events or holidays unfamiliar to them, like a Halloween party. However, with guidance and support, individuals can adapt and be more flexible. Elderly clients may seek complete dependency on their relatives or the local Ukrainian community upon arrival, especially if they lack English language skills. This could hinder their integration and day-to-day interactions. Conversely, children may adapt to their new environment more quickly.

**Language barriers may prohibit access:** Refugees who recently arrived may face greater challenges in terms of language barriers, unfamiliarity with local systems, and limited social networks. They may require more assistance in navigating available services and understanding their rights. In contrast, refugees who have been in the country for a longer period may have had more opportunities for integration, language acquisition, and building social connections, which can influence their ability to seek and access support for GBV.

**Language barriers may prohibit access:** Limited English literacy can create a language barrier, making it difficult for refugees to communicate their experiences of GBV effectively or seek support. It can be their primary obstacle obstructing their ability to understand and navigate available support services, legal processes, and resources related to GBV. Low English literacy levels may limit access to written information, including educational materials, awareness campaigns, and support materials related to GBV, making it harder for them to access the information they need.

**Ukrainian language support:** The majority of Ukrainian newcomers speak Ukrainian and Russian (depending on the group you have and region of Ukraine where they lived). It is advisable to ask, as some people can be sensitive or have negative reactions toward the Russian language due to the war in Ukraine.

**Russian Language:** Some Ukrainians may prefer to read and write in Russian as opposed to Ukrainian; this will largely be determined by the person, what region they come from, and what socio-political identity they have.

**Educational preparedness:** Ukraine has, according to UNESCO, an adult literacy rate of 99.97% with little deviance across the genders.<sup>6</sup>

**Learning and processing styles (e.g., linear, logical, sequential versus lateral, holistic, simultaneous):** A diverse range of learning and processing styles will help you create inclusive learning environments that cater to various preferences. If you use instructional approaches that incorporate a mix of strategies - such as presenting information in different formats, providing hands-on activities, promoting group discussions, and offering opportunities for reflection - you can accommodate different learning styles and enhance the overall learning experience for Ukrainians and all participants.



breaks in between sessions. This will provide opportunities for networking, sharing ideas, and fostering connections among participants.

**Balancing urgency and cultural sensitivity:** While addressing GBV requires timely responses, it is important to balance the need for immediate action with cultural sensitivity. This can involve providing survivors with information about available resources and support options while allowing them the autonomy to decide when and how to seek help.

**Communication styles:** Ukrainians tend to have communication styles that are characterized as open and friendly. However, it's important to keep in mind certain boundaries and cultural norms. To create an inclusive environment that meets the needs of the group, it is advisable to have a discussion during the initial meeting about establishing rules for communication. This allows participants to contribute their thoughts and preferences, ensuring that everyone feels comfortable. By involving the group in setting these guidelines, you promote a sense of ownership and mutual respect. It's important to remain flexible and considerate of individual communication styles within the broader framework established for the group.

## Multilingual Resources

Creating multilingual resources, including written materials, videos, or audio content, can enhance accessibility for refugees with limited English literacy. Translating important information into languages spoken by those that have experienced forced migration can help them access vital GBV-related resources and services.

**The concept of time:** Most Ukrainians will come on time for planned events. It is always good to ensure that transportation is planned. For people participating in programs that may interact and have conversations with each other, it is advisable to plan free time before or after the session or include designated conversation

**Importance of relationships, family, and friends:** For Ukrainians, family, relationships, and friends serve as crucial sources of support. When faced with challenges or in need of assistance, Ukrainians often turn to their close network of family members, friends, and loved ones. These relationships play a significant role in their lives and provide a strong foundation of support and understanding. The bonds formed within their social circles are highly valued and serve as reliable sources of emotional, practical, and social support.<sup>7</sup>

**Interpersonal relationships:** Ukrainians value hierarchical relationships, respect based on social status, and may speak fast and interrupt. They often demonstrate respect through gestures and show hospitality as hosts. Certain forms of touch, like handshakes and hugs, are acceptable among close acquaintances.

## Gender Roles and Expectations

**In daily life:** In Ukrainian society, there are certain social gender role norms that influence expectations regarding the behavior of boys/men and girls/women, as well as the perceptions of how individuals should act based on their gender. However, it is important to note that these gender role norms are evolving, and there is a growing recognition of gender equality and the importance of challenging stereotypes. Many individuals in Ukraine are actively working towards breaking down gender barriers and promoting more inclusive and equal opportunities for both men and women in various aspects of life.

