

SOCIAL WORK IN WARTIME UKRAINE:

Changing the Professional Landscape



Edited by Tetyana Semigina

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Changing the Professional Landscape

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The edited volume offers a comprehensive and timely analysis of how social work theory, practice, and education in Ukraine are being reshaped by prolonged war. The book examines professionalisation processes, community resilience, responses to internal displacement, psychosocial and gender-sensitive interventions, and innovations in formal and non-formal social work education.

The book targets scholars, university teachers, advanced social work practitioners, and policy-oriented professionals.

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Preface

Witnessing Social Work in Tumultuous Times

Tetyana SEMIGINA

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In the summer of 2024, I spent two months in Germany and the United States. While these countries face their own social challenges, they were not marked by nightly threats, air raid sirens, or the instability that has become part of daily life in Ukraine. From a serene backyard in Florida, it was easy to envision an eco-social world – a concept promoted by the international professional social work community, emphasizing harmony between human well-being, social justice, and environmental sustainability. This ideal highlighted the contrast with the urgent realities awaiting me back in Ukraine.

Returning home, the starkness of the situation was immediate: over one hundred missiles struck Kyiv in a single night. Shock, grief, and widespread vulnerability were palpable, underscoring the critical importance of social work in addressing urgent human needs and sustaining social cohesion. These experiences illustrate the extraordinary demands placed on practitioners and researchers alike, who navigate complex and high-stakes environments every day.

This edited volume captures the tension between idealized global social work agendas and the lived realities of Ukrainian practice. It brings together voices of scholars, educators, and field practitioners who engage with these challenges firsthand, offering insights into professionalisation, community resilience, gender-sensitive interventions, and adaptations in both education and research. Through this collection, we aim to illuminate not only what social work is in Ukraine today, but also how it is envisioned, practiced, and transformed in response to profound and ongoing upheaval.

In addition to bearing witness to contemporary practice, this volume seeks to share and reflect on the development of social work theory, practice, and research in Ukraine, a post-socialist context undergoing profound and overlapping transformations. It brings together scholarly contributions written in 2024–2025, though some empirical materials and findings were collected prior to the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022—an event that has since radically altered everyday life, social relations, and institutional structures across the country. This temporal layering is not a limitation, but a strength, offering readers the opportunity to trace the evolution of Ukrainian social work both before and during an unprecedented period of sustained war.

The realities of continuous armed conflict compel us to reflect not only on the future of social work education, research, and practice in Ukraine, but also on their past—on the profession's history, accumulated experience, and prior achievements. Social work in Ukraine was long described as a “new profession,” emerging in the wake of post-socialist welfare reforms. Today, however, it represents

nearly three decades of institutionalization. During this time, its development has been dynamic, uneven, and multifaceted, shaped by policy reforms, Europeanisation processes, changing social needs, and recurring crises. This volume captures these trajectories, illustrating how social work has evolved through moments of advancement and stagnation, innovation and constraint.

A defining characteristic of this book is that all contributing authors are insiders to the Ukrainian context. They are scholars, educators, practitioners, or practitioner-researchers who live and work within the realities they analyse. This insider positioning constitutes both a strength and a limitation of the volume. On the one hand, it enables deep contextual knowledge, ethical sensitivity, and an embodied understanding of wartime social work that would be difficult to access from an external perspective. On the other hand, it requires continuous reflexivity regarding positionality, emotional proximity, and the partiality of perspective. Rather than attempting to neutralise this insider status, the volume makes it explicit, treating it as an epistemological condition of knowledge production in times of war.

The book foregrounds the theme of professionalization under pressure. War has not suspended ongoing professional transitions; instead, it has intensified existing contradictions and exposed structural vulnerabilities within social services, education, and research. The chapters explore the professionalization of social work, the resilience of Ukrainian communities in times of continuous war and support to the displaced populations, strategies for supporting women experiencing multidimensional poverty, and responses to

gender-based violence and health-related stigma. Particular attention is given to the adaptation and innovation of social work education – both formal and non-formal – as educators and practitioners respond to wartime realities with limited resources but growing urgency.

A distinctive feature of the volume is its attention to gendered experiences of crisis and care. Several chapters examine women not only as recipients of support – such as wives of combatants, women living with HIV, or women affected by poverty and violence – but also as agents of change, peer supporters, activists, and professionals shaping crisis-responsive social work practices. These analyses highlight feminist, community-based, and network-oriented approaches that expand conventional understandings of social work beyond institutional frameworks.

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Each chapter in this book is an independent scholarly contribution, based on a separate empirical or conceptual study. At the same time, taken together, they offer a comprehensive and interconnected picture of contemporary Ukrainian social work. The volume does not advance a single linear narrative of progress. Instead, it reflects the contradictory lessons of social work's evolution in Ukraine – lessons that are particularly relevant for those engaged in building, reforming, and sustaining the profession under conditions of instability and uncertainty.

While firmly grounded in the Ukrainian context, this book also speaks to the global social work community. The chapters demonstrate how local practices and community responses are embedded in national policy frameworks and influenced by transnational ideas, norms, and funding regimes. In doing so, they

invite comparative reflection on professionalization, resilience, and ethics in contexts of war, post-socialist transformation, and prolonged crisis.

In the process of preparing this volume, artificial intelligence-assisted tools (including ChatGPT and Gemini) were used selectively to support the translation of selected texts into English and the development of certain visual materials. Their use was strictly auxiliary and did not replace authors' intellectual contributions, analytical judgment, or scholarly responsibility for the content, interpretation, and conclusions presented in the book.

Ultimately, this volume bears witness to the capacity of social work in Ukraine to endure, adapt, and generate knowledge even under extreme conditions. It affirms that social work is not merely a technical response to social problems, but a reflective and value-driven profession whose meaning is continuously renegotiated in dialogue with history, context, and human strengths.

Chapter 1

Social Work Professionalization in Ukraine: Progress, Challenges, and Unfinished Transitions

Tetyana SEMIGINA, Tetiana LIAKH

Abstract

This paper examines the professionalization of social work in Ukraine, a process shaped by historical legacies, social transformations, and the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war; it aims to analyze the development, challenges, and institutionalization of the profession in the Ukrainian context. Using a reflective and critical approach combining literature review, policy analysis, and contextual observations, the study highlights key advancements, including the establishment of academic programs, occupational standards, and the Social Services Classifier, while also identifying persistent challenges such as gaps in legal and ethical regulation, uneven implementation of standards, low professional recognition, and insufficient intersectoral integration. The findings underscore that Ukrainian social work remains “halfway” to full professionalization, requiring coordinated reforms in education, regulation, continuing professional development, and working conditions to build a resilient, competent, and ethically grounded workforce capable of responding to both routine social needs and crisis situations.

Key words: *social work; professionalization; Ukraine; standards; occupational frameworks; licensing; ethical standards; legislation; social services.*

INTRODUCTION

In Ukraine, social work unfolds against a backdrop of profound social transformations and numerous challenges. The ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war has significantly affected the economic well-being and subjective quality of life of the population (Karamuska et al., 2022; Semigina et al., 2025), public health (An et al., 2025; Fontanarosa et al., 2022; Kokun, 2025), and the demand for social services (Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine, 2024; Romaniuk et al., 2024). The war has intensified the need for social support and underscored the importance of rethinking social work paradigms while strengthening the competencies of professionals, and increasing the visibility of the profession.

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Despite these challenges, Ukrainian social work demonstrates remarkable resilience and adaptability. Social workers continue to innovate and respond to emerging societal needs, balancing established professional standards with the flexible, context-sensitive approaches required during times of emergencies and crisis.

This chapter explores the significance of studying social work in Ukraine, reflecting on the historical context, institutional development, and contemporary challenges that shape the profession amidst the war. Understanding professionalization sheds light on the ongoing transformation of social work as a profession and its crucial role in addressing the complex

realities of contemporary society, including those exacerbated by war, social change, and evolving community needs.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL WORK PROFESSIONALIZATION

At the heart of social work development lies **professionalization** – the process through which social work emerges as a recognized, competent, and ethically grounded profession. Professionalization involves the creation of a specialized body of knowledge, the establishment of professional standards, and the preparation of practitioners with the necessary skills to address complex social problems (Banks, 2020; Moorhead et al., 2025; Weiss-Gal & Welbourne, 2008). It is through professionalization that social work establishes its legitimacy, maintains high standards, and ensures that its practice aligns with ethical and societal expectations.

Research (Banks, 2020; Lai Wing Hoi & Chan Kam Tong, 2009; Ullrich et al., 2022) demonstrates that professionalization strengthens education, ethics, and practical competencies of social workers. By developing specialized skills and knowledge, practitioners are better equipped to respond effectively to a wide range of social issues, from family dynamics and mental health challenges to poverty and community development. Professionalization ensures that

social work services are both effective and ethically grounded, fostering trust and credibility with clients, communities, and institutions.

A clear professional identity also positions social workers to advocate for marginalized and vulnerable populations. Professionalized social workers can engage more effectively with policymakers, the public, and other stakeholders, promoting social justice and influencing social policy (Bark et al., 2023; Duan et al., 2021; Wiles, 2024). As the field becomes increasingly professionalized, public recognition and trust tend to grow, resulting in greater investment in social services, improved working conditions for social workers, and a stronger overall societal impact.

Professionalization extends beyond individual competencies to include organizational and systemic dimensions. Well-established standards, codes of ethics, and formalized education programs enable social work to function coherently as a profession. These structures support accountability, consistency in service delivery, and the capacity to respond adaptively to evolving social challenges (Beddoe, 2013; Lemaitre et al., 2024). In particular, professionalized social work is better equipped to address emerging issues such as migration, mental health crises, climate-related disasters, and the social consequences of armed conflicts.

Moreover, professionalization enhances collaboration with other sectors, including healthcare, education, and law enforcement. Integrated approaches enable social workers to provide holistic support, ensuring that individuals and communities receive comprehensive services (Kangasniemi et al., 2022; Miller, 2019). This intersectoral collaboration also strengthens the societal role of social work, positioning it as a key contributor to public policy and social development.

In summary, professionalization is a central pillar of the effectiveness, credibility, and societal impact of social work. It encompasses education, ethics, competencies, and intersectoral collaboration, providing a foundation for social workers to respond to both routine and extraordinary social challenges.

The Figure 1.1 illustrates the theoretical framework of social work professionalization, highlighting its central role in shaping the profession. At the core, professionalization integrates specialized knowledge, ethical and professional standards, organizational structures, intersectoral collaboration, and a clear professional identity. These elements collectively contribute to positive outcomes, including effective social services, ethical practice, client trust, and societal impact, and serve as a foundation for conducting further analysis.



Figure 1.1. Theoretical Framework of Social Work Professionalization

METHODS

This chapter employs a **qualitative, reflective, and critical analytical approach** to examine the professionalization of social work in Ukraine. Rather than reporting primary empirical data, the analysis is grounded in a **systematic synthesis of scholarly literature**, policy documents, and professional discourse, combined with **reflexive insights derived from prolonged professional engagement in the field of social work**.

The literature review encompasses Ukrainian and international academic publications on social work professionalization, welfare state transformation, post-socialist social policy, and professional standards development. Particular attention is paid to sources addressing the institutionalization of social work education, the regulation of professional practice, and the alignment of national developments with European and international frameworks. Policy documents, legislative acts, professional standards, and strategic papers relevant to social services and social work education in Ukraine are also considered as key analytical materials.

In addition to documentary analysis, the chapter draws on **author's long-term professional observations** accumulated through sustained involvement in social work education, research, curriculum development, and policy-related expert

activities in Ukraine. These observations are not treated as anecdotal evidence, but as **contextualized experiential knowledge**, enabling critical interpretation of formal reforms, implementation gaps, and everyday professional realities. This insider perspective supports a nuanced understanding of how professionalization processes are negotiated in practice, particularly under conditions of institutional instability and prolonged crisis.

The analytical strategy is informed by **critical social work and professionalization theories**, which view professional development as a non-linear and contested process shaped by power relations, resource constraints, and socio-political contexts. The chapter adopts a reflexive stance, acknowledging the author's positionality within the field and the potential influence of this positioning on interpretation. Rather than aiming for detached neutrality, the analysis emphasizes **analytical transparency and reflexive rigor**.

By triangulating academic literature, policy analysis, and reflexive professional insight, the chapter identifies key achievements, persistent challenges, and unfinished transitions in the professionalization of social work in Ukraine. This methodological approach allows for a historically informed and context-sensitive interpretation of professional change, offering insights that are relevant both for national reflection and for comparative discussions in international social work scholarship.

ADVANCEMENTS IN SOCIAL WORK PROFESSIONALIZATION IN UKRAINE

In Ukraine, the professionalization of social work has been shaped by both historical and contemporary forces. During the Soviet era, social work as we understand it today did not exist as a distinct profession. The focus was primarily on pedagogy—particularly corrective pedagogy—and medical care, rather than on social work per se. Social welfare tasks were largely integrated into broader state welfare and medical systems, with professionals performing activities that would now be considered social work, but without a clear professional identity or specialized training.

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The emergence of social work as a distinct profession in Ukraine began in the 1990s, following the country's independence. There was growing recognition of the need for trained professionals to address complex social issues such as poverty, family dynamics, and the social impacts of economic transition. This period saw the establishment of the first social services and academic programs, marking the beginning of the professionalization process. These developments were part of broader social reforms, as the state acknowledged the necessity of creating a structured system for social services and developing an educated workforce capable of meeting evolving societal needs (Semigina & Myhovich, 2005; Semigina et al., 2005; Semigina & Boyko, 2014).

The development of social services within Ukraine's territorial communities has become a key driver of the professionalization of social work. Legislative reforms and decentralization have expanded opportunities for integrating services and improving access for diverse population groups (Semigina, 2019; Semigina & Yeroshenko, 2024). At the same time, these processes have highlighted the need to enhance professional competencies and implement innovative approaches that respond to complex and emerging social needs, particularly under wartime conditions.

The first Law on social services was introduced in 2003, establishing a general legal framework for service provision. A significant revision came in 2019, with the adoption of a new Law on social services, which included a modernized classification of social **services** (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2019). The Law defines social services as interventions aimed at preventing, overcoming, **or** mitigating difficult life circumstances experienced by individuals and families. Importantly, the Law lists 18 basic services that are to be provided **in** all territorial communities, including home and day care, supported living, social adaptation, crisis intervention, counseling, in-kind assistance, physical support for persons with disabilities, sign language interpretation, and services for children in family-like conditions. In reality, however, many communities provide only a portion of these services, typically around 10–13, with certain specialized services, such as supported living, sign language

interpretation, and inclusive education support, frequently unavailable (Palatna & Semigina, 2024). This discrepancy highlights a persistent gap between legislative intent and service reality, undermining equity and access.

The **Social Services Classifier**, also introduced in 2019, was designed to operationalize this legal framework by standardizing service names, descriptions, target groups, and expected durations. The Classifier clarifies roles, promotes consistency in practice across territorial communities, and facilitates planning, monitoring, and evaluation. It also strengthens coordination between governmental and non-governmental providers and links service delivery to education and competency development (Semigina et al., 2024).

Recent additions, such as services for war veterans and counseling on housing adaptation, illustrate its responsiveness to emerging needs. Yet, as with the Law itself, its practical impact is constrained: many services remain unavailable at the local level, and the Classifier primarily functions as a technical tool, offering little guidance on the professional skills or judgment required to deliver high-quality services.

Occupational standards are intended to fill this gap by defining job functions, competencies, and qualification requirements. By 2024, more than 20 standards had been developed across the social sector, with six standards – such as “Social Worker,” “Social Work Specialist,” “Home Social

Assistance Specialist,” and “Psychologist in a Social Protection Institution” (NQA, 2025), providing a foundational competency framework. These standards, however, are general, often outdated, and largely fail to address contemporary challenges such as gender sensitivity, trauma-informed practice, psycho-emotional resilience, inclusivity, child protection and war-related interventions, digital skills, community-based approaches.

Critically, while the standards demand professional qualifications and competencies from service providers, only a small share of employees, around 15% according to an assessment of the workforce in four regions, have formal social work education (Maestral, 2025). This stark mismatch between required competencies and the actual workforce severely limits professionalization and the quality of services.

Efforts are underway to strengthen accountability and service quality through the development of a state monitoring system and expansion of the Social Service Providers Registry. These mechanisms, together with the Classifier and occupational standards, have the potential to enhance professional accountability, clarify roles, and support competency-based practice. Simultaneously, the establishment of occupational standards and the Social Services Classifier reflects a methodical approach to organizing and regulating social services, offering clear guidelines for service delivery and promoting consistency in quality.

However, persistent gaps in workforce qualifications, territorial disparities in service availability, and limited integration between legal, technical, and educational frameworks continue to constrain the development of a recognized, resilient, and fully professional social work sector in Ukraine.

In sum, the evolution of social services law, the Social Services Classifier, and occupational standards provides the institutional foundation for professionalization, but the effectiveness of these frameworks depends on bridging the gap between formal requirements and actual practice.

Social work education in Ukraine is also undergoing a gradual but meaningful transformation, as both higher education institutions and vocational training providers expand and revise their programmes to better prepare professionals for work in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing social context. These developments include curriculum updates that place greater emphasis on practice-oriented learning, responses to social vulnerability, and competencies relevant to crisis and post-crisis settings.

By 2025, the formal educational system in Ukraine is structurally aligned with the pan-European model of vocational and higher education, reflecting broader processes of European integration and providing a shared framework for qualifications and professional training (see **Figure 1.2**).

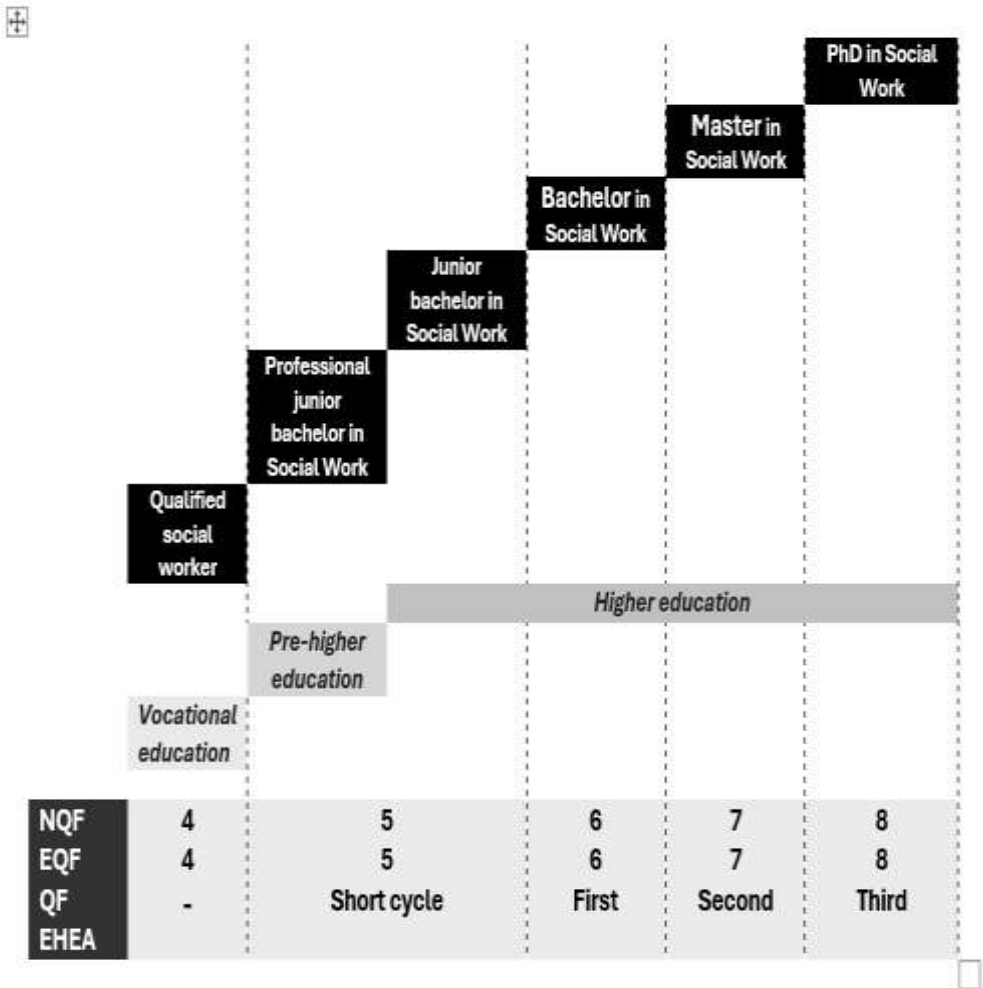


Figure 1.2. Levels of Social Work Education in Ukraine in 2025 (comparison of the National Qualification Framework/NQF, the European Qualifications Framework/EQF and the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area/QF EHEA)

According to the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, by November 2024, more than 400 educational programmes preparing social workers were available across 127 higher education institutions (in 2018 there were 65 HEIs teaching social workers). **Table 1.1** presents the distribution of these institutions by level of study.

Table 1.1. Distribution of Higher Education Institutions Offering Social Work Programmes

<i>Level of higher education</i>	<i>Number of HEIs with Social Work Programmes</i>
<i>Junior Specialist</i> (is now outdated)	4
<i>Junior Bachelor</i>	1
<i>Professional Junior Bachelor</i>	42
<i>Bachelor</i>	82
<i>Master</i>	57
<i>PhD (Doctor of Philosophy)</i>	18

In addition, as of November 2024, 43 vocational education institutions (VET schools) offered educational programmes in social work, preparing skilled workers in the specialty 5133, “Social Worker” (Semigina, 2024).

While these figures reflect a substantial effort to develop a trained social work workforce, the variability in programme quality, coupled with the lack of structured frameworks for

practical training and professional development, has resulted in inconsistencies across the field.

By early 2025, Ukraine had made notable strides in social work professionalization, implementing **educational standards across three levels of higher education** – bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs.

These developments represent a substantial step forward in the professionalization of social work and the creation of a structured framework for social services in Ukraine. The introduction of standardized educational programs ensures that the workforce is adequately prepared to meet the demands of the profession.

An important yet underdeveloped dimension of social work professionalization in Ukraine concerns the **formation of a specialized body of professional knowledge**. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the theoretical foundations of social work education in Ukraine were largely constructed through the integration of psychological, pedagogical, and sociological approaches. While these frameworks were reflected in early Ukrainian textbooks and curricula, they were only partially adapted to national legislation and socio-cultural contexts, as they were predominantly borrowed from international models and translated English-language sources. This pattern was strongly influenced by donor-driven projects that played a

significant role in shaping social work education and discourse during the early stages of professionalization.

The reliance on adjacent disciplinary theories contributed to a persistent gap between theory and practice. Social work practice in Ukraine remained heavily influenced by paternalistic traditions, emphasizing control and care rather than rights-based, empowerment-oriented, and resource-focused interventions.

Moreover, while higher education programs and doctoral studies have expanded since the 1990s, the production of social work knowledge remains fragmented and uneven. Research in social work is often weakly institutionalized, underfunded, and insufficiently integrated into practice and policy-making. As a result, professional knowledge is frequently imported, adapted ad hoc, or replaced by administrative and medical frameworks, limiting the development of context-sensitive, practice-based social work knowledge.

The wartime context has further exposed these gaps, simultaneously increasing the demand for evidence-informed interventions and constraining opportunities for systematic knowledge production.

■ CHALLENGES IN SOCIAL WORK PROFESSIONALIZATION IN UKRAINE

Based on previous research (Baidarova & Mykhailovska, 2021; Chuiko et al., 2024; Laboratoriia zakonodavchykh initsiatyv, 2024\$; Semigina et al., 2024), it is evident that despite notable advancements, significant challenges persist in the professionalization of social work and in establishing a cohesive framework for social services in Ukraine. While the adoption of educational standards represents an important step forward, there remains a need for continuous improvements in the quality and accessibility of training programs. Ensuring that the workforce is not only adequately trained but also capable of addressing emerging social issues remains a pressing concern.

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The development of occupational standards and the Social Services Classifier is an important achievement; however, concerns persist regarding the effective implementation of these standards across all regions and service areas. In addition, although state standards for service delivery have been introduced, the monitoring and enforcement of these standards remain inconsistent, undermining the quality and uniformity of services.

A central challenge lies in the lack of alignment and coherence between education standards, occupational standards, and social services standards. These standards have been

developed by different institutions, each with its own interpretation of social work and social services, resulting in inconsistencies that impede a unified approach to professionalization and service delivery (Pozhydaieva & Semigina, 2017). Furthermore, greater integration of social services with other sectors, such as healthcare and education, is necessary to provide comprehensive support to individuals and communities and to ensure effective rehabilitation programmes for populations affected by war.

Ukraine currently **lacks a universally recognized ethical code for social work**, as well as an authoritative national association empowered to oversee professional regulation. Although several professional associations exist, none have official regulatory status. Since the early 1990s, a number of organizations have emerged claiming or potentially qualifying as national associations of social workers. These organizations can be summarized chronologically as follows:

- *Ukrainian Association of Social Pedagogues and Social Workers* (1992). This association was project-oriented and served as the initiator of an ethical code. It had limited individual membership and eventually became largely inactive. It was a member of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) from 1994 to 1999 under the “one country – one association” principle.
- *League of Social Workers of Ukraine* (1999) is focused on project implementation and participation in the

development of standards and national professional association projects. It had approximately 500 members but was not affiliated with the IFSW.

- *National Association of Social Workers of Ukraine (2022)*. Established with IFSW support, this association implements local IFSW projects. It does not yet have a fully established membership base but uses the *Global Declaration of Ethical Principles for Social Work* as its national ethical framework.

In addition to professional associations, the Ministry of Family, Youth, and Sports of Ukraine formally approved the *Ethical Code of Social Work Specialists of Ukraine*. While this represented a step toward formalizing professional ethics, the code has several limitations:

1. Misalignment with the professional context: the code was issued by the Ministry of Family, Youth, and Sports, whereas the majority of social workers are employed under the Ministry of Social Policy.
2. Limited legitimacy among practitioners: social workers employed in other ministries or within NGOs may not perceive the code as relevant or binding, and it is generally not used in practice by non-governmental organizations.
3. Limited legal authority: the code, while normative, is not linked to licensing or certification, and violations of

its principles do not trigger formal professional sanctions.

As of 2025, the *Ethical Code of Social Work Specialists of Ukraine* is outdated. It reflects international norms relevant at the time of its adoption in 2005 but does not incorporate contemporary developments in global ethical standards, new approaches to human rights, principles of inclusion, or the modern challenges facing social work, including work in contexts of war, prolonged crises, and complex social vulnerabilities.

Furthermore, there is no standardized system for licensing social service institutions or for licensing, certification, or registration of social workers. These structural gaps highlight critical challenges in regulating and professionalizing the sector. Low salaries and the absence of a competitive labor market (Karpenko & Schved, 2025; Semigina & Stoliaryk, 2022) further hinder the growth and recognition of the profession.

Legislation still allows the provision of social services by non-professionals. Several service standards and regulations, which primarily encompass competencies such as providing social support and psychosocial assistance, do not require formal social work education. Services can also be delivered informally, with family members providing care and receiving compensation, which raises concerns about quality and consistency.

Finally, in times of war, the challenges to professionalization are even more pronounced. Social workers face urgent demands for crisis response, requiring competencies and methods that the current workforce may not be fully equipped to provide. Approaches such as strengths-based development (Stolyaryk & Semigina, 2022) are proven to enhance individual and community resources, but the limited professionalization of the field reduces the capacity to implement such approaches effectively and to uphold core professional values (Baidarova & Mykhailovska, 2021) in practice.

DISCUSSION

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Professionalization is not merely a technical or institutional process; it embodies a **normative, societal, and ethical commitment**. A fully professionalized field of social work provides a foundation for competent practice, shared ethical standards, and collective professional identity, enabling practitioners to advocate effectively for marginalized populations while delivering services that respect human dignity and fundamental rights.

International scholarship demonstrates that strong professional identity, robust knowledge production, and institutional recognition enhance public trust in social services and contribute to social cohesion and community resilience,

particularly in contexts of crisis and uncertainty (Duan et al., 2021; Weiss-Gal & Welbourne, 2008; Wiles, 2024). From this perspective, professionalization functions not only as an instrument for improving service quality, but also as a mechanism for sustaining democratic values, accountability, and social solidarity.

The history of social work professionalization in Ukraine is complex, marked by both significant achievements and recurring crises, which have been described as an «interrupted flight» (Semigina, 2007). Obstacles in this process are often linked to inadequate legal regulation, insufficient resources, and uneven development of social services at the local level.

Ukraine's experience exemplifies both the opportunities and challenges inherent in the path toward social work professionalization. It underscores that professionalization is not a linear process but an evolving one, shaped by social, political, and historical contexts. The absence of a unified national association, gaps in ethical regulation, and the lack of licensing systems reveal that the professionalization process remains incomplete. These challenges hinder the full development of social work as a recognized profession and limit its broader societal impact. Most importantly, Ukraine's experience highlights that professionalization is not merely a policy goal—it is essential for ensuring the well-being, as well as and rights of individuals and communities in a changing world.

Moreover, the gaps between legal mandates, classification, occupational standards, and the actual workforce highlight the need for a well-prepared, competent social work workforce capable of meeting both current and emerging social needs. Addressing these gaps requires not only systemic monitoring and competency frameworks but also the development of professional education that equips social workers with the knowledge, skills, and ethical grounding needed for practice in complex war-affected contexts.

Addressing the current “halfway” status of social work professionalization in Ukraine requires a combination of systemic reforms and strategic initiatives, informed by both international examples (Huseynli, 2022; Lai Wing Hoi & Chan Kam Tong, 2009; Ullrich et al., 2022; Veta & McLaughlin, 2022) and lessons from Ukrainian practice:

1. ***Establish a Unified Ethical Code and Regulatory Authority.*** Drawing on successful international models, Ukraine should create a universally accepted ethical code for social work and establish a national regulatory body with the authority to monitor and enforce professional standards. This would provide a foundation for consistent practice, ethical decision-making, and accountability across the profession.
2. ***Implement a National Licensing and Certification System.*** A standardized licensing system for social

service institutions and social workers would ensure that only qualified professionals deliver services. Such a system would enhance public trust and improve the overall quality of social work practice.

3. *Promote Knowledge Production and Integration.* Ukraine should strengthen the development of a specialized, practice-informed body of social work knowledge by supporting research initiatives, facilitating collaboration between academia and practitioners, and systematically integrating evidence into education and policy. This would help close the gap between theory and practice, ensure contextually relevant interventions, and consolidate professional expertise.
4. *Develop Comprehensive Continuing Education and Supervision.* International experience highlights the importance of lifelong professional development. Ukraine should introduce structured frameworks for ongoing education and supervision, allowing social workers to specialize and remain informed about evolving issues, including trauma care, mental health, and crisis intervention.
5. *Strengthen Intersectoral Collaboration.* Social work thrives when integrated into broader systems, particularly with healthcare, education, and law enforcement. Ukraine can build stronger

interdisciplinary partnerships to address complex social problems more effectively, fostering a cohesive and holistic approach to service delivery.

6. *Improve Working Conditions and Professional Recognition.* Drawing on international best practices, Ukraine should focus on increasing salaries, improving working conditions, and fostering greater societal recognition of social work. Creating competitive labor market opportunities will help retain professionals and enhance the impact of social work services on vulnerable populations.

The **Figure 1.3** synthesizes the key structural and institutional challenges shaping the incomplete professionalization of social work in Ukraine, as discussed in this chapter. It visually highlights the interconnections between regulatory gaps, fragmented standards, and external pressures—particularly war—while pointing to priority directions for systemic reform.

Taken together, the suggested steps provide a roadmap for advancing professionalization in Ukraine. They highlight the need for coordinated policy, education, and practice reforms to transform social work from a partially institutionalized occupation into a fully recognized, ethically grounded, and resilient profession capable of responding to both everyday and crisis-driven social challenges.



Figure 1.3. Key Challenges and Reform Pathways in the Professionalization of Social Work in Ukraine

CONCLUSIONS

The professionalization of social work in Ukraine reflects a complex and evolving process, shaped by historical legacies, social transformations, and the extraordinary challenges of ongoing conflict. Over the past three decades, significant progress has been made through the establishment of formal academic programs, occupational standards, and the Social Services Classifier, creating a foundation for a trained and ethically grounded workforce. At the same time, the profession remains “halfway” to full institutionalization, hindered by gaps in legal and ethical regulation, inconsistent implementation of standards, low salaries, limited professional recognition, and insufficient integration with other sectors. The wartime context has intensified these challenges, exposing systemic weaknesses while underscoring the urgent need for a resilient and adaptable social work profession.

Drawing on both Ukrainian experiences and international best practices, advancing professionalization requires a multifaceted approach: establishing a unified ethical code and regulatory authority, implementing standardized licensing and certification systems, strengthening continuing education and supervision, promoting intersectoral collaboration, and improving working conditions and professional recognition. These measures can help build a cohesive, competent, and credible workforce capable of responding effectively to both everyday social needs and crises. Ultimately, Ukraine’s

experience highlights that professionalization is not merely a technical or policy goal—it is essential for safeguarding the well-being, dignity, and rights of individuals and communities, offering lessons relevant for other transitional and post-socialist contexts seeking to strengthen social work practice.

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Chapter 2

Ukrainian Communities and Resilience in Times of Continuous War

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Abstract

This chapter explores micro and macro social work practices in Ukraine, a post-socialist country shaped by ongoing armed conflict and societal transitions. It examines how these practices address both long-standing social inequalities and urgent wartime needs. Micro-level interventions provide critical support to individuals and families, including mental health services and emergency aid, while macro-level strategies focus on community mobilization, advocacy, and promoting social justice.

The chapter highlights community resilience, showing how community-based approaches foster recovery, agency, and hope in war-affected areas. Through these examples, it demonstrates the effectiveness of social work in sustaining social cohesion and shaping societal responses to contemporary challenges, contributing to a more equitable and resilient Ukrainian society.

Key words: *Ukraine, war, paternalism, welfare, community resilience, micro-practice, macro-practice.*

INTRODUCTION

Since Ukraine gained independence in 1991, social work has evolved dramatically, adapting to the nation's shifting socio-political landscape and the ongoing challenges posed by the Russo-Ukrainian War. This chapter explores how social work in Ukraine has developed from its Soviet-era roots into a dynamic profession that operates at both micro and macro levels. It examines the dual roles of social workers in addressing immediate humanitarian needs and promoting long-term social reforms, highlighting the importance of community resilience in war-torn areas.

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We begin by presenting our theoretical framework and providing a historical overview of social work in Ukraine, tracing its evolution from Soviet paternalism to contemporary client-centered approaches. We then delve into the specific challenges and strategies employed by social workers during the ongoing conflict, showcasing practical examples of both individual and community-level interventions.

The chapter concludes by assessing the broader implications of these practices for social work in Ukraine, offering insights into the profession's future directions amidst global and local challenges.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Exploring the role of social work in Ukraine reveals valuable insights through various theoretical frameworks that illuminate the multifaceted nature of social work practices and their impact on individuals and communities, particularly amidst significant socio-political and economic transitions.

Firstly, **systems theory** plays a crucial role in understanding social work in Ukraine, especially within the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Parsons (1975) asserts that individuals and communities are integral parts of larger, interconnected systems, where changes in one part inevitably affect the whole. Moreover, Shenk, Krejci, and Passe (2023) emphasize social workers as change agents within these systems, capable of catalyzing transformative change. In Ukraine, social workers navigate within a complex web of interrelated systems, spanning from family and community dynamics to governmental structures. This holistic perspective empowers social workers to address issues comprehensively, recognizing that interventions at the micro level (individuals and families) must harmonize with macro-level strategies (community mobilization and policy advocacy) for maximum effectiveness.

Building on systems theory, **ecological systems theory** provides a framework for understanding the multiple environmental contexts that influence individuals' lives (Ungar, 2002). Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model emphasizes interactions across multiple systems: the microsystem (immedi-

ate environment), mesosystem (interactions between microsystems), exosystem (external environments indirectly affecting individuals), and macrosystem (broader cultural and societal influences). In Ukraine, social workers must navigate how the war impacts these levels, from immediate trauma to societal changes induced by displacement and conflict. This theory underscores the importance of creating supportive environments at all levels to foster resilience and recovery.

Additionally, **the strengths-based approach** forms a cornerstone of modern social work practice, focusing on individuals' and communities' inherent capacities rather than deficits. By emphasizing clients' strengths, social workers empower them to mobilize resources, develop coping strategies, and nurture a sense of agency and hope (Bellinger & Ford, 2022; Rapp & Goscha, 2011). This approach is particularly crucial in Ukraine's context, challenging paternalistic values entrenched in socialist and post-socialist welfare models (Stoliaryk & Semigina, 2022). Amidst war, social workers play a critical role in amplifying the resilience and resourcefulness of affected populations, countering disempowerment with positive reinforcement.

These conceptual anchors collectively provide a comprehensive framework for understanding social work in Ukraine, emphasizing holistic, strengths-based, and justice-oriented approaches to address complex social issues exacerbated by the Russo-Ukrainian war.

METHODS

The study adopted a **critical interpretive paradigm** (Watts & Hodgson, 2019) to explore the lived experiences of social workers during the Russo-Ukrainian war. This approach acknowledges the subjective nature of meaning-making in social situations, particularly relevant in the context of armed conflict. The research aimed to capture both the complexity of social work practice during wartime and the individual perspectives of those on the front lines.

Data collection involved a **multi-pronged approach**, encompassing both primary and secondary data sources. An **extensive desk review** included analysis of academic literature, policy documents from governmental and non-governmental organizations, statistical data on the impact of the war on social services, reports from NGOs working in conflict zones, and information from relevant websites. This comprehensive review helped frame the contextual background for understanding the systemic challenges faced by social workers.

In addition, **authors' reflections**—based on their professional experience and observations—were incorporated to provide additional context. This helped interpret data through a specialized lens of Ukrainian social work practice, enriching the depth of analysis.

Primary data collection involved **semi-structured interviews with 12 social workers** from various regions of Ukraine. Participants were purposively selected to ensure diverse representation in terms of gender, geographic location, type of institutional setting, and years of experience. The final sample included 5 men and 7 women, with professional backgrounds spanning the state sector (7 participants), non-governmental sector (4 participants), and international organizations (1 participant). Participants' experience ranged from 1 to over 10 years in the field, ensuring a comprehensive view of social work practice. Geographic diversity included regions directly impacted by the conflict, such as Kharkiv, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia, alongside less directly affected regions like Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, and Sumy.

Interviews were conducted in February–March 2024 via telephone to accommodate wartime conditions, which allowed for flexibility given disruptions caused by missile attacks and power outages. These interviews focused on the micro-level interventions social workers employed, the specific challenges they faced, their adaptive strategies, and reflections on how the war impacted their professional practice and personal well-being.

Additionally, interviews were conducted with **5 representatives of local communities** in the Ternopil, Ivano-Frankivsk, and Zhytomyr regions in May–June 2022. These communities were not directly in the combat zone, allowing

for an exploration of their social services provision and overall community cohesion in wartime. These interviews provided evidence of how communities far from the frontline responded to the challenges of large-scale war, and their expectations for the future of social work.

Data from both primary and secondary sources were analyzed using **thematic analysis**. Interviews were transcribed, and an initial round of coding was conducted to identify recurring themes, which were refined iteratively to ensure accurate representation of the data. This process resulted in three key themes:

- *Theme 1: Shifting Landscape: Social Work in Ukraine from Soviet Legacy to Decentralization*
- *Theme 2: Innovation Under Fire: Micro-Level Strategies in Ukrainian Social Work*
- *Theme 3: From Micro to Macro: Building Community Resilience and Social Justice in Wartime Ukraine*

The thematic analysis approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of social work practices under duress, yet the subjective nature of the coding process may introduce potential biases. The two researchers collaborated on coding, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion to enhance validity.

The study adhered to **ethical standards** in research, including obtaining informed consent from all participants and ensuring confidentiality and anonymity through data anonymization. This was particularly crucial given the sensitive and potentially dangerous nature of discussing social work in wartime.

Several **limitations** warrant attention. First, the relatively small sample size ($n=12$) of social workers may limit the generalizability of the findings across the broader Ukrainian social work sector. While efforts were made to ensure diverse representation, a larger sample could have provided a more comprehensive view. Additionally, conducting interviews via telephone—necessitated by the security context—may have restricted the depth and nuance of interactions.

Second, the critical interpretive paradigm relies on subjective interpretations of data, meaning that findings are shaped by the perspectives of both participants and researchers. Although efforts were made to ensure rigorous analysis through thematic coding, the subjective nature of meaning-making in conflict situations presents challenges for interpretation.

Finally, the rapidly changing wartime environment means that this research represents a snapshot of experiences during a specific time frame. As the war continues to evolve, so too may the practice of social work, limiting the study's long-term applicability.

■ SHIFTING LANDSCAPE: SOCIAL WORK IN UKRAINE FROM SOVIET LEGACY TO DECENTRALIZATION

The social work landscape in Ukraine has undergone a significant transformation, shaped by its complex historical context. During the Soviet era, social welfare was characterized by a highly centralized and bureaucratic system. The state adopted a paternalistic approach, prioritizing the provision of basic needs through state-run institutions. This system often disregarded individual needs and rights, treating social work more as an administrative function than a professional practice (Phillips, 2009; Semigina, Gryga & Volgina, 2005). Social issues were simplified and standardized, failing to address the diverse realities faced by individuals and communities.

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The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 ushered in a period of significant socio-economic upheaval for Ukraine. The early 1990s were marked by severe economic hardship, political instability, and a lack of social services infrastructure. The Soviet-era welfare system was ill-equipped to address emerging social issues like unemployment, homelessness, and poverty. Initial attempts at professionalizing social work were largely driven by international organizations and aid, introducing new methods and standards (Ramon, 2000). However, these efforts often lacked integration into the local context, leading to a disjointed and inconsistent application of social work practices.

With an aging population, the need for social services for the older people increased, including home care, day care, and specialized medical services. This demographic shift pushed the social work system to adapt and develop new forms of assistance, even within the constraints of a rather bureaucratized post-Soviet welfare system (Semigina & Karkach, 2022). These changes highlighted the necessity for a more individualized and responsive approach to social care.

Throughout the 2000s, Ukraine undertook a series of reforms aimed at improving the efficiency and accessibility of social services. These reforms included the introduction of professional training programs, the establishment of educational programs for social workers, and the development of new service delivery models. Despite these advancements, the professionalization of social work faced challenges, particularly in creating a sustainable and locally relevant framework (Semigina & Boyko, 2014). The shift from a paternalistic model to one that recognized the professional autonomy and expertise of social workers was gradual and often met with resistance.

The decentralization reform launched in 2014 aimed to transfer significant powers and resources from the central government to local communities. This reform was designed to improve the efficiency and responsiveness of local governance by empowering municipalities to address their unique social and economic challenges. In the context of social work, decentrali-

zation allowed for more localized and tailored social services, enabling communities to develop programs that directly respond to their specific needs (Palatna & Semigina, 2024; Slozanska, 2018). By fostering local autonomy, the reform sought to enhance community participation and accountability, ultimately strengthening the overall social support framework in Ukraine.

The enactment of the *Law on Social Services* (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2019) introduced a new framework for delivering social services at the local community level, accompanied by a refined understanding of social work practices. The Classifier of Social Services, established by the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine (2020), delineates the specific entitlements to social services, including definitions, concise descriptions, and timelines for service provision, along with eligibility criteria for various social groups. For instance, services like "providing shelter" are accessible to homeless individuals, victims of domestic violence, families affected by fires, natural disasters, and other crises. Concurrently, State Standards of Social Services elaborate on the Classifier by detailing the procedural steps and requirements for each service.

Studies (Palatna, 2022) indicate that in 2021, the main recipients of social services in Ukrainian communities were families facing difficult circumstances, children from such families, the elderly, and people with disabilities. Some communities also

provided support to young/single mothers and women/children affected by violence.

For example, in the Kherson region, an NGO has been working across several communities to develop social services. It collaborated with a specific community to establish an Integrated Services Center, which now provides a comprehensive range of services. Initially focused on child and family rights protection, the center has expanded to include various services, from consultative support for documentation and subsidies to pilot daycare services for children. The center's multifaceted approach emphasizes both problem prevention and resolution, addressing immediate needs while fostering long-term solutions. The establishment of the center has significantly transformed the community's dynamics, becoming a cultural focal point with residents from all demographics actively participating in its activities. The community's commitment, demonstrated by budgeting for the center and providing staff, indicates a transition towards sustainable development (Palatna & Semigina, 2024).

Despite the progress made, the decentralization reform, the decentralization reform faced significant obstacles. The economic downturn, worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, led to an increased demand for social assistance, exposing dissatisfaction with the accessibility and quality of social services (Semigina, Karagodina, & Baidarova, 2022). Then, the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022 severely disrupted the

reform process. These crises strained Ukraine's resources and shifted the national focus towards emergency response and crisis management, leaving decentralization efforts and social services reforms unfinished.

One persistent challenge is the lack of a fully professionalized workforce. While educational programs are actively developed in higher education institutions, many paraprofessionals or individuals without formal social work education still work in social services (Yeroshenko & Semigina, 2017). Furthermore, the absence of a cohesive long-term social policy leads to shifting priorities, goals, tasks, and strategies with each change of government. Political influence exerts a significant impact on social work in Ukraine, influencing its effectiveness and coherence.

In our reflection, a key characteristic of Ukraine's pre-war social work system was its reliance on paternalistic principles, where both the state and social workers assumed full responsibility for social welfare. However, a crucial challenge at the national level is not just funding limitations but also the value placed on social support by society. Historically, Ukrainian social work operated within this paternalistic context. Societal expectations often prioritize immediate and specific outcomes from social work interventions, sometimes overlooking the longer-term nature of such efforts. This can create tension between social workers who advocate for long-term support and a public that desires quick fixes.

So, Ukraine's social work landscape has undergone a remarkable transformation. From the Soviet-era's centralized and bureaucratic system to the ongoing decentralization efforts, the field has strived for professionalization and responsiveness to community needs. However, challenges such as a lack of fully professionalized workforce, political influence, and societal expectations for immediate results remain.

■ INNOVATION UNDER FIRE: MICRO-LEVEL STRATEGIES IN UKRAINIAN SOCIAL WORK

The outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2014 introduced significant challenges to social work in Ukraine, which were further exacerbated by the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022. This conflict has resulted in a notable increase in the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs), veterans, and civilians affected by violence and trauma (Semigina, 2019; Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union, 2024).

The full-scale invasion, beginning on February 24, 2022, has had devastating consequences. By July 1, 2022, 310 territorial communities were situated in active combat zones or temporarily occupied areas (Decentralization, 2022). According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2022), more than 6 million people, or 14.2% of the total population, were internally displaced within Ukraine during the initial months of the invasion.

As of November 2023, nearly 3.7 million IDPs remained within Ukraine's borders, while 6.3 million had fled abroad (IOM, 2023). By May 31, 2024, there were 4,686,607 officially registered IDPs, with nearly half being children and youth under 20 or elderly individuals over 61 years old. The population predominantly consists of families, often single mothers with children, and a significant number of elderly people facing mobility and functional limitations (Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine, 2024a), and has quite specific needs (HealthRight, 2022).

57 Additionally, as of June 2024, the Minister of Social Policy of Ukraine reported that 24% of the population lives in poverty, with 170,000 low-income households and 2.5 million households receiving subsidies. The estimated total population is 35.6 million, comprising 52.4% females and 47.6% males. There are also 3 million people with disabilities, reflecting an increase of 300,000 since 2022, with 48% females and 52% males. This increase may indirectly indicate the war's impact. Moreover, there are 4 million veterans and their family members, along with 19,500 children who have been deported and/or forcibly displaced by the aggressor (Ukraine Recovery Conference, 2024). However, comprehensive data on war losses among combatants and civilians is currently unavailable.

This current country's demographic profile underscores the urgent need for targeted support and services for numerous

vulnerable groups in Ukraine. These services could be of an emergent (crisis) nature and more prolonged.

The Russo-Ukrainian war has also profoundly impacted the mental health of the population, with varying degrees of stress, anxiety, and PTSD severity observed across different groups. Research indicates that internally displaced persons (IDPs) experience higher levels of stress and anxiety compared to non-displaced persons, while refugees face the highest levels of psychological distress (Lushchak et al., 2024). Forced displacement and the challenges of adapting to new cultural environments significantly contribute to these mental health issues among war-affected populations (Ben-Ezra et al., 2023).

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The entire Ukrainian population is experiencing collective psychological trauma induced by combat actions, including constant air alerts, missile attacks, and wartime restrictions (such as blackouts), alongside psychological warfare through propaganda and misinformation on social media, exacerbating these challenges (Celuch et al., 2024; Goto et al., 2024).

In response to these complex economic, social, and mental health needs, social workers play pivotal roles in providing psychosocial support and other interventions.

It became evident that there was insufficient time to adhere to all formal procedures and requirements. Local authorities needed to quickly adapt to the new circumstances, respond rapidly to emerging challenges, and deliver social services un-

der martial law conditions. In response, in early March 2022 the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine issued *Guidelines for Organising Social Services During Martial Law* (AUC, 2022). A central recommendation of these guidelines was to provide social services on an urgent (crisis) basis rather than following the complete case management procedures. This approach enables decisions to be made within 24 hours of receiving a request, application, or notification for assistance.

Social workers have become a pillar of support for those who have lost loved ones, experienced trauma, or faced extremely difficult life circumstances. Their ability to remain calm and provide psychological support during critical moments has been vital for many. The respondents from a frontline area recalled:

"...people had no one else but us – they had nowhere to go, no one to share their grief with, no one just to be with... we were their safety zone...".

"...we call social workers universal soldiers: in addition to solving humanitarian or social issues, they become what people who have saved from the war talk about their grief...".

Throughout the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian social workers faced extreme challenges yet demonstrated remarkable resilience and dedication. Their responses to the dire circumstances highlight not only their bravery but also the profound impact of their work on the communities they served during the conflict (Gusak, Martin & Sousa, 2024).

The resilience of social workers was not only demonstrated through their crisis response but also in how they managed ongoing trauma, stress, and PTSD among the populations they served. One of the interviewed social workers highlighted this aspect, noting:

"...Every time I calmed a mother who lost a child or a woman who left her husband, I knew that if I showed my weakness and cried – they would lose their only source of strength..."

Interviews with social workers revealed that as the invasion intensified, they found themselves in treacherous situations, steadfastly fulfilling their duties with exceptional courage despite facing profound ethical dilemmas. Their profound dedication to their roles was so intense that, tragically, it sometimes led to fatalities. This period was marked by the aggressor country's blatant disregard for internationally recognized rules of warfare, including the prohibition against targeting civilian and humanitarian facilities. Social workers often encountered moral quandaries, such as deciding whom to assist first in a crisis or whether to evacuate for safety or stay behind to help those who could not leave.

It is also worth mentioning, that as of early 2024, 160 social protection facilities have been affected due to large-scale hostilities across various regions of Ukraine (KSE, 2024).

At the same time, in 2023-2024, new social services and programs were introduced, some as pilot models. Analysis of governmental documents (Ministry of Social Policy of

Ukraine, 2024b; Ukraine Recovery Conference, 2024) reveals several key initiatives. As of June 2024, these include:

- *209 Resilience Centers*: These centers provide systematic psychosocial support, from professional assessment of individual needs to comprehensive support plans, targeting individuals, families, and groups in vulnerable or challenging situations.

- *National Program "Social Recovery and Adaptation for the Veterans' Community"*: This program supports the social adaptation of military personnel and their families to civilian life. It offers quality social services at territorial recruitment and social support centers and provides social support to military families based within military units. Social workers are deployed in healthcare institutions to assist wounded military personnel, with 300 multidisciplinary teams operating in hospitals.

- *National Program "Better Care for Children System"*: This program unites government efforts with local authorities, international organizations, the public sector, and business partners to develop community-level social services aimed at strengthening families and preventing child-family separations.

- *750+ Centers Against Domestic Violence*: In 2022, amid the full-scale war and in line with the country's Eurointegration aspirations, Ukraine ratified the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence. Prior to 2022, there were only about 30 shelters, but this ratification led to a rapid expansion, resulting in over 750 shelters

for victims and the provision of legal and psychological assistance.

In 2024, the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine is actively developing a new strategy for the advancement of social services and making amendments to the Classifier of Social Services to incorporate new approaches and address emerging needs.

The war and particularly the full-scale invasion marked a pivotal moment for the social services system and societal perception of social work. It became evident that social work extends beyond cash payments and basic services like in-kind support and home care for the elderly. The expected roles of social workers now encompass:

1. **Assessment and Case Management:** Conducting comprehensive assessments to identify mental health concerns, trauma exposure, and psychosocial needs, followed by developing and implementing tailored case management plans, including digital formats.
2. **Crisis Intervention:** Providing immediate support during critical incidents such as airstrikes or displacement to stabilize individuals and families emotionally and psychologically.
3. **Individual and Group Counseling:** Offering therapeutic interventions through individual sessions and group therapy to address trauma, anxiety, and PTSD symp-

toms, focusing on coping strategies and emotional well-being.

4. **Psychoeducation:** Educating individuals and communities about mental health issues, trauma responses, and coping mechanisms, enhancing mental health literacy and promoting available support services.
5. **Advocacy and Resource Mobilization:** Advocating for the rights and needs of vulnerable populations affected by war, ensuring access to mental health services, social support, and legal aid, and mobilizing resources for effective service delivery.

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It is also noteworthy that, despite having a strategy in place, the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine and the government are unable to fully address the needs of the population during the war. Therefore, supporting the development of community-level solutions and involving volunteers and the civil sector in these efforts is crucial.

All in all, the conflict highlighted the critical role of social workers in crisis situations, demonstrating their capacity for immediate support and long-term rehabilitation. This necessitated rapid evolution within the profession, integrating crisis and trauma-informed interventions and implementing new strength-based approaches for war veterans and IDPs. Social workers collaborated closely with local and international organizations to meet the diverse needs of affected populations.

■ FROM MICRO TO MACRO: BUILDING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN WARTIME

In the crucible of the armed conflict, the role of social work in Ukraine has evolved dramatically, shifting from traditional models of service provision to needy individuals encompassing broader efforts aimed at community resilience and social justice.

It is worth mentioning that as the armed conflict swept across Ukraine, communities faced unprecedented challenges. In response, an organic wave of solidarity and unity surged. Ordinary citizens, spurred by a sense of duty, joined forces with social workers, creating a grassroots volunteer movement for change. This community mobilization goes beyond traditional roles, with residents actively participating in enhancing the material and technical infrastructure of local social service centers. Community initiatives support recovery and rebuilding efforts while promoting a sense of agency and hope among community members.

At the community and NGO levels, numerous initiatives are underway to provide training and grant support for establishing or enhancing businesses that serve various population groups, including individuals with disabilities, veterans and their families, and IDPs. For instance, the Ukrainian Social Venture Fund (USVF, 2023) awards grants to businesses that focus on integrating vulnerable populations, developing innovative services, and implementing sustainable solutions.

There is a trend of religious communities becoming more active and involved in active social service. For example, some communities, having joined forces with local social services, are implementing projects of social and psychological support for people affected by the war, assistance to large families, families of military personnel and fallen soldiers, IDPs, lonely elderly people, etc., creating youth, volunteer centers and social enterprises (Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, 2023).

As evidenced by interviews with community representatives, the proactive response and organizational skills of local leadership were crucial. This collaboration between local authorities and the population generated a synergy that bolstered community resilience. Respondents emphasized that effective leadership and the community's collective action were pivotal in overcoming the crisis. This cooperative effort underscores the vital role of local leaders in orchestrating and sustaining community-driven initiatives.

Communities with a history of working with vulnerable populations and handling emergency situations were better equipped to respond. They applied their expertise and established practices to swiftly address the needs of their residents. This pre-existing experience served as a valuable asset, enabling quick and effective deployment of services and support.

Interviewees highlighted the importance of having skilled social workers who could efficiently assess needs, evaluate risks, and implement support strategies. One respondent noted:

"One significant advantage is our robust network of social workers. Our staffing levels and allocations are approved during village council sessions, aligning closely with workload standards. This ensures we can gauge the number of individuals each social worker can effectively assist".

Ukraine's experience demonstrates that well-trained personnel can mobilize swiftly, collaborate effectively with other organizations, and coordinate interventions across different levels, providing critical support and expertise. The study indicated that communities with prior experience in delivering social services responded more promptly and effectively to the crisis. Drawing on their accumulated knowledge, pre-established plans, and established protocols, these communities leveraged existing partnerships and resources, which proved invaluable in their emergency response.

Let's delve deeper into the case from the Ternopil region, examining its response three months after Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. Interviews with local government officials, social service providers, and a non-governmental organization shed light on the challenges and actions undertaken during this period.

The community initially faced significant hurdles due to unclear strategic planning and a three-month operational halt. This delay hampered the implementation of crucial initiatives and development projects, compounded by bureaucratic challenges in obtaining approvals from regional military admin-

istrations. Infrastructure issues, including disruptions in passenger transportation and road maintenance, further compounded the community's difficulties, affecting mobility and safety.

The sudden increase in demand for social services was another critical issue. The community saw a surge in clients needing support—from dozens to thousands—stretching resources thin and creating a crisis situation. The influx of internally displaced persons (IDPs) added to the complexity, necessitating urgent measures for emergency provision and social support.

In response to these challenges, the community mobilized swiftly and effectively. A humanitarian hub was established to coordinate local and international efforts, facilitating the distribution of essential aid such as food and clothing. Residents played an active role, organizing collections and providing temporary housing for IDPs. Local businesses also stepped in, contributing resources to alleviate shortages amidst economic decline.

As we explore this case, it becomes evident that the resilience of the Ternopil region community was bolstered by proactive local leadership, robust social capital, and the dedication of social workers. Their collective actions highlight the transformative role of social work in fostering community cohesion, advocating for vulnerable populations, and navigating complex emergencies with compassion and efficiency.

In addition to local activities, centralized decisions have been made to enhance community work. The implementation of the Order “On Approval of the Procedure for Determining the Needs of the Population of an Administrative-Territorial Unit/Territorial Community for Social Services” (Ministry of Social Policy, 2023) represents a notable advancement in the management of social services under exceptional conditions. This order establishes a framework for assessing social service needs during martial law, states of emergency, and the transition period following their conclusion. By refining the methods of need assessment and service provision, this regulation aims to streamline decision-making processes and ensure that social services are effectively adapted to the evolving needs of populations in crisis. This development is pivotal for advancing macro-practice in social work, as it promotes a more systematic and strategic approach to crisis management and recovery.

In summarizing the macro-level approaches, the crisis response in Ukraine has underscored the interconnectedness of societal elements guided by system theory principles. Social workers have played a pivotal role in maintaining stability amid disruption, employing a strength-based approach that not only addresses immediate needs but also empowers communities to leverage their inherent capabilities and resources.

As Ukraine continues to navigate the complexities of conflict, the resilience and adaptability of its social service systems

highlight the transformative potential of collaborative efforts among local leadership, social workers, and community members. Sustaining these initiatives going forward will necessitate ongoing support for training, resource mobilization, and the integration of innovative practices that uphold the dignity and rights of individuals and communities affected by crisis.

■ DISCUSSIONS

At the onset of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, local social work faced significant challenges rooted in post-Soviet legacies of paternalistic approaches. As evidenced by the findings presented in this chapter and other studies (Kravchenko, 2002; Liakh, 2023), social services were initially unprepared for the extreme conditions brought by war, prompting the introduction of new models driven by governmental policies (Ukraine Facility, 2024) and local community initiatives. These transformations underscore the evolving nature of social work in addressing war-induced challenges, highlighting its pivotal role in promoting social justice, resilience, and recovery within affected communities.

Social workers in Ukraine, supported by international organizations are actively enhancing their professional strategies to address the challenges posed by conflict. One key strategy involves empowering communities to achieve self-sufficiency and sustainability by leveraging their inherent strengths and

local knowledge. While external material aid is acknowledged as beneficial, there is a growing recognition that true rebuilding can only occur through the development of local resources tailored to meet community needs (Romanuik et al., 2024; Truell, 2022).

Viewed through the lens of system theory, the invasion disrupted societal equilibrium, acting as a pivotal bifurcation point that reshaped both societal structures and perceptions of social work. This turbulent period precipitated the formation of new relationships and heightened expectations regarding the roles of social workers, many of whom embraced their capacity as agents of change. This shift underscored the urgent need for social workers to innovate, collaborate across sectors, and adapt to novel challenges, thereby supporting resilience amidst crises.

Simultaneously, resistance from those accustomed to the paternalistic model – both social workers and clients – poses a significant challenge in transitioning to new approaches in social work. As traditional roles and expectations are disrupted by societal changes, some stakeholders may resist adopting more collaborative or empowering methods. Overcoming this resistance requires addressing entrenched beliefs, fostering trust through transparent communication, and demonstrating the benefits of participatory approaches in improving outcomes and empowering clients to take an active role in their own welfare.

The Ukrainian experience during the armed conflict and political violence underscores critical roles and the transformative purpose of social work in crisis settings. Social workers have demonstrated resilience and adaptability, essential qualities for navigating dynamic and challenging environments. Their ability to swiftly respond to crises while maintaining a focus on long-term recovery and community rebuilding underscores the profession's vital role.

Central to their effectiveness is interdisciplinary collaboration, where social workers work closely with healthcare professionals, psychologists, legal advisors, and community developers. This collaboration ensures comprehensive care that addresses not only immediate needs but also underlying social, psychological, and legal challenges faced by individuals and communities affected by conflict.

Given the widespread trauma caused by the Russo-Ukrainian war, trauma-informed care is a critical framework for social work in Ukraine. This approach involves understanding, recognizing, and responding to the effects of all types of traumas. Trauma-informed care principles emphasize safety, trustworthiness, peer support, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural sensitivity (Levenson, 2020; Mersky, Topitzes & Britz, 2019). War trauma, as a specific kind of trauma, exacerbates these effects by causing severe psychological distress and long-term mental health issues such as PTSD, depression, and anxiety among affected populations (Herman, 1997;

Somasundaram et al, 2023). Social workers use these principles to create supportive environments that promote healing and recovery for individuals affected by the war. This approach helps to mitigate the long-term psychological effects of trauma and supports the reintegration and well-being of veterans, IDPs, and other impacted populations.

Social workers should possess specialized skills to comprehend and address the profound psychological, emotional, and social impacts of trauma. This approach guarantees that interventions are sensitive and responsive to the unique needs and experiences of those they serve, promoting healing and resilience. However, competencies necessary for trauma-informed care are often pursued in Ukraine outside the formal education in social work, and social services workforce needs to be up-skilled (Better Care Network, 2023).

Similarly, the application of a strength-based approach is essential for ex-combatants returning after leaving the Armed Forces, often following injuries, along with their families. However, such interventions remain scarce in Ukraine and social workers are not trained for their effective delivery (Slozanska et al., 2023; Stoliaryk & Semigina, 2023).

Any war entails political violence, defined as the use of force to achieve political objectives (Kalyvas, 2019). This profoundly impacts communities by destroying infrastructure, worsening living conditions, disrupting social systems, and violating human rights, ultimately eroding social capital and undermining

community relationships (Dyakonenko, 2023). Resilience-based interventions (Patel et al., 2017) help communities absorb these disruptions, reorganize, and sustainably recover.

Based on the findings presented in this chapter and insights from other authors (Right to Defense, 2023; Zakharina, 2023), advocacy and policy influence emerge as crucial aspects of social work in the context of interstate wars. Social workers play a pivotal role in advocating for systemic changes and policies that uphold social justice, ensure equitable access to resources, and protect human rights. Drawing from their front-line experiences, social workers offer critical insights into the needs of vulnerable populations, thereby shaping policies that tackle root causes and promote sustainable solutions.

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The ongoing war has underscored the necessity of decentralizing power and resources while balancing the allocation of resources between military and social needs. Decentralization empowers local communities to address their unique challenges. By ensuring that resources are distributed more equitably, the diverse needs of the population can be better met. Equilibrating military expenditure with investment in social services is essential to prevent further deterioration of social infrastructure and to support the long-term resilience of communities.

It is also worth noting that during times of crisis, social workers play a crucial role in empowering communities to actively engage in their own recovery processes, thereby enhancing

local capacities and strengthening social networks. This approach promotes community resilience and solidarity, ultimately contributing to sustainable development and long-term stability (Palatna & Semigina, 2024). In Ukraine, certain social workers have emerged as community leaders, actively participating in community mobilization and grassroots movements. However, a contradiction arises from the formal absence of community work and macro-level interventions as officially defined by the Classifier of Social Services.

Looking ahead, the future directions of social work are shaped by both global trends and local imperatives. Globally, there is a growing recognition of the critical role social workers play in responding to complex humanitarian crises, advocating for social justice, and promoting community resilience. This recognition underscores the need for social workers to continue evolving their practices to meet emerging challenges effectively.

At the local level, in contexts like Ukraine, the profession is expected to navigate ongoing transitions from traditional models of social service delivery to more innovative, strength-based, and trauma-informed approaches. This shift requires investing in continuous professional development to equip social workers with the necessary skills and competencies. Integrating these new approaches into daily practice will be crucial for addressing the multifaceted needs of individuals and communities affected by armed conflict and other crises.

Technological advancements also present opportunities for social work practice, including telehealth services, digital case management tools, and online psychoeducation platforms. Embracing these technologies can enhance service delivery, improve accessibility, and reach marginalized populations more effectively, especially in remote or conflict-affected areas.

Lastly, nurturing leadership among social workers is crucial for driving these future directions forward. Empowering emerging leaders within the profession to innovate, collaborate, and lead change initiatives will be essential for adapting to evolving societal needs and global challenges.

In sum, social work in crisis settings embodies a commitment to humanitarian values, resilience-building, and empowering communities. The Ukrainian example illustrates how social workers not only provide direct assistance but also advocate for systemic change, promote healing, and empower individuals and communities to rebuild and thrive amidst adversity. These lessons are invaluable for understanding the transformative potential of social work in addressing complex humanitarian challenges worldwide.

■ CONCLUSIONS

During Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the landscape of social work underwent significant transfor-

mations, showcasing its crucial contributions and persistent challenges in humanitarian crises.

The shift from Soviet-era paternalism to decentralized governance implemented prior the war has opened avenues for localized social services, yet it has also highlighted enduring systemic challenges and resistance to change within Ukraine's social work framework. This transition underscores the complexities of adapting historical legacies to meet contemporary needs, emphasizing the ongoing struggle for systemic reforms.

At the micro-level, Ukrainian social work is transitioning from traditional support for the impoverished towards strength-based and trauma-informed services for those affected by continuous warfare. However, social workers in Ukraine encounter challenges in effectively integrating these new approaches into their practices, primarily due to a lack of relevant competencies.

Simultaneously, at the macro-level, social work is poised to play a pivotal role in nurturing community resilience and advocating for social justice. Social workers are crucial in fostering solidarity, empowering marginalized groups, and advocating for policies that uphold human rights and promote equality. Additionally, there has been a notable integration of social services into community needs assessment.

The Ukrainian experience highlights the profession's mandate to navigate complex historical contexts, mobilize innovative

responses, and advocate tirelessly for inclusive practices. Despite evident progress, persistent challenges such as resource constraints and resistance to change continue to impede broader impact and sustainability.

The roles of social work in Ukraine amidst wartime adversity exemplify both its indispensable contributions and the ongoing challenges it faces. By prioritizing roles that emphasize resilience-building, innovative solutions, and steadfast advocacy for social justice, social workers worldwide can contribute to cultivating more inclusive, equitable, and resilient societies in the face of adversity.

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Chapter 3

Addressing Protracted Displacement in Ukraine: Social Work Challenges and Practice Responses

Volodymyr PROSKURA

Abstract

This study examines the challenges faced by internally displaced persons (IDPs) residing mainly in collective accommodation centres in western Ukraine, focusing on the Lviv and Ternopil regions. The analysis draws on survey data from 281 respondents collected between 18 February and 3 March 2025 and explores displacement duration, housing conditions, employment, financial security, and social integration.

The findings show that displacement is largely protracted, with 90.7% of respondents displaced for more than two years. Financial insecurity is identified as the primary challenge by 83.3% of participants. Only 7.6% report full integration into host communities, while 35.1% receive no financial or material assistance despite existing government support programmes. The study situates these results within the literature on protracted displacement in Ukraine and outlines implications for social work practice, emphasising the need for enhanced psychosocial support, employment facilitation, and community integration initiatives.

Keywords: internally displaced persons, Ukraine, collective centers, social work interventions, integration, protracted displacement.

INTRODUCTION

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the country has experienced one of the largest displacement crises in Europe since the Second World War. By the end of 2022, approximately 5.7 million Ukrainians had fled abroad as refugees, while a further 11.6 million people were internally displaced (UNHCR, 2023). Yet internal displacement in Ukraine did not emerge solely as a consequence of the 2022 escalation. Armed conflict that began in 2014 had already forced nearly 1.8 million people to flee their homes, rendering Ukraine the country with the largest internally displaced population in Europe even prior to the full-scale invasion (Perelli-Harris et al., 2024).

As of early 2025, an estimated 3.7 million Ukrainians continue to live in internal displacement. Although initial displacement movements were largely directed towards comparatively safer western regions, the prolonged nature of the war has gradually transformed what was initially perceived as temporary displacement into long-term resettlement. Western oblasts such as Lviv, Ternopil, and Ivano-Frankivsk have thus become sites of sustained population concentration rather than short-term transit. Empirical evidence based on GPS mobility data demonstrates that the early weeks of the invasion were characterised by massive east-west population flows, resulting in pronounced demographic shifts, uneven regional population

losses and gains, and emerging labour market imbalances (Shibuya et al., 2024).

Within this context of protracted displacement, collective accommodation centres have assumed a central role in hosting internally displaced persons (IDPs), particularly those with limited economic resources, reduced mobility, or specific care needs. Living conditions in such centres, however, often entail long-term uncertainty, restricted autonomy, and constrained access to employment and community life. These dynamics pose significant challenges not only for displaced individuals and families, but also for social work systems tasked with responding to increasingly complex and enduring social needs.

The present study explores the lived experiences of IDPs residing in collective centres in western Ukraine, with a particular focus on the Lviv and Ternopil regions. Drawing on primary survey data and situating the findings within recent peer-reviewed scholarship, the analysis examines key dimensions of prolonged displacement, including housing conditions, financial security, employment opportunities, access to social services, and levels of social integration. Special attention is paid to differences across demographic groups, such as older persons, families with children, and those residing in collective centres compared to private housing.

By generating empirical evidence from a protracted displacement setting, this chapter seeks to contribute to ongoing de-

bates on the transformation of humanitarian responses into longer-term social policy and social work practice.

■ CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis is conceptually grounded in the notion of **protracted displacement**, a term commonly used to describe displacement situations lasting five years or more (UNHCR, 2004). Refugees and asylum seekers face pivotal challenges in integrating into local communities within host countries, with establishing and maintaining effective integration programs remaining challenging for resettlement countries and their partners in Europe (Namata et al., 2025). Comparative studies from European contexts demonstrate that prolonged residence in collective centres is associated with poorer mental health outcomes, restricted access to employment, and social isolation. Loss of homeownership and housing amenities has been shown to significantly reduce subjective wellbeing among displaced persons, underscoring housing as a central determinant of integration and quality of life (Belloni & Massa, 2022; Ferris & Kerwin, 2023.).

The phenomenological experience of displacement involves profound disruptions to normalcy and identity. Research from crisis resettlement contexts reveals that displaced individuals struggle to maintain psychological equilibrium, with lived experiences characterized by ongoing distress, loss of routine,

and difficulty establishing a sense of security (Timothy et al., 2026). This experiential dimension underscores that displacement is not merely a material or administrative condition, but fundamentally affects personhood and the capacity for self-determination (Morrissey, 2022). Such insights are particularly relevant for understanding the Ukrainian context, where displaced populations maintain linguistic and cultural resemblance with host communities yet still experience alienation and integration challenges.

While this temporal threshold has been useful for distinguishing prolonged crises from short-term emergencies, the Ukrainian context demonstrates that many structural characteristics of protracted displacement emerge much earlier. Already in the second and third years following large-scale displacement, IDPs in Ukraine experience persistent housing insecurity, limited labour market integration, psychosocial distress, and declining prospects for self-reliance (Shmeha & Dumanska, 2024; Tarkhanova, 2023). The status of internal displacement in Ukraine presents particular complexities, as IDPs retain full citizenship rights yet face systematic barriers to their realization, creating what Tarkhanova (2023) terms a condition of "citizenship in suspension" where formal legal equality coexists with practical marginalization. These dynamics suggest that protracted displacement should be understood not solely as a matter of duration, but as a condition shaped by the interaction of displacement length, structural constraints, and policy responses.

Global trends in forced displacement underscore the magnitude of contemporary displacement crises. By the end of 2022, over 108 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide, representing a significant increase driven by armed conflicts, climate change, and political instability (UNHCR, 2023). This global context situates the Ukrainian displacement within broader patterns of protracted crisis affecting migration systems worldwide (Segal et al., 2010).

Within this framework, *integration* is treated as a multi-dimensional process encompassing economic, social, cultural, and institutional dimensions. Economic integration refers to access to stable employment and financial security; social integration involves participation in community networks and a sense of belonging; institutional integration relates to access to public services, social protection, and legal recognition; and psychosocial integration reflects subjective wellbeing and the ability to regain a sense of agency and stability (Mayadas et al., 1992). These dimensions reflect an understanding of integration not as unidirectional assimilation, but as a dynamic process involving mutual accommodation between displaced populations and receiving communities, acknowledging inherent tensions between inclusion and xenophobia. For internally displaced populations, these dimensions are deeply influenced by both individual characteristics and the broader policy and community environment.

Social work occupies a critical position at the intersection of these processes. In contexts of protracted displacement, social work practice increasingly shifts from short-term humanitarian assistance towards longer-term support aimed at social inclusion, empowerment, and community cohesion (Frederico et al., 2024; Segal et al., 2010). Frederico et al. (2024) argue that responding to the needs of internally displaced persons requires social work to adopt trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and rights-based approaches that recognize both individual agency and structural vulnerability. This perspective positions social workers not merely as service providers but as advocates for systemic change and facilitators of community-level resilience. This chapter therefore approaches displacement not only as a humanitarian challenge, but also as a social policy and practice issue requiring sustained, coordinated interventions across multiple levels.

■ DISPLACEMENT IN THE UKRAINIAN CONTEXT

Existing research consistently shows that Ukrainian IDPs face substantial barriers to integration despite cultural and linguistic proximity to host communities. Studies document persistent economic, housing, and social difficulties, alongside the enduring effects of exposure to violence and forced displacement (Perelli-Harris et al., 2024). Housing instability, employment insecurity, and insufficient income are repeatedly identified as the most pressing challenges, with evidence of down-

ward mobility in both labour market participation and housing quality following displacement.

Patterns of internal mobility further shape these outcomes. Analysis based on human mobility data indicates that individuals from relatively higher-wealth areas were more likely to relocate over longer distances, while those from lower-wealth areas tended to remain closer to their original locations, reflecting unequal access to resources and relocation options (Shibuya et al., 2024). Such patterns have contributed to regional labour market saturation in western oblasts and have intensified competition for employment and affordable housing.

Mental health and psychosocial wellbeing constitute another critical dimension of prolonged displacement. Surveys of Ukrainian IDPs report high levels of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and somatic symptoms, often exacerbated by poverty, social fragmentation, and uncertainty about the future (Perelli-Harris et al., 2024). By late 2023, up to 30% of Ukraine's adult population exhibited symptoms consistent with PTSD, with even higher rates among displaced populations. While mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services have been increasingly recognised as essential components of the humanitarian response, existing provision remains uneven across regions and insufficient to meet growing needs.

Employment and economic integration remain particularly challenging for working-age IDPs. High levels of unemployment and underemployment reflect multiple intersecting barriers, including limited job availability in host communities, difficulties with credential recognition, discrimination, caregiving responsibilities—especially among women—and trauma-related reductions in work capacity. These constraints reinforce long-term dependency risks and undermine prospects for sustainable integration.

Housing conditions further shape the displacement experience. Collective accommodation centres, originally designed as temporary solutions, have increasingly become long-term living arrangements.

At the same time, institutional innovations aimed at strengthening participation and representation have emerged. The establishment of IDP Councils, formally institutionalised through Ukraine's 2025 State Strategy on Internal Displacement and subsequent governmental resolutions, represents an important mechanism for enhancing displaced persons' involvement in decision-making processes. By mid-2024, more than 800 IDP Councils were operating nationwide, contributing to problem-solving at local levels and improving access to social protection and services (IREX, 2024). While their long-term impact remains to be fully assessed, early evidence suggests that such participatory structures can mitigate some of the exclusionary effects of prolonged displacement.

Internationally, the Ukrainian displacement experience has also prompted broader debates on differential treatment of forced migrants. Comparative research highlights both the initial inclusion of Ukrainian refugees in European host societies and the conditional nature of this inclusion, shaped by assumptions about class, cultural proximity, and shared historical narratives (Springer Migration Studies, 2025). Qualitative studies of displaced Ukrainian women further reveal how gender, class, and other intersecting identities mediate experiences of integration and regulation in host contexts (Rock & Sharp, 2025).

METHODOLOGY

This study is situated within an **interpretative research paradigm**, employing a **phenomenological strategy** (Morrissey, 2022; Timothy et al., 2026) to explore the lived experiences of IDPs in western Ukraine under conditions of protracted displacement. The study adopts a **mixed-methods approach**, combining structured quantitative surveys with qualitative open-ended responses and field observations collected during humanitarian programming. This approach allows for a comprehensive examination of both the breadth of challenges faced by IDPs—including housing, employment, financial security, and access to social services—and the depth of personal experiences, meanings, and coping strategies that cannot be captured through quantitative data alone. In adopting this

strategy, the research situates empirical findings within the broader social, institutional, and policy context of western Ukraine, emphasizing the interplay between structural constraints and individual agency in shaping outcomes for displaced populations.

Primary data were collected through humanitarian programming conducted by the charitable organization HOPEFULL **during February and March 2025**. The research focused on IDPs residing in collective accommodation centres, capturing their social, economic, and integration experiences. Structured surveys were administered to 281 respondents across multiple locations, including Drohobych (n = 71, 25.3%), Novyi Rozdil (n = 11, 3.9%), Lviv City (n = 138, 49.1%), Ternopil City (n = 57, 20.3%), and several smaller locations (n = 4, 1.4%) such as Truskavets.

The survey instrument included both closed and open-ended questions addressing demographics, displacement history, living conditions, employment status, financial security, social integration, and utilization of social services. In addition to survey data, the research incorporated field observations and feedback collected through HOPEFULL's humanitarian activities, including food distribution and social interactions between international volunteers and IDP communities.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, frequency distributions, and cross-tabulations. Chi-square tests were conducted to examine associations between demo-

graphic characteristics and key outcomes, such as employment status and levels of social integration. Responses to open-ended questions were coded thematically to identify recurring patterns, concerns, and strategies, providing a more nuanced understanding of IDPs' lived experiences. Visualizations were employed to illustrate key trends and support interpretation.

Ethical considerations were central to the research design. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, with respondents fully informed about the purpose of the survey and their right to decline participation. No personally identifying information was collected, and all procedures were conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for research involving vulnerable populations.

RESULTS

The sample of 281 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in western Ukraine is predominantly female (90%) and includes a substantial proportion of older adults, with 48.4% aged over 60. This demographic profile reflects broader displacement patterns in Ukraine, where men of military age face restrictions on leaving the country. The overwhelming majority of respondents (90.7%) have been displaced for more than two years, highlighting the protracted nature of displacement and underscoring the need for long-term integration strategies beyond emergency humanitarian responses.

Financial insecurity emerges as the most pressing challenge among the surveyed population, affecting 83.3% of respondents. It should be noted, that the respondents could pick up more than one answer. 54.8% noted housing as the primary problem. 12.1% identified psychological problems as a primary concern. These findings correspond with previous research indicating that Ukrainian IDPs consistently face economic, housing, and mental health challenges, with high levels of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder compounded by social and financial stressors (Perelli-Harris et al., 2024). The hierarchy of needs observed in this sample suggests that while basic material survival dominates concerns, psychological well-being remains a significant issue, emphasizing the importance of integrating mental health support into social services.

Housing and living conditions reveal a complex picture. A majority of respondents (57.4%) rent accommodations, whereas 27.8% reside in free collective centres. The remaining participants are accommodated in paid hostels or live with relatives and friends, though the latter represents a surprisingly small proportion (5.7%), possibly due to geographic dispersal of family networks or limited family resources. Those residing in collective centres face challenges including overcrowding, lack of privacy, institutional restrictions, and uncertainty about long-term housing stability. The prevalence of rented accommodation indicates that many IDPs have transitioned from emergency shelters to private rental markets, creating financial

strain, particularly as rental costs in western Ukraine have risen sharply since 2022 (Harris-Brandts, 2024). Extended residence in collective accommodations is associated with decreased mental health outcomes, limited employment opportunities, and social isolation, underscoring the need for targeted housing interventions.

Economic vulnerability among IDPs is pronounced. Only 13.5% of respondents are employed, while pensioners constitute 48.4%, reflecting the age distribution of the sample. Among working-age individuals, unemployment and underemployment approach 26,2% when considering those actively seeking work or unable to secure full-time employment. This elevated rate exceeds national averages and reflects multiple structural and personal barriers, including age discrimination, skills mismatch, limited local job opportunities, caregiving responsibilities, and trauma-related limitations. 1% claim having disability. 3,6% are on parent leave. Self-employment is virtually absent (one person (0.4%) and one more person is doing online tutoring), indicating limited access to capital, business support, or entrepreneurial opportunities. These findings are consistent with research showing that population redistribution due to displacement has created labor market imbalances, with some regions experiencing shortages and others saturation (Shibuya et al., 2024).

Analysis of financial and material assistance indicates significant gaps. While 66.5% of respondents receive monthly gov-

ernment support through IDP payments, a substantial proportion (26.7%) report receiving no financial or material assistance. Only a small fraction (2.5%) access international humanitarian aid, reflecting the shift from emergency humanitarian provision to state-led support systems. Most recipients report that the assistance is insufficient: 66.9% rate financial aid as low (1 or 2 out of 5), with only 4.8% finding it adequate. Material support, including food, clothing, hygiene products, and medications, is rated slightly higher but still inadequate, with 54.2% rating it at 1 or 2.

Social integration among IDPs remains limited despite prolonged displacement. Only 12.4% of respondents report feeling fully integrated into host communities. A larger proportion experiences partial integration (35.2%), weak integration (16.8%), or no integration at all (5.9%), while 29.7% were uncertain about their degree of integration, suggesting ambivalence or difficulty assessing belonging (**Figure 3.1**).

This pattern indicates that integration is constrained by structural and institutional factors rather than duration of residence alone. Access to social adaptation services is uneven: approximately one-third received psychological support (20.4%) or legal consultations (17.2%), while smaller proportions received assistance with documentation (3.1%), participated in mutual support groups (8.4%), or accessed language courses (3.6%). Notably, 19.8% of respondents reported receiving no social

adaptation services, reflecting both gaps in service availability and limitations in outreach or accessibility.

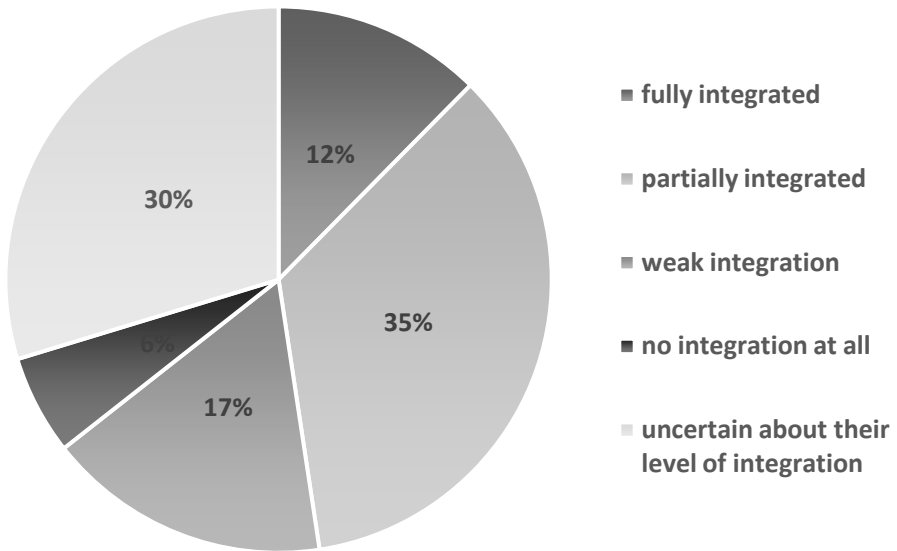


Figure 3.1. Perceived social integration into host communities, %

The **Table 3.1** illustrates the major challenges experienced by IDPs in western Ukraine, highlighting financial insecurity, housing difficulties, limited employment opportunities, psychological distress, low levels of social integration, and gaps in access to social adaptation services. Percentages indicate the proportion of respondents identifying each issue as a key challenge.

Table 3.1. Key challenges faced by IDPs in Western Ukraine

Challenge	Percentage of respondents (%)
Financial insecurity	83.3
Housing difficulties	54.8
Psychological problems	12.1
Employment / economic vulnerability	26,2 (working-age only – 145 resp.)
Lack of social integration	87.6 (not fully integrated)
Lack of access to social adaptation services	35.9

Overall, the results highlight a population experiencing prolonged displacement with overlapping economic, housing, psychosocial, and social integration challenges. The data underscore the necessity of multidimensional interventions that simultaneously address financial security, employment opportunities, housing stability, mental health, and community integration to support the long-term resilience and inclusion of IDPs in host communities.

DISCUSSION

Protracted Displacement and Socioeconomic Vulnerability

The findings of this study confirm the protracted nature of displacement among Ukrainian IDPs, with 90.7% of respondents having been displaced for over two years. This long-term displacement has produced persistent economic vulnerability, including high unemployment and underemployment, financial insecurity, and precarious housing conditions.

These results align with prior research demonstrating downward mobility among IDPs, and highlight the necessity of shifting interventions from short-term humanitarian assistance toward sustained development and integration strategies (Perelli-Harris et al., 2024). Socioeconomic factors also shape displacement patterns, with individuals from higher-wealth areas relocating farther distances, potentially influencing access to resources, employment opportunities, and social networks (Shibuya et al., 2024).

Psychological distress remains a significant concern, with one in four respondents reporting mental health challenges. This prevalence underscores the compounded effects of trauma, poverty, and social isolation. Despite cultural and linguistic similarity to host communities, integration remains limited: only 7.6% of respondents report full integration, while the majority experience partial or weak integration.

Barriers extend beyond individual adaptation, encompassing structural, economic, and institutional factors. Gendered dynamics further exacerbate vulnerability, as female-headed households dominate the displaced population and face additional caregiving and employment challenges (Kogan & Kosyakova, 2025).

Social Work Responses: Policy and Community Mechanisms

The institutionalization of IDP Councils across Ukraine offers a promising framework for community-based support and advocacy. By summer 2024, 814 councils were operational, formalized in the 2025 IDP State Strategy (IREX, 2024). These councils serve as mechanisms for promoting local engagement, resolving administrative challenges, and facilitating social integration. Successful initiatives highlight the potential of reframing IDPs as active contributors rather than passive recipients, exemplified by programs engaging displaced individuals in local agricultural production to enhance self-reliance and community cohesion (ICLD, 2025).

Recent Ukrainian scholarship emphasizes the necessity of comprehensive, multi-level approaches to IDP integration. Vasylieva-Khalatnikova and Protas (2025) document innovative social work practices in Ukraine that combine immediate humanitarian assistance with long-term adaptation support, highlighting participatory methodologies that engage IDPs as co-creators of integration strategies. Similarly, Vitkovska

(2024) argues that effective social work must develop the adaptive potential of displaced persons through capacity-building, psychosocial support, and creation of enabling environments that facilitate self-determination. These perspectives align with international frameworks emphasizing empowerment over dependency.

Infrastructure challenges constitute significant barriers to integration. Critical gaps in housing quality, service accessibility, and institutional coordination impede IDP integration efforts (Shmeha & Dumanska, 2024). The concentration of IDPs in collective centers with inadequate facilities, limited privacy, and uncertain tenure contributes to prolonged dependency and inhibits social and economic participation. Addressing these infrastructure deficits requires coordinated investment in both physical infrastructure and institutional capacity.

Based on the findings of this study and recent research (Gevchuk et al., 2025; Liakh, 2025; Shmeha & Dumanska, 2024; Svidersky, 2025), effective social work responses must simultaneously target economic, social, psychological, and institutional dimensions.

At the national level, enhancing financial security is essential. Current monthly IDP payments, amounting to approximately 3,000 UAH, are widely perceived as insufficient, with 66.9% of recipients rating them as inadequate. Government responses should include increasing base payment levels indexed to regional cost-of-living, differentiating payments according to

household composition, age, and disability status, and providing transitional support for employment entry that avoids disincentivizing work. Housing strategies at the national level should combine rapid construction of affordable units designated for IDPs, long-term rental subsidies, and targeted programs facilitating the transition from collective centers to private accommodations. Regulation of local rental markets and establishment of quality standards for collective centers are also critical to ensure dignity, privacy, and access to services.

Employment and economic inclusion policies must address the 50% unemployment or underemployment rate among working-age IDPs. National-level interventions include fast-track recognition of professional credentials, development of vocational training programs aligned with regional labor demands, provision of wage subsidies or tax incentives for employers, support for microenterprise and self-employment through grants and mentorship, and enforcement of anti-discrimination legislation alongside public awareness campaigns. Svidersky (2025) emphasizes the importance of entrepreneurial competency development among IDPs, arguing that psychological readiness and business skills training can facilitate economic self-sufficiency and reduce dependency on state assistance. Mental health and psychosocial support systems should be integrated into IDP registration and service provision frameworks, including universal screening, expansion of publicly funded services, deployment of mobile mental health teams to collective centers and rural areas, and school-

based support programs for children affected by trauma. Administrative barriers, including documentation gaps, require simplified registration procedures, mobile teams for isolated populations, document replacement services, interagency data sharing, and accessible legal aid.

At the community and municipal levels, interventions focus on fostering social cohesion and enabling meaningful integration. Community-level programming may include cultural exchange events, community festivals, volunteer initiatives, interfaith dialogue, and anti-discrimination campaigns to facilitate interaction between IDPs and host populations. Analysis of social integration programs demonstrates that successful initiatives embed IDPs within the daily life of territorial communities through structured participation in local governance, cultural activities, and economic development projects (Gevchuk et al., 2025). These programs move beyond superficial contact to create interdependence and shared identity. Strengthening local IDP Councils, providing resources and administrative support, and formalizing their role in municipal decision-making can enhance local advocacy and integration. Effective service coordination can be achieved through one-stop centers, outreach campaigns, service mapping, and deployment of community social workers conducting home visits and needs assessments. Local economic development initiatives, including inclusive hiring programs, support for IDP entrepreneurs, public works projects, and market access

for IDP-produced goods, simultaneously promote economic self-sufficiency and community acceptance.

Educational and child-centered approaches address the needs of a significant subpopulation of displaced children, incorporating school-based mentoring, after-school programs, trauma-informed counseling, and parent engagement initiatives. Recreational and summer programs provide shared experiences that facilitate social adaptation. Civil society organizations play a complementary role by ensuring programmatic stability through core funding, building the capacity of local organizations to expand IDP services, mobilizing volunteers, providing grassroots grants for community-led initiatives, and amplifying IDP voices in policy advocacy. Liakh (2025) identifies key tasks for social work with IDPs including psychosocial rehabilitation, facilitation of social connections, provision of legal and informational support, and advocacy for systemic policy reform. These functions require social workers to operate across micro, mezzo, and macro levels simultaneously.