**Gendered expectations:** There can be societal expectations regarding gender roles. For some Ukrainians being a “good man” is often associated with providing for the family by working and providing a source of income, while what is deemed being a “good woman” means that a woman may not necessarily be required to work but is allowed to do so if she chooses. Additionally, expectations of being “a good woman” is that women are

often expected to cook, clean, and take care of children. Most Ukrainian women have access to education and typically graduate from at least high school. Many women in Ukraine pursue higher education and obtain multiple degrees in various fields. In Ukraine, women have free access to public services.



**LGBTQIA+ rights:** There are various ideas and perspectives regarding Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression (SOGIE). While progress has been made in promoting LGBTQI+ rights and acceptance, challenges and discrimination still exist, and different segments of society hold differing opinions on these matters. Efforts towards education, awareness, and dialogue are crucial in fostering understanding, tolerance, and equality for individuals of all SOGIE backgrounds in Ukraine.

**Shifting gender norms post-resettlement:** Many Ukrainians believe that cultural differences should be respected, and that people should not impose Western ideals as the only singular perspective. For some people it will be important to share success stories, particularly those of Ukrainian families who have successfully adapted to gender expectations in the U.S.

**Reproductive health and rights:** There is social stigma surrounding topics related to reproductive health, including contraception, abortion, and sexually transmitted infections throughout Ukraine. It is important to note



that the availability and quality of reproductive health services may vary across regions in Ukraine. Financial barriers, social stigma, and lack of awareness can affect access to services.

Trafficking stands out as a prevalent and disturbing manifestation of gender-based violence (GBV) in Europe, particularly impacting Ukrainian women. The issue, rooted in forced labor, begging, and sexual exploitation, has persisted since the 1990s. Destinations include Russia, Poland, and Turkey, alongside internal trafficking in Ukraine. The invasion by Russia in 2022 heightened the vulnerability of the population, with fraudulent recruiters exploiting the crisis. Prior to the invasion, over 300,000 Ukrainians had fallen victim to trafficking since 1991, and from 2019-2021, 46,000 were trafficked, emphasizing the urgent need for comprehensive measures to combat this deeply rooted form of GBV.<sup>8</sup>

**Kinship and extended families:** Marriage, family, and kinship structures in Ukraine emphasize the importance of strong family ties and extended family units. Marriage is viewed as a lifelong commitment, and traditional wedding customs are common. While nuclear families are prevalent, extended families play a significant role, with multiple generations often living together or maintaining close contact. Ukrainian culture values kinship, with a sense of obligation and responsibility towards relatives and even close family friends.<sup>9</sup>

**Stages of life:** From a young age, Ukrainian boys are often taught to conform to traditional masculinity norms. This may include being encouraged to be strong, assertive, and independent, while suppressing emotions such as crying. Additionally, cultural associations of blue for boys and pink for girls are commonly reinforced, contributing to gender-specific expectations. Ukrainian girls are often taught to adhere to feminine gender norms. They may be encouraged to exhibit traits such as nurturing, gentleness, and an emphasis on appearance. These social expectations influence daily life activities, responsibilities, and decision-making processes within Ukrainian society.

**Values and norms regarding individualism, independence, collectivity, and conflict resolution:** In Ukraine, there is a balance between individualism and collectivity. While personal autonomy and independence are valued, there is also a strong emphasis on community and family ties. Conflict resolution tends to prioritize harmony and finding mutually beneficial solutions, with a preference for mediation and compromise.<sup>10</sup>

**Work habits and practices:** In terms of daily life activities, there may be assigned gender roles and responsibilities common with Ukrainian culture. Traditionally, men are expected to fulfill roles related to work, providing for the family, and decision-making in certain domains. Women, on the other hand, are often responsible for household chores, childcare, and nurturing roles.

**Help-seeking:** When seeking help or advice, Ukrainians often turn to their close friends and family as their first and most trusted sources of support. They prioritize seeking recommendations and guidance from people they have personal relationships with and who they consider to be knowledgeable and trustworthy. This reliance on close social networks reflects the importance of interpersonal connections and the value placed on personal recommendations in Ukrainian culture. Women and girls who experience GBV feel unsure about talking about their own experiences and often choose to keep such situations to themselves, thereby reinforcing feelings of shame.

**Religious or spiritual beliefs:** Ukraine is known for its multicultural and multi-religious environment, where individuals from various religious backgrounds coexist. Alongside the dominant Christian denominations, there are also practitioners of other religions such as Judaism, Islam, and various Eastern traditions. Tensions may arise between Ukrainian caseworkers and clients and Tatar caseworkers and clients among Crimean refugees due to historical and geopolitical factors. Caseworkers should prioritize cultural sensitivity, open

dialogue, and recognition of diverse identities to foster a harmonious working relationship. Informed awareness of the cultural and religious background of Tatar refugees is crucial for providing effective and culturally competent assistance.