Effective responses require an integrated, multi-level approach, recognizing that individual outcomes emerge from interactions across national, regional, municipal, community, and personal systems. For example, psychosocial support necessitates coordinated policy frameworks, regional service networks, municipal delivery points, community peer support initiatives, and individualized trauma-informed interventions. Similarly, employment facilitation benefits from national legis-

lation and incentive programs, regional labor market analysis, municipal job services, community mentorship and entrepreneurship support, and individual-level skills assessment and job preparation. This systemic perspective emphasizes that sustainable change requires alignment and cooperation across all levels of governance and social infrastructure.

Implications for Social Work Practice and Education

The findings of this study provide several critical lessons for social work practice in conflict-affected contexts, particularly in protracted displacement settings. Internally displaced persons in western Ukraine face interconnected challenges encompassing financial insecurity, precarious housing, limited employment opportunities, low levels of community integration, and significant psychological distress. Social workers operating in these contexts must therefore adopt **holistic, multi-level approaches** that address both immediate material needs and long-term integration challenges.

At the governmental and policy level, social workers play a vital advocacy role, ensuring that policies and programs are responsive to the complex realities of IDPs. This includes promoting the expansion and differentiation of financial assistance, improving access to housing, supporting employment facilitation programs, and advocating for mental health services integrated into national registration and service systems. Practitioners can also contribute to the development and moni-

toring of IDP councils, fostering participatory governance structures that amplify displaced populations' voices and facilitate community-based problem-solving.

At the community and municipal level, social workers act as coordinators and facilitators, bridging gaps between IDPs and host populations. Findings indicate the need for programs promoting social cohesion, including community events, volunteer mobilization, and targeted anti-discrimination campaigns. Strengthening networks of local service providers and improving accessibility to legal, social, and psychological services are central roles for practitioners. Social workers can further support local economic development by connecting IDPs with vocational training, microenterprise opportunities, and local labor markets, thereby promoting self-sufficiency while reducing potential tensions with host communities.

At the individual and family level, practitioners are called to provide direct support addressing psychosocial wellbeing, trauma, and coping mechanisms. Given that 25.5% of respondents reported psychological distress and low integration levels were widespread, interventions must include trauma-informed care, counseling, and targeted support for vulnerable populations such as elderly persons, single-parent households, and children. Child-centered programs in schools, recreational activities, mentoring, and parental engagement initiatives are critical for supporting intergenerational resilience and social inclusion.

For social work education, these findings underscore the importance of preparing future practitioners to operate in complex humanitarian and protracted displacement contexts. Curricula should integrate training in trauma-informed practice, intercultural competence, policy advocacy, community development, and multi-level coordination. Field placements in humanitarian and displacement-focused settings provide experiential learning opportunities, reinforcing skills in assessment, case management, and community engagement. Moreover, educators should emphasize reflective practice and ethical decision-making, equipping students to navigate the challenges of scarce resources, bureaucratic constraints, and competing needs inherent to displacement contexts.

Overall, the study highlights the profession's responsibility to promote resilience, social inclusion, and sustainable pathways toward self-reliance among displaced populations. Social workers must simultaneously address structural, social, and psychological dimensions, implement culturally sensitive interventions, engage host communities, and empower IDPs to participate actively in decisions that affect their lives. By doing so, social work practice and education contribute to both immediate humanitarian relief and long-term societal stability, advancing the profession's mandate in conflict-affected contexts.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several **limitations**. The sample was non-random and restricted to residents of collective centers and those receiving some support from local NGOs in western Ukraine, limiting generalizability to IDPs living in private housing or other regions. Self-reported data may be affected by social desirability bias, and the cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences. Additionally, qualitative responses collected in Ukrainian may lose nuance in translation.

Future research should address these gaps by conducting longitudinal studies to track integration trajectories over time, comparing IDPs in private housing, other regions, and non-displaced populations, and examining variation in outcomes by displacement origin, duration, and household composition. Evaluating the effectiveness of specific interventions through quasi-experimental or experimental designs, incorporating qualitative methods to explore lived experiences, and analyzing host community perspectives would provide a more comprehensive understanding of factors facilitating or hindering integration. Such research would inform both policy development and the design of context-sensitive social work interventions, reinforcing evidence-based approaches to supporting protractedly displaced populations.

CONCLUSIONS

This study highlights the profound and multidimensional challenges faced by internally displaced persons in western Ukraine following prolonged displacement. Most respondents have experienced protracted displacement exceeding two years, accompanied by pervasive financial insecurity, precarious housing, high unemployment among working-age adults, significant psychological distress, and limited integration into host communities.

The findings demonstrate that current governmental and community responses remain insufficient to meet the needs of displaced populations. Effective solutions require coordinated action across multiple levels, including individual support, community-based programs, organizational capacity-building, and policy reforms. Priorities include enhancing financial assistance, expanding employment facilitation and vocational training, integrating mental health and psychosocial support into routine services, improving access to affordable housing, and streamlining administrative procedures. Community-level strategies, such as fostering social cohesion, supporting IDP councils, coordinating services, promoting local economic development, and engaging civil society, are equally critical.

Beyond material support, the study underscores the importance of recognition, dignity, and meaningful social interaction for displaced persons. Social work interventions must adopt trauma-informed, culturally sensitive, and rights-based

approaches that empower individuals, strengthen social networks, and facilitate pathways to sustainable integration or safe return.

Three years into the full-scale war, displacement in Ukraine has shifted from an acute emergency to a protracted reality. Social work practice and education are therefore tasked with addressing immediate needs while also fostering long-term resilience, social inclusion, and agency among displaced populations. Achieving these goals requires both technical expertise and a commitment to social justice, human dignity, and the right to belong.

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Chapter 4

Social Work Responses to Internal Displacement at the Community Level in Ukraine: The Case of Uman

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Abstract

This paper examines community-based responses to internal displacement in Ukraine through a case study of the Uman City Territorial Community. Drawing on document analysis, surveys of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and host community members, and qualitative case materials, the study explores how local governance, social work practice, and civil society initiatives interact to support integration in a context of protracted war. The findings demonstrate that effective integration is driven by coordinated multi-level action, including municipal policy frameworks, accessible social services, and participatory community spaces such as social hubs. The analysis highlights the importance of recognising IDPs not only as service recipients but also as active agents contributing to local development. A SWOT analysis reveals both structural constraints and significant opportunities arising from community resources, social capital, and intersectoral collaboration. The paper contributes to debates on social work in conflict-affected settings by illustrating how locally grounded, rights-based, and community-oriented approaches can enhance resilience, social cohesion, and inclusive recovery.

Key words: *internal displacement; community integration; social work; local governance; community resilience; Ukraine; war-affected contexts.*

INTRODUCTION

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered one of the largest waves of displacement in Europe since the Second World War. Millions of people were forced to leave their homes, often abruptly and without the possibility of planning relocation or securing stable livelihoods (Shatberashvili, 2024; Stoliaryk & Semigina, 2024). As of the end of 2025, after nearly four years since the onset of the full-scale war in Ukraine, **4.62 million internally displaced persons (IDPs)** were officially registered in the country, according to data from the Ministry of Social Policy, Family and Unity of Ukraine. These figures refer to people who were forced to leave regions where active hostilities continue. Women constitute the majority of the displaced population (2.76 million), compared to 1.86 million men. In terms of age structure, 3.78 million IDPs are adults aged 18 and older, while 837,400 are children under the age of 18 (Hlushko, 2026). This demographic profile underscores not only the scale but also the social complexity of internal displacement in Ukraine, highlighting its gendered and intergenerational dimensions and the sustained pressure placed on community-based social work systems.

While national policies and humanitarian actors have played an important role in responding to internal displacement, the everyday realities of displacement are shaped primarily at the local level. Territorial communities have become the key

arenas where internally displaced persons (IDPs) seek safety, access social support, rebuild social ties, and negotiate their future (Kravchenko, 2022; Liakh, 2023). Within this context, social work has assumed a central, though often under-recognised, role in responding to the complex and evolving needs of displaced populations.

Internal displacement in Ukraine has unfolded alongside ongoing reforms in decentralisation and social service provision. Over the past decade, territorial communities have gained expanded responsibilities for social protection, service delivery, and local development. The war has not suspended these processes; instead, it has intensified them, placing unprecedented demands on local welfare systems and on social work as a profession (Zaviršek & Cox, 2024). Social workers have been required to respond to mass displacement under conditions of uncertainty, resource scarcity, emotional strain, and rapidly changing institutional arrangements. These circumstances have reshaped professional roles and practices, making internal displacement a critical lens through which to examine the contemporary development of social work in Ukraine.

This chapter focuses on social work responses to internal displacement at the community level, situating professional practice within broader community-based responses to war. Rather than approaching IDPs solely as recipients of humanitarian assistance, the chapter adopts a social work

perspective that emphasises psychosocial support, social integration, participation, and the mobilisation of local capacities. It explores how social work operates at the intersection of formal social services, local governance, non-governmental organisations, volunteer initiatives, and emerging community spaces, where professional and non-professional forms of support often coexist and overlap. Particular attention is given to psychosocial dimensions of social work responses. In wartime Ukraine, community-based psychosocial support has become a core field of social work practice, encompassing individual and group interventions, peer support, informal educational activities, and community-oriented initiatives. These practices illustrate the adaptive and hybrid nature of social work in crisis settings, where professional boundaries are frequently negotiated and redefined.

The chapter also foregrounds questions of agency and participation. Despite heightened vulnerability, internally displaced persons are not passive recipients of support. In many territorial communities, IDPs actively contribute to civic initiatives, mutual aid networks, and community spaces, often with the facilitation or involvement of social workers. Examining these dynamics allows for a more nuanced understanding of integration as a relational process involving both displaced populations and host communities, and of social work as a profession engaged not only in service

provision but also in community development and empowerment.

By situating internal displacement within the broader trajectory of social work development, this chapter contributes to critical reflections on professionalisation in times of prolonged crisis. It highlights how war exposes structural limitations of welfare systems while simultaneously generating new forms of professional practice, intersectoral collaboration, and learning. In the context of this monograph, the chapter complements analyses of professionalisation, education, gendered vulnerabilities, and community resilience by addressing internal displacement as one of the defining social challenges of wartime Ukraine and as a key arena in which the future of social work is being shaped.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social work responses to internal displacement emerge at the intersection of forced migration, local welfare systems, and community dynamics. In contexts of armed conflict and prolonged crisis, such as wartime Ukraine, internal displacement cannot be understood solely as a humanitarian, administrative, or logistical challenge. From a social work perspective, displacement constitutes a complex social process that involves the disruption of social ties, loss of material and symbolic resources, and the need for re-embedding

individuals and families within new social environments. This chapter approaches internal displacement as a multidimensional social phenomenon that places particular demands on social work practice at the community level.

The analytical perspective adopted here is grounded in an understanding of **social work as a community-embedded profession**, operating within decentralised systems of social protection and service provision. Studies (Corbin & Omona, 2020; Frederico et al., 2024) provide evidence that territorial communities function not only as administrative units but also as social spaces shaped by relationships, institutional arrangements, and local capacities, while community-based interventions constitute the main component of support for people affected by armed conflicts.

In Ukraine, the full-scale war has intensified community responsibilities, positioning social work at the centre of community responses to mass displacement. Social workers are required to coordinate services, mediate between institutions and individuals, and navigate cooperation with non-governmental organisations, volunteer initiatives, and informal networks (Collado, 2025; Popova & Bondarchuk, 2025; Semigina et al., 2025). This perspective allows social work responses to internal displacement to be analysed as part of broader community responses, rather than as isolated professional interventions.

As WHO (2007) notes, internal displacement can be understood through a **psychosocial lens** that emphasizes the interdependence of psychological well-being and social environments. Forced displacement is associated with exposure to violence, uncertainty, and prolonged stress, which affect not only individual mental health but also family relationships, social functioning, and a sense of belonging (Chiumento et al., 2021; Keynan, 2015; Lushchak et al., 2024). From this perspective, Ingabire et al. (2017) and Semigina et al., (2025) argue that social work responses extend beyond specialized mental health interventions, encompassing a broad range of practices aimed at restoring everyday functioning, strengthening coping capacities, and supporting social connections. Community-based psychosocial support—including group activities, peer initiatives, informal education, and the creation of safe social spaces—plays a particularly important role in wartime contexts, where formal services are limited or overburdened (Bogdanov et al., 2017). This combined understanding underscores the adaptive and hybrid nature of social work practice under crisis conditions.

A further conceptual dimension informing this chapter is the understanding of **social integration** as a relational and dynamic process. Integration is not treated as a one-sided expectation placed on internally displaced persons to adapt to host communities. Instead, it is conceptualised as an interactive process involving both displaced populations and local residents, shaped by access to resources, participation in

community life, and the negotiation of social belonging (Korn, 2001; Ran & Join-Lambert, 2019; Roshchyk et al., 2024). From this perspective, processes of integration are closely linked to **questions of social identity**, including how internally displaced persons perceive themselves within new community settings and how they are recognised—or categorised—by host populations (Chuiko & Fedorenko, 2021; Hogg, 2016). Shared spaces, everyday interactions, and participation in local initiatives contribute to the reconfiguration of social identities, influencing boundaries between “locals” and “newcomers” and shaping patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

From a social work perspective, integration involves facilitating access to services and rights while also creating opportunities for participation, civic engagement, and mutual recognition (Shkoliar, 2017). This approach aligns with strengths-based and empowerment-oriented traditions in social work, which emphasise agency, social capital, and the capacity of individuals and groups to contribute to community life, even in conditions of heightened vulnerability.

Taken together, these conceptual considerations provide a framework for analysing social work responses to internal displacement as professional practices embedded within community contexts, shaped by psychosocial needs and oriented towards integration and participation. This framework enables a critical examination of how social work in wartime Ukraine responds to displacement not only by

addressing immediate needs, but also by contributing to longer-term processes of social cohesion, community resilience, and professional development under conditions of prolonged crisis.

METHODS

This chapter adopts a **descriptive case study approach** (Descriptive case study, 2010) to examine social work responses to internal displacement at the community level in wartime Ukraine. The case study design enables an in-depth exploration of institutional arrangements, service provision, and community practices within a specific territorial context, while also allowing broader reflections on the development of social work under conditions of prolonged crisis. The focus on a single community does not aim at statistical generalisation; rather, it provides an analytically grounded illustration of how social work operates within decentralised governance structures and under sustained displacement pressure.

The empirical focus of the chapter is the **Uman City Territorial Community**, located in Cherkasy region. The community was formally established in 2020 in accordance with the resolutions of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine of 6 May 2020 (No. 541-r) “On the Approval of the Perspective Plan for the Formation of Community Territories in Cherkasy Region” and of 12 June 2020 (No. 728-r) “On the Determination of Administrative Centres and Approval of the Territories of Territorial Communities of Cherkasy Region”. The Uman City Territorial

Community comprises the city of Uman and the village of Polianetske.

Uman was selected as a case due to its favourable geographic location, developed transport connections, and relatively strong socio-economic infrastructure, which have made the community attractive for internally displaced persons seeking temporary residence. With a total area exceeding 63,000 square metres and a population of approximately 83,000 residents, the community is located at a relatively safe distance from occupied territories while maintaining accessibility to major transport routes. Since the beginning of the full-scale war, Uman has demonstrated a capacity to absorb and support displaced populations. As of 1 March 2023, the community had officially registered more than 13,000 internally displaced persons. The presence of volunteer coordination centres, charitable foundations, and a developed network of social protection institutions has further shaped the local response to displacement and informed the choice of this case.

The study draws on multiple sources of data in order to capture both institutional perspectives and lived experiences related to internal displacement. First, **an analysis of official documentation and statistical data** was conducted, including records and reports produced by structural units of the Department of Labour and Social Protection of the Population of the Uman City Council. These materials were examined to explore organisational and administrative aspects of the

implementation of national and local policies aimed at supporting internally displaced persons, as well as to assess service coverage and institutional capacity.

Second, **a survey of residents of the Uman City Territorial Community** was carried out using an online questionnaire (Google Forms). The survey was distributed by professionals working in the social sector through social media platforms and messaging applications (including Viber and Facebook). The aim of this survey was to examine public perceptions of IDP integration, local attitudes towards displaced persons, and community readiness to support integration processes. A total of 695 respondents participated in the survey.

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Third, **a separate survey targeting internally displaced persons** residing in the community was conducted by social sector professionals. This survey focused on experiences of adaptation and integration into new socio-economic conditions, access to services, and perceived barriers and supports within the host community. In total, 312 internally displaced persons took part in the survey.

In addition, **a SWOT analysis** was applied to systematise strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to the integration of internally displaced persons within the community. This analytical tool supported the identification of strategic priorities for further development of social work responses and community-based support mechanisms. Finally, a content analysis of the local Programme for the Support and

Integration of Internally Displaced Persons in the Uman City Territorial Community for 2023–2025 was conducted to assess its alignment with the actual needs of displaced persons and the available resources of the community.

The combination of these methods ensured a holistic examination of social work responses to internal displacement at the community level. It enhanced the analytical depth of the case study, supported the triangulation of findings, and enabled the formulation of practice-oriented insights relevant to both policy development and the professionalisation of social work in wartime Ukraine.

The study employed **thematic analysis** to interpret material derived from survey responses, policy documents, and reflective observations arising from the authors' professional involvement in social work practice at the community level. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns related to experiences of displacement, access to services, integration trajectories, and perceptions of social work support. This approach enabled the systematisation of insights and supported a deeper understanding of how social work responses are perceived and enacted within the community context.

Ethical considerations were an integral component of the research process. Given the vulnerability of internally displaced persons and the ongoing wartime context, particular attention was paid to principles of voluntary participation,

informed consent, and confidentiality. Participation in surveys was anonymous, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and the use of collected data. No personal identifiers were collected, and data were analysed in aggregated form. The authors' professional involvement in social work practice within the community was approached reflexively, with an awareness of potential power imbalances and the need to avoid harm or undue influence. Ethical sensitivity guided both data collection and interpretation, ensuring respect for participants' dignity and lived experiences.

■ INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT AND UMAN'S COMMUNITY CONTEXT

The presence of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the Uman City Territorial Community represents a significant social and demographic phenomenon, shaping both the experiences of displaced households and the perceptions of the host population. A survey of 312 IDPs and 695 community residents provides a comprehensive view of this dynamic, revealing key insights into population composition, living conditions, social integration, and community attitudes.

The IDP population in Uman primarily originates from regions heavily affected by active hostilities, including Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv, Kherson, Mykolaiv, Zaporizhzhia, and Dnipropetrovsk. Many displaced individuals fled areas

with destroyed or damaged housing, often leaving behind their possessions under conditions of urgency and uncertainty. Approximately 82% of IDPs from these high-conflict regions have remained in Uman in temporary accommodations, while only a small fraction possess their own housing. The demographic composition of the displaced population reflects a predominance of women and children, with men underrepresented due to both registration practices and partial family relocation. Economically, nearly half of the IDPs are actively employed, while pensioners and individuals with disabilities constitute smaller shares. A significant proportion of households include minor children, reflecting the family-centered nature of displacement.

Living arrangements among IDPs highlight both resilience and vulnerability. Most reside with relatives, in dormitories, hotels, or rented apartments, with dependence on family networks providing immediate shelter but creating long-term sustainability challenges. IDPs report high satisfaction with essential services such as food provision, healthcare, education, and administrative support, as well as public infrastructure including parks, water supply, and transport. Nonetheless, difficulties persist in accessing psychological support and securing employment, with many households experiencing financial strain. Immediate needs identified by IDPs focus on individual temporary housing, financial support, food security, and access to information regarding available aid and community events, while professional

advancement and business opportunities are of comparatively lower priority.

Community perceptions of IDPs reveal a generally positive and nuanced understanding of their presence. Among residents, nearly two-thirds (64%) expressed favorable attitudes toward displaced persons, with an additional 28% maintaining neutral positions and only a small minority (8%) expressing negative views. Awareness of IDPs is high, with nearly 66% of residents familiar with their presence and a quarter having direct personal acquaintance. Residents recognize both opportunities and challenges associated with displacement. Over half anticipate the arrival of additional qualified specialists, and many expect the formation of social connections with IDPs. At the same time, concerns are evident regarding labor market competition and economic impacts, with more than 60% of respondents perceiving increased competition for employment. Opinions regarding potential financial benefits for the community are mixed, with a significant proportion uncertain.

The evaluation of community services by residents aligns closely with IDPs' own assessments. Parks and recreational areas received the highest ratings, while healthcare, education, social services, and administrative support were predominantly rated positively. Infrastructure services, including water supply and sanitation, were generally well regarded, whereas street cleanliness, road conditions, and

public safety elicited divided opinions, suggesting areas for ongoing improvement.

Demographically, survey participation highlights active engagement by women in community life, with female respondents representing three times the number of men. Age distribution among residents was relatively balanced, with the exception of children under 17, who were minimally represented. Occupational composition included employees, administrative staff, students, pensioners, unemployed individuals, managers, entrepreneurs, and other categories, reflecting a cross-section of the local population.

Overall, the findings illustrate a dynamic interaction between displaced persons and the host community. IDPs demonstrate resilience and adaptability in navigating socio-economic challenges while generally expressing satisfaction with life in Uman. The host community exhibits a broad awareness of displacement and largely positive attitudes, while acknowledging potential economic and social pressures. Together, these perspectives underscore the importance of targeted policies and interventions that address both immediate humanitarian needs and longer-term integration objectives. Ensuring access to housing, healthcare, employment opportunities, and social support for IDPs, alongside initiatives that foster positive relations and mutual understanding with host residents, is essential for sustaining

community cohesion and facilitating effective adaptation to ongoing demographic and social change.

■ LOCAL POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR IDP INTEGRATION

The integration of IDPs in Uman community is guided by a comprehensive policy framework designed to coordinate the efforts of governmental, municipal, educational, cultural, and civil society institutions. The **Uman City Program for the Support and Integration of Internally Displaced Persons (2023–2025)** serves as the primary instrument for structuring local responses, ensuring that interventions are consistent with national legislation and international standards for the protection of IDPs.

The Program aims to facilitate the integration of displaced populations by removing barriers to the exercise of their rights and fundamental freedoms, ensuring full access to administrative, social, cultural, and other services, and creating conditions for the development of their potential and capacity. It builds on the legal foundation provided by the Law of Ukraine “On Ensuring the Rights and Freedoms of Internally Displaced Persons,” as well as the *Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine Resolution No. 1364-r (2021) on the Approval of the Strategy for IDP Integration and Medium-Term Solutions for*

Internal Displacement until 2024, thereby aligning local actions with national strategies.

The Program is grounded in several guiding principles that shape the implementation of all initiatives related to IDP support. These include prioritizing human rights, upholding the rule of law, ensuring transparency and openness in program implementation, and promoting accountability among local authorities. The framework explicitly prohibits discrimination against displaced persons and encourages constructive cooperation among municipal authorities, the local population, volunteer organizations, and business actors. Furthermore, it emphasizes the meaningful participation of IDPs in dialogue regarding local and national policy, enabling them to contribute to decisions affecting their rights, interests, and community life.

A key feature of the Program is its emphasis on multi-stakeholder collaboration. Local authorities coordinate with state agencies at all levels, civil society organizations, educational and cultural institutions, humanitarian partners, and international actors, including sister cities, to plan and implement services effectively. This coordination ensures that interventions are comprehensive, contextually appropriate, and responsive to the evolving needs of displaced populations. By establishing mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation, and continuous engagement, the Program also

provides a framework to assess the effectiveness of integration measures and identify areas for improvement.

Within this policy and institutional framework, the Uman City Territorial Community has been able to implement a broad array of social services and psychosocial support programs. These efforts range from emergency material assistance to long-term initiatives supporting education, mental health, rehabilitation, and community engagement, ensuring that displaced persons are not only provided with immediate support but are also empowered to participate actively in civic and social life. The Program thus provides both a legal and operational foundation for the community's comprehensive approach to supporting IDPs, bridging the gap between policy intentions and practical service delivery.

■ SOCIAL WORK RESPONSES: SERVICES AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT WITHIN THE COMMUNITY

Social work responses in the Uman City Territorial Community encompass a comprehensive and multifaceted system designed to support internally displaced persons (IDPs) across material, social, and psychosocial dimensions. These interventions combine immediate humanitarian assistance, long-term integration initiatives, and targeted support for vulnerable populations, reflecting a holistic

approach to social work in a context of protracted displacement.

Registration, Material Assistance, and Initial Support

The initial stage of support focuses on registration and provision of essential material assistance. A unified registration system allows local authorities to assess population needs, plan social payments, and mitigate potential misuse of state or donor resources. Direct support includes the distribution of food packages, hygiene products, bedding, and other items that improve living conditions, as well as guidance on accessing social benefits.

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The Department of Labor has coordinated the reception and accommodation of IDPs continuously since the onset of the conflict. Temporary housing is provided in schools, social institutions, hotels, and private apartments, accommodating both transiting and permanently settling displaced persons. Over 128,000 individuals have been served by the refugee center, illustrating the scale and organizational capacity of these efforts.

Outreach and Access to Social Services

Ensuring equitable access to services has involved extensive outreach. Mobile offices, community meetings, interest-based clubs, and charitable campaigns are conducted in neighborhoods and areas with high concentrations of IDPs to

provide information on available support. Online surveys and other feedback mechanisms are utilized to monitor service quality and ensure responsiveness to the needs of displaced populations.

Social accompaniment programs target vulnerable households, including families with children, youth, older adults, and individuals with disabilities, offering individualized guidance and support to mitigate the negative effects of difficult life circumstances. Specialized social services include day care, supported living, residential and palliative care, and rehabilitation services tailored to older adults and persons with disabilities. Rehabilitation services for children and youth with disabilities are provided through institutions such as the Comprehensive Rehabilitation Center for Children with Disabilities “Prolisok” and the Rehabilitation Complex “Harmony.”

Additional programs support social adaptation and psychosocial rehabilitation. The “Bug” center offers integrated rehabilitation, leisure, and health programs for IDPs, while digital literacy initiatives, such as the “Country in a Smartphone” program, and educational programs through the University of the Third Age “Dyvosvit” facilitate learning, social integration, and empowerment.

Psychosocial Support and Trauma-Informed Interventions

Psychosocial support is a cornerstone of the community's response. Psychologists conduct individual consultations and group sessions addressing mental health, trauma, and social adaptation. Programs for children affected by war, such as "Children and War: Healing Techniques," provide structured support for coping and resilience. Specialized services also support survivors of domestic and gender-based violence, delivered through dedicated centers and mobile social-psychological teams.

In addition, IDPs benefit from organized excursions, recreational activities, sports, wellness programs, and structured creative workshops. Yoga, mental health sessions, psychological transformation courses, and community celebrations provide informal opportunities for social interaction, peer support, and relationship-building. These interventions promote emotional well-being and strengthen social networks, facilitating adaptation to life in a new environment.

Education, Cultural Activities, and Community Integration

Education, cultural participation, and leisure activities serve as key mechanisms for integration and resilience. Youth and family centers provide structured programs for children, adolescents, and adults from both IDP and local populations, including creative workshops, masterclasses, vocational

training, and extracurricular education. Excursions, cultural events, and inclusive social-rehabilitation tourism activities foster social engagement, exposure to new experiences, and skill development.

The holistic approach extends to promoting lifelong learning and inclusion through participation in educational programs and digital literacy initiatives. Adolescents from IDP families engage in peer hubs such as “Khalabuda,” where they collaborate with local youth in recreational, educational, and civic activities, fostering cross-community interaction and social cohesion.

Community Engagement and Social Hubs

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Active participation of IDPs in civic and community life is a defining feature of Uman’s social work response. Displaced persons are involved in local public organizations, self-governance structures, and the Public Council under the City Executive Committee, contributing to municipal decision-making and the co-creation of community solutions.

Social hubs play a central role in integration and empowerment. The “*Avdiivka. Free People. So It Was, So It Will Be*” hub provides structured activities for both local residents and IDPs, focusing on recreation, education, psychosocial support, and practical guidance. The hub serves displaced families from Donetsk and other regions, offering

comprehensive support ranging from benefit consultations to psychological assistance and problem-solving for daily life.

Children and youth participate in dedicated spaces such as the adolescent hub “*Khalabuda*,” where recreational, educational, and cultural activities promote inclusion, civic engagement, and peer support. Over three years, the hubs have conducted 676 events in mental health, education, culture, employment, sports, tactical medicine, and mine safety, engaging 8,362 participants across all age groups, including children, adolescents, adults, older adults, and families of service members.

Programs at the hubs include workshops, creative classes, excursions organized with the Department of Labor’s Inclusive Social Rehabilitation Tourism division, yoga and wellness sessions, psychological transformation courses, and community celebrations. These activities provide informal spaces for socialization, mutual support, and cultural exchange, strengthening relationships between IDPs and host populations.

The hubs also promote digital literacy and educational engagement through programs such as “The Country in a Smartphone” and participation in the University of the Third Age “*Dyvosvit*.” This collaboration fosters a mutually enriching environment, enabling IDPs to share knowledge, expertise, and cultural perspectives, while local residents gain

exposure to new experiences, resulting in a synergistic effect that enhances social cohesion.

Over forty local, national, and international organizations have participated in hub activities, demonstrating trust, collaboration, and community-wide support. The hubs exemplify how structured social work interventions can create spaces of hope, inclusion, and empowerment, allowing displaced populations to rebuild social networks, access vital services, and actively participate in civic and community life.

So, the social work response in Uman demonstrates a holistic, coordinated, and adaptive approach to displacement (see **Figure 3.1**). It integrates emergency assistance, psychosocial support, rehabilitation, education, recreational programming, and civic engagement, creating a sustainable framework for adaptation and integration. By combining government services, volunteer initiatives, international support, and community-led programs, Uman has established a model for responsive, inclusive, and innovative social work that addresses both immediate needs and long-term integration for internally displaced populations.

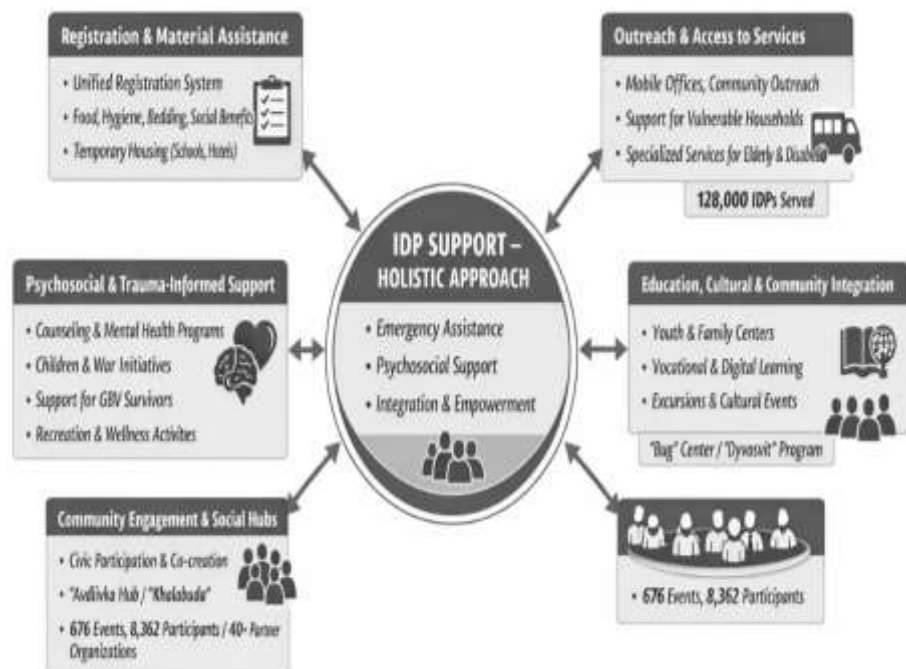


Figure 3.1. Services and psychosocial support for IDPs in the Uman city territorial community

■ SWOT ANALYSIS AND STRATEGIC PRIORITIES FOR IDP INTEGRATION IN UMAN

Based on the analysis of policy documents, survey data from IDPs, and feedback from local residents, a comprehensive SWOT analysis was conducted to assess the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to the integration of IDPs and the broader development of the Uman City Territorial Community. This analysis highlights both structural and socio-economic factors influencing the community's capacity to support displaced populations.

Strengths identified include Uman's strategic logistical and geographic location, supported by a developed transportation network connecting the city to Kyiv, Odesa, Cherkasy, Kropyvnytskyi, and Vinnytsia. The community benefits from well-established recreational and cultural zones, a diversified service sector, and a comprehensive educational infrastructure across multiple levels. The city also possesses a network of hotels that accommodate visiting pilgrims, offering reduced tourist fees to support IDPs residing in these establishments. Social services are well-organized, with a network of social protection institutions providing essential services and three specialized rehabilitation facilities. Communal infrastructure ensures uninterrupted provision of water, heat, electricity, and gas, alongside effective waste management and urban maintenance. Moreover, Uman has cultivated productive

partnerships with international sister cities, enhancing access to resources and technical support.

Weaknesses reflect structural and socio-economic challenges, including a critical demographic imbalance with mortality exceeding birth rates, limited internal and external investment, high competition in the local labor market, and insufficient municipal land and housing stock for the relocation of enterprises or qualified IDP professionals. The local tourism sector remains underdeveloped in the context of ongoing conflict, wages are comparatively low, and social service personnel face emotional burnout. In addition, deficiencies exist in civil protection infrastructure, including shelters and age-appropriate housing for the elderly.

Opportunities for Uman relate primarily to the integration and empowerment of IDPs. High-skilled specialists among displaced populations can fill critical labor gaps, while small and medium-sized enterprises can be relocated and incentivized through preferential taxation and access to municipal property. International aid, grants, and donor support provide avenues for developing social infrastructure to meet the needs of both IDPs and host community members. Engagement of IDPs as community activists enhances social participation and generates broader socio-economic benefits, while state-led integration programs provide structural support for sustainable inclusion.

Threats include potential outmigration of young people, skills shortages, legislative restrictions on municipal revenues, and the financial burden of delivering social services. Additional risks arise from the escalation of hostilities, deterioration of sanitation and public health, damage to critical infrastructure, donor fatigue, and rising energy costs.

Figure 3.2 visually summarises the key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats shaping the community's capacity to support the integration of IDPs and to pursue sustainable local development under conditions of protracted displacement and ongoing uncertainty.

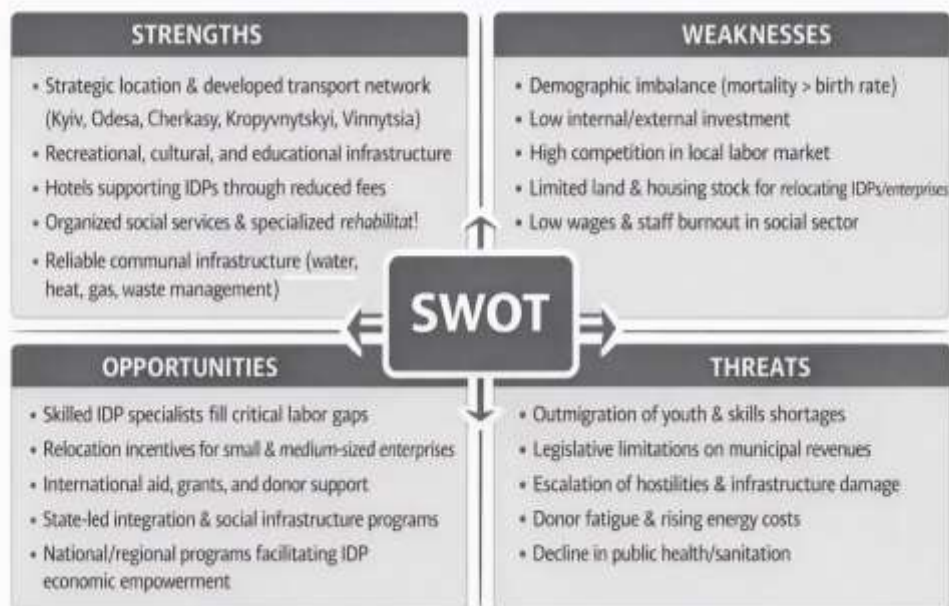


Figure 3.2. SWOT-analysis of IDPs integration in Uman

The analysis underscores the importance of leveraging community strengths while addressing structural weaknesses and mitigating threats. **Key strategic priorities** for Uman City in promoting the integration of IDPs include:

- *Housing*: ensuring temporary and long-term accommodation through public programs, municipal housing funds, and private sector partnerships.
- *Education*: guaranteeing access to high-quality pre-school, school, extracurricular, higher, and vocational education, while fostering a supportive psychological environment for children of displaced families.
- *Employment*: facilitating labor market access for IDPs, including retraining and upskilling aligned with community labor needs.
- *Access to services*: providing comprehensive social, rehabilitation, administrative, and medical services, including psychosocial support and innovative service delivery models.
- *Community participation*: promoting active involvement of IDPs in local decision-making, cultural life, and civic initiatives, ensuring their full integration into public, cultural, and tourist spheres.
- *Child development and family support*: supporting children as a key mechanism for social integration, fostering

interaction between IDP and local families, and providing opportunities for youth engagement in education, culture, and sports.

This strategic approach emphasizes mutual benefit for both displaced and local populations, leveraging the skills, knowledge, and civic engagement of IDPs to strengthen social cohesion and community resilience. By systematically addressing structural gaps and fostering inclusive participation, Uman City aims to create sustainable pathways for the integration of displaced populations while enhancing the well-being of the entire community.

■ DISCUSSIONS

Lessons Learnt

The case of Uman provides critical insights into the processes of integrating internally displaced persons (IDPs) within a municipal context during a protracted conflict. A primary lesson is the importance of leveraging **local community resources and infrastructure** to facilitate effective social work responses. The pre-existing network of social services, educational institutions, health facilities, and civic organizations provided a foundation upon which tailored interventions for IDPs could be built. This aligns with Wessels (2016), who highlights that community strengths—both

material and social—are central to adaptive responses in contexts of displacement.

The study further demonstrates the value of **coordinated, multi-stakeholder approaches**. Collaboration among local government, social services, volunteer organizations, civil society, and international partners enabled timely registration, provision of temporary housing, psychosocial support, and access to social benefits. The success of initiatives such as the Social Hubs—particularly the “Avdiivka. Free People. As It Was, As It Will Be” hub—illustrates how structured support combined with community-led engagement can create inclusive spaces that foster social cohesion and resilience.

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The findings also underline the **agency of displaced persons**. IDPs in Uman actively participated in social, cultural, and civic life, forming community organizations, youth hubs, and volunteer initiatives. These practices reflect Hogg’s (2016) social identity framework, demonstrating that IDPs are not passive recipients of aid but active contributors to community life, shaping integration pathways through both formal and informal networks. Similar patterns are observed in other Ukrainian contexts, where responsive social work that centers the lived experiences of displaced populations has proven essential (Hevchuk & Vapniar, 2024; Semigina et al., 2025; Slozanska et al., 2025).

Finally, the Uman case emphasizes the importance of **flexible, adaptive service delivery**. Initiatives such as mobile offices,

home visits, psychosocial counseling, educational programs, and digital literacy training illustrate how multi-modal approaches can respond to diverse needs, from children and youth to older adults and persons with disabilities. The combination of structured institutional support and grassroots engagement creates a synergetic effect that strengthens both IDPs' adaptation and the community's resilience.

Implications for Social Work Development

The Uman experience has implications that extend beyond the local context, offering lessons for national and international social work practice in displacement settings. First, it underscores the necessity of **integrating community assets into social work planning**, ensuring that local infrastructure, social networks, and civic initiatives are mobilized in ways that complement formal services.

Second, the case highlights the value of **inclusive participation of displaced persons** in program design, decision-making, and service delivery. Social work interventions that empower IDPs to take leadership roles and engage in community governance not only enhance their agency but also strengthen social cohesion, mitigating potential tensions between displaced populations and host communities.

Third, the findings reinforce the importance of **multi-level collaboration** between local authorities, NGOs, international

agencies, and volunteer networks. Effective coordination mechanisms can reduce duplication, improve service efficiency, and ensure that both short-term humanitarian assistance and long-term integration measures are delivered coherently.

Finally, the Uman case illustrates the potential of **innovative service delivery models**, such as social hubs, mobile offices, and integrated psychosocial and educational programs, which can be adapted and scaled in other conflict-affected settings. These models demonstrate how social work can address complex challenges arising from displacement while simultaneously promoting social inclusion, resilience, and community development.

Study Limitations and Further Research

While the study provides rich insights into IDP integration in Uman, certain limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research focuses primarily on one municipal context, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other Ukrainian regions or international settings. Second, the reliance on survey data and document analysis may not capture all nuanced experiences of IDPs or host community members, particularly marginalized groups who may be less visible. Third, the dynamic nature of displacement and ongoing conflict means that community responses and IDP needs are continuously evolving, and the findings reflect a specific temporal snapshot.

Future research could address these limitations by conducting **longitudinal studies** to track integration outcomes over time, comparative analyses across multiple municipalities, and more **in-depth qualitative research** that centers the voices of particularly vulnerable populations. Additionally, exploring the long-term impact of community-led hubs, volunteer networks, and integrated service models could inform broader strategies for social work development in conflict and post-conflict settings.

■ CONCLUSIONS

The study demonstrates that successful integration of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Uman relies on the interplay between community strengths, institutional capacity, and the agency of IDPs themselves. Coordinated efforts among local authorities, NGOs, volunteers, and host communities have enabled effective delivery of social, educational, and psychosocial services. Inclusive and participatory approaches, coupled with strategic municipal policies, foster resilience, social cohesion, and empowerment.

The Uman experience highlights a practical model for social work in conflict-affected contexts, showing that community-led initiatives and multi-stakeholder collaboration can transform displacement challenges into opportunities for inclusive development.

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Chapter 5

Digitalising Social Work Support for Internally Displaced Persons in Ukrainian Communities

Serhii GUNKO, Viktor LIAKH

Abstract

This chapter explores the digitalisation of social work with internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Ukrainian territorial communities in the context of the full-scale war, decentralisation, and social service reform. It traces the transformation of social work from predominantly emergency responses to people-centred and community-oriented models aimed at long-term adaptation, integration, and social cohesion. The chapter shows that, despite formal legal guarantees, access to and quality of services largely depend on community capacity, resource availability, and organisational readiness, particularly in rural and remote areas.

Based on theoretical analysis and empirical evidence from the EGAP Program, the chapter examines digitalisation as a tool for overcoming spatial and organisational barriers, while also highlighting risks related to digital inequality, ethical challenges, and personal data protection. It argues that effective digitalisation requires the integration of digital tools into community governance, the development of professional competencies, cross-sectoral cooperation, and a strong social justice-oriented, people-centred approach.

Key words: social work; social services; community-based social work; internally displaced persons; digitalisation; digitalisation of social services; community.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the integration of digital technologies has become a transformative trend in social work worldwide. From mobile applications to online platforms and teleconsultation, digital tools are changing the ways social services are delivered, coordinated, and monitored (Aasback, 2022; LaMendola, 2019; Recmanová et al., 2022). In Ukraine, this process has been significantly accelerated by the unique challenges caused by the full-scale war, which disrupted traditional models of service provision and highlighted the need for innovative and flexible approaches to supporting vulnerable population groups (Ihnatenko & Sadzaglishvili, 2023; Semigina, 2025). At the same time, research shows that the digitalisation of social services in communities is uneven and largely depends on their resource, human, and organisational capacity. These challenges are particularly acute in rural and remote communities, where limited digital infrastructure and shortages of specialists can not only complicate access to services but also reproduce new forms of social inequality (Gunko & Liakh, 2025).

Digital tools are especially important in conditions of war and crisis, when rapid needs assessment, timely response, and continuity of assistance become critical. By ensuring remote communication, real-time monitoring, and efficient resource allocation, such tools make it possible to maintain the functioning of essential services under extreme conditions. Vasylyeva-Khalatnykova and Protas (2025) show that the

implementation of chatbots, hotlines, and online platforms enables social workers to promptly assess the needs of internally displaced persons and provide timely, targeted support. Importantly, the authors demonstrate that the integration of digital, socio-economic, and psychotherapeutic tools forms a new paradigm of social work oriented towards sustainable development, inclusion, and the strengthening of human potential in wartime conditions.

In addition to practical benefits, the digitalisation of social work has significant professional and ethical implications. It challenges practitioners to find a balance between efficiency and relational care, between innovation and inclusivity, between technological opportunities and equal access, and ethical considerations (Goldkind et al., 2021; Skliar, 2021). At the same time, digitalisation opens up opportunities for strengthening professional competencies, affirming ethical practice, and enhancing community resilience, especially in rural or under-resourced areas, provided that it is implemented in accordance with the principles of accessibility and social justice.

Under conditions of a full-scale war, internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Ukraine have become one of the most numerous and socially vulnerable population groups, which positions them as a key target of social work at the level of territorial communities. Internal displacement is accompanied not only by the loss of housing, employment, and material resources, but also by the disruption of social ties, customary support networks, and a sense of security, which significantly

complicates processes of social adaptation and integration into host communities (Blok, 2023; Semigina et al., 2015; Weiss, 2003;).

The research identifies significant inequalities in the capacities of territorial communities to receive and integrate IDPs. These challenges are most acutely manifested in rural and remote communities, where staff shortages, limited access to specialized services, and weak infrastructure hinder the organization of comprehensive social support (Gunko & Liakh, 2025a; Shkuro & Vorona, 2023; Solianyk, 2022).

Under these conditions, the transformation of the social service delivery system is increasingly associated with processes of digitalization, which are positioned as instruments for enhancing the accessibility, efficiency, and transparency of social support (Semigina, 2025). At the same time, wartime experience indicates that digital solutions are not universal and carry risks of deepening digital inequality, particularly for residents of rural areas and persons with disabilities (Gunko et al., 2025; Kostiusenko et al., 2025).

The chapter examines the transformation of social work supporting internally displaced persons in Ukrainian communities through digital solutions, focusing on their impact on service accessibility, organizational practices, and professional competencies. It highlights opportunities and challenges for delivering equitable, sustainable, and rights-based social support, considering community capacity and methodological approaches.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Contemporary research situates social work with internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Ukraine at the intersection of legal, socio-economic, psychological, and managerial perspectives. Across disciplines, IDPs are consistently conceptualised as a social group experiencing heightened vulnerability, the intensity of which has increased under conditions of full-scale war, mass internal displacement, martial law, and the ongoing transformation of the social protection system (Blok, 2023; Stepanova, 2023; Fedotov, 2024). Scholars emphasise that the scale and dynamics of displacement have exposed the limitations of traditional, centrally oriented mechanisms of social support, thereby reinforcing the role of territorial communities as key actors in providing social services and facilitating social integration.

The theoretical framework of this chapter is grounded in a **community-oriented approach to social work**, which conceptualises territorial communities as key spaces for social support, collective action, and social cohesion, particularly under conditions of uncertainty and crisis (Ife, 2016; Palatna & Semigina, 2024). This perspective highlights the importance of local capacity, participation, and shared responsibility in responding to complex social challenges, including large-scale internal displacement.

Within social work scholarship, there is a documented shift from predominantly compensatory and emergency responses toward more comprehensive, people-centred, and community-

oriented models of support. These models emphasise the integration of material assistance with psychosocial support, employment facilitation, the strengthening of social ties, and the inclusion of IDPs in the social life of host communities (Liakh, 2023; Liakh, 2025; Oksenyuk, 2025). Researchers also highlight the growing role of civic and charitable organisations, which under wartime conditions have become important providers of innovative, project-based, and intersectoral forms of social support (Liakh, 2024; Liakh & Dulia, 2024).

Empirical studies further demonstrate increasing differentiation in the needs of IDPs depending on age, health status, family composition, place of residence, and socio-economic conditions. Particular attention is paid to groups requiring specialised approaches, including persons with disabilities, families with children, unemployed individuals, and residents of rural communities where access to social services remains limited (Gunko & Liakh, 2025b; Liakh & Petrovych, 2024; Solianyk, 2022). This differentiation reinforces the need for flexible and adaptive models of community-based social work.

Within this context, the **digitalisation of social work and social services** has become an increasingly prominent topic in academic and policy discourse. Digital transformation is commonly viewed as a means of modernising the social protection system, improving administrative efficiency, and expanding access to social support (Dovhan, 2024). At the

same time, scholars stress that digitalisation is not a neutral or purely technical process, as it may both mitigate and reproduce existing social inequalities.

A key analytical concept in this debate is the **digital divide**, understood as unequal access to digital technologies, disparities in digital skills, and limited availability or usability of electronic services among vulnerable population groups (Mariën & Prodnik, 2014; Karkach & Semigina, 2022). Empirical research in Ukrainian territorial communities indicates that the digitalisation of social services is uneven and constrained by infrastructural, organisational, and human-resource limitations (Gunko & Liakh, 2025b; Gunko et al., 2025). At the same time, several studies emphasise the role of volunteers and civic initiatives as important drivers of digital innovation, particularly in rural and low-capacity communities (Karpenko et al., 2025).

Within this study, digitalisation is conceptualised not as a purely technical update of service delivery processes, but as an **institutional transformation** encompassing regulatory, organisational, and professional dimensions of social work at the community level. This conceptualisation enables an analysis of how digital tools reshape access to social services, influence the transparency of managerial decision-making, and affect the capacity of communities to provide comprehensive and sustained support for internally displaced persons.

Contemporary theories of **digital and hybrid social work** conceptualise digital tools as integral components of professional practice rather than auxiliary technical instruments. These approaches highlight the combination of face-to-face and remote interaction, digital analytics, online counselling, and platform-based coordination of assistance (Marković, 2024; Pink et al., 2021; Özsungur, 2021). Under wartime conditions, such hybrid models often become essential for maintaining the continuity of social support.

At the same time, researchers draw attention to the ethical challenges of digital social work, particularly in relation to personal data protection, digital security, trust between professionals and service users, and the risk of reducing social support to standardised technical procedures (Goldkind et al., 2021; Skliar, 2021). In this context, the concept of **data justice** provides a critical framework for assessing digitalisation in terms of fairness, inclusion, and the prevention of new forms of exclusion.

The analysis is further informed by **human-centred and rights-based approaches**, which frame access to social services as a matter of social justice and human rights, foregrounding dignity, agency, and the differentiated needs of vulnerable groups (Mapp, 2014). In the context of digital transformation, these approaches draw attention to the ways in which technologies may both support and constrain the realisation of social rights, depending on how they are designed and implemented in practice (Taylor-Beswick, 2025).

While researchers note that Ukraine's legal framework largely corresponds to international standards for the protection of internally displaced persons, they also point to significant gaps and fragmentation in the practical implementation of these norms at the local level (Doluda, 2023; Marchenko, 2023; Sheludchenkova et al., 2019). Territorial communities operate under conditions of unequal resource availability, organisational capacity, and human capital, which directly affects their ability to deliver comprehensive and accessible social services, particularly in rural and remote areas.

The regulatory and legal framework of Ukraine defines IDPs as a distinct social category with guaranteed rights in the field of social protection and access to social services. At the same time, empirical studies demonstrate that the existence of legislative guarantees does not always translate into equal and timely access to assistance at the community level, particularly under martial law and in the context of substantial disparities in local capacities (Doluda, 2023; Fedotov, 2024; Marchenko, 2023; Semigina, 2025).

Finally, comparative research on social work responses to displacement in wartime contexts underscores the importance of institutional capacity, professional discretion, and ethical responsibility in safeguarding rights within welfare systems operating under pressure (Necel, 2025).

Taken together, these perspectives (presented at **Figure 5.1**) provide a coherent normative and analytical foundation for examining digitalisation as a means of strengthening

community cohesion and rights-based social work support for internally displaced persons in Ukrainian communities.

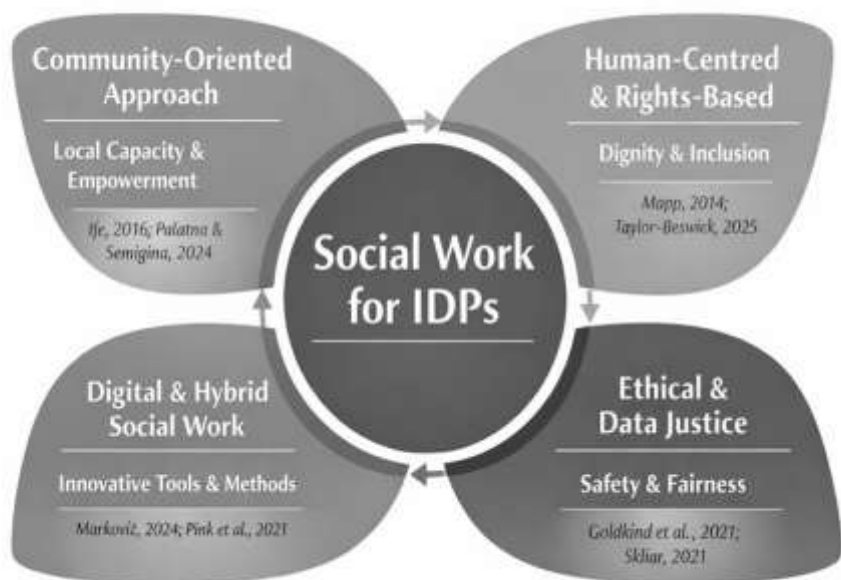


Figure 5.1. Conceptual framework for social work with IDPs

EGAP PROGRAMME

This chapter focuses on the implementation of digital solutions in social work within the framework of the **Electronic Governance for Accountability and Community Participation (EGAP) Programme**. Established in 2015, the programme supports the digital transformation of local governance and public services in Ukraine by enhancing

transparency, accountability, and citizen participation. The programme is implemented by the **Eastern Europe Foundation** with the support of **Switzerland**, in cooperation with the **Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine** and the **Innovabridge Foundation**, and covers pilot communities with varying levels of security risks, demographic pressure, and institutional capacity.

In response to full-scale war and mass internal displacement, EGAP has increasingly targeted the adaptation of social and administrative services to the evolving needs of internally displaced persons. The programme has been implemented in pilot communities with diverse institutional capacities, territorial locations, population sizes, and concentrations of IDPs, providing a context to explore how digitalisation is applied in practice across varying settings.

The programme's social work components include the introduction of digital tools for case management, client registration, needs assessment, and intersectoral coordination, as well as the development of online and hybrid service delivery formats. These initiatives aim to expand access to social support, particularly for populations facing spatial, mobility, and informational barriers in rural and remote communities.

Implementation relies on collaboration between local self-government bodies, social service providers, IT specialists, civic organisations, and volunteers. Social workers play a

central role as mediators between digital systems and service users, requiring the development of new professional competencies and organisational practices. Importantly, the programme allows communities to adapt digital tools to local needs and capacities, reflecting the broader logic of decentralisation and community-oriented social work while also highlighting challenges related to unequal resources, digital skills, and infrastructural readiness.

METHODOLOGY

The study is situated within a **critical-interpretive paradigm**, which allows for the examination of institutional transformations, managerial practices, and social service delivery in context. This approach is particularly suited to understanding social work responses to mass internal displacement under conditions of crisis, as it enables the interpretation of patterns, organisational adaptations, and challenges rather than the mere description of individual cases.

Empirical data were drawn from multiple sources. These included programme materials generated during the implementation of the EGAP Programme between 2022 and 2025, systematic observations of social service delivery in pilot communities, syntheses of managerial decisions and digital practices introduced by local self-government bodies, and statistical and monitoring data provided by these authorities.

In addition, the study incorporated survey data from **28 territorial communities** in Dnipropetrovsk, Volyn, and Vinnytsia regions that had used the CNAP Mobile Case system for at least one year. The heads of ASCs from this communities were involved in the survey.

The analysis also drew on the knowledge and experience of **six social sector experts** with prior successful experience in organising and delivering social services in the target regions. These experts contributed through the collection and synthesis of data, preparation of analytical reports, and structured discussions aimed at improving methodologies and developing practical recommendations for communities.

Analytical work followed a **sequential expert synthesis procedure**. Materials were organised thematically to examine the organisation of social work, managerial decisions, staffing challenges, and digital practices. Recurring patterns and challenges were identified across communities with different characteristics, including frontline versus rear communities and areas with high versus moderate concentrations of internally displaced persons. Comparative analysis focused on variations in practices according to institutional capacity and the specifics of community engagement with displaced populations. Particular attention was paid to transformations in administrative processes, remote service provision, and professional roles of social workers and managers.

Analysis was conducted without the use of specialised qualitative data analysis software, relying instead on expert interpretation of programme materials, observations, and statistical data. The objective was to provide a generalised understanding of organisational and managerial transformations rather than to reconstruct individual experiences of service users.

Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the study. Measures included the responsible use of programme and community data, protection of personal information, and careful generalisation to prevent the identification of individuals or vulnerable groups. Attention was also given to cybersecurity and data protection as integral components of digital social work under conditions of martial law.

Several **limitations** should be noted. The authors' status as programme insiders may have influenced interpretation, and the analysis relied primarily on expert synthesis and programme-generated materials without direct interviews with service recipients. Observations and survey data were limited to communities already using the CNAP Mobile Case system, which may not represent all territorial communities. Moreover, the findings are context-specific to the pilot communities and may not be fully generalisable to other regions or countries. Despite these limitations, the approach enabled the integration of analytical depth with practical relevance.

RESULTS

Community Contexts and Differential Approaches to IDPs

Analysis of EGAP pilot communities revealed that a community's proximity to active hostilities and the proportion of IDPs within the population strongly influence the strategic orientation of social services. In frontline communities, the immediate focus was on providing emergency assistance, such as temporary shelter, rapid registration, and access to essential resources. Observations indicated that in these communities, social work practices were largely reactive, responding to urgent needs without significant long-term planning.

Conversely, in rear communities, IDPs were increasingly seen as a potential resource for demographic recovery and local development. Here, local self-government bodies placed greater emphasis on integration, including facilitating employment, enrolment of children in schools, and the development of social networks.

Comparative analysis across 28 surveyed communities demonstrated that communities with higher institutional capacity were able to combine emergency response with structured integration efforts, while lower-capacity communities tended to prioritise immediate humanitarian needs, often at the expense of longer-term social cohesion. This finding highlights the importance of contextual factors in shaping managerial decisions, resource allocation, and the

strategic orientation of social work in diverse Ukrainian territorial communities.

Constraints of Traditional Social Work Models and the Role of Digitalization

Empirical evidence from pilot communities indicates that traditional social work models were insufficiently prepared to cope with the surge in IDP populations. Systems designed for relatively stable populations and predictable application volumes were quickly overwhelmed, particularly in communities where IDPs comprised more than 10% of residents. Key constraints included reliance on paper-based documentation, manual data processing, and decision-making concentrated in individual administrators, which led to delays, duplicated procedures, and inconsistent access to services. Interviews with social sector experts confirmed that these limitations contributed to a reactive, rather than proactive, approach to social service delivery.

The introduction of digital tools, including template-based projects such as the Digital Administrative Service Center (ASC) Suitcase, addressed some of these limitations. Comparative analysis of the 28 communities surveyed before the implementation of structured digital methodologies revealed that outreach services were minimal, averaging one visit per month and two services provided.

Following deployment of the mobile ASC kits across 41 pilot communities between 2021 and 2025, outreach visits increased

to an average of 3.82 per month, with nearly 10 services provided monthly per kit. These quantitative improvements indicate that structured digital interventions, particularly those supported by template-based implementation frameworks, significantly enhance service coverage and operational efficiency. Furthermore, qualitative insights from local administrators emphasised that the effectiveness of digital tools depended not only on functionality but also on the presence of clear procedures, staff training, and integration with local policies.

Transformation of Social Work Practices: Record-Keeping, Remote Access, and Case Management

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Digitalization has reshaped the everyday practice of social work, particularly in record-keeping, administrative processes, and case management. The **introduction of electronic registers and integration with national platforms** such as *Diia* enabled faster processing of applications and standardised procedures, reducing bottlenecks that had previously arisen from manual data handling. This transition also altered the substance of social work: formalized processes reduced reliance on informal practices, strengthened accountability, and ensured more equitable access to services for IDPs.

In parallel, remote access channels expanded the availability of services, allowing online applications, consultations, and information dissemination. Findings show that these channels were particularly critical in frontline communities, where

mobility constraints and security concerns limited face-to-face interaction. However, analysis of survey responses and expert interviews indicated that purely digital solutions were often perceived as impersonal, underscoring the continued importance of face-to-face contact. Hybrid models, combining digital and in-person interaction, were reported as the most effective, balancing speed, accessibility, and trust-building.

Digital case management emerged as another important transformation. By documenting interactions, tracking interventions, and coordinating across multiple services, social workers could provide more holistic support to individuals and families with complex needs. However, analysis also revealed challenges related to ethical standards and data access: in some cases, lack of clear guidelines risked perceptions of control rather than support, highlighting the necessity of integrating professional ethics with digital practices.

Human Factors, Professional Competencies, and Data Governance

The effectiveness of digitalization is closely linked to human and professional factors. Social workers remain the primary users of digital tools and intermediaries between systems and IDPs. The increased volume and complexity of cases resulting from mass displacement necessitated the development of new competencies, including analytical skills, digital literacy, and coordination abilities. Observations from pilot communities

indicated that remote training and professional development initiatives helped mitigate gaps in staff capacity and contributed to the sustainability of digital interventions.

At the managerial level, the accumulation of data on service usage, IDP needs, and intervention outcomes has facilitated the gradual adoption of data-driven decision-making. Comparative analysis suggests that communities with higher analytical capacity were able to adjust resource allocation, plan interventions more effectively, and monitor outcomes in near real-time. However, the study also identified risks related to **data security and cyber hygiene**. Breaches of confidentiality or unclear rules for data access could undermine trust in the system and reduce service uptake, particularly under wartime conditions. Findings indicate that embedding robust data governance practices, clear ethical guidelines, and ongoing staff training are essential to ensure that digital tools enhance, rather than compromise, the quality, equity, and accountability of social work practices.

■ DISCUSSION

The findings from the analysis of social work with IDPs in Ukrainian territorial communities, alongside the empirical evaluation of digitalization practices, highlight a set of interrelated challenges and considerations for theory and practice. The evidence demonstrates that digitalization cannot be understood in isolation from broader factors such as

community development, institutional capacity, managerial culture, and readiness for systemic change. In this context, digital tools operate within complex social and organizational systems rather than as standalone innovations.

The results confirm that mass internal displacement under conditions of full-scale war constitutes a long-term social process, imposing multidimensional demands on local social work systems. This burden is reflected in both the quantitative surge of applications and the increasing complexity of needs, encompassing material, psychological, legal, and social dimensions, compounded by uncertainty regarding life prospects. Traditional social work models, designed for stable demographic environments, are limited in responding to such dynamics. Evidence from frontline and rear communities demonstrates that context shapes both priorities and strategies: frontline communities emphasize emergency and temporary assistance, while rear communities increasingly pursue integration and development-oriented approaches. These findings underscore the necessity of differentiated strategies that account for local capacities, population composition, and security contexts.

The analysis also reveals structural limitations of traditional organizational models. Reliance on paper-based documentation, fragmented record-keeping, informal practices, and dependence on individual managerial discretion contributed to service overload, delays, and inequalities in access. In this setting, digitalization emerges as a critical

mechanism for maintaining governability and operational coherence in social protection systems. However, the effectiveness of digital tools is not determined solely by technical features; rather, implementation methodology, local policies, clearly defined procedures, resource allocation, and communication with the population are decisive. Template-based projects, such as the mobile ASC Suitcase, exemplify how structured implementation can transform digital tools from procedural “add-ons” into instruments that substantively enhance service accessibility and quality.

Digitalization has also reshaped the substance of social work. The introduction of electronic registers, remote service channels, and digital case management alters the balance between process formalization and professional autonomy. While transparency, accountability, and standardization are strengthened, professional discretion and ethical decision-making remain essential to ensure that digital tools are perceived as supportive rather than controlling. These findings indicate that digital transformation is as much a socio-professional process as it is a technical one.

Human factors are central to the success of digital social work. Social workers act as intermediaries between digital systems and vulnerable populations, navigating complex, multidimensional needs. The study highlights the critical role of developing analytical, coordination, and digital competencies alongside adherence to core professional values, including human-centredness, inclusion, and non-

discrimination. Digitalization does not reduce the importance of professional expertise; instead, it amplifies the need for skillful, reflective, and ethically grounded practice.

The socio-ethical dimension of digitalization further emerges as a key concern. Digital tools make decision-making more transparent and formalized, reducing reliance on subjective judgments, yet they do not resolve resource scarcity. Instead, digitalization surfaces difficult questions regarding the prioritization of needs, the balance between IDPs and host communities, and the accountability of local authorities. Similarly, the findings demonstrate that digital accessibility is uneven. Older adults, persons with disabilities, rural residents, and individuals with low digital literacy may be disadvantaged, reinforcing the need for hybrid service models that combine digital and in-person support, individualized case management, and targeted outreach initiatives.

In sum, the study confirms that successful digitalization of social work supporting IDPs requires an integrated approach: technological solutions must be embedded within organizational frameworks, implementation methodologies must be well-designed, social workers must be professionally and digitally prepared, and intersectoral coordination must be sustained.

■ IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORK

The study highlights several important implications for the practice, organization, and development of professional social work in contexts of mass displacement and digital transformation:

Strengthening Competencies for Hybrid Practice

Social workers must develop both **digital and analytical skills** alongside traditional social work competencies. The integration of electronic case management, remote service channels, and digital record-keeping requires proficiency in technology, data interpretation, and coordination, while retaining the ability to provide personalized, empathetic support. Hybrid models—combining face-to-face interaction with digital tools—should become a standard approach, ensuring accessibility, trust, and responsiveness in diverse community contexts.

Embedding Ethical and Rights-Based Principles in Digital Practice

Digitalization is not neutral. Social workers need to apply **ethical frameworks** to digital tools, ensuring confidentiality, data security, and fairness in service provision. Human-centred and rights-based approaches must guide digital practice, particularly when assisting vulnerable populations such as older adults, persons with disabilities, and rural residents. Ethical vigilance is essential to prevent digital tools

from functioning as mechanisms of control rather than instruments of support.

Adapting Organizational and Managerial Practices

The study demonstrates that the effectiveness of social work is shaped by **organizational context, implementation methodology, and managerial culture**. Professional social workers should engage in planning and decision-making processes, contribute to the design of digital workflows, and support the development of local policies that formalize procedures for access, prioritization, and accountability. Social workers' professional expertise is critical in interpreting data, coordinating services, and ensuring equitable treatment across diverse population groups.

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Promoting Community-Oriented and Context-Sensitive Approaches

Professional social work should align with **community development frameworks**, recognizing the variability of needs, capacities, and security conditions across communities. Tailoring interventions to local contexts—whether frontline, rear, rural, or urban—enhances the relevance and effectiveness of both digital and traditional services. Social workers act as intermediaries between communities, institutions, and displaced populations, facilitating social cohesion and participatory approaches to service delivery.

Supporting Capacity-Building and Professional Development

The findings indicate a need for **ongoing training, mentorship, and support** for social workers in both digital and organizational competencies. Structured methodologies, such as template-based projects, can facilitate rapid adoption of digital solutions, but professional judgment remains central to ensuring these tools translate into meaningful support. Investment in professional development strengthens the ability of social workers to respond effectively under conditions of prolonged crisis and systemic uncertainty.

Leveraging Data for Evidence-Based Practice

Digital tools generate opportunities for **data-informed decision-making**, enabling social workers to monitor trends, evaluate interventions, and adapt strategies to evolving needs. However, the responsible use of data requires analytical capacity, critical reflection, and adherence to ethical standards. Professional social workers play a key role in interpreting and applying digital data to ensure that interventions are targeted, equitable, and aligned with social justice principles.

■ CONCLUSIONS

The study demonstrates that social work with internally displaced persons in Ukrainian territorial communities is evolving into a systemic, multidimensional, and long-term process. Mass internal displacement has imposed new social

burdens, revealing the limitations of traditional models and highlighting the need for adaptive, community-oriented approaches.

While digitalization significantly improves accessibility, transparency, and coordination of social services, its effectiveness depends on well-designed implementation methodologies, professional readiness, and integration within broader organizational and community frameworks. Digital tools alone cannot resolve structural, staffing, or managerial challenges; rather, they function as instruments that support human-centred, equitable, and accountable social work.

The human factor remains central: social workers are key intermediaries between digital systems and displaced populations, requiring not only digital competencies but also analytical, coordination, and ethical skills. Sustainable social work for IDPs emerges from the combination of professional development, intersectoral cooperation, hybrid service delivery models, and methodologically grounded digital tools.

Ultimately, the study underscores that effective social work under conditions of mass displacement and prolonged crisis requires an integrated approach, where technology serves as a facilitator rather than a substitute for human judgment, ethical practice, and community-oriented social support. Future research should examine the effectiveness of specific digital practices on social integration, cohesion, and community resilience.

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Chapter 6

Social Support for War Veterans and Their Families: State Standards and Implications for Practice

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Abstract

This chapter examines the evolving social work responses to the needs of war veterans and their families in Ukraine, with a particular focus on institutional frameworks. It analyses two parallel regulatory instruments: the State Social Service Standard for social adaptation of veterans and their family members, and the Occupational Standard for specialists supporting war veterans and demobilised persons. The chapter highlights conceptual and operational misalignments between these frameworks, including role ambiguity, functional duplication, fragmented service provision, and infrastructural gaps in rehabilitation and psychosocial support. The discussion explores the implications for social work practice, education, and training, emphasizing the need for trauma-informed, coordinated, and evidence-based approaches that integrate paraprofessional veteran support specialists within professional social work systems. Directions for policy development, professionalisation, and future research are proposed to strengthen coherent, equitable, and sustainable veteran support in Ukraine.

Key words: *Ukraine, war veterans, social adaptation, psychosocial support, social work practice, trauma-informed care, occupational standard, veteran support specialists, professionalisation, post-war reintegration, social policy, paraprofessional roles.*

INTRODUCTION

Ukraine is facing an unprecedented and rapidly expanding population of war veterans as a result of the prolonged full-scale invasion. As of 2024–2025, the number of veterans is estimated at approximately **1.5 million**, including women and men who have acquired disabilities due to combat-related injuries (Veremeyeva & Honcharova, 2025). This number continues to grow as active hostilities persist and increasing numbers of service members are demobilised. When family members are taken into account, several million people are already directly affected by the social, psychological, economic, and relational consequences of military service. Veterans and their families thus constitute one of the largest and most socially significant groups shaped by the war in contemporary Ukraine.

The challenges faced by veterans extend far beyond medical rehabilitation. Many experience complex psychosocial difficulties related to trauma, reintegration into civilian life, changes in family roles, loss of employment or income, social isolation, and difficulties in navigating fragmented support systems. These challenges are often compounded by long-term stress, disability, and gendered expectations surrounding military service and post-war adjustment (Ahern et al., 2015; Blinka & Harris, 2016; Semigina & Stoliaryk, 2024). Consequently, the needs of veterans and their families cannot be adequately addressed through clinical or medical

approaches alone; they require **comprehensive psychosocial and community-based social work interventions** that operate at the intersection of individual well-being, family functioning, and social inclusion (Lohvinova & Rasskazova, 2021 Prib et al., 2022; Slozanska et al., 2023; Zakharina, 2023).

In response to these challenges, Ukraine has recently introduced important policy and professional innovations. Notably, the **state standard of the social service “Social Adaptation of War Veterans and Their Family Members”** (Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine, 2024) and the **occupational standard “Specialist in Supporting War Veterans and Demobilised Persons”** (Ministry of Veterans Affairs of Ukraine, 2024a, 2024b, 2025a) signal a growing recognition of veterans’ support as a distinct and institutionalised domain of social work practice. These developments reflect an emerging professional landscape in which psychosocial support, coordinated service delivery, and long-term social integration are positioned as central components of veteran policy. However, these standards remain under-analysed in academic literature, particularly from a social work and psychosocial perspective.

This chapter draws on qualitative analysis of national policy and professional standards for veterans’ support, complemented by practice-informed perspectives from social work and psychosocial interventions in wartime contexts. The analysis is framed by a person-in-environment perspective

and a psychosocial approach, highlighting how state and professional frameworks shape social work roles, competencies, and intervention strategies.

The purpose of this chapter is to analyse emerging social work responses to the needs of war veterans and their families in Ukraine, with a particular focus on psychosocial support. Drawing on policy and document analysis, the chapter critically examines the state social service standard for veterans' social adaptation and the professional standard for specialists supporting veterans and demobilised persons. It aims to assess how these frameworks conceptualise psychosocial needs, define professional roles and competencies, and reshape social work practice in wartime context.

The chapter is structured as follows. The first section outlines the conceptual foundations of psychosocial and trauma-informed social work with war veterans, situating the analysis within the person-in-environment perspective. The second section examines the state standard of the social service "Social Adaptation of War Veterans and Their Family Members," focusing on its objectives, intervention logic, and psychosocial components. The third section analyses the occupational standard "Specialist in Supporting War Veterans and Demobilised Persons," with particular attention to professional competencies, ethical responsibilities, and implications for social work practice. The final section

discusses the broader implications of these developments for social work education, professionalisation, and the transformation of social work in wartime Ukraine, followed by concluding remarks and directions for further research.

■ CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: PSYCHOSOCIAL AND TRAUMA-INFORMED SOCIAL WORK WITH VETERANS

The **psychosocial approach, grounded in trauma-informed principles** (Stoliaryk, 2025; Stoliaryk & Semigina, 2024), provides the central lens for understanding social work with war veterans and their families. Exposure to combat, injury, and post-service stress can produce long-term psychological and social effects, and interventions must therefore prioritize safety, trust, empowerment, collaboration, and non-re-traumatizing practices (Baum, 2012; Tosone & Bloomberg, 2022). The **person-in-environment (PIE) perspective** complements this approach by integrating individual psychological needs with family, community, and systemic factors, supporting holistic recovery and social reintegration (Gebert & Lowe, 2025; Mthembu et al., 2025).

A central feature of this framework is **family-centred and community-based support**. Veterans' psychosocial well-being is intimately connected to the functioning and resilience of their families and immediate social networks (Corbin & Omona, 2020; Harris, 2012; Stoliaryk & Semigina, 2023).

Trauma-informed social work interventions strengthen family relationships, facilitate communication, and enhance community support mechanisms, thereby mitigating the effects of war-related trauma. Community-based practices foster social inclusion, peer support, and avenues for meaningful participation in social and economic life (Levenson, 2020; Mersky et al., 2019).

Social work with veterans must also be **gender-sensitive and attentive to life-course perspectives**. Men and women may experience combat activities, trauma and post-war adjustment differently, shaped by societal norms, caregiving responsibilities, and occupational roles (Katz et al., 2010; Faidiuk & Liakh, 2021). Similarly, different life stages—from transition out of active service to family formation and ageing—affect psychosocial needs and resources (Chiu, 2026). Trauma-informed social work ensures that interventions are equitable, contextually appropriate, and responsive to the unique experiences of individuals across gender and age groups.

Finally, it is essential to distinguish **clinical treatment from social work interventions**. While psychological or psychiatric services focus on symptom reduction and clinical care, trauma-informed social work interventions emphasise psychosocial recovery, empowerment, and access to social resources rather than symptom-focused therapy alone (Masin-Moyer et al., 2022; Suarez & Baines, 2022). Social workers

operate collaboratively with mental health professionals, applying trauma-informed principles to ensure that interventions are non-re-traumatizing, culturally sensitive, and responsive to veterans' lived experiences. This approach allows social workers to address broader social determinants of well-being, facilitate access to services, and promote family and community reintegration.

The conceptual framework presented in **Figure 6.1** illustrates the core principles of trauma-informed psychosocial social work with war veterans. It highlights the central role of the person-in-environment perspective, while connecting family- and community-based support, gender- and life-course considerations, and the distinction between clinical treatment and social work interventions, with trauma-informed principles applied throughout.

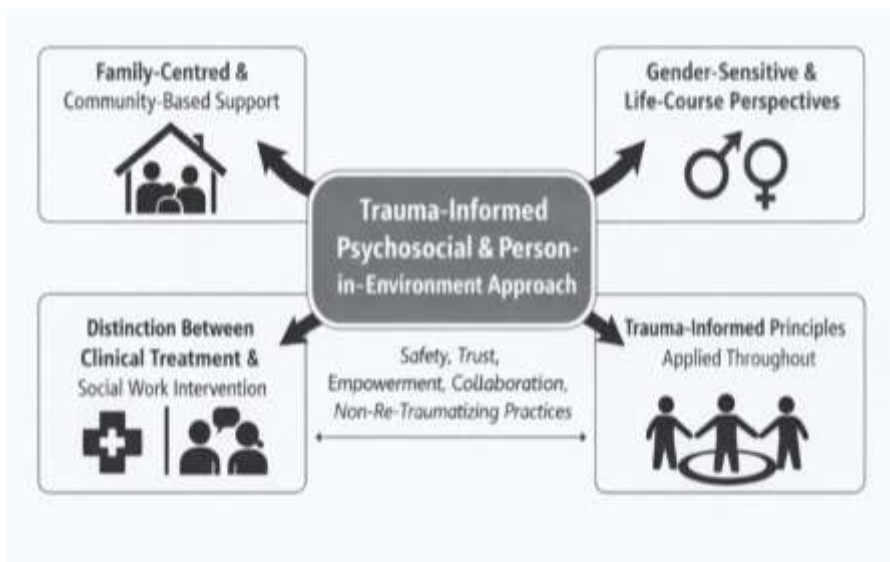


Figure 6.1. Trauma-Informed Social Work with Veterans: Conceptual Framework

■ STATE SOCIAL SERVICE STANDARD “SOCIAL ADAPTATION OF WAR VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILY MEMBERS”

Historically, social policy in Ukraine has focused primarily on veterans of World War II and other conflicts involving the former Soviet Union. Support measures were largely compensatory in nature and included preferential access to public services, utility subsidies, and periodic free railway travel. While these measures addressed material needs, they were not designed to respond to the realities faced by younger veterans returning from contemporary combat zones. Many of these veterans confront complex and intersecting challenges,

including war-related disabilities, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), disrupted life trajectories, and profound transformations in personal values and social roles.

At the same time, Ukrainian social workers traditionally lacked specialized training and professional experience in working with war veterans and their families. This resulted in a substantial gap between veterans' psychosocial needs and the capacity of existing social services to address them effectively.

In 2024, the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine approved the **State Standard for the Social Service of Social Adaptation of War Veterans and Their Family Members**, marking an important institutional response to these challenges. The State Standard defines the content, scope, conditions, procedures, and quality indicators for the provision of social adaptation services by providers of all forms of ownership.

The Standard is intended to guide the organization, delivery, monitoring, and quality assessment of social adaptation services for demobilized war veterans, their family members, and persons equated to them under Ukrainian legislation. The social adaptation service is conceptualized as a comprehensive set of measures aimed at social prevention and social support, preservation and restoration of social and family ties, prevention of adverse life circumstances, and adjustment to changed social environments. Its overarching objectives include supporting veterans' social independence, sustained social participation, and opportunities for personal and

professional life planning, including in cases of war-related disability.

The State Standard establishes a **two-stage model of service provision**. The first stage consists of a one-time, short-term intervention delivered within six months after demobilization and implemented in a recreational or rehabilitation setting. This stage lasts between 7 and 14 calendar days and involves the implementation of an individual support plan by a multidisciplinary team in cooperation with the service recipient and, where appropriate, family members.

The second stage focuses on individual social adaptation and is delivered either at the veteran's declared or registered place of residence (i.e., at the community level) or at the premises of the service provider. This stage is implemented by social work professionals, specialists from partner institutions, and members of interdisciplinary teams in accordance with the individual support plan. Its duration is determined on an individual basis, taking into account assessed needs, motivation, and service goals, but may not exceed six months.

Access to the service is granted on the basis of a written or electronic application submitted to local social protection authorities or administrative service centers. During periods of martial law or a state of emergency, applications may be submitted regardless of the applicant's registered place of residence, including through the Unified State Web Portal of Electronic Services (the Diia Portal). Decisions on service

provision or refusal are made in accordance with the national framework for organizing social services.

The State Standard also regulates professional training requirements for service providers. Training may be delivered by regional and municipal social service centers, non-governmental organizations, or through certified online courses, emphasizing the importance of professional capacity-building for effective service implementation (Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine, 2024).

Overall, the adoption of the State Standard represents a significant paradigm shift in Ukrainian social policy, moving beyond benefit-based, compensatory approaches toward a structured, psychosocially oriented model of support. Its emphasis on social prevention, restoration of family and social ties, and sustained social participation aligns conceptually with trauma-informed and person-in-environment approaches in social work. The two-stage service model creates institutional space for addressing both immediate post-demobilization needs and longer-term processes of social reintegration.

From a trauma-informed perspective, several elements of the Standard can be regarded as **strengths**. The involvement of multidisciplinary teams, the use of individualized support plans, and the recognition of family members as service recipients reflect an understanding of trauma as a phenomenon affecting not only individuals but also families and broader social networks. The community-based second

stage is particularly important, as it enables social work interventions to address social determinants of well-being – such as access to services, employment, housing, and community participation—which lie beyond the scope of clinical treatment but are central to psychosocial recovery.

At the same time, the Standard reveals a number of structural and implementation-related **limitations** that constrain its transformative potential. Although it provides detailed regulation of procedural and organizational aspects of service delivery, it offers limited guidance on the substantive content of trauma-informed practice. Core trauma-informed principles—such as psychological safety, empowerment, trust-building, choice, and the prevention of re-traumatization—remain insufficiently operationalized in everyday social work interventions. As a result, the trauma-informed orientation of the service remains largely implicit rather than explicitly embedded in practice guidelines.

The effectiveness of the Standard is also highly dependent on local-level capacity, which varies considerably across communities. Empirical evidence from community monitoring studies points to persistent shortages of rehabilitation infrastructure, trained social workers, and psychosocial specialists, as well as fragmented service coordination. In many localities, veterans continue to receive support on general terms, without systematic consideration of their war-related experiences and specific psychosocial needs (Right to Protection, 2025). This gap between policy design and local

implementation risks reducing the Standard to a formal regulatory instrument rather than a genuinely transformative framework for practice.

Although the Standard acknowledges the importance of professional training, it relies predominantly on short-term courses and self-directed online learning. While these formats increase accessibility, they are unlikely to be sufficient for developing the complex competencies required for trauma-informed social work with veterans, particularly in cases involving severe psychosocial distress, disability, or family disruption. This underscores the need for stronger integration between the State Standard, occupational standards, and formal social work education.

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A closer analysis of the principles embedded in the State Standard—namely accessibility, respect for dignity, individualization, effectiveness, safety, and professionalism—demonstrates an intention to institutionalize quality assurance. However, these principles are primarily operationalized through procedural and compliance-oriented indicators, which limits their capacity to capture the relational, contextual, and process-oriented nature of trauma-informed social work with veterans.

Accessibility and safety are largely interpreted through infrastructural, informational, and administrative requirements. While these conditions are necessary, they do not ensure that services are experienced as accessible or safe by veterans themselves. From a trauma-informed perspective,

safety and accessibility also encompass psychological safety, predictability, trust, and relational continuity—dimensions that are insufficiently addressed within the current framework.

Respect for dignity and individualization are articulated mainly through documentation practices, including needs assessments, individualized plans, and client surveys. Although important, these tools risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative. Trauma-informed practice requires recognition that veterans' motivation, emotional availability, and decision-making capacity may fluctuate as a result of trauma exposure. Accordingly, respect for dignity must extend beyond formal participation to include sensitivity to vulnerability, ambivalence, and the right to disengage temporarily without negative consequences.

The principle of effectiveness is primarily assessed through short-term, quantifiable outcomes, such as employment status or improved family relationships. These indicators inadequately reflect social adaptation as a long-term, non-linear psychosocial process. Trauma-informed effectiveness also includes qualitative changes—such as increased sense of control, restored trust in institutions, emotional stabilization, and gradual re-engagement with civilian life—which remain largely invisible within the current evaluation framework.

Similarly, the principle of safety is framed mainly through formal complaint mechanisms and internal regulations, prioritizing organizational accountability over client-centered

protection. Psychological and emotional safety (core components of trauma-informed care) are not explicitly addressed, and the absence of clear response mechanisms to reported risks may undermine veterans' trust in the system.

Finally, professionalism is defined predominantly through formal qualifications, certifications, and material resources, with limited attention to relational, ethical, and emotional competencies. Trauma-informed social work requires empathy, reflective practice, ethical sensitivity, tolerance of uncertainty, and the capacity to manage secondary trauma – competencies that cannot be adequately captured through formal credentials alone. The limited emphasis on continuous reflective supervision further weakens the practical implementation of professional standards (Semigina et al., 2024).

In sum, while the State Standard aligns rhetorically with contemporary social work values, its current formulation reflects a bureaucratic understanding of quality rather than a fully trauma-informed, veteran-centered approach. Bridging this gap requires a shift from procedural compliance toward relational practice, contextual sensitivity, and long-term psychosocial outcomes, particularly in a social context shaped by large-scale war-related trauma.

OCCUPATIONAL STANDARD “SPECIALIST IN SUPPORTING WAR VETERANS AND DEMOBILISED PERSONS”

Alongside the introduction of the State Social Service Standard for the social adaptation of war veterans and their family members, Ukraine established a new professional role aimed at strengthening veteran support at the community level. This role was formally introduced by the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine (2024). The profession “*Specialist in Supporting War Veterans and Demobilised Persons*” was incorporated into the National Classification of Occupations of Ukraine (code 2446.2). An Occupational Standard for this profession was developed and approved by the Ministry for Veterans Affairs of Ukraine and subsequently entered into the National Qualifications Register (Ministry of Veterans Affairs of Ukraine, 2024a). The Standard was substantially revised later in 2024 and further amended in 2025, reflecting an ongoing process of professional differentiation, qualification clarification, and institutional consolidation of the role (Ministry of Veterans Affairs of Ukraine, 2024b 2025a).

According to the Occupational Standard, the functional responsibilities of specialists in veteran support include organising individual case accompaniment, providing psychological support, facilitating employment and professional adaptation, liaising with healthcare institutions, and assisting with documentation and access to social guarantees. Formally, this set of tasks partially corresponds to

international models of comprehensive psychosocial support and rehabilitation, including those promoted by the World Health Organization (2007), which emphasise coordinated, multidimensional responses to the needs of war-affected populations.

In 2025, the Occupational Standard was updated to clarify educational and professional requirements and introduce mandatory continuing professional development. Specialists without a category must hold at least a bachelor's degree, with no work experience required. Specialists of II and I categories need a combination of relevant professional experience, prior service in lower categories, or experience in social work, education, healthcare, law, psychology, security, or defence, alongside certification from a recognised qualification centre. Leading Specialists must hold a master's or specialist degree in designated fields and obtain professional certification within six months of appointment. All specialists are required to complete at least **5 ECTS credits (150 hours) of professional development every three years**, formalising career progression and professionalisation while allowing recruitment of paraprofessionals with lived experience.

The 2025 Professional Standard further defines a comprehensive set of **competencies** required for effective veteran support. General professional and organisational competencies include work organisation and planning, proficiency in digital tools and data management, and communicative skills for interacting effectively with diverse

stakeholders. Special professional competencies cover monitoring and record-keeping according to legal frameworks, assessment of individual veteran needs (social, medical, psychological), information provision and counselling on rights and guarantees, mediation and advocacy with service providers and authorities, social accompaniment and primary psychosocial support, and participation in shaping local veteran policy. Qualification levels align with the National Qualifications Framework: Level 6 corresponds to the positions of Specialist, Specialist II, and Specialist I, while Level 7 applies to Leading Specialists, reflecting higher autonomy and expert responsibility. Key requirements across levels include adherence to professional ethics and legal norms, ensuring confidentiality and data integrity, and accountability for the timeliness and quality of management decisions and service provision (Ministry of Veterans Affairs of Ukraine, 2025a).

Despite this detailed competency framework, there remains an unresolved tension in the official interpretation of the new professional role. On the one hand, the Ministry for Veterans Affairs presents veteran support as a comprehensive form of state assistance delivered through specialists who help with adaptation, rehabilitation, psychological support, employment, legal issues, and access to social benefits. This support is organised through the national e-Veteran digital platform, which enables veterans to submit applications and receive assistance, complemented by the work of specialists

engaging directly with veterans and their families. On the other hand, the Ministry simultaneously emphasises that specialists in veteran support perform primarily an informational and navigational function—providing guidance on how to access services—while the actual provision of social services is delegated to social workers employed in local social service institutions.

This dual framing creates conceptual ambiguity regarding the professional mandate of veteran support specialists. It remains unclear whether they are intended to function as case managers with a coordinating and supportive role across systems, or merely as intermediaries directing veterans to existing services. From a trauma-informed perspective, such ambiguity risks undermining continuity of care, relational trust, and clarity of responsibility—key conditions for effective psychosocial support.

Second, the organisational design of the role raises concerns regarding workload and sustainability. The activities of veteran support specialists are financed through a state budget programme that assumes a caseload of approximately **100 war veterans per specialist**. Information on services provided is entered into the electronic communication system of the Ministry for Veterans Affairs, enabling centralised reporting and monitoring. However, a caseload of this magnitude significantly constrains the capacity for meaningful, individualised, and trauma-sensitive engagement. Given the complexity of veterans' psychosocial needs—particularly

among those experiencing disability, PTSD, or family disruption—such ratios risk reducing support to administrative coordination rather than sustained accompaniment.

Third, a joint order of the Ministry for Veterans Affairs and the Ministry of Social Policy, Family and Unity (2025) has introduced a formal algorithm for interaction between veteran support specialists and providers of municipal and state social services. According to this framework, specialists in veteran support are responsible for accompaniment, counselling, informing veterans about rights and guarantees, and facilitating access to services in line with individual needs. Social service providers, in turn, are responsible for preparing documentation, delivering social services, coordinating organisational aspects with veteran support specialists, and involving them when necessary during service provision.

While this division of labour aims to enhance coordination, the activities of veteran support specialists are regulated by separate legal and administrative frameworks. This fragmented regulation creates risks of overlap, duplication of functions, and inconsistencies in procedures and accountability. In practice, such parallel systems may lead to competition for resources, confusion among professionals, and unequal access to support for different groups of veterans and their families, depending on local implementation capacity.

Fourth, the training and professional status of veteran support specialists warrant critical attention. Guidelines for professional training programmes, competitive recruitment procedures, and candidate testing have been developed. As of end of 2025, according to the Ministry for Veterans Affairs, **2,323 specialists in veteran support** are employed in Ukraine. Notably, nearly 40% of them are themselves veterans, family members of veterans, or relatives of fallen service members (Ministry for Veterans Affairs of Ukraine, 2025b).

While lived experience can be a valuable resource in peer-based support, this composition effectively positions many veteran support specialists as **paraprofessionals** rather than fully trained social work practitioners. From a trauma-informed perspective, this raises several concerns. Peer identification may enhance trust and accessibility, but without robust professional training, supervision, and emotional support, specialists may be vulnerable to secondary trauma, role overload, and ethical boundary challenges. Moreover, reliance on paraprofessional labour risks shifting responsibility for complex psychosocial work away from adequately resourced professional systems.

Taken together, the Occupational Standard for specialists in supporting war veterans and demobilised persons represents an important attempt to institutionalise coordinated veteran support in Ukraine. However, its current configuration reflects unresolved tensions between informational and supportive functions, centralised monitoring and relational practice, and

professionalisation and paraprofessionalisation. Without clearer delineation of roles, stronger integration with social work services, manageable caseloads, and sustained investment in trauma-informed professional training and supervision, the new role risks reinforcing fragmentation rather than enhancing coherence within the veteran support system.