Understanding diverse perspectives among refugees from occupied territories like Crimea is key. Many see it as part of Ukraine, while others consider Russia their new home. Sensitivity, open communication, and a neutral stance are crucial for building trust and support, regardless of differing views on Crimea's status.

If religious leaders or faith-based organizations are used to support GBV survivors in this community, ensure a process that vets individuals and organizations to avoid perpetuating harmful practices or beliefs. In many cultures, beliefs regarding the cause of distress are related to one's explanatory belief system. Some people may hold beliefs related to mental health or disability as being caused by karma, an imbalance of energy, problems in the spirit realm, witchcraft, and more. What one believes may be causing harm may then dictate what one believes to be supportive for their health and wellbeing. Understanding the belief system of one's clients offers allows for tailored support that considers the needs and wellbeing of the whole person.

As a general consideration, Arthur Kleinman's eight questions designed for providers to better understand medical patients offers a helpful model for better understanding individuals and their needs within the resettlement context as well. As with survivor-led care, Kleiman's approach centers the individual seeking support and encourages the provider to set aside assumptions and implicit biases while striving for cultural humility.

### **Dr. Arthur Kleinman's Eight Questions** <sup>11</sup>

- What do you call your problem? What name do you give it?
- What do you think has caused it?

- Why did it start when it did?
- What does your sickness do to your body? How does it work inside you?
- How severe is it? Will it get better soon or take longer?
- What do you fear most about your sickness?
- What are the chief problems your sickness has caused for you (personally, family, work, etc.)?
- What kind of treatment do you think you should receive? What are the most important results you hope to receive from the treatment?

## **Additional Resources**

[Waiting for the Sky to Close: The Unprecedented Crisis Facing Women and Girls Fleeing Ukraine - VOICE Amplified](#)

[Trafficking in Persons | Ukraine | U.S. Agency for International Development \(usaid.gov\)](#)

<https://www.unicef.org/ukraine/en/research-and-reports>

<https://response.reliefweb.int/ukraine/gender-based-violence>

<https://www.usaid.gov/education>

<https://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/pt/countries/europe/ukraine>

[https://coresourceexchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/CORE\\_Background\\_Ukraine.pdf](https://coresourceexchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/CORE_Background_Ukraine.pdf)

[Arthur Kleinman's Eight Questions \(hhs.gov\)](#)

## **Contributors**

**Mariia Korchemliuk (she/her)**, Cultural Advisor for HIAS and Ukrainian Services Case Manager, Jewish Family Services Ann Arbor, MI.

**Ruxandra Marcu, PhD (she/they)**, GBV, Child Safety & Wellness Program Manager, HIAS.

**Amy Neiman, MSW, MPH (she/her)**, Gender and GBV Consultant for HIAS.

**Sasha Verbillis-Kolp, LCSW, MSW (she/her)**, Mental Health, Psychosocial Support and Holistic Services Senior Program Manager, HIAS.

# Endnotes

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3. National Coalition Against Domestic Violence Fact Sheet. [https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2497/domestic\\_violence-2020080709350855.pdf?1596828650457](https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2497/domestic_violence-2020080709350855.pdf?1596828650457)
4. Regional Gender Task Force, Making the Invisible Visible. An evidence-based analysis of gender in the regional response to the war in Ukraine, October 2022, p. 8.
5. Gender-Based Violence in the Context of the Ukraine Crisis, 2023. VOICE-HIAS-Romania-GBV-Assessment-Report-\_Final.pdf
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8. USAID. <https://www.usaid.gov/ukraine/fact-sheet/dec-16-2022-trafficking-perso>
9. CORE: Ukrainian backgrounder. <https://coresourceexchange.org/ukrainian-backgrounder/>
10. CN: Ukrainian mindset map. [https://www.countrynavigator.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/UKRAINE-MINDSET-MAP\\_2022.pdf](https://www.countrynavigator.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/UKRAINE-MINDSET-MAP_2022.pdf)
11. <https://thinkculturalhealth.hhs.gov/assets/pdfs/resource-library/arthur-kleinmans-eight-questions.pdf>



**Global Headquarters**

1300 Spring Street, Suite 500  
Silver Spring, MD 20910 USA

+1 301.844.7300

[info@hias.org](mailto:info@hias.org)  
[hias.org](http://hias.org)