From an analytical perspective, the emergence of this occupational role illustrates broader challenges in post-war social policy: the rapid creation of new institutional solutions under conditions of urgency, limited resources, and uneven local capacity. Addressing these challenges requires not only regulatory innovation but also conceptual clarity regarding the place of trauma-informed social work, professional responsibility, and relational care within systems designed to support war veterans and their families.

■ DISCUSSION

As highlighted by Harris (2012), Zaviršek (2025) and Zakharina (2024), the expansion of veteran support is reshaping social work practice. Engagement with war-affected populations is accelerating the adoption of trauma-informed approaches, interdisciplinary collaboration, and community-based interventions. The challenges and innovations emerging from veteran services are catalysing broader professional development, influencing curriculum design, and promoting

systemic changes in social work roles and responsibilities (Semigina, 2025).

In Ukraine, the parallel introduction of the State Social Service Standard for the social adaptation of war veterans and their family members (Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine, 2024), the Occupational Standard for specialists in supporting war veterans and demobilised persons (Ministry of Ukraine for Veteran Affairs, 2024a), and formal and non-formal provision of psychosocial and rehabilitation services for war veterans (Mikheieva et al., 2025; Semigina & Stoliaryk, 2024; Slozanska et al., 2023; Stoliaryk & Semigina, 2023) reflects a rapid institutional response to large-scale reintegration needs created by the war. However, these regulatory frameworks reveal a significant lack of alignment, with important implications for coherence, effectiveness, and sustainability of veteran support.

The State Social Service Standard conceptualises social adaptation as a professional social work intervention grounded in needs assessment, individual planning, psychosocial support, family- and community-based approaches, and intersectoral cooperation. It presupposes the involvement of trained social workers operating within established social service institutions and emphasises continuity, professional accountability, and quality assurance. In contrast, the Occupational Standard for veteran support specialists defines a role that combines information provision, coordination, and accompaniment, while simultaneously

limiting the specialist's mandate to a largely navigational function. Although the declared tasks of these specialists partially overlap with the goals of social adaptation—particularly regarding psychosocial support, access to services, and coordination—their activities are regulated through separate legal instruments, financed via a distinct budgetary programme, and monitored via a centralised digital system operated by the Ministry for Veterans Affairs.

This structural separation produces functional duplication without conceptual integration. In practice, veterans may simultaneously fall under the responsibility of social workers providing social adaptation services and veteran support specialists responsible for accompaniment and guidance, without a clear hierarchy of responsibility or shared case-management framework. Such fragmentation is particularly problematic from a trauma-informed perspective, as it risks disrupting continuity of care, weakening trust-based relationships, and increasing the administrative burden on veterans navigating complex post-war transitions.

Moreover, the professional status of veteran support specialists—many functioning as paraprofessionals with lived experience of war or loss—stands in tension with the professional requirements embedded in the social adaptation standard. While peer-based elements can enhance accessibility and engagement, the absence of clearly articulated professional boundaries between social work interventions and supportive accompaniment raises ethical, organisational,

and quality-related concerns. Without systematic supervision, role clarity, and integration into multidisciplinary teams, paraprofessional support risks being overextended into areas requiring specialised social work or mental health expertise.

Taken together, the coexistence of two partially overlapping but weakly coordinated standards reflects a broader governance challenge in Ukraine's veteran policy: the tendency to develop parallel institutional solutions in response to urgent needs rather than consolidating existing professional frameworks. Moreover, the effectiveness of both social adaptation services and veteran support specialists is constrained by limited local infrastructure. The Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine (2024) has acknowledged that the provision of rehabilitation services to participants of the return system is insufficient. The lack of social and psychological rehabilitation centres and specialised services limits opportunities for comprehensive psychosocial support, particularly for veterans experiencing trauma, disability, or complex social reintegration needs. Unless mechanisms for formal coordination, shared case management, and role differentiation are strengthened, this dual-standard system, combined with infrastructural gaps, may undermine efficient resource use and contribute to unequal access to support across regions and population groups.

Figure 6.2 illustrates the parallel structures of veteran support in Ukraine, highlighting the State Social Service Standard, the Occupational Standard for veteran support specialists, and the

gaps in local infrastructure and coordination. It underscores the challenges of fragmentation, role ambiguity, and limited access to comprehensive psychosocial services.

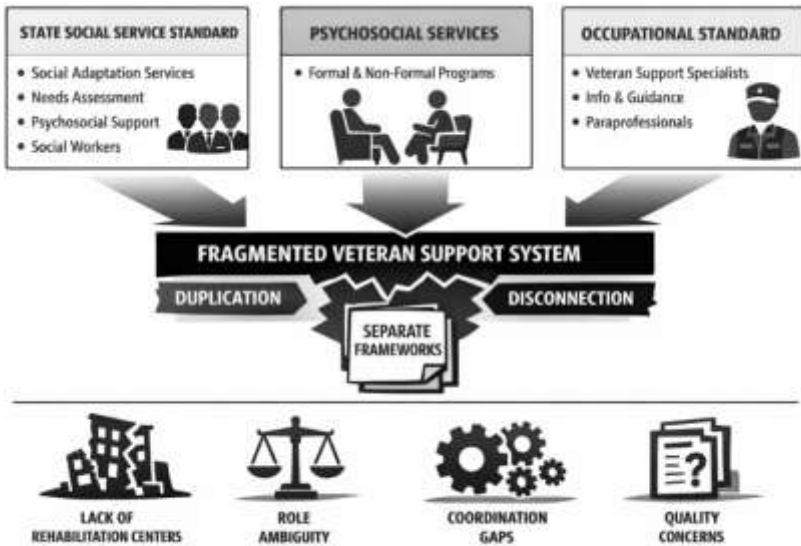


Figure 6. 2. Veteran Support Frameworks in Ukraine: Alignment, Gaps, and Professional Roles

From a policy and practice perspective, the findings suggest the need to reposition veteran support specialists within a coordinated, trauma-informed social work system rather than alongside it. Clarifying complementarities between the two standards—where social workers retain responsibility for professional psychosocial intervention and veteran support

specialists focus on navigation, advocacy, and continuity – could enhance system coherence while preserving the added value of lived-experience-based support. Strategic coordination between the Ministry of Social Policy and the Ministry for Veterans Affairs is necessary to harmonise legal frameworks, funding mechanisms, and digital monitoring systems, thereby supporting equitable access to services, reducing duplication, and strengthening system-wide accountability.

Special attention should also be paid to educational pathways and credentialing. The occupational role's expansion, including Levels II, I, and Leading Specialist, requires integration with formal social work education. Partnerships between universities, professional associations, and government agencies can ensure that veteran support specialists receive academic credit for experiential learning, bridging their practice and formal social work qualification. The 2025 competency framework provides a foundation for structured training but requires alignment with social work practice standards. Professional development should include applied modules in trauma-informed care, mental health support, conflict resolution, and ethical practice. Mentorship and reflective supervision should be integrated to strengthen capacity and mitigate risks of secondary trauma.

Further empirical studies are needed to evaluate the effectiveness of social adaptation services and veteran support specialists in meeting psychosocial and reintegration needs.

Research should examine service accessibility, professional-practitioner competencies, trauma-informed outcomes, and the long-term impact of paraprofessional versus professional social work approaches. Comparative studies across regions, service delivery models, and international best practices could inform evidence-based policy refinements.

■ CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has examined the evolving social work responses to the psychosocial needs of war veterans and their families in Ukraine, focusing on the State Social Service Standard for social adaptation and the Occupational Standard for specialists supporting veterans and demobilised persons. The analysis highlights both significant advances and persistent challenges in the institutionalisation of veteran support.

The introduction of the State Social Service Standard represents a shift toward structured, trauma-informed, and community-based social work interventions, emphasising needs assessment, individual planning, psychosocial support, family- and community-oriented approaches, and intersectoral coordination. The Occupational Standard for veteran support specialists complements this framework by providing a formalised role for paraprofessional and peer-based accompaniment, navigation, and advocacy, although its current configuration reveals ambiguities regarding mandate, professionalisation, and alignment with social work standards.

Critical gaps remain in local infrastructure, particularly the scarcity of social and psychological rehabilitation centres, which constrains the effectiveness of both social adaptation services and veteran support specialists. Parallel regulatory frameworks, separate funding streams, and centralised monitoring systems create risks of fragmentation, duplication, and inequitable access to services. Professional capacity, training, and supervision are central to ensuring that both social workers and paraprofessional specialists can deliver trauma-informed, ethical, and effective support.

From a social work perspective, these developments illustrate the dual role of veteran services: as a catalyst for professional transformation and as a stress test for systemic coordination. They underscore the need for clearer role delineation, integrated case management, strengthened professional education, and sustained investment in psychosocial infrastructure. Alignment between social adaptation services and veteran support specialists, combined with robust training and reflective supervision, is essential to maximise the impact of Ukraine's rapidly evolving veteran support system.

Finally, further research is needed to evaluate service effectiveness, identify best practices, and inform policy refinements. Comparative studies of regional service delivery, professional-paraprofessional collaboration, and long-term psychosocial outcomes will be crucial to consolidating a coherent, evidence-informed, and trauma-informed social work approach to veteran reintegration in Ukraine.

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Chapter 7

Strengthening Psychosocial Support for Wives of Ukrainian Combatants: The Role of Immediate Social Networks

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Abstract

This chapter explores the psychosocial challenges of wives of Ukrainian combatants during prolonged war and examines how immediate social networks and professionally facilitated peer-support groups bolster resilience and well-being. Using a person-in-environment perspective, psychosocial distress is framed as relational and contextual, shaped by disrupted social ties, role overload, and chronic anxiety. A mixed-methods study – combining secondary analysis of 56 counseling cases with interviews of seven wives and three facilitators – reveals cumulative psychological burden, social isolation, and gaps in support systems.

Findings show peer-support groups normalize trauma, reduce isolation, and strengthen social connectedness, highlighting the complementary roles of formal facilitation and informal networks.

The results contribute to social work scholarship by advancing a person-in-environment conceptualization of psychosocial support in wartime and by informing the development of family- and community-centered interventions for military families in conflict-affected contexts.

Key words: *wives of combatants, psychosocial support, person-in-environment perspective, immediate social networks, peer-support groups, resilience, social work, war-related stress, Ukraine.*

INTRODUCTION

The full-scale war in Ukraine has profoundly affected not only combatants but also their families. Among the most impacted yet underexplored groups are wives of Ukrainian combatants, whose daily lives are shaped by prolonged uncertainty, the absence of partners, and constant wartime stress. These women face daily anxiety, loneliness, secondary traumatization, and significant emotional exhaustion. At the same time, prevailing cultural stereotypes continue to devalue psychological difficulties, often framing them as a sign of “weakness.” Such attitudes foster a culture of silence around personal experiences, complicating both individual help-seeking and the provision of support to others (Kovalchuk, 2023; Shynkariova, 2024; Sorokina, & Shynkariova, 2020). Under wartime conditions, these tendencies are further exacerbated, as societal attention shifts toward meeting basic needs while mental health concerns are relegated to the periphery.

International experience demonstrates the value of structured psychosocial programs for military personnel and their families. Programs such as *Battlemind* in the United States, designed to support service members and their families before, during, and after deployment, highlight the importance of addressing both combatants’ and families’ well-being (Caruthers, 2022; Lesieur, 2025). This body of international experience underscores the profound interdependence between individual well-being and familial resilience.

In contrast, contemporary Ukrainian policy and practice related to supporting families of local combatants have predominantly focused on assistance for soldiers themselves and on the provision of professional psychosocial services oriented toward combatants (Borodin, 2025; Semigina & Stoliaryk, 2024; Stoliaryk & Semigina, 2023). The needs of their closest family members, particularly wives, remain largely underexplored. While soldiers may participate in some structured interventions through humanitarian programs, their wives continue to navigate daily psychosocial challenges – such as anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and secondary traumatization – largely without targeted support.

An additional challenge in addressing the psychosocial needs of wives of Ukrainian combatants lies in the limited availability of reliable data on the potential scope of need. According to Ukrainian media reports citing official statements by President Volodymyr Zelensky, as of September 2024, more than 43,000 Ukrainian service members have been killed and approximately 370,000 wounded since the full-scale Russian invasion began in February 2022 (Petrenko, 2024). According to the monitoring project *UA Losses*, as of December 2025, approximately 87,000 service members have been killed, 85,000 are reported missing, and around 4,500 are held as military prisoners (UA Losses, 2025). While these figures provide the most comprehensive publicly available estimates, the exact numbers remain uncertain due to the ongoing nature of the armed conflict. These data illustrate the profound and continuing psy-

chosocial burden on families of combatants, particularly wives, whose daily lives are shaped by anxiety, uncertainty, and the absence of their partners.

State support for families of combatants in Ukraine remains predominantly financial in nature, consisting mainly of monetary benefits and selected social privileges. Although Ukraine has introduced a designated professional role for veterans and their family support specialists and adopted a corresponding state service standard, this form of assistance is primarily meditative and informational. The specialist's mandate focuses on guiding veterans or their family members toward available legal, medical, rehabilitation, or material services, rather than providing direct psychosocial support (Semigina et al., 2025). Consequently, structured psychosocial interventions tailored specifically to the emotional and relational needs of wives of combatants remain scarce.

Moreover, informal support from immediate social networks—including relatives, friends, and close social ties—has received little systematic attention, despite its crucial role in shaping emotional well-being and resilience, as noted by international scholars (Schiraldi, 2017; Worden, 2013; Zdjelarević et al., 2011). Addressing this gap is essential for developing holistic, family-centered approaches to psychosocial support in the context of wartime Ukraine.

By highlighting the role of immediate social networks as a dynamic and pivotal resource, alongside professionally facili-

tated peer-support groups, this chapter contributes to a more nuanced understanding of psychosocial support during wartime and lays the groundwork for exploring strategies to strengthen both formal and informal support systems within social work practice.

THE CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

This chapter is grounded in the **person-in-environment (PIE) perspective**, which serves as the central conceptual framework for understanding psychosocial support for wives of Ukrainian combatants. PIE enables an integrated analysis of women's psychosocial needs, the challenges they encounter, and the role of immediate social networks in shaping well-being, resilience, and access to support. Rather than conceptualizing distress as an individual psychological condition, PIE views psychosocial difficulties as arising from dynamic interactions among individuals and their social, relational, and institutional environments (Dybicz, 2015; Weiss-Gal, 2008).

Psychosocial support in social work is understood as a set of interventions addressing psychological well-being and social functioning simultaneously, recognizing their inseparability (IFRC, 2023). Its theoretical foundations lie in the biopsychosocial model (Engel, 1977) and ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which emphasize that human experience and adaptation are shaped through continuous interaction with multiple environmental systems. Within social work, eco-

logical thinking has evolved into ecological and systems-oriented practice, shifting attention from individual adaptation toward improving person–environment fit (Heal, 2014; Närhi & Matthies, 2025). From this perspective, psychosocial support extends beyond individual counseling and includes engagement with families, informal networks, and communities as integral components of intervention.

The psychosocial tradition in social work has long emphasized the importance of mobilizing social systems surrounding the client as key resources for coping and resilience. Hollis’s foundational work highlighted that effective intervention requires attention to the social contexts in which clients function, as these contexts significantly shape adaptive capacity under conditions of stress (Woods & Hollis, 1990). This perspective aligns closely with **strengths-based and resource-based approaches**, which focus on existing capacities, relational supports, and tangible and intangible resources that individuals and families can draw upon in times of adversity (Semigina & Stoliaryk, 2023; van Breda & Reynolds, 2025). Applied to the situation of wives of combatants, this framework supports understanding women not only as recipients of support but also as active agents embedded in relational systems that can be strengthened through targeted psychosocial interventions and mobilization of available resources. An analysis of resilience through the prism of risk factors, protective factors, and vulnerability (Rutter, 1990; Bolton, 2013; Lazos, 2019) provides a

deeper understanding of the mechanisms of adaptation to crises and losses characteristic of combatants' wives.

The person-in-environment perspective integrates these insights into a coherent analytical framework. Since its emergence in the 1970s, PIE has become a foundational concept in social work theory and practice, emphasizing the inseparability of individual experiences and environmental conditions (Dybicz, 2015). Social problems are conceptualized as outcomes of interactions between persons and their environments rather than as individual pathologies (Weiss-Gal, 2008). From this standpoint, the psychosocial challenges experienced by wives of Ukrainian combatants are understood as relational and contextual phenomena shaped by family dynamics, immediate social networks, community resources, and broader socio-political conditions associated with war.

The foundation of all community-based psychosocial work is the belief that affected or vulnerable families also have the capacity for recovery and resilience. McCubbin and Walsh are leading family resilience scholars globally: first one focuses squarely on the family system ("the positive behavioral patterns and functional competence individuals and the family unit demonstrate under stressful or adverse circumstances" (McCubbin et al., 1996, p. 5) and second one emphasizes on processes outside the family system ("family members tapping into internal and external processes in times of adversity" (Walsh, 2012, p. 401).

Contemporary developments of the PIE framework further emphasize strengths, agency, and the significance of social and physical environments. The shift toward strengths-oriented interpretations highlights clients' capacities for adaptation and meaning-making (Dybicz, 2015), while place-based perspectives draw attention to how everyday environments structure opportunities for support and connection (Akesson et al., 2017). Within this framework, resilience and empowerment are conceptualized not as individual traits but as relational and contextual processes that emerge through access to supportive relationships, meaningful roles, and enabling resources (Domínguez, 2024). The resource-based approach complements PIE by emphasizing that individuals, families, and communities possess both tangible and intangible assets – social, emotional, informational, and material – that can be mobilized to buffer stress, enhance coping, and foster psychosocial recovery (van Breda & Reynolds, 2025).

Immediate social networks – including family members, close relatives, friends, neighbours, colleagues, and informal groups – occupy a central position within the micro- and meso-levels of the ecological system. In the PIE perspective, these networks constitute primary environments in which daily interactions, meaning-making, and coping occur. Social work theory conceptualizes immediate social networks as both potential sources of vulnerability and key protective resources. A lack of emotional and practical support, negative societal attitudes, stigmatization, and social isolation constitute key conditions

that foster feelings of helplessness and reinforce a victim position (Yilmaz, 2021).

The weakening or disruption of these networks, common in contexts of military deployment and prolonged conflict, can exacerbate isolation, emotional distress, and caregiving burdens. It also contributes to the persistence of passive coping strategies and maladaptive patterns of responding to adversity (Kerdyvar & Khrystenko, 2021; McGill et al., 2022). Empirical studies indicate that insufficient support from family members, friends, community initiatives, and social services intensifies loneliness, passivity, and distrust toward formal institutions, particularly in contexts of war-related displacement and loss (Chesnokova, 2025; Kerdyvar & Khrystenko, 2021; Tymchenko et al., 2020). Widows and wives of missing or detained combatants are especially vulnerable to social misunderstanding and stigmatization, which further complicates their adaptation to a new social reality (Illarionova, 2019; McGill et al., 2022). Economic insecurity and financial dependence further exacerbate women's sense of powerlessness (Cedos, 2023; Chesnokova, 2025), while difficulties in social reintegration following the loss or prolonged absence of a partner reinforce withdrawal from active social participation (McGill et al., 2022).

These processes unfold against the backdrop of **collective trauma** associated with war, which exerts long-term psychological effects not only at the individual but also at the societal level – collective trauma and its transmission intergeneration-

ally through family narratives, social memory, and cultural discourses (Gornostai, 2023). Conversely, supportive and resource-rich networks can provide emotional validation, practical assistance, guidance, and pathways to social integration, thereby enhancing psychosocial well-being and resilience in crisis situations (Bonanno et al., 2006).

Within psychosocial social work, immediate social networks are therefore viewed as active objects and subjects of intervention. Community-based modalities such as support groups, peer support, and self-help groups represent structured mechanisms for mobilizing and strengthening these networks. **Support groups** bring together individuals facing similar challenges and provide opportunities for psychoeducation, emotional sharing, and mutual understanding in a safe and egalitarian environment (Brigadir, 2023; Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000; Worrall et al., 2018). Peer support and self-help groups further emphasize reciprocity, shared experience, and empowerment, reducing hierarchical distinctions between helpers and recipients and fostering not only individual mechanisms for overcoming adversity but also collective agency (Baidarova & Kachan, 2024; IFRC, 2023). Participants in a support group manifest personal growth over time, form strong connections, and become each other's support systems (Agarwal et al., 2025). These approaches explicitly integrate the resource-based perspective, leveraging participants' personal, relational, and community assets to enhance coping, self-efficacy, and collective resilience.

Grounded in the person-in-environment perspective, this chapter conceptualizes support groups not only as spaces for individual coping but also as environments in which immediate social networks and available resources can be restored, expanded, and reconfigured. Group-based psychosocial interventions are understood as mechanisms for strengthening social connectedness, reducing isolation, and fostering collective resilience among wives of combatants.

Figure 7.1 summarises the person-in-environment framework for psychosocial support of wives of Ukrainian combatants, illustrating how individual well-being, immediate social networks, psychosocial interventions, and mobilized resources interact within a war-affected socio-political context. Arrows indicate bidirectional influence, highlighting that resilience and coping emerge through dynamic interactions between personal capacities, relational supports, and environmental conditions.

Taken together, these theoretical concepts integrate psychosocial support, immediate social networks, resource-based strategies, group-based interventions, and communication-focused environmental approaches into a coherent person-in-environment model. It provides the conceptual foundation for examining the needs and challenges of wives of Ukrainian combatants, analyzing the role of support groups, and designing interventions to strengthen their immediate social environments.

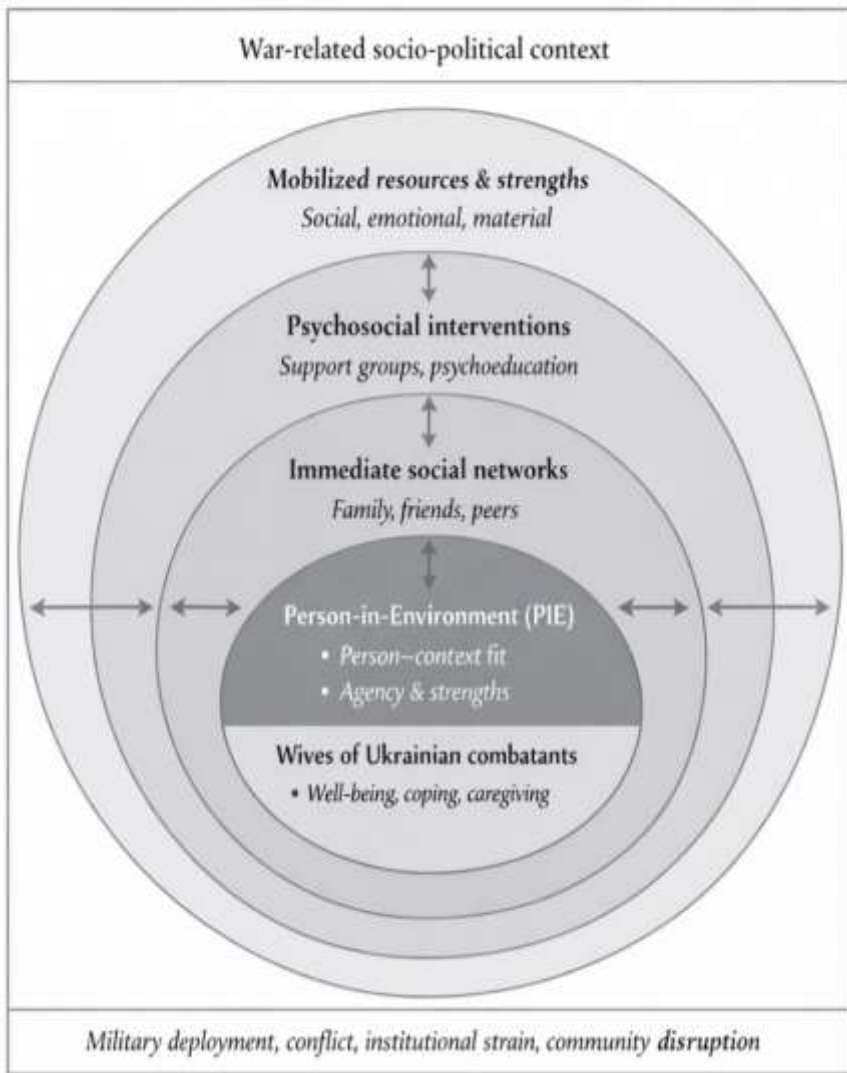


Figure 7.1. Person-in-Environment Framework for Psychosocial Support of Wives of Ukrainian Combatants

METHODOLOGY

This study is grounded in an **interpretivist paradigm**, commonly applied in social work research to understand lived experiences, meanings, and social contexts. The interpretivist approach assumes that reality is socially constructed and that individuals interpret their experiences through interactions with their immediate environment, social networks, and cultural frameworks (Semigina, 2025).

This paradigm was selected because the study aims to explore the psychosocial challenges faced by wives of combatants, their coping strategies, and the dynamics of their immediate social networks, phenomena that cannot be fully captured through purely quantitative measures. Women's perceptions of support, stress, and relational dynamics are inherently subjective, and understanding these meanings requires qualitative exploration. Furthermore, the interpretivist lens allows researchers to situate participants' experiences within the broader socio-cultural and wartime context, accounting for ambivalence in immediate social networks and prevailing cultural norms around mental health. While the study also draws on quantitative data, the interpretivist approach ensures that the voices of participants and facilitators are central to understanding psychosocial support.

The research employed a mixed-methods design, combining secondary analysis of quantitative data with qualitative interviews.

Secondary data were collected by the NGO “Masha Foundation” from August 2023 to January 2024 for monitoring purposes, and the organization provided consent for their use in line with the study objectives. A total of 290 client questionnaires from the Foundation’s counseling service were reviewed, and from this dataset, 56 cases corresponding specifically to wives of combatants were selected for detailed analysis because they contained comprehensive descriptions of psychological and social difficulties.

These cases were analyzed using QDA Miner software, allowing for systematic coding and the identification of key themes. Two primary categories of challenges were distinguished: (1) psychological challenges, reflecting changes in emotional states due to life circumstances, and (2) social and socio-psychological challenges, reflecting women’s situations in relation to their immediate social networks.

In addition to the secondary data, **semi-structured interviews** were conducted with nine participants of peer-support groups facilitated by the “Masha Foundation” and the International non-governmental organization “International Leadership and Development Centre” (ILDC), including seven wives of combatants and three group facilitators. These support groups were organized for women whose husbands are actively serving in the war, as well as for women whose relatives are detained, missing, or considered prisoners of war.

Interviews focused on participants' lived experiences of war-time stress, changes in family and social relationships, perceived gaps in formal and informal support, motivations for joining support groups, and reflections on group participation and its outcomes. Facilitator interviews additionally explored group dynamics, perceived mechanisms of change, and challenges associated with group-based psychosocial support in a prolonged crisis context.

All qualitative materials were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed an iterative process of familiarization with the data, initial coding, and the development of broader themes through constant comparison across interviews and counseling cases. Coding was both inductive, allowing themes to emerge from participants' narratives, and theoretically informed by the PIE framework, with particular attention to the role of immediate social environments and relational resources.

Thematic development resulted in several interrelated themes capturing (1) cumulative psychosocial distress and resource depletion under conditions of uncertainty and loss; (2) erosion of everyday social ties and experiences of isolation; (3) the search for understanding and shared experience as a motive for joining peer-support groups; and (4) the role of professionally facilitated groups in restoring social connectedness, normalizing emotional responses, and fostering resilience through horizontal peer relationships.

Facilitators' narratives were analyzed alongside participants' accounts as a complementary interpretive layer, enabling triangulation of perspectives on group processes, mechanisms of support, and limitations of group-based interventions.

All data were anonymized prior to analysis. Participation in interviews was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Given the sensitivity of war-related experiences, particular attention was paid to ethical principles of confidentiality, emotional safety, and respectful representation of participants' narratives.

Electronic data were stored securely, and steps were taken to minimize any potential distress, including offering referrals to professional psychosocial support when needed. The NGO "Masha Foundation" and ILDC formally authorized the use of its data, ensuring alignment with institutional and ethical guidelines.

CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY WIVES OF UKRAINIAN COMBATANTS

From a person-in-environment perspective, the psychosocial challenges experienced by wives of Ukrainian combatants emerge through the dynamic interaction between individual experiences and broader social and structural contexts shaped by prolonged war. These challenges cannot be understood as isolated psychological difficulties; rather, they should be con-

ceptualised as outcomes of sustained exposure to environmental stressors and disrupted support systems.

The analysis of case records from a service supporting wives of Ukrainian combatants reveals a complex and multifaceted picture of psychosocial challenges, consistent with patterns identified in prior research on populations affected by armed conflict. **Figure 7.2** and **Figure 7.3** present the distribution of challenges experienced by the wives of the military personnel.

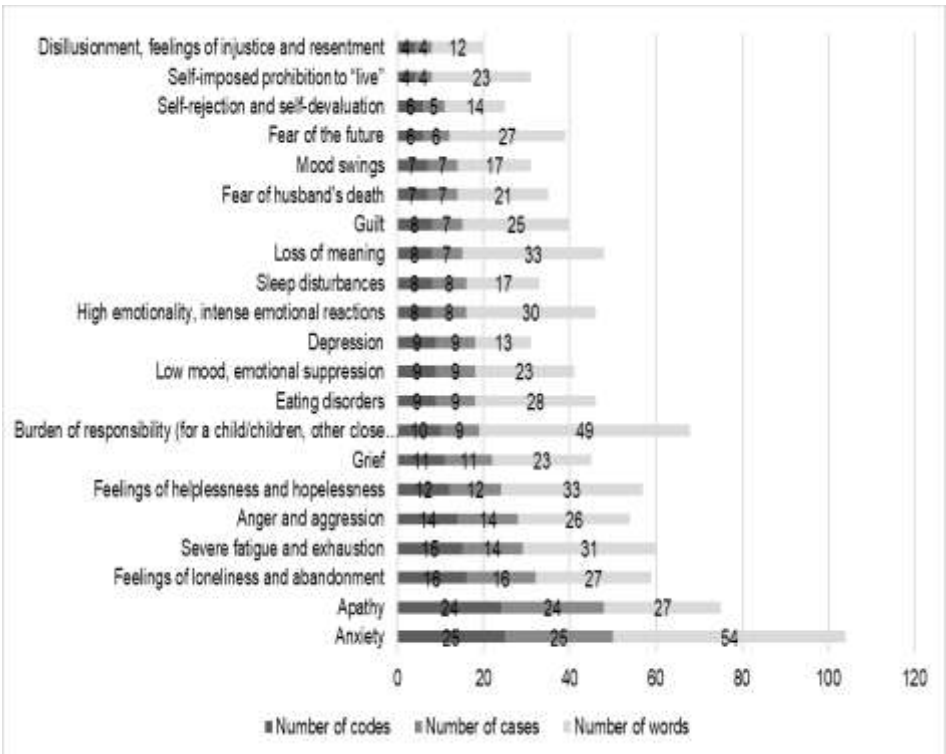


Figure 7.2. Psychological challenges of combatants' wives, identified based on text analysis of cases of counseling service clients

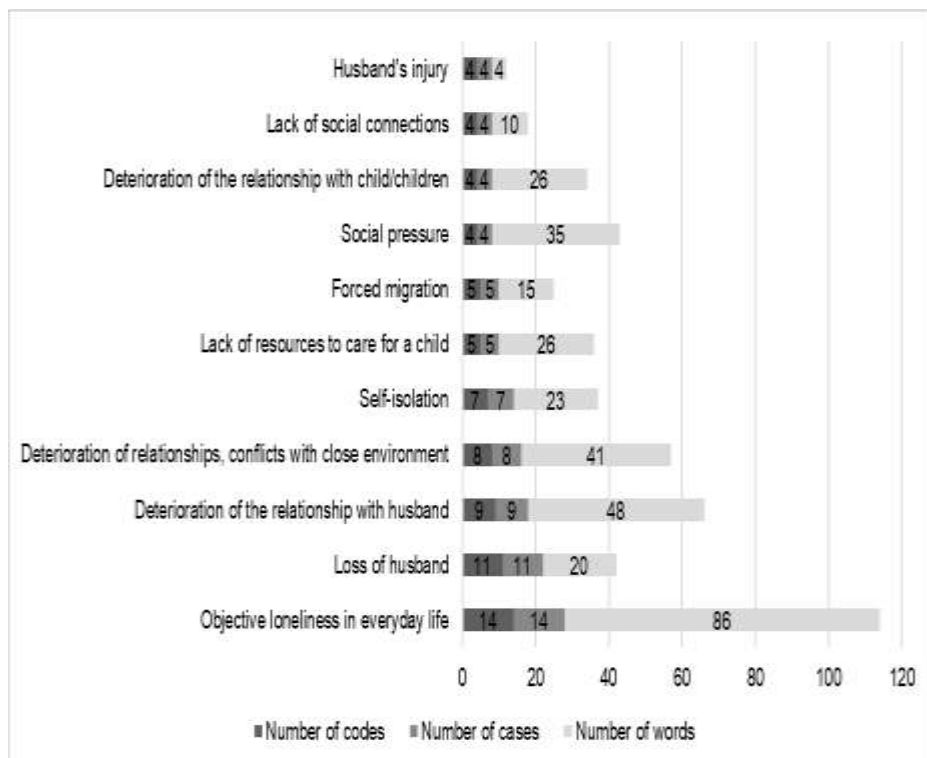


Figure 7.3. Social and socio-psychological challenges of combatants' wives, identified based on text analysis of cases of counseling service clients

Among the most frequently reported difficulties are **persistent anxiety and emotional exhaustion**, observed in nearly half of the women. Anxiety manifested through constant worry about the husband's safety, intrusive thoughts, and heightened vigilance, while emotional exhaustion encompassed chronic fatigue, reduced motivation, and diminished responsiveness to both personal and familial needs. Apathy and emotional

numbing affected more than two-fifths of respondents, reflecting a coping response to prolonged emotional overload. Experiences of loneliness and abandonment were reported by over one-quarter of participants, echoing findings by Sorokina and Shynkarova (2020), who emphasize the compounded stress experienced by women performing multiple social roles in the absence of adequate support networks.

Experiences of **loneliness and abandonment** emerge as a recurrent theme, even among women who are not physically isolated. Respondents often describe a sense of being “left alone with responsibility,” highlighting the emotional dimension of solitude that accompanies the husband’s absence. Feelings of **helplessness and hopelessness** are also common, particularly in relation to the perceived inability to influence the course of events or ensure family stability under conditions of ongoing uncertainty, while grief related to the absence or potential loss of the husband was identified in a similar proportion, paralleling evidence reported by Frunze (2022) regarding the emotional toll of prolonged separation during wartime.

A central empirical finding concerns the phenomenon of **role overload**. Across cases, women describe a substantial expansion of responsibilities following their husbands’ mobilization. Household management, financial decision-making, childcare, and emotional support for children converge into a single, continuous burden. This accumulation of roles is frequently experienced as overwhelming, particularly in the absence of practical assistance from extended family or community net-

works (Kovalchuk, 2023). Within the PIE framework, these experiences reflect not individual psychological vulnerability, but a structural mismatch between escalating environmental demands and diminishing psychosocial resources.

The data show that **everyday household tasks**, that might otherwise be manageable, become sources of significant stress when combined with emotional strain and time pressure. Approximately one quarter of the respondents explicitly note that they manage all daily responsibilities alone, which contributes to fatigue, irritability, and episodes of anger or emotional outbursts. These reactions are often accompanied by feelings of guilt and self-blame, reinforcing emotional distress.

These findings align with studies by Potapchuk and Potapchuk (2024). Participants frequently articulated **a need for practical assistance, emotional support**, or at least acknowledgment of their efforts, underscoring gaps in both informal and institutional support systems. This finding is consistent with the literature on family-centered care and social work interventions in conflict-affected contexts (Bataeva & Artemenko, 2023).

Parenting emerges in the empirical material as one of the most emotionally demanding domains. Women report heightened concern for their children's psychological well-being, particularly in relation to fear, separation anxiety, and reactions to news about the war. Respondents describe ongoing efforts to maintain emotional stability and a sense of normalcy for their children, even when they themselves feel depleted.

This sustained **emotional labour** – regulating one’s own emotions while simultaneously supporting children – frequently leads to emotional burnout. Some cases reveal signs of **secondary traumatization**, as women internalize their children’s distress or mirror their fears. Difficulties in parent-child relationships are reported not as a lack of care, but as a consequence of reduced emotional resources and chronic stress. This process may manifest in anxiety, sleep disturbances, emotional dysregulation, and reduced psychosocial functioning (Zhuravliova, 2018).

From a resource-based perspective, prolonged exposure to war-related stress contributes to the gradual depletion of both **external resources** – such as social support, stable income, and institutional assistance – and **internal resources**, including self-esteem, adaptive capacity, emotional regulation, and optimism (Bataeva & Artemenko, 2023; Hobfoll, 2001). Resource depletion is further intensified by the uncontrollable nature of war, continuous exposure to distressing media content, and the emotional labour involved in supporting combatant husbands through remote communication.

Figure 7.4 synthesises the key psychosocial challenges experienced by wives of Ukrainian combatants, conceptualised through the person-in-environment (PIE) perspective. Rather than portraying these challenges as isolated individual difficulties, the figure illustrates their interconnected and structurally conditioned nature, shaped by prolonged exposure to war-related stressors. Central to the visualisation is the dy-

namic interaction between role overload, chronic anxiety, emotional exhaustion, parenting stress, social isolation, and resource depletion, which together form a cumulative burden. By situating individual emotional experiences within broader social and environmental contexts, the figure underscores the limitations of individual coping strategies and highlights the need for family-centred, community-based, and network-oriented psychosocial interventions.



Figure 7.4. Psychosocial Challenges Experienced by Wives of Ukrainian Combatants: A Person-in-Environment Perspective

THE IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSIONALLY FACILITATED PEER SUPPORT GROUPS

The findings from interviews with participants and facilitators demonstrate that support groups function as complex psychosocial, relational, and meaning-making spaces that address both individual suffering and collective disruption caused by war.

Lived Experience of Loss, Uncertainty, and Resource Depletion

Interviews with wives of Ukrainian combatants reveal a cumulative and relational experience of psychosocial distress shaped by prolonged separation, uncertainty, and, in some cases, bereavement. Women described military mobilization or the death of a partner as a profound rupture of everyday life that was experienced as a form of loss, even when the husband was still alive. For many, this was their first direct encounter with death and mourning, which intensified the emotional impact:

"It was the first time in my life that I was at a funeral, and it was for someone I loved. It was very traumatic, and I didn't even understand how this person had died." (wife of a deceased combatant)

Even in the absence of confirmed loss, women articulated a persistent sense of incompleteness and loneliness, often described in bodily and existential terms:

"Loneliness. It's like half of you has been torn away. A sense of loss... I am alone." (wife of a combatant)

A dominant feature of everyday life was chronic anxiety fuelled by constant danger and uncertainty. Women spoke of continuous emotional tension, disrupted communication, and the need to limit contact with their partners for security reasons:

"Since my husband was mobilized, I have been overcome with anxiety, day and night, constantly." (wife of a mobilized soldier)

This prolonged anxiety was closely intertwined with social isolation. Many respondents described a drastic narrowing of their social worlds due to caregiving responsibilities, remote work, and emotional withdrawal:

"My whole world was sealed within four walls." (wife of a mobilized soldier)

The responsibility burden intensified this isolation. Women reported having to assume full responsibility for family decision-making while simultaneously providing emotional support to children, parents, and colleagues, often at the expense of their own well-being:

"At some point, it became too much for me... for myself, I only found support among girls like me, who would listen and understand." (wife of a combatant)

Facilitators confirmed that participants often entered groups with depleted personal resources, describing exhaustion, apathy, and psychosomatic symptoms as common manifestations of prolonged stress and indeterminate loss.

Searching for Understanding: Motives for Joining Peer-Support Groups

Against this background of isolation and emotional overload, women described joining support groups primarily as a search for understanding rather than professional advice or problem-solving. A recurring motive was the need to be heard by others who shared similar experiences:

"I really needed a community where everyone would understand what I was talking about, what I was feeling." (wife of a combatant)

Equally important was the desire to avoid pity, moralizing, or the need to explain one's pain in detail:

"The understanding that you don't have to explain at length what's bothering you... that's the most important thing in groups." (wife of a combatant)

Women emphasized the importance of being among "their own people" — those who had lived through comparable uncertainty, fear, or loss.

Facilitators interpreted this as a response to the limits of informal support in the broader social environment, where war-

related experiences are often misunderstood, minimized, or avoided altogether. The wives of combatants in villages and small towns are experiencing a complex response from their communities.

"Cities and small communities are very different. It is easier for women in cities to form groups; there, the culture is much stronger, whereas in communities, women are ashamed. These small communities have their own culture and atmosphere, where there is more prejudice, more stigmatization, and more bullying."
(facilitator)

As one facilitator noted, trauma tends to isolate people, while groups function as a tool for breaking this isolation and restoring social contact.

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Support Groups as Safe Psychosocial Spaces of Shared Experience

Participants consistently described support groups as safe spaces characterized by acceptance, emotional security, and shared experience. The presence of clear rules, confidentiality, and a non-pressuring facilitation style allowed women to engage at their own pace:

"There was a feeling of support and a safe space where you could just be there, even if you didn't want to talk." (wife of a combatant)

A key function of the groups was the normalization of emotional reactions to war and loss. Hearing similar stories ini-

tially intensified emotions, but over time helped participants reframe their own experiences as understandable and legitimate:

"At first, I constantly wanted to cry... but then I realized that everything was fine with me." (wife of a deceased combatant)

Both women and facilitators emphasized that the groups provided multiple forms of support simultaneously – emotional, informational, psychoeducational, and practical. Beyond structured discussions, participants exchanged advice, resources, and tangible gestures of care, such as sending medicine or small gifts, which further strengthened interpersonal bonds.

The group process itself was described as emotionally demanding, particularly during the initial meetings. Some women reported feeling overwhelmed and tempted to withdraw:

"During the first two meetings, I just wanted to leave... I was overwhelmed with emotions." (wife of a combatant)

Facilitators confirmed that this initial emotional overload is a common and expected phase that requires careful containment and normalization. Over time, however, participants reported increased resilience, a renewed sense of agency, and the ability to reconnect with life:

"I realized that I want to keep living." (wife of a deceased combatant)

From Facilitated Support to Horizontal Networks: Sustaining Resilience Beyond the Group

One of the most significant outcomes identified in the interviews was the emergence of stable horizontal ties that extended beyond the formal duration of the program. Women described a gradual transformation of group meetings into relationships resembling friendship and mutual care:

"It gradually transformed from psychological relief into friendly conversations. It's like sitting down for a cup of coffee with a good friend." (wife of a combatant)

Many groups continued to exist informally after facilitation ended, evolving into peer-to-peer self-support networks:

"The project ended, but we organized ourselves into a self-support group and continue to meet." (wife of a combatant)

Facilitators viewed this transformation as a key indicator of successful psychosocial intervention, emphasizing that professionally facilitated groups can serve as a catalyst for rebuilding immediate social networks. These networks not only provided ongoing emotional support but also empowered some women to engage in civic initiatives, volunteer work, and mutual aid activities.

At the same time, participants and facilitators acknowledged limitations and risks, including emotional intensity, changing life circumstances, unrealistic expectations, and the potential for over-reliance on the group as a "protective bubble." These

challenges underscore the importance of balancing group cohesion with gradual re-engagement in the broader social environment.

Overall, the findings illustrate that strengthening immediate social networks through facilitated peer-support groups plays a critical role in sustaining psychosocial well-being among wives of Ukrainian combatants. By restoring social connectedness, validating lived experience, and enabling mutual support, these groups function as a vital relational resource in conditions of prolonged war and uncertainty.

DISCUSSION

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This study explored the psychosocial challenges experienced by wives of Ukrainian combatants and examined the role of immediate social networks and professionally facilitated peer support groups in mitigating distress and fostering resilience under conditions of prolonged war. Interpreted through the person-in-environment (PIE) perspective and resource-based approaches, the findings underscore that women's psychosocial difficulties cannot be adequately understood as individual psychological problems detached from context. Rather, they emerge from sustained exposure to war-related stressors, escalating role demands, disrupted relational environments, and chronic depletion of both internal and external resources.

Psychosocial distress as a manifestation of person–environment mismatch

Viewed through the PIE framework, the psychological difficulties reported by combatants' wives—persistent anxiety, emotional exhaustion, apathy, loneliness, and feelings of helplessness—reflect a structural mismatch between environmental demands and available coping resources. The qualitative findings illustrate that women are required to assume multiple roles simultaneously: primary caregiver, sole decision-maker, emotional anchor for children and extended family members, and often financial provider. These responsibilities accumulate under conditions of uncertainty, fear for a partner's life, and lack of predictability, producing chronic stress rather than episodic crisis.

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From a PIE perspective, such distress should not be interpreted as individual vulnerability or insufficient resilience (Dybicz, 2015; Heal, 2014; Weiss-Gal, 2008;). Instead, it reflects an environment that continuously generates stress while offering limited opportunities for emotional containment, recovery, and support. Participants' narratives demonstrate how prolonged war erodes adaptive capacity even among women with prior psychological knowledge or professional training. Psychosomatic symptoms, sleep disturbances, and emotional burnout described in the interviews point to cumulative resource depletion rather than acute psychopathology.

These findings align with contemporary interpretations of PIE that emphasize context, relational processes, and structural conditions over individual pathology. Psychosocial distress emerges not only from exposure to traumatic events but from living within an environment characterized by chronic danger, unresolved uncertainty, and constant role overload. In such conditions, the expectation that individuals should “cope” through personal resilience alone becomes both unrealistic and ethically problematic.

Immediate social networks: between erosion and protective potential

A central contribution of this study lies in its nuanced portrayal of immediate social networks. Empirical findings indicate that combatants’ wives often experience a dramatic narrowing of their social world. Participants describe distancing themselves from friends who “do not understand,” limiting emotional disclosure to relatives to avoid burdening them and withdrawing from social interactions due to fear of judgment, invalidation, or emotional exhaustion. As a result, women frequently report profound loneliness even when surrounded by others.

At the same time, immediate social networks remain the most proximal and potentially powerful source of psychosocial support. Ukrainian society, shaped by historical experiences of collective adversity, demonstrates ambivalent patterns of social support-seeking. Research suggests both a reluctance to

explicitly ask for help due to fear of being perceived as weak or dysfunctional (Kim et al., 2008) and a strong reliance on family ties during periods of crisis (Kostenko et al., 2024). The findings of this study reflect this tension: close relationships simultaneously hold the potential to buffer stress and to generate secondary distress through minimizing responses, unsolicited advice, or avoidance of emotionally difficult topics.

In this sense, immediate social networks function as both vulnerability and protective factors. Their impact depends not on their mere presence but on the quality of everyday interactions. The study highlights that social isolation often represents an adaptive response rather than a personal deficit. Withdrawal serves as a form of self-protection against invalidating or emotionally unsafe environments. However, over time, this strategy exacerbates resource depletion, reinforcing a cycle of isolation and distress.

These findings support social work scholarship emphasizing that informal support systems are not inherently supportive and require conditions of understanding, acceptance, and communicative competence to become protective resources (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Thoits, 2011). Strengthening psychosocial well-being under prolonged war, therefore, necessitates attention not only to individual coping strategies but also to relational dynamics within immediate social environments.

Support groups as reconstructed micro-environments in wartime social ecology

The qualitative findings provide strong evidence that professionally facilitated peer support groups operate as reconstructed micro-environments within the broader social ecology of wartime Ukraine. Rather than functioning solely as spaces for emotional ventilation or short-term crisis intervention, support groups emerge as intentional relational contexts characterized by psychological safety, shared experience, mutual recognition, and normalization of emotional responses.

Consistent with prior research on the determinants of social support (Lahey & Cohen, 2000; Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000), participants' narratives indicate that peer support groups offer empathic understanding often unavailable in natural support networks. Shared lived experience allows women to speak without explanation, reduces internalized stigma, and legitimizes a wide range of emotional states, including anger, apathy, grief, and ambivalence. From a PIE standpoint, support groups can thus be conceptualized as environmental interventions that temporarily restore person-environment fit by replacing disrupted or insufficient social contexts with structured, supportive relational spaces.

The findings also underscore the importance of professional facilitation in sustaining these environments. Facilitators play a critical role in regulating emotional intensity, preventing re-traumatization, establishing clear boundaries, and ensuring

inclusivity of diverse experiences (Illarionova, 2019). At the same time, effective facilitation avoids hierarchical expert positioning and reinforces horizontal, empowering group dynamics, consistent with strengths-based and empowerment-oriented social work approaches. This balance allows groups to function as spaces of collective meaning-making and identity reconstruction rather than as sites of prescriptive therapeutic intervention.

Importantly, the study reveals both the strengths and limitations of group-based support. Participants and facilitators note risks associated with emotional overload, the heterogeneity of experiences, and the potential for group “closure,” which intensifies polarization between the group and the external social environment. These findings highlight that support groups are not universally or uniformly beneficial; their effectiveness depends on careful composition, facilitation, and sensitivity to group dynamics, particularly in contexts of ongoing and indeterminate loss.

Study Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The qualitative component of the study focuses on the experiences of a specific group of women participating in support programs and may not capture the full diversity of combatants’ families. Future research would benefit from longitudinal designs, comparative analyses across different family roles (parents, children, siblings), and examination of psychosocial needs in post-

war and reintegration phases. A quantitative evaluation of the long-term outcomes of support group participation would further strengthen the evidence base.

■ IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Strengthening Supportive Communication

The study highlights the central role of immediate social networks in shaping psychosocial well-being. Social workers can facilitate communication skills training for family members, peers, and community actors to enhance empathic listening, emotional validation, non-judgmental understanding, and respectful recognition of changing boundaries (Rogers, 1951; Sullivan, 1953; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Walsh, 2016, 2021). Training should focus on recognizing and validating emotions, offering practical assistance proactively, promoting social integration, maintaining contact, and expressing gratitude and recognition of women's efforts and strengths (Bataeva & Artemenko, 2023; Lovka, 2024). Such programs can be delivered in brief, scalable formats, including workshops, group sessions, or modules integrated into existing community initiatives.

Implementing Resilience-Oriented Training

Social work interventions should integrate resilience-oriented frameworks, such as the Walsh Family Resilience Framework, to guide work with families and social networks (Walsh, 2016,

2021). Programs should foster shared belief systems, strengthen organizational resources, and improve communication processes that support family resilience. Psychoeducational components on stress, grief, loss, and self-regulation can be delivered in interactive formats to enhance coping capacities and mobilize available resources, reducing secondary stressors and improving person–environment fit.

Enhancing Peer Support

Professionally facilitated support groups remain essential for psychosocial care. Social workers should ensure sessions address resilience processes, including emotional expression, adaptation to adversity, social inclusion, and personal growth. Facilitators must be trained in trauma-informed care, grief work, group dynamics, and low-intensity psychosocial interventions.

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Incorporating intersessional meetings and peer-to-peer formats can strengthen ongoing support and community connections, while flexible participation options encourage iterative engagement. Supporting participant leadership fosters the creation of new mutual support initiatives within communities (Schwarzer, 2024).

Integrating Community and Policy-Level Strategies

Social work interventions are most effective when aligned with broader community and policy initiatives. Governments

and institutions should invest in long-term peer support programs and community-based psychosocial care systems. Social workers play a critical role in designing and implementing scalable, low-intensity interventions consistent with national mental health strategies (Knowledge Center, 2022). Community engagement should focus on strengthening informal networks, promoting social cohesion, and creating supportive environments that reduce isolation and enhance collective resilience.

Supporting Professional Development

Implementing these strategies requires ongoing professional development for social workers. Training should encompass trauma-informed facilitation, group management, grief-focused interventions, and delivery of psychoeducational and communication skills programs. Supervision and reflective practice help maintain professional competence, prevent burnout, and ensure high-quality support for military families.

By extending interventions beyond individual care to families and communities, social work can foster empathic, practical, and sustainable support systems. These strategies strengthen resilience, restore a sense of safety, and facilitate reintegration into everyday social life for combatants' wives and their families.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the psychosocial challenges experienced by wives of Ukrainian combatants and the role of immediate social networks and professionally facilitated peer support groups in mitigating distress during prolonged war. Grounded in the person-in-environment perspective and informed by psychosocial and resource-based approaches, the findings demonstrate that women's distress is not an individual deficit, but a relational and structural phenomenon shaped by chronic uncertainty, role overload, social isolation, and cumulative resource depletion.

Immediate social networks occupy an ambivalent position. While they are accessible and potentially powerful sources of support, they are often weakened by stigma, misunderstanding, and the inability of close others to tolerate complex emotional experiences. Social withdrawal may be adaptive in the short term, but prolonged isolation can exacerbate loneliness and undermine well-being, underscoring the need to deliberately strengthen supportive communication in everyday relational contexts.

Professionally facilitated peer support groups serve as reconstructed micro-environments, temporarily compensating for disrupted networks. By providing safety, normalization, shared meaning, and horizontal peer relationships, groups restore person-environment fit, enable women to process distress, rebuild agency, and reconnect socially. The emergence of

informal peer-to-peer networks indicates their potential to generate sustainable social resources embedded in everyday life.

Theoretically, this study extends the person-in-environment framework to conditions of prolonged conflict and ambiguous loss, conceptualizing support groups as intentional relational environments that mobilize resources and foster resilience. In practice, the findings point to the need for multi-layered psychosocial support systems that integrate group-based interventions with efforts to strengthen immediate social environments, including communication training and facilitator support.

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Supporting combatants' wives is not a secondary task but a core component of societal resilience. Strengthening immediate social networks alongside professional interventions is essential for mitigating chronic distress, restoring relational resources, and enabling families to move from survival toward sustainable adaptation and recovery.

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Chapter 8

Social Work Strategies for Supporting Women Facing Multi-Dimensional Poverty in Ukraine

Tetyana SEMIGINA, Natalya DMYTRYSHYNA

Abstract

In a country navigating war, economic instability, and entrenched social inequalities, empowering women to break the cycle of poverty is both urgent and transformative. This chapter examines an economic empowerment programme for disadvantaged women in Ukraine, implemented by the international organization Pact in 2013–2016 and renewed in 2020–2025. Grounded in Pact’s Livelihoods approach and the developmental concept of social work, it delivers tailored interventions that align with the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goal 1: No Poverty. Initially targeting HIV-positive mothers with low income, it now reaches other socially vulnerable groups of women. Combining strengths-based group work, individual case management, vocational training, and small business start-up support, the programme demonstrates how context-specific, evidence-informed social work can foster social inclusion, sustainable livelihoods, and offer globally relevant lessons from Ukraine’s experience in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

Key words: *economic empowerment, multi-dimensional poverty, social work interventions, women’s empowerment, strengths-based practice, livelihoods approach, Ukraine.*

INTRODUCTION

Poverty remains one of the most persistent and complex global challenges, manifesting not only as a lack of income but also through limited access to education, healthcare, and social protection. Its impacts are deeply gendered and intersectional: women, particularly those from marginalized communities, are disproportionately affected due to structural inequalities, discrimination, and unequal access to resources and opportunities (UN Women, 2025). Eliminating poverty is therefore central to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, particularly *SDG 1: No Poverty*, which calls for the eradication of extreme poverty in all its forms, and *SDG 5: Gender Equality*, which emphasizes the empowerment of women and girls as a pathway to sustainable development.

Social work has a critical role to play in addressing these complex challenges, engaging with the structural, economic, and social dimensions of poverty to promote social justice, inclusion, and human rights (Lombard, 2015). In fragile and conflict-affected contexts such as Ukraine, women face overlapping vulnerabilities—including economic insecurity, gender-based violence, and limited access to education and healthcare—which reinforce cycles of social exclusion and multidimensional poverty. By applying context-sensitive approaches, social workers can help strengthen women's agency, facilitate access to resources, and support sustainable pathways out of poverty.

While state-led social protection programs provide essential relief, they often remain bureaucratic and focused on short-term material assistance. In contrast, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), often supported by international donors, have pioneered innovative, person-centered interventions that integrate psychosocial support with economic empowerment, community engagement, and skills development (Androff & Damanik, 2023). These initiatives aim to move beyond traditional welfare provision, fostering sustainable social and economic inclusion and enabling individuals to exercise agency and build resilience against structural inequalities and external shocks.

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This chapter adopts a critical social work perspective (Hafford-Letchfield, 2022; Maschi et al., 2022; Rogowski, 2013), emphasizing structural inequality, gendered dimensions of poverty, and the promotion of social justice and human rights. It examines NGO-led interventions in Ukraine that aim to enhance the economic independence and social resilience of women experiencing multidimensional poverty. Drawing on practical lessons from the RESPOND Project and the Women Included: Nurturing Growth and Security (WINGS) initiative, the chapter illustrates how integrated social work interventions can support empowerment, social inclusion, and sustainable livelihoods.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, it provides an overview of the Ukrainian socio-economic context and the

realities faced by women living in multidimensional poverty. Second, it presents the development and theoretical foundations of the economic empowerment interventions for women. Third, it details the implementation, and core components of the RESPOND and WINGS programs. Finally, it discusses lessons learned and implications for social work practice in Ukraine and internationally.

■ UKRAINIAN CONTEXT: THE SOCIOECONOMIC REALITIES OF WOMEN

The socioeconomic realities of women in Ukraine have been shaped by the country's long and complex transition from a socialist planned to a market economy, characterized by recurring political instability, social inequality, and a weak system of social protection. Ukraine continues to face economic disparities, regional development gaps, and marginalized communities (State Statistics Service of Ukraine, 2021). In 2020, the national poverty rate was 7.1% (Macrotrends, 2023), while the *Human Development Index* (HDI) stood at 0.773, ranking the country 88th out of 189 nations (UNDP, 2022).

Ukraine adopted the *Law on Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men* in 2005, which established the formal basis for gender equality. However, the law has largely remained declarative, with limited enforcement mechanisms

and insufficient integration into sectoral policies. According to the Gender Inequality Index, Ukraine ranked 60th out of 160 countries in 2019 (UNDP, 2019). Progress toward gender equality has been gradual, driven mainly by greater participation of women in political and economic life. For instance, women constituted only 5% of the members of the Ukrainian Parliament in 2002, but this share increased to 20.8% (88 out of 423 deputies) by 2019. Women's labor market participation remains lower than men's (46.7% vs. 62.8%), and the gender pay gap stands at 21.2%.

According to *the Global Gender Gap Index* (World Economic Forum, 2019) Ukraine ranked 59th in 2019, reflecting persistent disparities in economic participation and opportunities, despite advances in education and political representation. Underlying gender inequalities in Ukraine are often perpetuated by hidden discrimination and entrenched patriarchal norms, which shape societal expectations and practical behaviors. Research indicates that women disproportionately bear the burden of unpaid domestic labor, a phenomenon widely regarded as "normal" within the society (Bardina & Martsenyuk, 2014; Malysh, 2018).

Studies by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) also document the widespread prevalence of violence against girls and women in Ukraine, further exacerbating social and economic vulnerabilities (Volosevych et al., 2014). Such gender-based violence reinforces cycles of marginalization and

highlights the urgency of interventions that combine protection, empowerment, and social support.

The presence of additional dimensions of vulnerability, such as disability, HIV status, or internally displaced person (IDP) status, intensifies discrimination and social exclusion. Surveys conducted in Ukraine indicate that over one-third of women living with HIV have experienced physical or sexual violence from a partner, with nearly half receiving no support following these incidents (Zeziulin et al., 2024). The primary barriers to seeking help include internalized stigma and previous experiences of discrimination.

These women also face challenges in accessing the labor market, further limiting their economic opportunities. Similar patterns of vulnerability are observed among women in rural areas, highlighting the compounded effects of geographic, social, and economic marginalization (Kochubey et al., 2025).

These structural and cultural barriers reinforce women's economic dependence and limit their opportunities for social and professional advancement, highlighting the need for gender-sensitive and empowerment-focused social work interventions. While Ukraine's social service system has remained largely paternalistic and reactive, emphasizing material assistance ("packages for children," humanitarian aid) rather than empowerment or long-term inclusion, NGOs have pioneered innovative, developmental approaches that

integrate psychosocial support, skills development, and economic strengthening.

The decentralization reform initiated in 2014 further transformed the institutional landscape of social service provision. While it aimed to bring services closer to communities, many local governments lacked resources and qualified personnel to effectively manage social programs, leading to significant regional disparities.

Since 2022, the full-scale Russian invasion has exacerbated pre-existing socioeconomic inequalities. Millions of women have faced displacement, job loss, and increased caregiving responsibilities (Semigina et al., 2025). At the same time, women's leadership in volunteering, mutual aid, and community resilience has underscored their vital role in Ukraine's societal recovery.

In this complex context, gender-responsive and empowerment-oriented social work interventions are essential. While state-run programs continue to prioritize emergency assistance, NGOs have developed holistic models that move beyond short-term relief toward sustainable social and economic inclusion. These initiatives integrate psychosocial support, livelihood development, and community engagement, demonstrating the potential for social work to strengthen agency, resilience, and well-being among women facing multidimensional poverty.

This chapter now proceeds to examine two such initiatives – the RESPOND Project (2013–2016) and the Women Included: Nurturing Growth and Security (WINGS) project (2020–2025) – illustrating how theory-informed, practice-driven interventions can translate into meaningful empowerment and social inclusion in the Ukrainian context.

■ THE INTERVENTION DESIGN

The overall design of the *Studio of Opportunities* intervention integrates **developmental social work, feminist, and strengths-based** approaches to promote women’s self-reliance and social inclusion.

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The model is structured around a sequence of empowerment processes that begin with **economic literacy and confidence-building**, followed by **group support, skills training**, and **access to seed funding** for microenterprise development.

Figure 8.1 presents a visual summary of this conceptual model, illustrating how these interconnected components contribute to **multidimensional empowerment outcomes** in fragile and war-affected contexts.

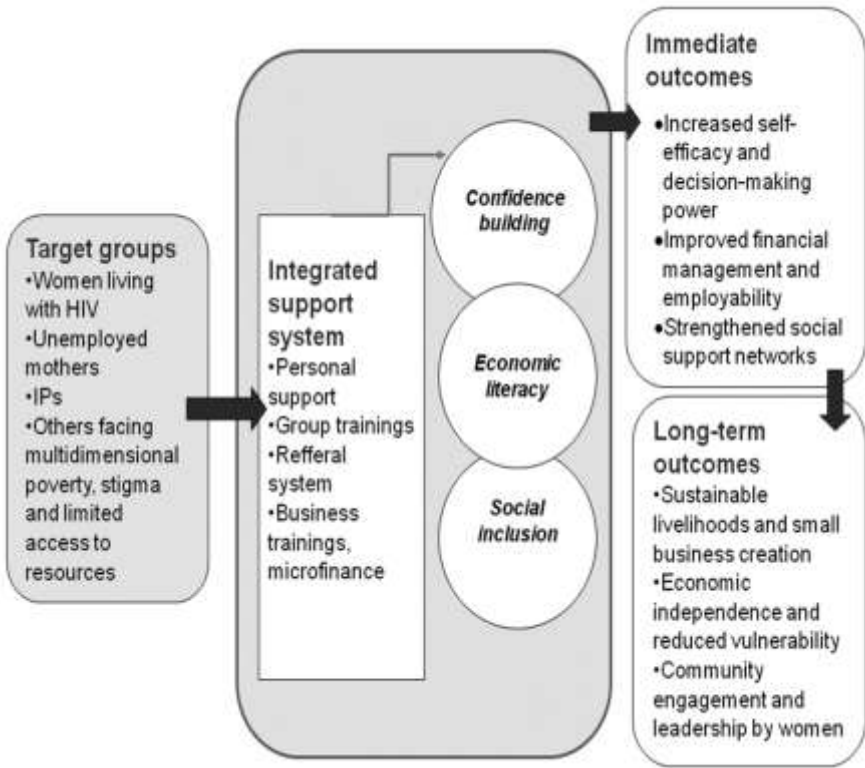


Figure 8.1. Conceptual model of the *Studio of Opportunities* intervention in Ukraine

At the core of the intervention lies *Developmental Social Work (DSW)*, a perspective that positions poverty alleviation and social inclusion as central goals of the profession (Midgley, 2010).

DSW has emerged as a paradigm that positions social work at the intersection of social justice, human development, and poverty alleviation. Originally conceptualized in the Global South, particularly in Africa and Asia, DSW responds to the limitations of residual welfare models and seeks to integrate social and economic strategies into professional practice (Grey, 2016; Midgley, 2010). Its central premise is that poverty is not only a matter of individual deprivation but also the outcome of structural inequalities that require both empowerment of marginalized populations and systemic reform.

Unlike remedial or therapeutic models that primarily address immediate needs, DSW adopts a proactive and future-oriented stance. It emphasizes capacity building, participation, and productive inclusion as vehicles for sustainable change (Gray, 2023). Social workers are not confined to the role of crisis responders but are instead positioned as development actors who design and implement interventions that strengthen human capital, enhance livelihoods, and contribute to inclusive social and economic policies.

Key principles of DSW include (Gray, 2016, 2023; Mendes, 2021; Midgley, 2010):

1. *Integration of social and economic objectives* – social work interventions link welfare, skills development, and access to resources to create sustainable opportunities.
2. *Strengths-based and participatory practice* – DSW emphasizes clients' inherent capabilities and collective

action, fostering empowerment through structured group work, participatory decision-making, and community engagement.

3. *Alignment with social development and policy frameworks* – DSW situates social work within larger developmental agendas, including social investment, social protection, and human rights-based approaches.

The relevance of DSW in fragile and transitional contexts is particularly significant. In countries experiencing conflict, weak institutions, or economic instability, traditional welfare mechanisms are often insufficient or absent. Here, DSW offers a framework for social workers to address not only psychosocial needs but also to foster resilience through livelihood opportunities, skills training, and community development. Evidence from diverse contexts demonstrates that interventions guided by DSW can contribute to poverty reduction, gender equity, and long-term social inclusion (Patel & Midgley, 2023).

In Ukraine, where social services have historically been underfunded and fragmented, and where the war has intensified poverty and social exclusion, the developmental orientation provides a particularly useful lens. By adopting DSW principles, programmes such for disadvantaged women integrate psychosocial support with economic empowerment, thereby aligning micro-level interventions with macro-level

objectives of sustainable development and poverty alleviation on the community level .

The second theoretical pillar underpinning the intervention is the *Feminist Social Work (FSW)* approach, which emphasizes the gendered dimensions of poverty, social exclusion, and power relations. Feminist social work highlights how structural inequalities, social norms, and discrimination intersect to create unique vulnerabilities for women, particularly those facing multiple forms of marginalization, such as survivors of domestic violence, women living with disabilities, or women affected by conflict (Dominelli, 2002; Rees & Pease, 2008).

FSW foregrounds empowerment, agency, and participatory practice, advocating for interventions that recognize women as active agents capable of shaping their own lives (Maschi et al., 2022). In the Pact programme, this translated into a primary focus on enhancing women's economic well-being, combining psychosocial support with skills development and practical opportunities to improve livelihoods. Many participants were supported to develop their own small businesses, enabling them to achieve greater financial independence and stability.

Importantly, the intervention in Ukraine was designed and implemented *by women for women*: all programme managers, trainers, and group-work facilitators were women. This gender-congruent model not only aligned with feminist principles of solidarity and shared experience but also

strengthened trust, safety, and relational engagement within the programme.

Key principles of the Feminist Social Work approach relevant to this programme include:

1. *Gender-aware analysis of poverty and vulnerability* – recognizing how economic, social, and cultural factors intersect with gender to exacerbate disadvantage.
2. *Empowerment and capacity building* – supporting women to gain skills, confidence, and decision-making power, particularly in the economic domain.
3. *Advocacy and social change orientation* – interventions extend beyond individual support to include advocacy for structural changes, policy reform, and social justice (Dominelli, 2002).
4. *Intersectionality* – attention to overlapping identities and vulnerabilities, such as ethnicity, disability, HIV status, or experiences of incarceration, ensures that interventions are tailored and inclusive (Crenshaw, 1989; Frontline AIDS, 2021; Hankivsky, 2012).

By explicitly combining feminist principles with developmental and strengths-based approaches, the intervention in Ukraine enabled women not only to increase their income and financial security but also to exercise agency in economic, social, and personal spheres. The integration of gender-sensitive empowerment with economic development

illustrates how social work can facilitate sustainable livelihoods, social inclusion, and transformative change in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

The Strengths-Based Approach (SBA) serves as the third theoretical foundation for the intervention. Rooted in positive psychology and social work theory, it shifts the focus from individuals' problems and deficits to their resources, capacities, and potential (Saleebey, 2006; Stoliaryk & Semigina, 2022). Rather than defining clients through their challenges, SBA emphasizes collaboration, empowerment, and recognition of existing competencies as the foundation for change.

In social work, the approach was notably advanced through Rapp's (1997) *Strengths Model* of case management, which demonstrated that identifying and mobilizing clients' strengths enhances motivation, resilience, and self-determination. SBA views individuals not as passive recipients of aid but as active participants in shaping their own development. This orientation is closely aligned with Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy – the belief in one's ability to achieve desired outcomes – and with goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2013), both of which emphasize agency and intentional progress toward self-defined goals.

From a broader theoretical standpoint, empowerment is a key underpinning of the strengths-based approach. As Joseph (2020) argues, empowerment theory serves as a countermeasure to traditional practice models that positioned

practitioners as experts and clients as dependent recipients of services. Instead, empowerment reframes the helping relationship as a partnership, enabling individuals and communities to influence their own lives. Workers at all levels of intervention (micro, mezzo, and macro) can employ empowerment-oriented strategies to promote self-determination, collective agency, and structural change.

In the Ukrainian programme implemented by Pact, the strengths-based approach was reflected in both group work and individual case management. Participants were encouraged to identify personal strengths, prior experiences, and aspirations that could support their economic independence. Through structured exercises, peer support, and coaching, women built confidence, set achievable goals, and developed vocational or entrepreneurial plans – often leading to the creation of small businesses. This approach proved particularly effective in promoting self-efficacy and long-term empowerment, helping participants to see themselves not as victims of circumstance but as capable agents of change.

The fourth pillar is the **Pact's Livelihoods approach**. This approach was grounded in the broader framework of the *Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA)*, first developed in the United Kingdom in the 1990s and later adapted worldwide (Knutsson, 2006). This framework recognizes that poverty is multidimensional and that sustainable development requires

strengthening the diverse resources—or assets—that individuals and households possess. These resources extend beyond income to include human, social, natural, physical, and financial assets, which together shape people's capacity to secure livelihoods and achieve well-being.

Within this framework, five key asset types are typically distinguished:

1. *Human capital* – health, education, skills, and personal capacities;
2. *Social capital* – networks, trust, and collective support structures;
3. *Financial capital* – savings, earnings, credit, or business profits;
4. *Natural capital* – land, water, and other environmental resources;
5. *Physical capital* – tools, equipment, and infrastructure access (Pact, 2009).

These assets are interrelated, and the development of one can reinforce others, enabling individuals to navigate risks and pursue sustainable livelihoods. In social work practice, assessing this “asset portfolio” helps practitioners design tailored interventions that strengthen existing capacities while addressing vulnerabilities.

Pact has long operationalized this holistic perspective through its *WORTH model*, a globally recognized community-based

savings and lending initiative. Since the 1990s, WORTH has reached more than one million women in sixteen countries, combining **group-based microfinance** with literacy, numeracy, and entrepreneurship training (Pact, 2022). WORTH groups, typically composed of 20–25 members, form small community banks that pool regular savings, provide short-term low-interest loans, and offer peer-based capacity-building. These groups empower women, particularly those in rural or marginalized communities, to diversify income sources, build assets, and strengthen their decision-making roles within families and communities. Over time, WORTH groups self-replicate, creating new member networks and amplifying local resilience. The model has proven effective not only in poverty alleviation but also in fostering leadership, agency, and social solidarity—principles central to feminist and developmental social work.

Empirical evidence supports the positive outcomes of Pact's livelihood interventions. For example, a study in Myanmar found that participation in Pact's microfinance programmes significantly improved rural households' economic stability and income diversification (Tun, 2015). Similarly, research in environmental and conservation contexts highlights that alternative livelihood strategies contribute to community resilience and people-centred development when integrated into broader social or ecological initiatives (Yanggen, 2006). At the same time, critical analyses of post-conflict assistance underscore that livelihood programming must account for

institutional fragility, gender inequalities, and the risks of reinforcing dependency (Cain et al., 2004).

Pact's Ukrainian programme reflected these global lessons by combining **individual case management** with **group interventions** that helped women map their existing assets, set economic goals, and build entrepreneurial or vocational pathways. Assessment tools identified available resources and vulnerabilities, allowing practitioners to co-develop empowerment strategies with each participant. Through coaching, peer support, and small business training, women strengthened self-efficacy, diversified livelihoods, and enhanced resilience to shocks such as displacement, loss of income, and conflict-related stress.

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By emphasizing asset development and community empowerment, Pact's Livelihoods Approach aligns with **strengths-based and developmental paradigms** in social work. It demonstrates that breaking cycles of poverty requires integrated, context-sensitive interventions that enhance multiple forms of capital and enable participants to pursue self-defined goals—turning empowerment into a sustainable practice of agency and inclusion.

Together, these four conceptual pillars created a **comprehensive framework** in which social work practice was aimed at allowing participants to achieve both immediate improvements in economic well-being and longer-term social inclusion.

■ THE INTERVENTION IMPLEMENTATION AND RESULTS

The 2013-2016 Project

Between **2013 and 2016**, within the framework of the **five-year USAID RESPOND Project** implemented by *Pact*, an innovative intervention known as the *Studio of Opportunities* was developed and piloted in Ukraine. Conceived through collaboration between Ukrainian and international experts, the intervention was grounded in empirical evidence derived from an **assessment of the living conditions of people living with HIV**, which revealed the particular vulnerability of women facing the combined challenges of poverty, stigma, and limited access to employment and healthcare (Galchynska & Semigina, 2017; Semigina & Tymoshenko, 2016).

The programme adopted a livelihoods-based and empowerment-oriented approach that integrated case management, group work, and individual support. It reflects some international experience as well (Dworkin & Blankenship, 2009).

The intervention targeted women aged over 18 years, primarily mothers of young children, who were unemployed or in precarious work, living in poverty, and often struggling with adherence to antiretroviral therapy (ART). Four HIV service organizations participated in piloting the model – in Dnipro, Poltava, Cherkasy, and Chernihiv – with a total of 202

women enrolled, exceeding the initial target of 200. The majority of participants were over 30 years old, with only 6% under 25 and none younger than 21.

Baseline assessments confirmed a generally low level of material well-being among participants. Only 3% reported relatively high levels of financial assets, while 45% indicated moderate and 52% low levels. According to self-evaluation, about half of the women were unemployed by the international criteria, though only a few were officially registered as such due to administrative barriers. Seventeen percent had temporary jobs, and roughly one-third were on childcare leave. None of the participants reported a high standard of living; nearly 60% stated that their income was sufficient only for food and basic necessities, a level considered indicative of poverty and social vulnerability.

Despite limited material assets, participants demonstrated higher levels of social and personal assets. Around one-quarter reported high and another quarter moderate social assets, reflecting family and community support. Personal assets – encompassing health, education, motivation, and self-efficacy – were even stronger: about half of the women rated them as high. Educationally, 39% of participants had completed technical or higher education, 33% had vocational training, and only 4% had not completed secondary school, indicating substantial human capital despite economic hardship. In terms of health behavior, 13% had just started ART, 24% had

experienced treatment interruptions, and 63% reported problems with timely medication adherence prior to joining the intervention.

Nearly one-fifth of participants (19%) had never previously accessed services from the implementing HIV-service organization, and a further 14% had long discontinued contact. This indicates that the *Studio of Opportunities* model successfully reached both new and previously disengaged clients, thus expanding access to support for underserved groups. The typical participant could therefore be characterized as a woman over 30, living in economic hardship, raising one or two young children, and possessing modest material but relatively strong social and personal resources – a profile that reflected the complex interplay between vulnerability and resilience in this population.

The intervention combined group-based learning with individual support and referrals.

Each participant was supported by a multidisciplinary team that facilitated access to social, psychological, and health services. Case management was built on empowerment and strengths-based principles that emphasized recognition of clients' resources rather than deficits, voluntary participation, and joint goal setting. Practitioners acted as facilitators of change rather than gatekeepers of assistance, enabling women to regain agency over their lives. This orientation was reflected

in the project's terminology, which deliberately replaced the traditional notion of a "client" with that of a "participant."

The group component of the intervention was implemented through the "90 Days" methodology—a structured training programme that guided women through self-exploration, resource mapping, and skill development. The course consisted of *twelve interactive sessions*, each dedicated to specific life domains:

1. *My Life Goals* – introductions, establishing group rules, "Life Wheel" exercise to assess satisfaction and set near-term goals.
2. *My Next Steps* – goal formulation, positive thinking, affirmations, time-management skills, journaling, and bonus/reward system for consistent behavior.
3. *My Communication* – addressing stereotypes and obstacles in communication, exercises for building rapport.
4. *My Budget* – family budget planning, basic savings, expense planning, "Four Envelopes" exercise, record-keeping tips.
5. *My Support System* – mapping personal and family support networks ("My Circles of Support"), weekly budgeting and journal review.
6. *My Health* – healthy lifestyle and personal responsibility for health.

7. *My Conflict Behavior* – “Iceberg” exercise, family conflicts, and strategies for conflict resolution.
8. *My Relationship with My Child* – foundations of parenting competence.
9. *My Additional Resources* – family budget analysis, identifying extra household resources, business plan development.
10. *My Employment Skills* – job search, employment precautions, resume writing.
11. *My Rights* – family law, marital and parental rights and responsibilities, legal consequences of divorce, alimony, and property division.
12. *My Achievements and Plans* – motivational session reviewing progress, assessing new knowledge and skills, and encouraging continued positive change.

This 12-session programme, delivered over two hours per session, serves as a step-by-step tool for developing relevant knowledge, skills, and competencies, combining personal reflection, practical exercises, and applied learning to support long-term behavioral and economic change.

Participants were encouraged to define personal goals, assess progress through self-evaluation tools, and develop realistic plans for economic improvement. The participatory design, including weekly reflection and peer reporting, fostered mutual support and sustained motivation.

If a woman expressed interest, she could participate in short business training or brief vocational courses (such as hairdressing, manicure, etc.) and receive a small financial grant to start her own business. Case managers also collaborated with local employment services and vocational training centers to help women find suitable job placements or further education opportunities.

The entire process lasted approximately six months, including an intensive three-month training phase, with regular monitoring and individual follow-up. A referral mechanism connected participants to additional legal, medical, or social services beyond the project's scope, ensuring comprehensive and sustainable support.

Evaluation data from the pilot confirmed notable progress across multiple dimensions. In Cherkasy, for example, 24 of 50 participants enrolled in professional training courses (hairdressing, accounting, manicure, etc.), while 20 women launched small businesses and 22 gained formal employment by the end of the intervention. Across regions, participants reported restored family relations, debt restructuring, and the initiation of self-employment activities such as tailoring and repair services. One participant secured a position as a social worker in a homeless adaptation center, illustrating the programme's potential for social mobility and professional reintegration (Galchynska & Semigina, 2017).

Research findings (Barska et al., 2017) from an independent research institution demonstrated that the implementation of the intervention positively impacted participants' lives in multiple ways.

So, the initial version of *Studio of Opportunities* demonstrated that empowerment-oriented, context-sensitive interventions can yield tangible results in resource-limited settings. By strengthening personal agency, improving health adherence, and building pathways to economic independence, the model advanced a shift in Ukrainian social work practice from paternalistic assistance toward a developmental, participatory, and gender-responsive approach. The integration of psychosocial and livelihood components proved essential to promoting sustainable change, highlighting the importance of combining individual strengths with structural support mechanisms in addressing the multifaceted vulnerabilities of women living with HIV.

The 2020–2025 Project

Building on the earlier success of the *Studio of Opportunities*, in 2020 the approach was adapted and scaled up under the **WINGS Project (Women Included: Nurturing Growth and Security)**, implemented by Pact with the support of a new donor. While the project benefited from a larger budget, expanded geography, and a broader target audience, its conceptual foundations and key implementing partners

remained the same. The adaptation aimed to strengthen women's economic security and resilience, particularly in rural areas and small towns of Ukraine, while preserving the motivational and empowerment-based structure of the original *Studio of Opportunities* programme.

The WINGS Project operated in 23 communities across Kyiv, Poltava, Lviv, and Kharkiv regions, reaching 3,423 women, of whom 2,711 participated in the *Studio of Opportunities* motivational programme and 2,369 completed it. The project's primary target groups included women from rural and small urban areas with unstable incomes; women with viable business ideas seeking to scale their ventures; and local stakeholders such as employment service officers and representatives of local authorities. Implementation was supported by leading civil society organizations – *Convictus Ukraine*, *Light of Hope*, *Walnut House Foundation*, and the Swedish-Ukrainian IT school *Beetroot Academy* – with resource partnerships involving the *Astarta-Kyiv* agricultural holding, *TAS Agro*, and *ING Bank Ukraine*.

The intervention retained its central three-pillar approach:

- (1) providing direct support to women through motivational and skills-development programmes and facilitating access to financial resources for entrepreneurship;

- (2) building enabling community environments for women's economic empowerment through awareness-raising and engagement of local stakeholders; and
- (3) strengthening the institutional capacity of partner organizations to implement women's livelihood programmes and deliver technical assistance to others.

The *Studio of Opportunities* programme was restructured into five group modules and four individual sessions, incorporating proven tools from the earlier model—such as the *Wheel of Life* exercise, goal-setting techniques, affirmation practices, and goal achievement cards—while adding new thematic modules on *Stress and Self-Help* and *Nurturing Mental Health*. These additions reflected both contextual needs and lessons learned, recognizing the importance of psychosocial resilience and mental well-being for sustainable empowerment. The new modules followed a flexible delivery format, allowing trainers to sequence them according to participants' readiness and local conditions.

At the community level, WINGS placed particular emphasis on fostering supportive and inclusive environments. Public events, local fairs, and interregional networking meetings promoted gender equality, entrepreneurship, and women's visibility within their communities. Importantly, the programme leveraged in-kind contributions from local administrations, which provided premises free of charge for training activities. This collaboration not only strengthened

community ownership but also enhanced women's social recognition and public engagement.

Evaluation data attest to the significant outcomes achieved. Ninety-three percent of women reported increased confidence in setting and achieving financial goals; 96% improved their knowledge and employability skills; and 94% expressed confidence in their ability to find employment after completing the training. Among participants who undertook employment training, 50% became employed, while 59% of those who joined entrepreneurship courses started or expanded their businesses. Nearly 60% of women reported having a stable income sufficient to maintain a decent standard of living within 11 months after completing the programme. Moreover, 99.8% indicated that they would recommend the programme to others.

Beyond individual achievements, WINGS strengthened cooperation between civil society, business, and local governments, engaging private sector partners such as *ING Bank* and *TAS Agro* in financing and mentorship. The project also helped to institutionalize gender-responsive and community-based approaches to local economic development, positioning women not merely as beneficiaries but as active agents of change and contributors to local resilience (Pact, 2024; Pact, 2025).

Overall, the WINGS experience confirmed the adaptability and sustainability of Pact's livelihoods approach. The

intervention demonstrated that even in a context marked by economic instability and social inequalities, empowerment-based, asset-focused models can effectively enhance women's economic security, psychosocial well-being, and community participation. By integrating lessons from the *Studio of Opportunities* and responding to new socio-economic realities, WINGS represented an evolution from a pilot initiative to a scalable framework for inclusive development and social resilience in Ukraine.

■ DISCUSSIONS

The Ukrainian experience exemplifies how social work can enable women to move *from margins to markets* — from social exclusion and dependency toward economic participation and community leadership — through integrated, empowerment-oriented interventions aimed at reducing multidimensional poverty. In this context, social work operates not only as a mechanism of individual support but as a strategic instrument of social development, tackling structural barriers that perpetuate gendered and intergenerational poverty.

The *Studio of Opportunities* intervention offers valuable insights into the practical application of gender-responsive and community-driven livelihood models in a post-crisis and transitional context. As highlighted in the theoretical framework, sustainable livelihood programs are most effective when they combine access to economic resources with the

strengthening of social capital, human capabilities, and collective agency (Cain et al., 2004; Tun, 2015). The design and evolution of the *Studio of Opportunities* and *WINGS* projects clearly illustrate this multidimensional approach to poverty reduction.

A key strength of this approach lies in its *integration of livelihoods and empowerment components* consistent with Pact's broader WORTH model (Pact, 2022). The program's structure — combining financial literacy, vocational skills, and psychosocial support — helped women recognize and mobilize their own capacities, building self-efficacy and confidence. This multidimensional focus proved particularly effective for women living with HIV and other socially disadvantaged groups, who were often excluded from formal employment or credit systems. The intervention thus confirmed a global trend observed in similar contexts, where economic empowerment initiatives for women affected by HIV or poverty contribute not only to improved financial outcomes but also to greater treatment adherence, wellbeing, and social participation (Nadkarni et al., 2019; Gopalakrishnan et al., 2025; Boadi et al., 2025).

The *Studio of Opportunities* curriculum, through its modular and reflective structure, aligns with evidence suggesting that combining economic skills with psychosocial support and awareness of rights enhances women's long-term agency, resilience, and capacity to exit poverty (Yanggen, 2006). It re-

flects concepts of critical social work paradigm (Rogowski, 2013).

Another strength is the *adaptability of the model*. During crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's full-scale invasion, the intervention was adjusted to maintain continuity through flexible formats and a strengthened stress-management component. Adjustments such as stress-management sessions, blended learning formats, and express trainings allowed for continuity and responsiveness to changing realities.

In 2025, the *Studio of Opportunities* model was further adapted for women veterans—those who had served in the military, sustained injuries, completed rehabilitation, and sought to return to active social and economic life. Implemented by the NGO *Convictus*, a former partner of the WINGS Project (2020–2025), this adaptation demonstrated the model's capacity to address the needs of a new, rapidly growing group of women whose reintegration requires tailored, gender-transformative support. The initiative attracted support from several foreign banks operating in Ukraine, underscoring both its credibility and the recognition of women veterans as a priority group for reintegration.

These modifications not only reflect operational resilience but also embody context-specific (Healy, 2022), strengths-based (Saleebey, 2006; Stoliaryk & Semigina, 2022), and **feminist** principles, ensuring that interventions remain person-

centered, equity-oriented, and capable of challenging structural inequalities even under extreme conditions.

Third, *systemic engagement with local communities and multiple stakeholders* proved a decisive factor in achieving sustainable outcomes. Collaboration with local authorities, employment centers, and private sector partners (such as TAS Agro, ING Bank, and EY) helped to build an enabling ecosystem for women's economic participation. This approach echoes the people-centered development model (Cain et al., 2004), which emphasizes that post-crisis recovery and sustainable livelihoods depend on local ownership, intersectoral cooperation, and the reinforcement of community networks. Notably, the active involvement of community leaders and the use of municipal spaces for project activities strengthened trust, visibility, and social cohesion at the local level—key preconditions for poverty reduction at the community scale.

Fourth, the unexpected emergence of informal women's networks – alumni associations that continue to function independently – underscores the intervention's social sustainability. These self-organized groups not only facilitate ongoing peer learning and mutual support but also engage in civic initiatives, including charitable work and advocacy for women's rights. This outcome exemplifies the concept of *empowerment spillover*, where individual transformation translates into collective agency and community resilience,

reinforcing the social fabric essential for inclusive development.

However, the intervention also has certain limitations. The model's dependence on external funding and partnerships raises questions about long-term sustainability once donor support declines. The program's reach, though impactful, remained limited relative to the scale of gendered poverty nationwide. In several regions, broader systemic barriers – such as regional labor market disparities, caregiving burdens, and policy inconsistencies – constrained women's economic inclusion. Addressing these gaps requires stronger institutional anchoring, stable national funding, and coordinated intersectoral efforts to sustain and scale such approaches.

Moreover, the intervention presupposes participants' readiness for change and motivation to engage in economic and personal transformation. It does not include a preparatory or motivational phase for women with deep psychosocial distress or prolonged traumatic experiences, nor does it provide long-term therapeutic support. As a result, the program is most effective for women who have already achieved a certain level of stability and are ready to rebuild their livelihoods, rather than those in acute crisis or requiring intensive psychological rehabilitation. Addressing this gap may require complementary interventions that combine

motivational, psychosocial, and economic components in a sequenced manner.

From a practice perspective, several lessons emerge for future scaling. It is crucial to maintain participatory needs assessments in each community, ensure leadership engagement from the outset, and secure resources for business start-up and expansion. The introduction of business accelerator programs for project graduates could further enhance post-training outcomes and promote local entrepreneurship as a sustainable poverty reduction mechanism. Moreover, the model's structure allows for adaptation to new target groups, including veterans and internally displaced persons, whose reintegration into the labor market remains a national priority in Ukraine's recovery.

Overall, the Ukrainian case validates theoretical propositions that poverty reduction requires moving beyond microfinance to embrace integrated, empowerment-oriented, and community-based strategies. By aligning economic opportunity with psychosocial support, local engagement, and gender equality, the *Studio of Opportunities* approach demonstrates how social work can function as a driver of inclusive recovery, social justice, and resilience in fragile and post-conflict settings. It thus reaffirms the transformative role of social work in addressing structural poverty — not merely by mitigating its consequences but by enabling women to

claim agency, rebuild livelihoods, and participate fully in economic and civic life.

POLICY AND SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

The experience of implementing the *Studio of Opportunities* model in Ukraine offers several insights for policy design and sustainability planning in poverty reduction and gender-responsive programming. It illustrates that successful interventions for women facing multidimensional poverty must go beyond temporary economic relief and embed empowerment within broader institutional, community, and policy frameworks. Sustainable change requires that social work interventions function not as isolated projects but as integrated components of local development systems.

At the policy level, the intervention's outcomes underscore the importance of aligning local social initiatives with national strategies on poverty reduction, gender equality, and community development. Ukraine's ongoing decentralization reform and the establishment of community-based social service centers created both opportunities and challenges for such integration. On one hand, decentralization enhanced local autonomy and responsiveness to community needs; on the other, it exposed gaps in local capacity and uneven resource distribution. The *Studio of Opportunities* model demonstrated how partnerships between NGOs, municipal authorities, and private actors can mitigate these gaps by

pooling expertise, infrastructure, and funding. Institutionalizing such cross-sectoral collaboration within municipal planning processes could enhance both efficiency and sustainability.

A crucial lesson from the intervention relates to the role of social work in fostering long-term empowerment. Policies that view social workers merely as service providers risk overlooking their strategic potential as agents of social innovation and local development. The *Studio of Opportunities* case shows that social workers can facilitate participatory needs assessments, build trust between women and institutions, and help link micro-level empowerment with macro-level policy goals. Therefore, strengthening the professional capacity of social workers—through continuous education, supervision, and inclusion in policy planning—is essential for maintaining the quality and sustainability of similar interventions.

The model's success relied heavily on case managers' ability to build trust, assess needs, and coordinate individualized plans. Institutionalizing trauma-informed, empowerment-based, and community-driven methods in social work education and training programs will ensure continuity of quality and approach. Policy frameworks should thus recognize social workers as *agents of change* within local economic development — not merely as welfare administrators. Establishing interdisciplinary learning platforms where social workers,

educators, and employment specialists exchange experiences would further consolidate this professional base.

Sustainability also depends on the continuity of economic support mechanisms beyond the project cycle. While the provision of seed funding and training catalyzed women's entrepreneurial activities, ensuring access to credit, mentorship, and market linkages remains a policy priority. The creation of municipal or regional "business acceleration hubs" for women graduates could serve as a bridge between social support and economic development programs. Embedding such mechanisms in local budgets would allow communities to sustain outcomes independently of external donors.

From a governance perspective, the model demonstrates that empowerment-oriented interventions must be institutionalized through multi-level coordination. This entails aligning social service delivery, employment programs, and gender equality initiatives within a unified policy framework. For example, integrating social entrepreneurship components into national poverty reduction strategies could facilitate replication of the *Studio of Opportunities* approach in other regions. Similarly, the development of national guidelines for trauma-informed and gender-sensitive community interventions would help standardize good practices identified through this initiative.

Another important implication concerns monitoring and evaluation (M&E). Sustainability cannot be achieved without systematic assessment of both short- and long-term outcomes. The use of participatory M&E tools—where women themselves contribute to defining success indicators—can help ensure that interventions remain responsive to changing realities. At the same time, data collection on employment trajectories, social participation, and well-being can inform future policy adjustments and funding priorities.

Finally, the Ukrainian experience highlights the necessity of embedding resilience thinking into program and policy design. As demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic and the full-scale Russian invasion, adaptive capacity is critical to maintaining service continuity under crisis conditions. Policies that encourage flexibility, community-led decision-making, and psychosocial support components can increase systemic resilience and prevent regression into poverty.

In sum, the *Studio of Opportunities* model provides an actionable framework for integrating social work, gender equity, and economic development within national poverty reduction efforts. Its sustainability depends on institutionalization at the community level, stable financial mechanisms, and ongoing professional capacity-building. For policymakers, the key challenge is to ensure that the principles of empowerment, inclusiveness, and local ownership that defined this intervention are not confined to isolated projects

but embedded into the architecture of Ukraine's post-war social and economic reconstruction.

■ CONCLUSIONS

The Ukrainian experience clearly demonstrates that social work can serve as a transformative force in reducing multidimensional poverty and promoting gender equality. By helping women move from the social and economic margins toward active participation in markets and community life, integrated, empowerment-oriented interventions illustrate how social work bridges personal change and structural reform.

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The *Studio of Opportunities* intervention, rooted in Pact's livelihoods approach and aligned with the developmental and feminist perspectives in social work, confirms that sustainable poverty alleviation requires more than economic assistance. It depends on the simultaneous enhancement of human capabilities, psychosocial resilience, and collective empowerment. Combining group learning, individual case management, and access to livelihood opportunities has proven particularly effective in supporting women's self-efficacy, financial independence, and social inclusion.

The program's adaptability in crisis conditions — including the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's full-scale invasion — underscores the resilience of integrated, community-driven models. By incorporating trauma-informed and strengths-

based approaches, the intervention remained responsive to rapidly changing contexts while preserving its person-centered and equity-focused nature.

Another key lesson concerns the importance of systemic partnerships. Cooperation with local authorities, employment centers, and the private sector not only enhanced access to resources but also reinforced local ownership and sustainability. The emergence of informal women's networks and alumni associations further demonstrated the potential for empowerment to extend beyond program boundaries, generating lasting social capital and civic engagement.

Looking forward, the Ukrainian model offers relevant insights for other fragile or transitional settings. Scaling up similar interventions requires participatory assessments, continued engagement of local leadership, and investment in business development opportunities for women. Expanding the model to include other vulnerable groups — such as internally displaced persons and veterans — could contribute to inclusive recovery and national resilience.

Ultimately, this case validates the theoretical proposition that social work is indispensable to poverty reduction efforts. By integrating economic empowerment with psychosocial support, gender equity, and community engagement, social work not only mitigates poverty's symptoms but actively dismantles its structural causes. In this way, the Ukrainian experience affirms the discipline's developmental potential —

to turn empowerment into economic participation, resilience into recovery, and social work into a key actor in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

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Chapter 9

Addressing Gender-Based Violence Among Marginalized Women in Ukraine: Insights from the WINGS Intervention

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Abstract

This chapter presents the WINGS intervention, a brief, structured, and trauma-informed program designed to support marginalized women in Ukraine, including those affected by HIV, drug use, sex work, and displacement. Grounded in evidence-based theoretical frameworks addressing gender-based violence, empowerment, and social support, the intervention was carefully adapted to the Ukrainian context, considering cultural, social, and logistical factors. WINGS combines education on four forms of gender-based violence, individualized risk assessment, safety planning, social support enhancement, goal-setting, and referrals to relevant services. Delivered in both in-person and digital formats, it emphasizes client-centered principles, confidentiality, and empowerment. Quantitative outcomes demonstrated increased awareness and reporting of violence, improved self-efficacy, and enhanced perceived control over life, while qualitative findings revealed shifts in participants' recognition of abuse, strengthened social networks, and motivation to seek support.

Key words: *WINGS intervention, gender-based violence, social work, marginalized women, Ukraine, digital tools, trauma-informed care, empowerment, safety planning.*

INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a serious social problem in Ukraine, particularly among women from marginalized groups who experience multiple forms of discrimination and victimization. The ongoing armed conflict, widespread displacement, economic instability, and limited access to social and health services have further exacerbated the risk of GBV and its harmful consequences (Capasso et al., 2022). Current estimates indicate that approximately 2.4 million people in Ukraine—predominantly women and girls—require services to prevent and respond to GBV (UNFPA, 2024).

Women from marginalized populations, including those who use drugs, engage in sex work, are HIV-positive, or have been internally displaced, face particularly heightened vulnerability. They often encounter structural barriers, social stigma, and a lack of tailored support, which can prevent them from seeking help and increase their exposure to repeated episodes of violence.

In recent years, digital technologies have emerged as a promising avenue for supporting GBV prevention and response. Mobile applications, online platforms, and digital outreach tools can enhance awareness of risks, provide educational resources, facilitate confidential reporting, and improve access to services, even for women who face mobility or social barriers (Sabri et al., 2023). Integrating such tools into interventions offers potential for increasing the reach,

effectiveness, and sustainability of programs aimed at empowering marginalized women.

These circumstances underscore the urgent need for effective, contextually adapted interventions that increase awareness of GBV, strengthen coping and self-protection skills, and provide pathways to safety and empowerment. Research on interventions in high-risk and conflict-affected settings, particularly those leveraging digital tools, is still limited, making the evaluation of tailored approaches crucial for informing policy and practice in Ukraine.

The aim of this paper is to present and examine the WINGS intervention as a short-term, contextually adapted program for addressing gender-based violence among marginalized women in Ukraine. The chapter focuses on the intervention's conceptual foundations, structure, digital format, implementation process, and outcomes, drawing on quantitative and qualitative data. By analyzing the adaptation and application of WINGS in the Ukrainian context, the paper assesses its relevance, feasibility, and contribution to the development of evidence-informed and digitally supported social work practice; the insights generated also inform discussions on the use of such interventions in contexts shaped by war and prolonged crisis.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in the principles of **critical social work** and **feminist social work**, which provide a lens for understanding gender-based violence (GBV) as a phenomenon shaped by structural, social, and power inequalities rather than solely individual actions. Critical social work emphasizes how oppression, social injustice, and systemic inequalities increase vulnerability, particularly among marginalized populations such as women who use drugs, sex workers, HIV-positive women, and internally displaced women. Feminist social work complements this perspective by centering women's lived experiences, challenging patriarchal norms, and advocating for empowerment and social change (Semigina & Stoliaryk, 2025). These frameworks underscore the importance of interventions that address both immediate safety needs and structural barriers that perpetuate violence.

The WINGS intervention builds on these foundations by integrating **social learning theory**, **social-cognitive theory**, and **motivational interviewing** to support awareness, empowerment, and behavior change among marginalized women (Gilbert et al., 2017). Bandura's social-cognitive theory (1994) highlights the role of **self-efficacy**, or the belief in one's ability to influence outcomes and achieve goals, as a key mechanism for personal change. In the context of GBV, this framework explains how women can develop self-protective skills, adopt healthier relationship behaviors, and gradually

redefine themselves as agents capable of decision-making and action.

WINGS emphasizes the **strengths-based approach**, which focuses on identifying internal and external resources, capabilities for change, and prior experiences of resilience, rather than only deficits or trauma (Stoliaryk et al., 2024). The intervention promotes psychological safety, social support, recognition of women's autonomy, reduction of self-stigmatization, and the development of social connections that reinforce safe and autonomous life trajectories (Asay et al., 2016; Chandhok & Anand, 2020).

Motivational interviewing, developed by Miller and Rollnick (2013), further strengthens the theoretical foundation by framing motivation as a dynamic, often ambivalent process that benefits from empathetic guidance rather than directive instruction. This approach aligns with feminist-informed social work by positioning the practitioner as a partner in change, fostering autonomy, and supporting women in identifying and pursuing their own goals.

Core principles of motivational interviewing applied in WINGS include expressing empathy, highlighting discrepancies between current and desired states, avoiding confrontation, supporting self-efficacy, and respecting autonomy.

By integrating critical and feminist perspectives with social-cognitive and motivational frameworks, WINGS addresses both the **structural context of GBV** and the **individual pathways for empowerment**, awareness, and engagement with support networks. This theoretical foundation guided the design, implementation, and evaluation of the intervention, emphasizing the importance of fostering internal resources, social inclusion, and sustainable positive change for marginalized women in Ukraine.

To synthesize the conceptual foundations discussed above and to illustrate how the different theoretical perspectives are integrated within the WINGS intervention, **Figure 9.1** presents a visual representation of the study's theoretical framework. The diagram demonstrates the relationship between critical and feminist social work principles, the psychological and behavioral theories underpinning the intervention, and the key mechanisms through which WINGS fosters awareness, empowerment, and behavior change among marginalized women.

This visualization is intended to clarify the logic of the intervention and to show how structural and individual-level approaches are combined into a coherent, practice-oriented model.

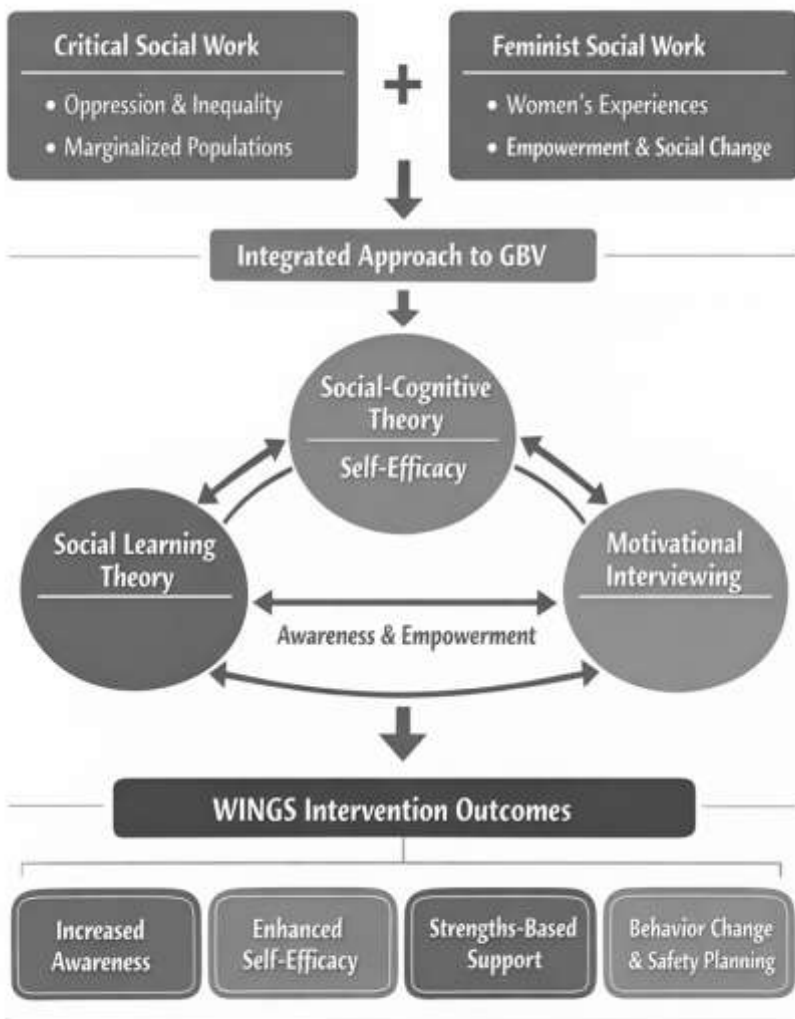


Figure 9.1. Theoretical Framework of the WING Intervention

■ THE WINGS INTERVENTION: STRUCTURE, PRINCIPLES, AND DIGITAL ADAPTATION

The WINGS intervention (Women Initiating New Goals for Safety) is an evidence-based psychosocial program developed by the research team at Columbia University to support women from marginalized groups who experience or are at risk of intimate partner violence and other forms of gender-based violence (Columbia SIG (2020). Originally designed as a facilitator-led, structured intervention, WINGS combines screening, brief motivational intervention, risk assessment, safety planning, goal setting, and referral to social and health services within a single, multi-component program. Its primary aim is to empower women to increase awareness of different types of violence, strengthen motivation for safe behavior, develop individualized safety strategies, enhance social support, and connect with relevant services.

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The intervention is guided by practical, evidence-based principles, emphasizing psychological safety, trust, and client-centeredness. Participants are encouraged to openly discuss their experiences in a supportive environment while recognizing their autonomy and decision-making capacity. WINGS also addresses self-stigmatization, promotes recognition of personal strengths, and helps women identify internal and external resources that can facilitate resilience, social inclusion, and empowerment. The intervention is designed to shift the focus from trauma alone to opportunities

for growth, self-strengthening, and active participation in shaping one's own safety and well-being.

In its original facilitator-led format, WINGS is typically delivered in one or two sessions, each following a structured sequence of stages. The first stage involves raising awareness of violence, where the facilitator engages participants in discussions about physical, psychological, sexual, economic, and coercive forms of abuse. Visual tools such as the Power and Control Wheel, developed within the Duluth Model, are used to illustrate patterns of power and control in intimate relationships, prompting reflection and dialogue. The second stage focuses on enhancing motivation for safety, with facilitators helping participants explore the impact of violence on their health and well-being, and identify personal motivations for taking protective actions. The third stage comprises screening and risk assessment, using validated instruments to evaluate experiences of violence and associated risks, followed by individualized feedback from the facilitator. During the fourth stage, participants collaboratively develop personalized safety plans using checklists and guided exercises to identify actionable strategies for preventing or responding to violent situations. The fifth stage emphasizes strengthening social support, guiding women to map supportive networks, identify key individuals, and plan steps to reinforce connections. The sixth stage focuses on setting safety goals, breaking them down into achievable steps, and planning concrete actions for implementation. The final stage

involves assessing the need for additional services and providing referrals to legal aid, healthcare, counseling, shelters, and other relevant supports. Each stage is implemented in a manner that fosters reflection, discussion, and active engagement, ensuring that participants are informed, motivated, and equipped to make decisions about their safety.

The digital adaptation of WINGS preserves all core stages and objectives of the original intervention while introducing features that enhance confidentiality, autonomy, and accessibility. In the computerized format, participants can complete the intervention independently, using interactive questionnaires, multimedia presentations, and self-assessment exercises. The Power and Control Wheel is presented in an interactive format, allowing women to explore different forms of abuse and triggers at their own pace. Video testimonies, animations, and clickable safety planning guides facilitate engagement and understanding. Automated scoring and individualized feedback enable participants to immediately recognize risk levels and receive tailored suggestions for protective behaviors. Digital tools also support visualization of social networks and mapping of support systems, helping women strengthen social connections and identify resources. This flexible format allows the intervention to be delivered remotely or in settings where in-person sessions are not feasible, increasing accessibility for women who face barriers

such as geographic distance, mobility constraints, or fear of stigma (Gilbert et al., 2017; Tokhtamysh et al., 2018).

Overall, the WINGS intervention, whether delivered in a traditional facilitator-led or digital self-guided format, represents a structured, multi-component, and client-centered approach to psychosocial support. It combines awareness-raising, motivational engagement, risk assessment, safety planning, goal setting, and referral in a coherent sequence, fostering empowerment, resilience, and practical strategies for personal safety. The digital format, in particular, enhances accessibility, confidentiality, and interactivity, making WINGS a versatile and effective model for supporting women at risk of gender-based violence across diverse contexts and populations.

ADAPTATION OF WINGS FOR UKRAINE

The implementation of the WINGS intervention in Ukraine began in 2018 through the efforts of the non-governmental organization “Club Eney,” which has over 20 years of experience working with women from vulnerable groups, including women who use drugs, sex workers, and women living with HIV—populations at heightened risk of gender-based violence. The intervention was initially piloted with groups of women who use drugs and sex workers (Sarnatska et al., 2019) as part of the project “Women Initiating New

Goals for Safety in Ukraine,” funded by the UN Trust Fund. The developers of the original WINGS methodology, represented by Luisa Gilbert, granted permission for its use, although they were not directly involved as consultants in the adaptation process.

The adaptation of WINGS in Ukraine followed a multi-stage process.

Stage 1. Planning and contextual exploration

Consultations with target group representatives and local specialists in Kyiv were conducted to understand the intersectional vulnerabilities to gender-based violence and to identify contextual needs. Insights from this stage informed initial adaptation priorities.

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Stage 2. Material localization and digital adaptation

The original WINGS intervention was modified to suit the Ukrainian context, including localization of materials and instruments. A computerized, self-guided version was developed to enhance accessibility, confidentiality, and participant autonomy.

Stage 3. Pilot testing

The adapted intervention was piloted in Poltava and Cherkasy (one group per city). Pre- and post-intervention surveys and monitoring informed iterative improvements to content, format, and delivery.

Stage 4. Refinement through feedback loops

Findings from the pilot phase guided ongoing refinement of the intervention, ensuring responsiveness to participants' experiences, learning needs, and practical challenges.

Stage 5. Full-scale implementation

The refined intervention was implemented in Poltava and Cherkasy (30 groups in each city), with systematic surveys used to evaluate feasibility, effectiveness, and emerging insights, which could inform further adjustments if needed.

To illustrate the iterative process of adapting the WINGS intervention for the Ukrainian context, the following **Figure 9.2** presents a visual summary of the five interconnected stages. This circular diagram emphasizes the continuous feedback loops, showing how planning, localization, piloting, refinement, and full-scale implementation informed each other to ensure the intervention was contextually relevant, accessible, and effective for marginalized women.

Understanding the iterative adaptation process is important because implementing an evidence-based intervention in a new context goes beyond translating materials or replicating procedures. It requires continuous engagement with local realities, cultural norms, and participants' specific needs. Each stage builds on feedback and emerging insights, enhancing the intervention's relevance, feasibility, and overall effectiveness.

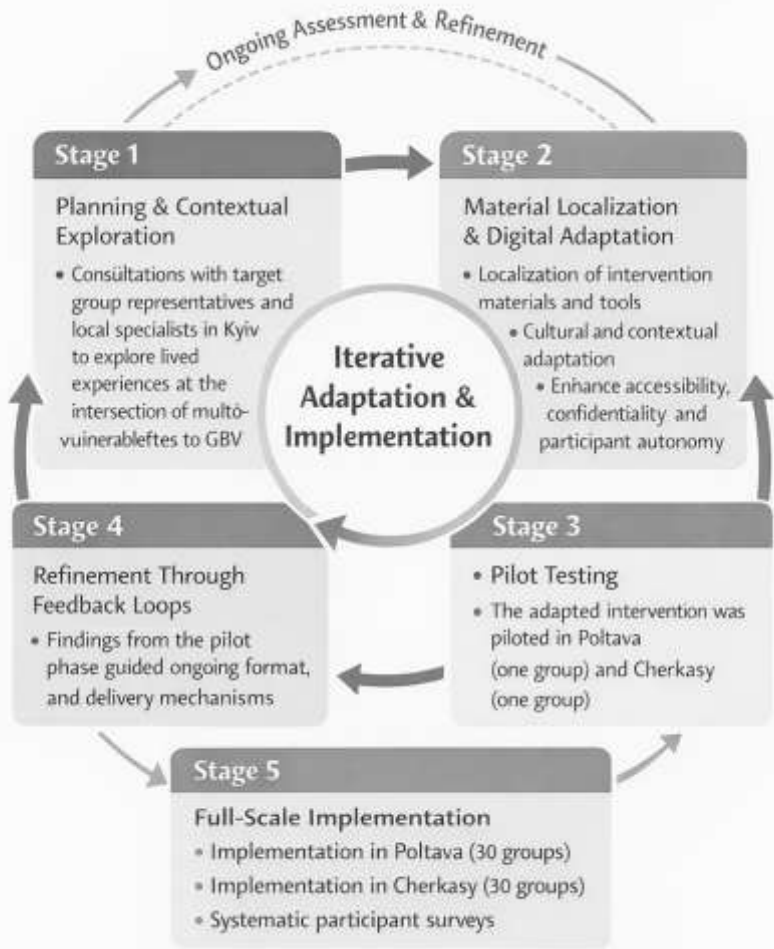


Figure 9.2. Iterative Adaptation of WINGS Intervention

So, with regard to the initial implementation, the original WINGS intervention was substantially modified to suit the Ukrainian context. The intervention structure was expanded from a single session to two sessions separated by several

months, following evidence from prior two-session WINGS programs demonstrating the benefits of follow-up. The first session focuses on screening for experiences of violence, raising awareness, and developing a personalized safety plan. The second session, conducted approximately three months later, consolidates skills, evaluates the implementation of safety strategies, and provides additional training. This second session also addresses topics such as HIV prevention, reproductive and overall health, economic security, and the expansion of social support networks. Participants receive information on maintaining reproductive health, safe sexual practices, and adherence to antiretroviral therapy (for women living with HIV).

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To promote ongoing engagement and peer support, an information module on building and utilizing support networks was introduced. After the first session, participants were encouraged to join peer support groups and maintain regular contact with social workers. During the second session, participants reflect on their experiences, exchange advice, engage in motivational exercises, and receive positive reinforcement for their progress. Through this approach, the adapted intervention shifted from a one-off session to a short-term support program, aligning with recommendations to supplement screening interventions with ongoing follow-up (Terlikbayeva et al., 2025).

The content of the intervention was also enriched to address challenges identified in focus groups. The original emphasis on intimate partner violence was broadened to include institutional and structural forms of violence. Adapted materials highlight that discrimination or abuse by police, medical, or social services also constitutes gender-based violence, and participants are provided with guidance on how to respond, including complaint procedures and hotline contacts.

The Safety Plan, a core WINGS tool, was updated and localized to reflect the specific needs of women living with HIV and internally displaced women. For displaced women, the plan now includes resources for emergency relocation, shelter addresses across regions, support center contacts, and information on entitlement to social assistance. For women living with HIV, recommendations were added on safely maintaining treatment during conflict, including carrying a minimal supply of antiretroviral medication and storing it securely. Economic safety guidance was also expanded to include practical strategies for protecting finances and action plans when a perpetrator controls funds. Importantly, each participant's safety plan is individually tailored: women select the steps most relevant to them using structured prompts, generating a personalized set of recommendations with the support of the intervention tools.

This approach preserves the **client-centered philosophy** emphasized by the original developers (Gilbert et al., 2017), while integrating locally relevant resources and themes.

In addition, the adaptation incorporated skill-building for self-defense and boundary-setting. Based on participant feedback, an interactive exercise was added to practice assertive refusal in situations of coercion, such as partners demanding access to phones or unprotected sexual activity. Participants practice strategies for saying “no” with the facilitator modeling scenarios. This exercise enhances self-confidence and prepares women for real-life situations, particularly those with limited prior experience resisting perpetrators.

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Finally, a specialized Safety Plan was developed for sex workers, addressing their unique risks and reinforcing strategies for personal safety, confidentiality, and access to social services.

To illustrate how the WINGS intervention was specifically tailored for the Ukrainian context, **Figure 9.3** presents a visual overview of the content adaptation process. It highlights the structure of the two-session program, key elements introduced in each session, and the iterative, client-centered modifications informed by participant feedback. Cross-cutting components, including digital tools, peer support, and empowerment strategies, are integrated throughout, emphasizing the continuous refinement that ensures relevance, accessibility, and effectiveness for marginalized women.

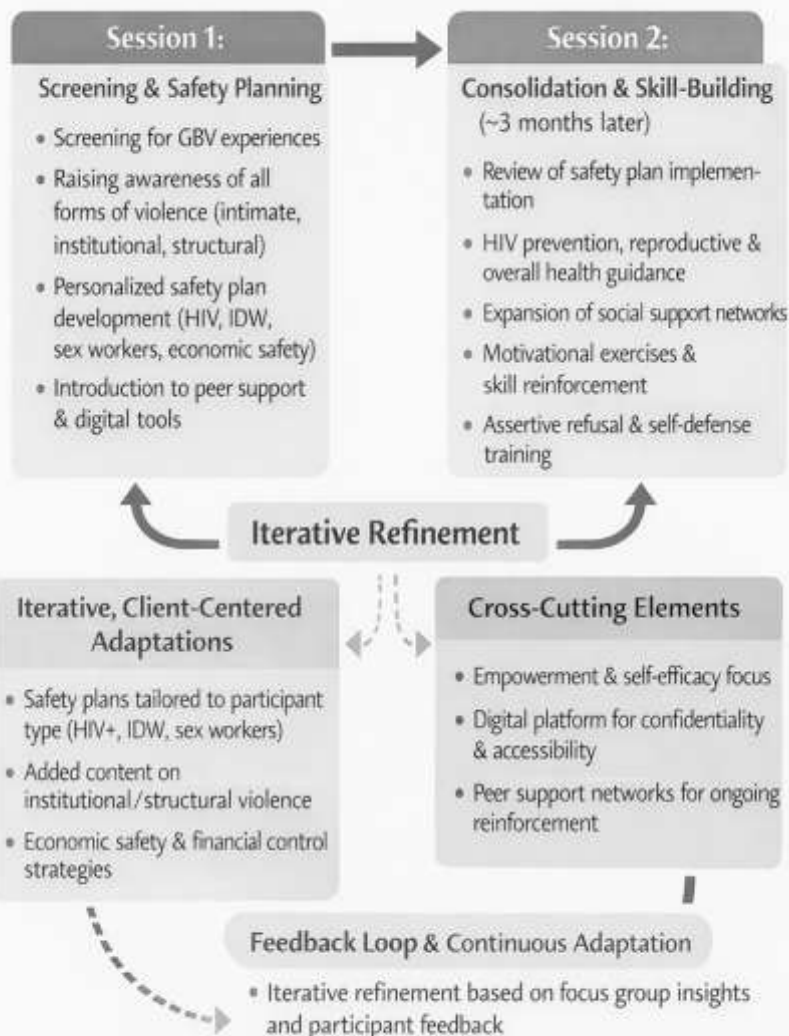


Figure 9.3. Content Adaptation of WINGS for Ukraine

Through these modifications, the Ukrainian adaptation of WINGS has evolved into a **multi-session, context-sensitive, client-centered intervention**, combining personalized safety planning, peer support, empowerment exercises, and digital tools to enhance accessibility and confidentiality for women from vulnerable populations.

■ IMPLEMENTATION OF THE WINGS INTERVENTION AND OUTCOME MEASUREMENT

Over a fifteen-month period, from April 2020 to June 2021, the WINGS intervention was implemented in Poltava and Cherkasy, Ukraine, targeting women from vulnerable populations, including internally displaced women, women living with HIV, sex workers, and women who use drugs. Groups of approximately six participants convened twice monthly in each city, resulting in a total of sixty sessions and reaching around 360 women.

To ensure accessibility for participants unable to attend in person—due to geographic, logistical, or personal constraints—additional sessions were delivered individually, either face-to-face, by phone, or online, extending coverage to approximately 140 more women, and achieving a total sample of roughly 500. The intervention was facilitated by trained social workers from a local NGO and employed a trauma-informed, client-centered approach, ensuring flexibility,

confidentiality, and emotional support while allowing participants to pause or skip content as needed.

The program combined psychoeducation, skills-building, and empowerment strategies. Initial sessions provided education on physical, sexual, psychological, and economic forms of gender-based violence, illustrated with practical examples, alongside personalized screening and risk assessment for experiences of violence over the preceding six months.

Each participant developed a personalized safety plan addressing potential threats, emergency preparedness, financial security, and strategies to strengthen social support networks. Motivational interviewing and goal-setting components aimed to enhance commitment to implementing safety measures and accessing services, including legal aid, medical care, shelters, and counseling. Subsequent sessions emphasized HIV prevention, testing, treatment, stigma reduction, and personal boundary-setting, fostering skills relevant to both violence prevention and general well-being.

This flexible, client-centered delivery was essential, particularly under the constraints of the pandemic and the subsequent full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which necessitated adaptation to brief, two-session formats while maintaining focus on empowerment, safety, and awareness.

Quantitative evaluation employed standardized questionnaires to capture physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence, incorporating frequency and severity to produce a composite index of overall exposure.

Psychosocial outcomes were measured using scales of perceived social support and self-efficacy. Of the 500 women who participated in the primary survey, 110 completed both intervention sessions and follow-up questionnaires. Analyses revealed a significant increase in reported awareness and documentation of violence: the composite index of overall violence rose from 454 to 1,139 points ($p \approx 0.04$), largely driven by a more than threefold increase in sexual violence reporting (242 to 800 points, $p \approx 0.04$), while changes in physical and psychological violence were smaller and not statistically significant.

Subgroup analyses indicated that internally displaced women experienced the most pronounced increase, with sexual violence indices rising elevenfold (24 to 266, $p < 0.005$) and overall violence from 83 to 442 ($p = 0.012$). Sex workers and women who use drugs also demonstrated marked increases in reported violence, reflecting improved recognition and reporting, while women living with HIV showed minimal change, with a slight decrease in physical violence, potentially indicative of higher baseline awareness or context-specific factors.

The apparent increase in reported cases of violence following the WINGS intervention should be interpreted as a sign of heightened awareness and decreased tolerance, rather than an actual surge in new incidents. The program appears to have equipped participants with the skills and confidence to identify and label behaviors as abusive that they may have previously ignored or silently endured. This interpretation is consistent with both the educational aims of WINGS and research highlighting the chronic underreporting of gender-based violence (Palermo et al., 2014; Villardón-Gallego et al., 2023). Many forms of GBV remain unreported due to stigma or social normalization, so initiatives that raise awareness often lead to an initial rise in reporting. After completing WINGS, participants were more likely to recognize various forms of violence—particularly sexual abuse and controlling behavior—as unacceptable. The increase in reports of sexual violence likely reflects a new understanding that coercive sex is always violence, prompting women to acknowledge and document past experiences.

Measures of psychosocial outcomes similarly reflected positive change: perceived social support modestly increased (SE1_1, 3.27 to 3.47), and self-efficacy indicators, including perceived control over life (SE5_1, 2.68 to 3.17, $p = 0.01$) and coping confidence (SE6_1, 2.76 to 3.15, $p = 0.03$), demonstrated statistically significant improvements, reflecting enhanced readiness to act and resilience.

Overall, these results suggest a positive shift in awareness: women became less tolerant of violence and more willing to recognize it and seek help.

To deepen understanding of the quantitative outcomes, a qualitative phase was conducted using focus groups and semi-structured interviews with participants and staff, including representatives from all target groups in Poltava and Cherkasy and six staff members across three sites. Thematic analysis identified key mechanisms and contextual factors underpinning program effects. Many participants initially normalized violence, particularly psychological and economic abuse, failing to recognize coercion, control, or financial deprivation as forms of abuse. Through WINGS, women began naming previously unacknowledged behaviors as abusive, including marital rape, economic control, and persistent monitoring, marking a critical shift in awareness. This shift explains the apparent paradox of increased violence reporting in the quantitative data, as previously invisible experiences were articulated and documented. Qualitative findings further underscored the high prevalence and distinctive manifestations of violence among marginalized groups. Internally displaced women described dependency and exploitation in host communities, sometimes enduring sexual harassment in exchange for shelter. Women living with HIV reported psychological abuse compounded by stigma, while sex workers and women who use drugs experienced both intimate partner and external violence from clients,

pimps, and law enforcement, often unreported due to fear of arrest or social judgment.

Participation in WINGS also fostered social cohesion and peer support, with women emphasizing the value of discussing experiences in a nonjudgmental environment and maintaining informal networks for ongoing guidance and encouragement. Staff reported that the peer-to-peer facilitation model, in which women with lived experience led sessions, was crucial in building trust and facilitating engagement.

Challenges identified included emotional strain during sessions, heterogeneity of group composition, and participant requests for practical skills and ongoing support, addressed through individualized follow-up consultations, careful group formation, and referrals to complementary programs. Despite these challenges, staff observed incremental but meaningful participant outcomes, including legal or administrative actions, engagement with services, and small but significant improvements in safety behaviors, self-efficacy, and social support (Sarnatska, 2025).

Integrating quantitative and qualitative findings, the WINGS intervention demonstrates that even a brief, structured, trauma-informed program can significantly increase awareness and reporting of gender-based violence, enhance psychosocial outcomes, and initiate empowerment processes among women in marginalized and high-risk contexts. While immediate reductions in measured violence were not

observed, the intervention effectively “brought the problem into view,” fostering critical shifts in perception, agency, and peer-supported resilience that lay the foundation for longer-term improvements in safety, well-being, and life control. These findings highlight the importance of combining rigorous measurement with rich qualitative insight to fully understand intervention impact and inform scalable, context-sensitive approaches to supporting women exposed to violence in Ukraine.

■ DISCUSSIONS

The implementation of the WINGS intervention in Ukraine yielded multiple positive outcomes for participants and contributed meaningfully to the advancement of social work practice in the country, particularly within the context of prolonged armed conflict. A key achievement was the marked **increase in awareness and accurate identification of diverse forms of gender-based violence**, especially among marginalized women whose vulnerabilities are often intensified by war-related displacement, economic insecurity, and the erosion of informal support networks. The substantial rise in reported instances of sexual and overall violence reflects a critical shift in participants’ ability to recognize previously normalized or hidden experiences, including coercive control and psychological abuse that may become less visible during wartime due to competing survival priorities.

This enhanced awareness forms a foundation for empowerment, enabling women to implement protective strategies, seek support services, and exercise greater control over their lives, aligning with similar findings in international research (Keith et al., 2022; Sapkota et al., 2022).

Improvements in psychosocial indicators, including perceived social support and self-efficacy, further underscore the intervention's positive impact on individual resilience and agency. In war-affected settings, where uncertainty, chronic stress, and institutional instability undermine coping capacities, strengthening self-efficacy is particularly critical. The development of personalized safety plans and skills in boundary-setting reinforced participants' capacity to translate knowledge into practical action, bridging the gap between learning and real-life application. These skills are especially relevant when formal protection mechanisms are fragmented or inaccessible, positioning women as active agents in managing risk rather than passive recipients of aid.

A key factor in WINGS' success was the **integration of digital tools and online modalities**, which proved particularly valuable under conditions of war. The online format allowed the program to reach women who were previously excluded from support due to stigma, geographic isolation, displacement, or security risks associated with in-person meetings. Research confirms that survivors of violence often prefer digital interventions because they offer anonymity and

a safe, nonjudgmental space to share experiences (Sabri et al., 2023). In the Ukrainian context, digital delivery also enabled continuity of support amid air raids, population mobility, and disruptions to social infrastructure. The digital environment safeguards privacy and confidentiality, enabling participants to disclose sensitive experiences without fear of stigma or retaliation (Katuli & Wandwi, 2025), which is particularly important in small communities and conflict-affected settings where anonymity is difficult to maintain offline.

The intervention's **economic efficiency and feasibility** further enhance its relevance for social work practice in Ukraine during wartime. WINGS is delivered in a clearly structured, two-session format that is short-term and easily integrated into the operations of NGOs and humanitarian organizations operating under resource constraints. Unlike long-term therapeutic programs, WINGS does not require sustained involvement of highly specialized professionals, allowing trained social workers to implement it within existing service frameworks. This feature is especially important in a context marked by workforce shortages, staff burnout, and the rapid scaling of emergency services. International evidence indicates that such brief interventions can successfully engage at-risk populations while maintaining high participation and retention rates (Gilbert et al., 2017). Pilot projects with women who use drugs demonstrated near-complete session attendance and strong engagement, confirming the method's acceptability and viability even under conditions of instability.

Another strength of WINGS is its **multifaceted yet coherent design**, combining education on forms of violence, risk assessment, safety planning, strengthening of social support, and referral to services. Despite its brief format, this comprehensive approach promotes rapid acquisition of knowledge and practical skills. Our findings indicate that participants were significantly better able to identify different forms of GBV and more willing to seek support after completing the intervention. Comparable outcomes have been reported internationally; for example, in Kyrgyzstan, a three-month post-WINGS assessment showed a nearly 60% reduction in physical violence and increased engagement with support services (Gilbert et al., 2017). These results suggest that even short-term, well-structured interventions can catalyze meaningful behavioral and safety-related changes, a critical consideration in crisis and humanitarian contexts.

The flexibility and scalability of WINGS, particularly in its digital form, further strengthen its value for social work in wartime Ukraine. The intervention can be delivered across diverse regions, including remote or conflict-affected areas lacking specialized services. Participants can engage via smartphones or computers, making the program accessible to women with caregiving responsibilities, mobility limitations, or security concerns. The online format also allows for participant anonymity, increasing feelings of safety and encouraging engagement from women who might otherwise avoid in-person sessions due to fear, shame, or social

judgment. Digital interventions thus create a “stigma-free space,” fostering trust and openness that are essential for addressing traumatic experiences (Sabri et al., 2023; Terlikbayeva et al., 2025).

Beyond direct participant benefits, WINGS has important implications for the development of social work in Ukraine. Its structured, evidence-based, and trauma-informed approach offers a practical model for integrating international interventions into national practice while remaining sensitive to local and wartime realities. By training local social workers to facilitate sessions and effectively use digital tools, WINGS strengthens workforce capacity, promotes professionalization, and expands the repertoire of interventions available for marginalized women. Importantly, the intervention demonstrates how social work can move beyond ad hoc crisis response toward systematic, evidence-informed practice even under conditions of prolonged conflict.

The findings also point to broader **implications for social policy and practice**. Digital tools and online delivery should be actively incorporated into GBV interventions, as they expand reach, reduce stigma, and ensure continuity of support during crises. Brief, standardized, and evidence-based programs like WINGS can be embedded into the routine operations of NGOs and community services, maximizing efficiency without sacrificing impact. Training social workers in such interventions not only improves service quality but

also fosters innovation and resilience within the profession. The adaptability and scalability of WINGS suggest its potential for regional or national implementation, contributing to a more inclusive, responsive, and sustainable social work system in Ukraine.

At the same time, the digital delivery of WINGS exposed several **challenges**. Digital inequality limited participation for some women due to unstable internet access or insufficient digital skills, reflecting broader patterns of exclusion among marginalized populations. Concerns about confidentiality and online safety also affected engagement, particularly given fears of digital surveillance by perpetrators. Although multiple protective measures were implemented, these risks could not be fully eliminated.

Methodological limitations further constrain interpretation of the findings. The pilot study involved a relatively small sample, lacked a control group, and included a short follow-up period, limiting causal inference and assessment of long-term outcomes. While short-term improvements in awareness and self-efficacy were evident, their sustainability over time remains uncertain. Emotional distress during discussions of traumatic experiences also posed challenges, despite the use of trauma-informed facilitation and access to psychological support.

Finally, wartime conditions created significant organizational constraints, including participant displacement, staff burnout,

and logistical disruptions. Taken together, these findings underscore the need to strengthen digital accessibility, enhance privacy safeguards, ensure continuity of care, and conduct more robust, longitudinal evaluations when scaling digital GBV interventions in conflict-affected settings.

CONCLUSIONS

The chapter demonstrates that the WINGS intervention is an effective, evidence-based, and adaptable approach for supporting marginalized women in Ukraine. Its structured, multi-component design—covering education on gender-based violence, risk assessment, safety planning, social support, and empowerment—yielded measurable improvements in awareness, self-efficacy, and perceived control. Quantitative and qualitative data together indicate that participants became more capable of identifying and reporting previously unrecognized forms of violence, while developing practical strategies to enhance safety and seek help.

Digital tools and online delivery proved crucial in reaching women affected by stigma, geographical isolation, or mobility constraints, ensuring confidentiality, flexibility, and inclusion. The intervention's brief, standardized format facilitated rapid implementation within existing NGO and community services,

demonstrating scalability, economic feasibility, and professional applicability.

Overall, WINGS exemplifies how evidence-informed, trauma-sensitive, and digitally adaptable interventions can enhance psychosocial outcomes, foster empowerment, and strengthen social work practice in challenging social and geopolitical contexts. The program provides a replicable model for expanding access to support, building resilience, and advancing the development of professional social work in Ukraine.

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Chapter 10

Shaping Crisis-Responsive Feminist Social Work in Ukraine: Activist and Peer Practices Among Women Living with HIV

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Abstract

This chapter explores the adaptation and practice of feminist social work in Ukraine through the case of the non-governmental organization Positive Women, which provides support to women living with HIV. The chapter examines how principles such as empowerment, intersectionality, solidarity, and the understanding that “the personal is political” are operationalized at individual, group, and systemic levels. The analysis highlights how these principles have guided the organization’s response to both chronic marginalization and the acute challenges posed by the ongoing war giving rise to a model of Crisis-Responsive Feminist Social Work. By documenting this uniquely Ukrainian experience, the chapter contributes to global knowledge in social work, demonstrating how community-led, feminist-informed interventions can foster resilience, social justice, and structural transformation in contexts of overlapping crises.

Keywords: *feminist social work, Ukraine, women living with HIV, intersectionality, empowerment, crisis-responsive practice, community-based interventions, social justice.*

■ INTRODUCTION

Ukraine's social work profession has undergone profound transformation over the past decades, shaped by post-Soviet legacies, ongoing social reforms, and multiple, overlapping crises (Semigina et al., 2025). Within this evolving landscape, feminist perspectives have gradually emerged as a critical lens for rethinking power relations, social inequalities, and the role of social work in advancing social justice. This chapter argues that feminist social work in Ukraine is being shaped not only through academic debates or policy frameworks, but also – crucially – through community-based practices developed in response to the lived experiences of marginalized women.

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Women living with HIV in Ukraine represent a social group situated at the intersection of multiple forms of vulnerability, including gender inequality, stigma, poverty, and restricted access to health and social services (Moroz, 2019; Pozytyvni zhinky, 2023; Semigina et al., 2022). Historically, responses to HIV have been dominated by biomedical and risk-focused approaches (Skurbati, 2008), often marginalizing women's voices and overlooking their everyday coping strategies, collective agency, and knowledge. In contrast, feminist social work emphasizes empowerment, solidarity, and the recognition of lived experience as a source of expertise, offering an alternative framework for both practice and professional reflection (Phillips, 2022; Semigina & Yaroshenko, 2024).

This chapter explores the specificities of feminist social work in Ukraine through the lens of community-based practices developed by the non-governmental organization *Positive Women*, focusing on the experiences of women living with HIV. It demonstrates how initiatives led by these women enact and reflect global principles of feminist social work, offering insights into the practical realization of feminist values in challenging social and institutional contexts.

The chapter begins with an analysis of the core principles of feminist social work and their relevance to the Ukrainian context, emphasizing how these principles guide professional reflection, ethical commitments, and community engagement. It then presents a detailed description of the practices and services of *Positive Women*, highlighting how interventions operate across multiple levels—from individual empowerment and peer support to community-based collective action. Finally, the chapter examines the alignment of Ukrainian experiences with international feminist social work principles, considering both the achievements of local initiatives and the ongoing challenges they face. By situating this work within the broader transformation of social work in Ukraine, the chapter positions community-based practice not only as a response to immediate social needs but also as a site of knowledge production that actively shapes emerging models of feminist social work.

METHODS

This study is grounded in a **critical paradigm**, which emphasizes the analysis of social reality through the lens of inequality, power, and discrimination, while consciously incorporating the perspectives of marginalized groups (Semigina, 2025b). The critical paradigm highlights the feminist character of social work and allows for an examination of how organizations working with women living with HIV implement principles of empathy, equality, and social justice in practice (Hafford-Letchfield, 2022).

The theoretical analysis encompasses key concepts of feminist social work, gender-sensitive practice, and transformative approaches to social interventions. This approach facilitates an understanding of how the theoretical foundations of feminist social work are adapted to the Ukrainian context, particularly in relation to the discrimination and stigma experienced by women living with HIV. The analysis draws not only on organizational documents but also on findings from previous research on HIV services in Ukraine, providing broader contextualization and enhancing the reliability of the conclusions.

To investigate the specificities of feminist social work in Ukraine, a **case study** methodology was employed, focusing on the activities of the non-governmental organization *Positive Women*. This method allows for a comprehensive examination of the organization's practices, principles, and approaches to

working with women living with HIV, highlighting the feminist perspective at both micro- and macro-levels of social work practice. While the focus on a single NGO limits the generalizability of findings, it provides the advantage of **in-depth insight** into organizational practices and decision-making processes.

The primary sources of information included official organizational publications, such as reports, analytical materials, research studies, methodological guidelines, and informational brochures; empirical data from the organization's previous research on the needs and experiences of women living with HIV (2015–2025); and an analysis of organizational events and advocacy campaigns. In addition, **reflective interviews were conducted with key leaders of the organization**, capturing insider perspectives on challenges, strategies, and the application of feminist principles in practice. These interviews enriched the analysis by providing nuanced insights into organizational rationale and leadership reflections.

Data were analyzed using content analysis and **documentary analysis**, enabling the identification of core principles of feminist social work, models of support for women, and their alignment with global standards. Insights from reflective interviews were integrated to deepen the understanding of organizational practices and decision-making processes.

In line with values-based qualitative research approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2024), **the author's positionality** – shaped by long-standing professional experience in evaluating HIV services and an explicit commitment to pro-feminist values – was treated as an analytical resource rather than a limitation. Reflexive engagement with the data informed interpretation throughout the study, ensuring transparency, critical awareness of power relations, and coherence between methodological choices, analytical focus, and normative commitments.

Artificial intelligence tools (ChatGPT) were used to assist in translating and organizing extensive textual data. All outputs were critically reviewed and interpreted by the author to ensure that the findings remained firmly grounded in professional expertise and reflective analysis.

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■ FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: PRINCIPLES OF FEMINIST SOCIAL WORK AND THE WORK OF ICW

Feminist social work emerged as a critical response to mainstream social work practices that tended to individualize social problems, depoliticize inequality, and overlook the structural conditions shaping women's lives.

Rooted in the second wave of feminism in the United States and the United Kingdom in the late 1960s and 1970s, feminist social work developed at the intersection of political activism,

critical theory, and professional practice. Its foundational premise lies in the recognition that social work is never neutral and that professional interventions are inevitably embedded in relations of power, gender norms, and institutional hierarchies (Pennell & Ristock, 1999). Over time, feminist social work evolved from an initial focus on women's oppression toward a more complex and inclusive framework that accounts for multiple and intersecting forms of inequality, including those related to class, race, sexuality, age, health status, and migration (Semigina & Stoliaryk, 2025).

A core principle of feminist social work is the **commitment to social justice and gender equality**, understood not merely as formal equality of opportunities but as substantive equality in access to resources, rights, and social recognition. Feminist social work explicitly challenges discrimination and exclusion by situating individual difficulties within broader socio-political contexts. Rather than framing women's problems as personal deficits or maladaptive behaviors, feminist practitioners conceptualize them as outcomes of structural inequalities, gendered power relations, and institutional practices that systematically disadvantage certain groups of women.

This perspective laid the groundwork for understanding feminist social work not as a marginal specialization, but as a critical lens capable of reshaping the profession as a whole (Dominelli, 2002; 2006; Kemp & Brandwein, 2010).

Closely linked to this orientation is the principle of **recognizing women as active agents** rather than passive recipients of help. Feminist social work rejects paternalistic and expert-driven models of intervention, emphasizing instead participation, shared decision-making, and the validation of women's voices. Women are understood as knowledgeable actors with experiential expertise, whose lived experiences constitute a legitimate and indispensable source of knowledge for social work practice.

This principle challenges traditional professional hierarchies and redefines the relationship between social workers and service users as collaborative and dialogical.

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Intersectionality represents another foundational principle shaping contemporary feminist social work. Introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), this concept highlights how multiple axes of oppression intersect and mutually reinforce one another, producing differentiated experiences of marginalization and privilege. For feminist social work, an intersectional perspective is crucial in avoiding reductive categorizations that treat women as a homogeneous group. It enables practitioners to understand how gender interacts with other social positions, such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, HIV status, or displacement, thereby informing more context-sensitive and ethically grounded interventions.

Intersectionality also provides a theoretical framework for analyzing how social institutions—including health care,

welfare systems, and criminal justice—may simultaneously address and reproduce inequalities.

Another central principle concerns the **critical analysis of power and patriarchal structures**. Feminist social work explicitly interrogates how power operates at interpersonal, organizational, and societal levels, shaping both social problems and professional responses to them. This includes examining how policies, service delivery models, and professional norms may reinforce gendered expectations, normalize women's caregiving roles, or silence experiences of violence and exclusion. By making power relations visible, feminist social work seeks not only to mitigate harm at the individual level but also to challenge and transform the structural conditions that sustain inequality.

Collective action and solidarity constitute an additional dimension of feminist social work principles. Drawing on the feminist insight that “the personal is political,” feminist social work emphasizes that individual struggles often reflect shared social conditions and thus require collective responses. Group-based interventions, peer support, community organizing, and advocacy are integral to this approach, as they foster mutual recognition, reduce isolation, and create spaces for collective empowerment. Through such practices, feminist social work bridges micro-level support with meso- and macro-level social change efforts.

Reflexivity and **positionality** further distinguish feminist social work from more technocratic or procedural approaches. Feminist practitioners and researchers are encouraged to critically reflect on their own social positions, values, and assumptions, acknowledging how these shape professional interactions and knowledge production. This reflexive stance rejects claims of objectivity detached from context and instead embraces ethical responsibility and accountability in both practice and research. Long-term professional experience, value-based commitments, and engagement with feminist and pro-feminist perspectives are thus understood not as biases to be eliminated but as elements that must be critically examined and transparently articulated.

Finally, feminist social work is inherently **transformative** in its orientation. While it addresses immediate needs and provides support to individuals and families, its ultimate aim extends beyond adaptation or coping. Feminist social work seeks to transform the social relations, institutional arrangements, and cultural norms that generate and legitimize inequality. In this sense, it differs fundamentally from gender-sensitive social work, which often focuses on adjusting services to gender-specific needs without necessarily challenging the underlying structures of power. Feminist social work, by contrast, positions itself as a critical and emancipatory project that combines practice, reflection, and advocacy in pursuit of long-term social change (Bernard, 2021; Carr, 2003 Langan & Day, 1992).

In sum, feminist social work represents a coherent yet dynamic paradigm that integrates principles of equality, agency, intersectionality, critical power analysis, collective action, reflexivity, and transformation. By centering women's experiences and challenging structural inequalities, it offers a robust theoretical and practical framework for addressing complex social problems in diverse and unequal contexts.

The **Figure 10.1** illustrates the core principles of feminist social work, highlighting its shift from individualizing problems to addressing the structural and patriarchal roots of inequality. By centering intersectionality, agency, and collective action, the model provides a transformative framework for practice that links personal struggles to broader social change.

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The translation of these principles into concrete practice is exemplified by the International **Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS (ICW)**, established in the early 1990s. ICW foregrounded women's lived experiences, long overlooked in health and social policy, embodying the feminist commitment to giving voice to those who have been silenced. The organization exposed the structural dimensions of women's vulnerability, including patriarchal norms, gendered stigma, economic dependence, and intersecting forms of discrimination, while fostering sisterhood, solidarity, and collective empowerment through self-help groups.

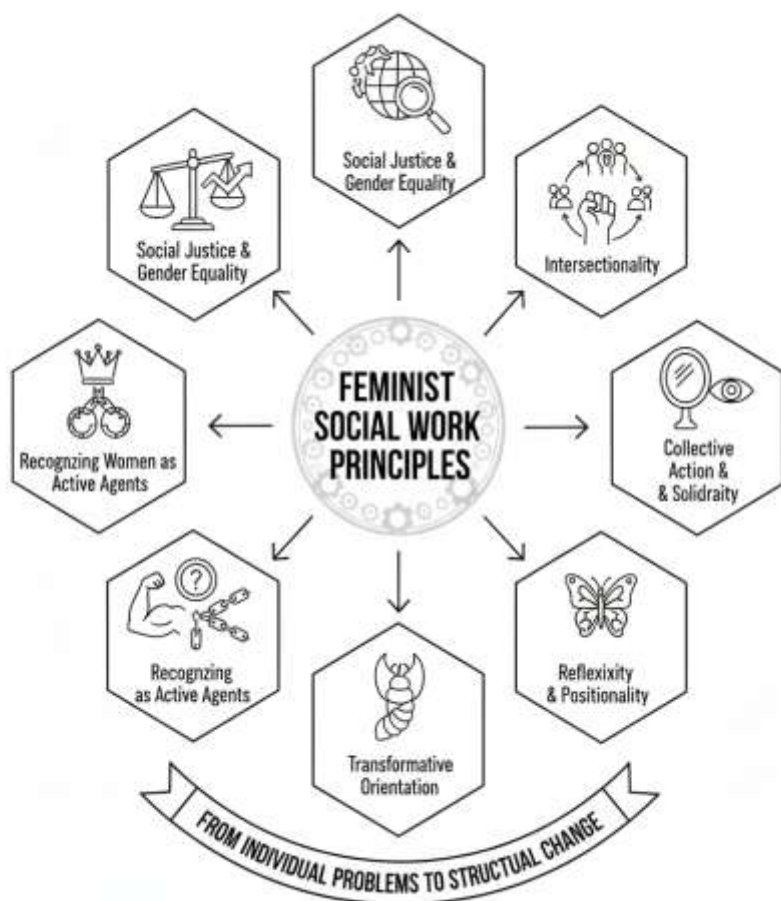


Figure 10.1. The Conceptual Framework of Feminist Social Work: Core Principles and Transformative Dimensions

ICW also emphasized women's active participation in decision-making at both local and international levels, demonstrating an intersectional approach by addressing the needs of women facing multiple marginalizations, such as women in prison, sex workers, women with histories of drug use, and lesbian women. Its advocacy challenged male-centered scientific and medical frameworks, calling for research and definitions of HIV and AIDS that reflect women's specific experiences (Dunaway et al., 2022; ICW, 2025; Manchester, 2021).

Through these initiatives, ICW not only placed women's issues at the center of the global HIV agenda but also established foundational principles that inform feminist social work with women living with HIV worldwide. Within this global context, the Ukrainian organization Positive Women emerged as a national community inspired by ICW, adapting these feminist principles to the specific social, cultural, and institutional context of Ukraine.

The following section explores the emergence and development of *Positive Women*, illustrating how feminist social work principles are operationalized in practice and how community-based initiatives can transform both individual lives and broader social structures.

■ THE EMERGENCE OF THE WOMEN LIVING WITH HIV MOVEMENT IN UKRAINE

In the early stages of the HIV epidemic in Ukraine, the crisis predominantly affected men who injected drugs, leaving the specific experiences and needs of women largely invisible. Women living with HIV faced compounded forms of marginalization, including societal stigma and discriminatory treatment within healthcare settings, which rendered their voices and concerns largely unheard.

Initial support for women emerged through self-help groups within the All-Ukrainian Network of People Living with HIV (PLHIV Network). By the early 2010s, it became increasingly clear that women required dedicated spaces to address their unique challenges.

This recognition coincided with Ukrainian women's active participation in European meetings of women living with HIV, where discussions emphasized critical issues such as the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV and gender-based violence—issues that would shape the agenda of a national women's movement.

The initiative to establish a dedicated women's community received strong support from the PLHIV Network, which provided organizational and resource assistance to activists seeking to unite. This support enabled the first steps toward institutionalizing the movement: organizing meetings,

participating in international forums, and gradually asserting women's voices as a distinct and influential force in Ukraine's HIV response.

The founding assembly of the organization took place in 2011, attended by fourteen representatives from across Ukraine, in line with the legal requirements for establishing a non-governmental organization. The official registration was completed on 5 April 2013 under the name "*Association of Women in Ukraine Affected by the HIV Epidemic – Positive Women*". In 2016, the organization adopted the legal status of a charitable organization and became known simply as Positive Women.

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Leadership played a pivotal role in establishing the organization's legitimacy and strengthening its international connections. The first Chairperson, Iryna Borushek, brought substantial experience in HIV advocacy and women's rights activism in both Ukraine and international arenas, contributing to the organization's early credibility and strategic orientation. Her leadership ensured that the initial development of *Positive Women* was firmly grounded in the principles of solidarity, empowerment, and self-representation.

At the same time, the organization's integration into global women-led HIV initiatives was significantly reinforced through the active engagement of Svitlana Moroz in international processes. This engagement facilitated *Positive*

Women's inclusion in transnational advocacy networks, including the International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS (ICW) and the Eurasian Women's Network on AIDS, positioning the organization within broader feminist and rights-based movements beyond the national context.

In 2016, Olena Stryzhak was elected Chairperson of the Board. With extensive experience in HIV activism and a deep understanding of women's lived realities, she has continued to lead Positive Women, representing the voices and rights of women living with HIV nationally and internationally. Under her leadership, the organization has strengthened its networked model, connecting women's communities across Ukraine, expanding advocacy and educational initiatives, and engaging in policy-making processes.

Positive Women remains one of the few Ukrainian civil society organizations that openly identifies as feminist, developing its activities on the principles of solidarity, equality, and mutual support among women living with HIV. Its **mission** is articulated as the creation of conditions in which *"Ukrainian women living with or vulnerable to HIV can freely exercise their rights and opportunities without barriers, stigma, discrimination, or any form of violence"*. This mission reflects a deeply feminist orientation, combining a bottom-up approach with systemic advocacy efforts aimed at amplifying women's voices and promoting structural change.

Over the course of the organization's development and the consolidation of its community, a set of **key principles** has emerged that guides the work of Positive Women and embodies the practice of feminist social work in action:

- *Equality* – Ensuring equal rights and opportunities for all women, regardless of their status, life circumstances, or medical diagnosis, and eliminating any forms of stigma and discrimination.
- *Support for women with limited resources* – Prioritizing efforts to assist those with the least access to social, economic, or emotional resources.
- *Safe space* – Creating an environment in which women living with HIV can freely express their thoughts, share experiences, and feel accepted and protected.
- *Inclusivity* – Recognizing the diversity of women's experiences and ensuring equal access to services, participation, and leadership for representatives of all groups, including women with disabilities, LGBTQ+ women, women who use psychoactive substances, Roma women, and others.
- *Feminism and sisterhood* – Upholding the belief in the power of women's solidarity, mutual support, and collective resistance to patriarchal and discriminatory structures.
- *Tolerance* – Adopting a non-judgmental attitude, respecting diverse experiences, identities, and life paths of each woman (Pozytyvni zhinky, 2025).

As of 2025, Positive Women brings together sixteen full members with voting rights and 225 associated members who actively participate in the organization's programs and initiatives. This structure combines centralized decision-making with broad member engagement in practical activities, enhancing organizational effectiveness and ensuring sustainability.

The organization operates through a **networked model**. Regional representatives, active in twenty-two oblasts as well as in the cities of Kyiv and Kryvyi Rih, provide local representation of the interests of women living with HIV and facilitate the dissemination of service and advocacy initiatives. This network enables the organization to respond promptly to women's needs across diverse regions while maintaining effective connections with local authorities and civil society actors.

The national structure is further supported by twelve regional branches with legal entity status, operating according to the principles and positions of Positive Women. These branches, located in Dnipro, Zaporizhzhia, Kryvyi Rih, Mykolaiv, Odesa, Poltava, Rivne, Kherson, Khmelnytskyi, Cherkasy, Chernihiv, and Chernivtsi, serve as local hubs for service provision, the development of initiative groups, and the implementation of educational programs tailored to the specific needs of women living with HIV.

The organization's growth trajectory illustrates the gradual strengthening of capacity at both central and regional levels. From a small group of activists united around mutual support, Positive Women has evolved into a national network with extensive reach, integrating advocacy, service provision, educational, and research activities (Semigina, 2025a).

Building on its foundational principles and decades of advocacy, *Positive Women* translates its commitment to equality, solidarity, and empowerment into a wide array of practical initiatives. From localized service provision to national advocacy and educational programs, the organization's networked model ensures that the voices of women living with HIV are heard and their needs addressed across Ukraine. The following section outlines the key practices and services that embody the organization's feminist social work approach in action.

■ KEY DIRECTIONS OF THE ORGANIZATION ACTIVITIES

The *Positive Women* organization emerged in a context of limited resources, scarce formal recognition, and minimal experience in HIV-focused social services. Its development, however, was driven by a strong commitment to creating spaces where women living with HIV could articulate their needs, exercise leadership, and access essential services. Over

time, the organization expanded its scope to encompass advocacy, service provision, education, research, and community building, consistently integrating a feminist perspective into social work practice in Ukraine. The following sections describe the organization's activities according to major types of intervention, illustrating both scope and impact, while reflecting the profound changes brought by wartime circumstances.

1. Advocacy and Policy Work

Advocacy forms a cornerstone of the organization's approach. Since its inception, *Positive Women* has engaged with national and local policymakers to advance the rights and interests of women living with HIV. The organization organized the first National Women's Forum on HIV and AIDS in 2015, bringing together participants from Ukraine, the post-Soviet region, and international organizations such as UNAIDS, UNDP, and UN Women. These forums provided a platform to discuss community achievements, highlight peer support practices, and formulate recommendations for policy and programming. Annual resolutions from the forums have served as advocacy instruments, ensuring that the voices of women living with HIV inform national strategies and policies.

Key advocacy achievements include enabling access to assisted reproductive technologies for women living with HIV (2019), lifting bans on adoption for people living with HIV (2020), and supporting the development of clinical guidelines

for the prevention of mother-to-child HIV transmission (2022).

A central focus of the organization's advocacy has been promoting the integration of cohort-based principles outlined by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2023), which emphasize holistic, psychosocial support, peer-led interventions, and continuity of care across the lifespan of women living with HIV. Positive Women actively lobbies for these principles to be embedded into national HIV strategies, clinical guidelines, and social service frameworks, ensuring that interventions are both rights-based and responsive to the diverse needs of marginalized women.

Engagement with feminist movements, participation in Women's Marches, and consultations on systematic monitoring reinforced the organization's role in shaping a rights-based approach.

The onset of the Russian full-scale intervention in 2022 intensified advocacy needs, particularly regarding displaced women and those facing heightened vulnerability to violence. The organization responded by advocating for emergency social protections, ensuring continuity of HIV treatment, and influencing policies on humanitarian assistance and inclusive service delivery in conflict-affected regions.

2. Service Provision

Direct service provision constitutes another central component of the organization's work. Since 2016, *Positive Women* has implemented programs offering integrated social, medical, and legal support to women living with HIV, including internally displaced women affected by conflict. Services include psychological counseling, peer-to-peer support, case management, prevention of domestic and gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health guidance, and legal assistance.

The war created unprecedented challenges: disruptions to healthcare access, population displacement, and rising rates of gender-based violence. In response, the organization scaled up its humanitarian aid activities, establishing safe spaces in eleven Ukrainian cities and ensuring essential services for women in both frontline and host communities. Service models were adapted to mobile and online formats to reach women in shelters, temporary housing, and remote locations, reflecting a flexible, trauma-informed approach rooted in feminist social work principles.

3. Educational and Awareness Initiatives

Education and awareness-raising constitute a vital pillar of the organization's strategy, moving beyond the simple dissemination of information toward the development of critical consciousness and collective agency. *Positive Women*

utilizes peer-led education as a primary methodology, which effectively deconstructs the traditional hierarchy between the "expert" and the "learner." Through workshops, leadership training, and public campaigns, the organization fosters an environment where women living with HIV can reclaim their self-worth and develop the skills necessary for informed decision-making and self-advocacy.

Major public-facing initiatives, such as the annual "16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence," utilize creative and participatory methods—including art therapy, film clubs, and street performances—to engage the broader public. These activities serve a dual purpose: they challenge the deeply rooted societal stigma surrounding HIV and gender-based violence while simultaneously providing a platform for women to occupy public space and assert their presence as active citizens.

With the onset of the full-scale invasion, these educational efforts were rapidly adapted to address the acute, life-threatening vulnerabilities introduced by the conflict. The pedagogical focus shifted toward "resilience education," incorporating training on psychological first aid, emergency preparedness, and the navigation of disrupted medical and social infrastructures. Recognizing the chaos of mass displacement, the organization developed specialized programs to empower women to navigate new, complex bureaucratic systems in both frontline and host communities.

This shift highlights a critical evolution in their educational approach: from a focus on long-term empowerment and stigma reduction to a model of "survival-centered self-advocacy." By equipping women with the tools to demand access to healthcare and social services amidst the breakdown of institutional norms, *Positive Women* has ensured that education remains a vital instrument of protection and human rights in a wartime context.

4. *Research and Knowledge Sharing*

Research activities within *Positive Women* are not merely administrative requirements but serve as a fundamental tool for reclaiming the narrative of women living with HIV. By employing a participatory approach, the organization ensures that studies are conducted by the community, for the community, thereby validating "lived experience" as a legitimate form of academic and political expertise. Since 2015, this research has systematically documented the social, legal, and health challenges that were previously sidelined by mainstream biomedical discourse. Early studies focused on the intersections of sexual and reproductive health with gender-based violence, while more recent longitudinal data (2019–2025) has captured the shifting needs of the community amidst the 2022 invasion, particularly focusing on the psychosocial well-being of internally displaced women.

This community-led research model functions as a site of "counter-knowledge" that challenges systemic barriers to care. By grounding their findings in the authentic voices of women, the organization ensures that program designs and educational initiatives remain evidence-based and deeply responsive to real-world needs rather than theoretical assumptions. Furthermore, these findings are elevated to the international stage through contributions to global conferences and the submission of shadow reports to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

This strategic use of data amplifies the importance of local expertise in international discourse, asserting that women living with HIV are not just beneficiaries of aid, but are the primary authorities on their own lives and the structural changes required to achieve justice.

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5. Network and Community Building

Network and community building represents a final, vital dimension of the organization's work. Regional branches, online communities, mentorship programs, and peer support networks foster solidarity, mutual support, and knowledge exchange. These networks strengthen leadership capacities, enable local advocacy initiatives, and facilitate rapid responses to emerging challenges.

The war underscored the importance of community cohesion:

networks provided psychological support, information sharing, and practical guidance for navigating displacement, accessing aid, and preventing violence. By creating safe spaces for dialogue, learning, and mutual assistance, the organization ensures both personal empowerment and collective action, in line with feminist social work principles (Semigina, 2025a).

To sum, the multifaceted approach of the *Positive Women* organization demonstrates the essential role of community-based, feminist-informed social work in addressing complex vulnerabilities. By integrating advocacy, service provision, education, research, and network-building, the organization not only meets immediate needs but also promotes systemic change. The war in Ukraine has tested and strengthened these interventions, highlighting the resilience and adaptability of both the organization and the women it serves. Insights from this experience illustrate how social work can respond effectively to crises, combining evidence-based practices with participatory, rights-focused approaches to support marginalized women in contexts of both chronic vulnerability and acute conflict.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that feminist social work in Ukraine is not merely a transplanted academic framework but a contextually grounded, adaptive practice that

operationalizes core feminist principles in a uniquely challenging environment. The work of *Positive Women* demonstrates how these principles – empowerment, intersectionality, solidarity, and the recognition that “the personal is political” – can be applied at multiple levels of social work practice, from individual support to systemic advocacy.

At the individual level, interventions reflect the feminist *principle of empowerment* by prioritizing agency and self-determination among women living with HIV. Support is tailored to account for intersecting vulnerabilities, including gender, health status, socio-economic position, age, and displacement caused by the ongoing war. By recognizing these multiple dimensions of marginalization, the organization exemplifies the application of *intersectional feminism* (Crenshaw, 1989; Bernard, 2021), ensuring that each woman’s lived experience informs the nature of support provided. The principle that “*the personal is political*” is evident here, as enhancing individual knowledge, rights awareness, and self-respect contributes not only to personal well-being but also to broader social transformation. However, the integration of individualized support with collective empowerment raises questions about potential tensions between personal and group objectives, echoing concerns raised in the literature (Carr, 2003).

At the group level, *Positive Women* operationalizes the feminist principle of *solidarity*. Peer networks, learning circles, and collective initiatives allow women to share experiences, develop leadership skills, and support one another, thereby fostering collective empowerment. These spaces exemplify the feminist ideal of horizontal relationships, where authority is decentralized, and expertise derives from lived experience rather than hierarchical structures. Such networks have proven particularly vital during the ongoing war, when displacement and disruptions to formal services demanded flexible, community-led responses. Yet, maintaining egalitarian dynamics within these groups requires vigilance to prevent the emergence of informal hierarchies that could undermine feminist ideals of equality and collective agency.

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At the systemic level, the organization's advocacy and policy engagement exemplifies the principle of *structural transformation*, another key tenet of feminist social work. By challenging discriminatory laws, expanding reproductive rights, and influencing health and social protection policies, *Positive Women* demonstrates that feminist social work extends beyond individual and group interventions to actively reshape social and institutional norms.

While Western models of feminist social work (Dominelli, 2002; Phillips, 2022) often focus on deconstructing established welfare states, the Ukrainian experience — as exemplified by the work of *Positive Women* — highlights a model of transformative nation-building.

By centering the voices of women living with HIV, the organization has effectively challenged the post-Soviet biomedical legacy that historically treated these women as passive subjects of medical surveillance. Instead, through the operationalization of "expertise by experience," the organization has redefined the social worker-client relationship as a horizontal partnership, proving that empowerment is most effective when it is led by those who intimately navigate the realities of marginalization (Semigina et al., 2025).

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This shift toward horizontal empowerment proved particularly vital during the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which served as a definitive stress test for these feminist principles. The networked model employed by *Positive Women* demonstrated a level of adaptability that often eluded traditional, hierarchical state infrastructures. This resilience is rooted in the feminist principle of solidarity over bureaucracy; as women were displaced across borders and regions, the intersectional nature of their vulnerability—encompassing gender, HIV status, and internal displacement—demanded a response that was fluid rather than rigid (NGORC, 2023).

Consequently, the organization's ability to pivot toward humanitarian aid while maintaining its feminist core suggests the emergence of a *Crisis-Responsive Feminist Social Work*. This model posits that in contexts of acute conflict, safe spaces are not merely physical locations but robust social networks

that ensure psychological and medical continuity when formal systems alter.

This model aligns with Baker and McCall Magan's (2023) call for a shift from crisis management toward social transformation through feminist, human rights-based preparedness. By framing the invasion as an opportunity for structural change, *Positive Women* enacted a form of social protection that centers the most marginalized. Similarly, Agapiou Josephides (2020) emphasizes the importance of "feminist human rights preparedness" in emergencies. Gartzia et al. (2012) further highlight that crises can amplify the effectiveness of female-led and gender-sensitive interventions, supporting the notion that feminist approaches not only mitigate vulnerability but also enhance organizational adaptability. By building infrastructure grounded in mutual aid and rights-based advocacy, *Positive Women* were uniquely positioned to maintain the dignity and safety of women living with HIV amidst profound social disruption.

The success of these community-led interventions, however, exists in a state of constant tension with a "patriarchal buffer" that persists within the broader Ukrainian institutional landscape. While *Positive Women* has achieved significant advocacy victories—such as the removal of discriminatory bans on adoption and the expansion of reproductive rights—these milestones highlight a critical gap between civil society and state practice.

The organization's work reveals that while grassroots activists have embraced a rights-based, feminist approach, the state apparatus often remains anchored in paternalistic models focused on "protection" rather than "emancipatory agency". For feminist social work to be fully institutionalized in Ukraine, professional education and policy frameworks must move beyond superficial gender-sensitivity toward a practice that actively interrogates power imbalances at every level of service delivery.

Ultimately, the trajectory of *Positive Women* positions the Ukrainian experience as a vital site of global knowledge production within the field of social work. By documenting the synergy between local activism and international frameworks like the ICW, this chapter illustrates that feminist social work is a dynamic practice that gains its strength from local adaptation. The transition from a small self-help group to a national policy influencer underscores the enduring relevance of the "personal is political" mantra, proving that individual health and dignity are inseparable from the structural fight for human rights. As such, the Ukrainian case provides a powerful roadmap for other transit countries and conflict zones, demonstrating that community-based, feminist-informed social work is not a specialized niche, but a necessary foundation for achieving social justice in the face of overlapping crises.

CONCLUSIONS

The case of *Positive Women* demonstrates that feminist social work in Ukraine is a dynamic, contextually responsive practice that integrates core feminist principles—empowerment, intersectionality, solidarity, and the understanding that “the personal is political”—across individual, group, and systemic levels. By centering the lived experiences of women living with HIV, the organization has transformed the traditional social worker-client relationship into a horizontal partnership, highlighting the importance of expertise derived from experience and lived reality.

The ongoing war has amplified both the challenges and the necessity of this feminist approach. Displacement, disrupted services, and heightened vulnerability underscore the relevance of Crisis-Responsive Feminist Social Work, in which resilient social networks function as safe spaces that maintain psychological, social, and medical continuity even when formal infrastructures falter. At the same time, the persistence of paternalistic norms within state institutions demonstrates that systemic transformation requires not only grassroots activism but also the integration of feminist principles into professional education, policy development, and institutional culture.

The Ukrainian experience illustrates that feminist social work is not a niche intervention but a foundational approach for promoting social justice in contexts of overlapping crises. The

integration of empowerment, intersectionality, solidarity, and horizontal partnerships provides a practical framework for both immediate interventions and long-term societal change. By documenting these practices, the Ukrainian case contributes to global knowledge, offering a model for other transitional, conflict-affected, or crisis-prone societies seeking to implement feminist-informed, community-centered social work.

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Chapter 11

Social Work PhD Education in Ukraine: Institutional Trajectories, Europeanisation, and the Missing Wartime Agenda

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolution of social work PhD education in Ukraine, tracing institutional trajectories from the post-Soviet period through efforts at Europeanisation, and analyzing the impact of wartime conditions on research and training. Drawing on a review of active PhD programs, defended dissertations, and regulatory frameworks, the study highlights persistent Soviet-era legacies, limited integration of international methodologies, and a gap between doctoral research and practical social work needs. While Ukraine has formally adopted the PhD and aligned with the Bologna Process, doctoral programs remain heavily influenced by socio-pedagogical traditions, bureaucratic procedures, and local research cultures. The full-scale war (2022–2025) further exposed shortcomings, as most research topics were pre-war and insufficiently responsive to emerging challenges such as displacement, collective trauma, and social service provision under wartime conditions. The findings underscore the need for adaptive, practice-oriented, and ethically grounded doctoral education aligned with global standards.

Keywords: *Ukraine, social work, PhD education, Europeanisation, wartime, collective trauma, evidence-based research.*

■ INTRODUCTION

In the Soviet Union, social work did not exist as a distinct profession or academic discipline. Following Ukraine's declaration of independence, the country began a process of establishing social work roles, developing educational programs, and implementing international projects aimed at piloting social work interventions. Despite Ukraine's formal adoption of the Bologna Process in 2005, doctoral-level education was not introduced until 2015. The first licensed social work doctoral programs commenced in 2016, with the first legally recognized PhD defenses taking place in 2020.

This chapter critically examines the **institutionalization of doctoral education in social work in Ukraine**, focusing on its historical evolution, structural development, and alignment with European standards. As noted by Rumyantseva and Logvynenko (2018), higher education developments in Ukraine carry traces of path dependency and post-Soviet legacies, particularly in the early stages of program formation.

By analyzing curricula, defended dissertations, and regulatory frameworks, the chapter identifies gaps between academic training and practical social work demands, highlights promising trends in methodological innovation, and considers the implications of war for the future professionalization and modernization of doctoral-level social work education in Ukraine.

METHODS

This study adopts a **qualitative, interpretative approach** to explore the development and institutionalization of social work doctoral education in Ukraine. Following the interpretative paradigm, the focus is on understanding the meanings, processes, and contextual factors that shape doctoral education, rather than testing hypotheses or producing generalizable statistical findings (Schmid et al., 2021).

The analysis is based on multiple complementary sources. First, **document analysis** was conducted, encompassing state regulations, licensing materials, curricula, and PhD dissertations in social work accessed through the electronic database of the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance (NAQA).

Second, **institutional case studies** were used to examine the experiences of several Ukrainian higher education institutions that launched doctoral programs in social work. The selection of cases was guided by the availability of documentary materials as well as the authors' direct involvement in the development and implementation of these PhD programs.

Third, a **comparative analysis** was undertaken to assess the extent to which Ukrainian doctoral education in social work aligns with European standards and benchmarks in the field.

A distinctive feature of this study is its emphasis on **authorial reflexivity**. All three authors were directly engaged in establishing doctoral programs in social work in Ukraine. Through collective discussions, we reflected on our practical experiences, identified recurring challenges, and articulated key lessons learned. These reflexive insights are embedded in the analysis, offering an insider perspective that illuminates procedural complexities and contextual specificities shaping the institutionalization of doctoral education in social work.

Additionally, artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used to process and refine English-language texts, supporting translation, summarization, and clarity throughout the analysis.

By combining interpretative analysis, document and case study review, and authorial reflection, this chapter examines how historical legacies, institutional practices, and European influences intersect in shaping the doctoral education of social work in Ukraine. It should be noted, however, that this study is based on a limited number of institutions and documents, and the authors' direct involvement in program development may introduce some subjectivity. Therefore, while the insights are contextually rich, they may not fully represent all experiences across Ukraine or be directly generalizable to other contexts.

HISTORICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT OF DOCTORAL EDUCATION IN UKRAINE

During the Soviet and early post-Soviet periods, Ukraine's system of academic degree awarding differed markedly from international and European models and operated within a highly centralized, state-controlled framework. Decisions on academic degrees were tightly regulated by the state (Kotova, 2000; Wynnytsky, 2008) and overseen by the Higher Attestation Commission (Vysshaya Attestatsionnaya Komissiya, VAK), initially located in the Soviet capital and later transferred to Kyiv.

At the time of the Soviet Union's dissolution, doctoral education followed a two-tier structure consisting of the *Candidate of Science* (*Kandidat Nauk*) and the *Doctor of Science* (*Doktor Nauk*), with degree holders expected to assume leading research or university teaching roles.

The primary pathway to the Candidate of Science degree was the *aspirantura*, offered by higher education institutions and research institutes affiliated with the Academy of Sciences, although alternative routes also existed. A prerequisite for dissertation defense was completion of the "*candidate minimum*" examinations in the research specialty, a foreign language, and *scientific communism*—later replaced by philosophy in post-Soviet Ukraine.

Dissertation publication and defense procedures were strictly regulated. Research findings could be published only in state-

controlled journals, while defenses took place before Dissertation Councils accredited by the Ministry of Education for five-year terms and typically comprising 20–25 members. Prior to the defense, a concise dissertation summary (*autoreferat*) was distributed to major research institutions and libraries. The defense itself involved a formal presentation, critiques by officially appointed opponents, and responses by the candidate.

The *Doctor of Science* degree represented the highest academic qualification in the Soviet system. The duration of *doktorantura* was not fixed and often extended from five to fifteen years, with admission largely reserved for established scholars expected to produce significant scientific contributions.

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Academic degrees in the Soviet period carried not only scholarly recognition but also social prestige and political legitimacy, often signaling loyalty to the Communist Party (Tazabek, 2018). Degree holders benefited from higher salaries, improved housing opportunities, enhanced career prospects, and elevated social status. Levels of corruption in Soviet higher education were relatively low (Osipian, 2009).

Although early Soviet research institutions were marked by innovation, research activity gradually became constrained by extensive bureaucratic regulation. Dissertation topics were governed by an official list of research specialties, each defined by a “*specialty passport*” specifying approved research directions (Kotova, 2000). This system limited intellectual

autonomy and creativity. As Tomusk (2004) notes, Soviet doctoral education was characterized by restricted academic freedom and limited innovation, while Eliutin (1984) emphasizes its reliance on standardized, pre-formulated solutions. These features are essential for understanding the enduring legacy of Soviet academic degree awarding in post-Soviet higher education systems.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, higher education systems across post-socialist countries underwent substantial reforms. Influenced by the **Bologna discourse**, many of these states looked to Western models as points of reference (Rumyantseva & Logvynenko, 2018), often driven by concerns about falling behind internationally (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012).

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Despite formal commitments to change, reforms in several post-Soviet countries—including Ukraine—remained **partial and uneven**. Soviet legacies continued to shape research philosophies, governance practices, and academic degree awarding (Kotova, 2000; Tazabek, 2018). This persistence is partly explained by the deep entrenchment of Soviet ideological and administrative traditions. Regions less affected by Soviet governance proved more receptive to innovation (Tampayeva, 2013). Ukraine's postcolonial condition, reinforced by Russia's hegemonic role as the former imperial center, further contributed to the endurance of hierarchical and centralized models in education and policymaking.

During the transition to a market economy, Ukrainian higher education experienced institutional expansion while maintaining a high degree of centralization. New private and municipal universities emerged, and the previously free system of higher education was supplemented by fee-based training models. At the same time, corruption became a systemic problem (Bazaluk, 2016), undermining academic integrity and trust in doctoral education (Karagodina et al., 2019b). PhD preparation and defense procedures grew increasingly bureaucratic, with defenses often reduced to ritualized processes accompanied by informal payments, raising concerns about the credibility of academic degrees (Dobko, 2020).

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The rapid proliferation of academic journals further complicated the system. In response, a formalized registry of “scientific journals” was introduced, though compliance with peer-review standards was not always effectively enforced. As a result, Ukraine’s higher education reforms produced a system that appeared aligned with European standards at the formal level, yet retained post-socialist practices in everyday operation. Kvit (2020) critically describes this period as one of institutional survival, during which universities adopted business-oriented logics and increasingly framed education in economic terms.

A significant shift occurred after 2014, when Ukraine explicitly oriented its political and educational development toward

Europe. The adoption of the Law of Ukraine “*On Higher Education*” in 2014 marked a new phase of reform aligned with the Bologna Process, including the formal introduction of **PhD programs as the third level of higher education**. Key innovations included structured four-year educational and research programs, implementation of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and the Diploma Supplement, and the promotion of academic mobility with financial support mechanisms.

Further regulatory changes followed. A 2016 Cabinet of Ministers resolution established standardized procedures for PhD training, introducing a structured educational and scientific program consisting of coursework and a research stage. In 2019, an experimental model delegated PhD degree awarding to specialized academic councils within higher education and research institutions. While formal procedures evolved, informal defense practices largely persisted.

In 2022, a new procedure for awarding the Doctor of Science degree was introduced, increasing transparency through the publication of dissertations and opponents’ reviews in the database of the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance. Nevertheless, specialized councils and final degree decisions remain subject to approval by the Ministry of Education and Science, and the overall system continues to be highly regulated (Semigina et al., 2023).

Finally, despite the intention to fully replace the Soviet-era *Candidate of Sciences* degree with the PhD, both degrees currently coexist due to prolonged transition periods, illustrating the **hybrid nature of doctoral education reform** in Ukraine.

■ THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF THE THIRD LEVEL OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION (2010–2022)

During the Soviet period, social work did not exist in Ukraine as a recognized scientific specialty, academic discipline, or field of professional practice. Social problems were largely denied as structural phenomena and instead framed as temporary difficulties or manifestations of social pathology, addressed through treatment or ideological “re-education” (Semigina & Boyko, 2014).

In the early post-Soviet years (1991–1992), social work was introduced as an academic discipline at the Bachelor’s and Master’s levels. Concurrently, Social Pedagogy was institutionalized as a full-fledged academic specialty, within which Candidates of Sciences could defend dissertations. Consequently, most academic staff preparing social workers were trained in social pedagogy, relying on classical pedagogical experiments and historical-descriptive approaches. Later, the specialty “Social Psychology. Psychology of Social Work” was established, emphasizing experimental methods grounded in psychological paradigms. Dissertations in social work could also be defended under

“Branch Sociology,” typically employing mass surveys or historical-descriptive designs (Boyko, 2017; Povidaichyk et al., 2022). These disciplinary pathways shaped early doctoral-level research related to social work, despite the absence of social work as an independent scientific field.

A key precursor to doctoral social work education was an experimental program at the **National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy**, titled “Social Work and Social Policy” (2010–2012). Developed within the European Commission-funded Tempus project “Improving the Three-Level Education System in the ‘Social Work’ Specialty in Six European Countries,” the programme aimed to enhance research capacity and foster international collaboration by engaging Ukrainian scholars and students with European partner universities. Its focus was on aligning doctoral training with European academic standards and strengthening research-oriented competencies. Despite its innovative design, the program was discontinued, as the third cycle of higher education had not yet been formally established in Ukraine (Lucas, 2010; Semigina et al., 2017).

The formal introduction of PhD programmes in the 231 “Social Work” specialty in 2016 marked a major milestone, presenting challenges due to the lack of prior experience in training Candidates of Sciences in this area, unlike disciplines such as psychology, sociology, pedagogy, or law. In 2016, the Ministry of Education and Science licensed the first PhD programmes in

social work. By February 2017, 15 institutions—including 14 higher education institutions and one research institution—were authorized to train Doctors of Philosophy in social work, offering 166 study places (Karagodina & Pozhydaieva, 2017). The number of licensed programmes continued to grow in subsequent years (Kolyada et al., 2021).

The first PhD programmes in Social Work in Ukraine emerged in the absence of formal educational standards or methodological guidelines for the specialty. Consequently, programme requirements were largely procedural, focusing on compliance with government regulations rather than alignment with international best practices. According to the National Qualifications Framework, third-cycle graduates were expected to demonstrate autonomy, innovation, academic and professional integrity, and the capacity for continuous self-development. Curricula were required to specify the list and volume of disciplines, sequencing, teaching formats, workload, schedules, and assessment methods.

The early programmes varied significantly in content and orientation, often reflecting prior experience in training Candidates of Sciences rather than contemporary social work doctoral education.

For example, **the Academy of Labour, Social Relations and Tourism (ALSRT)**, licensed in January 2017, designed its programme to integrate a research-focused component (192 ECTS) and an educational component (48 ECTS). Students

engaged in fundamental and applied research addressing complex social work issues and developed professional competencies through courses on empirical research, social policy, innovation in teaching, and modern ICT tools. Teaching practice was included via assistantship and dedicated courses. By 2020, students were researching topics from community-level social services to digitalization of elderly care and gender-based violence. In 2021, the first dissertation was defended, notably applying feminist theory, gender analysis, and action research—departing from the traditional socio-pedagogical approach. Despite these achievements, the programme was not accredited under NAQA's new criteria, forcing students to transfer elsewhere.

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Other early programmes exhibited similar patterns. At **Ternopil Volodymyr Hnatiuk National Pedagogical University**, the educational and scientific programme was designed to develop 8 general competencies (e.g., critical thinking, interdisciplinary research, ethical conduct) and 12 professional competencies focused on research methodology, empirical data analysis, and pedagogical activity. However, the majority of compulsory courses (21 ECTS) and one elective had a pedagogical focus, with limited attention to contemporary social work practice.

In contrast, the PhD programme at **Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv** emphasized research autonomy, critical thinking, international engagement, and innovation. Its

10 professional competencies included the design and execution of research, analytical and methodological skills, and teaching in formal and non-formal education. Despite these innovations, the programme retained a strong orientation toward academic research rather than applied social work practice, reflecting the legacy of departmental traditions and prior experience with Candidate of Sciences training.

In 2020, legislative changes introduced mandatory accreditation of PhD programmes through the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance. By February 2022, six doctoral programmes in social work had successfully obtained accreditation—five within higher education institutions and one in a research institution—representing a critical step toward institutionalizing quality assurance in doctoral social work education and ensuring alignment with national standards.

Analysis of the six accredited programmes revealed that most educational components ranged between 36 and 60 ECTS credits, with 8-22 disciplines. Five of six programmes were housed in pedagogical institutions or departments, emphasizing research grounded in social pedagogy rather than social work as a contemporary, emancipatory discipline. Variations among programmes demonstrate the influence of departmental traditions, the developers' limited engagement with international social work standards, and divergent

conceptualizations of the doctoral-level social work paradigm (Denecke et al., 2017; Harrington et al., 2014; Semigina, 2021).

The adoption of the national PhD standard for Social Work in December 2021 has not fully resolved these inconsistencies. The standard remains broad, largely framed within a social welfare paradigm, and emphasizes theoretical knowledge of social development and protection, general research skills, and pedagogical competencies. While HEIs retain the ability to specify additional disciplines and learning outcomes, strict NAQA oversight effectively constrains innovation, preserving state control over doctoral programme content and limiting alignment with international doctoral education practices (Semigina et al., 2023).

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As of February 1, 2022, eighteen PhD theses in the “Social Work” specialty defended between 2020 and 2022 were publicly accessible through higher education institutions’ websites and the Ministry of Education and Science. All dissertations were defended within the specialized councils of the institutions where the candidates were enrolled.

Thematic analysis shows that doctoral candidates addressed a range of socially significant issues relevant to contemporary Ukraine, including improving the quality of life of persons with functional disabilities, optimizing the provision of social services in rural areas, strengthening social workers’ gender competence, supporting the social integration of internally displaced persons, examining poly-professional mobility

among social workers, and developing harm-reduction strategies related to psychoactive substance use.

At the same time, the majority of dissertations were strongly shaped by the methodological and conceptual traditions of social pedagogy. These studies predominantly focused on young populations and socio-pedagogical interventions, such as the socio-pedagogical conditions of gender socialization of students with special needs, pedagogical support for first-time employees, the formation of poly-professional mobility, and the analysis of informal youth movements as socio-cultural environments.

Only a limited number of dissertations moved beyond this framework to engage more directly with core areas of contemporary social work practice, including social integration and inclusion, work with vulnerable populations, gender analysis, family-based care for orphans and children deprived of parental care, harm-reduction approaches for adolescent drug users, and community-based or foster care services.

All theses formally complied with the Ministry of Education and Science requirements, including structure, theoretical grounding, research methods, sample descriptions, results, conclusions, and recommendations. Empirical research was included in all works, demonstrating practical relevance through the implementation and evaluation of interventions for specific client groups.

The focus and methodology of dissertations were also strongly shaped by departmental traditions and supervisors' professional backgrounds, whether philosophical, pedagogical, sociological, or psychological. Many studies targeted higher education settings, aiming to develop students' professional competencies, while others extended research to local social service agencies, youth probation institutions, and NGOs. A smaller subset of theses produced new intervention models for specific populations, including internally displaced persons, foster carers, and adolescents with substance use challenges.

Dissemination of research findings was primarily through scientific publications, often in collaboration with colleagues and supervisors. Some authors published in journals indexed in Scopus and Web of Science (Karagodina & Semigina, 2022; Semigina et al., 2023).

Overall, the first PhD dissertations in Ukrainian social work largely reflected socio-pedagogical traditions and emphasized the professional competence of practitioners and local authorities. As the discipline develops, integrating interdisciplinary perspectives and international standards could enrich research quality and align doctoral work more closely with contemporary social work practice.

SOCIAL WORK PhD PROGRAMS DURING WARTIME (2022–2025)

The full-scale war in Ukraine has significantly disrupted the organization of doctoral training in social work. Many PhD candidates were forced to adapt their research due to limited access to target groups, as potential participants were either in occupied territories or had relocated elsewhere. This situation necessitated methodological adjustments, including the transition to digital surveys and interviews, as well as rethinking approaches to data collection and analysis (Semigina, 2022).

Institutional challenges compounded these difficulties. PhD candidates frequently had to adjust to unexpected changes in testing and defense rules, which added stress and obstacles to completing their degrees. Key issues included: (1) the requirement to defend within the duration of the educational program, conflicting with established national and international practices, particularly under pandemic and wartime conditions that limited the feasibility of experimental research; and (2) the restriction that defenses could only take place in programs accredited by the NAQA, whereas prior to 2022, a Ministry of Education license alone was sufficient. The instability and inconsistency of these requirements negatively affected both candidates and their supervisors, complicating the preparation and defense of dissertations.

As of December 2025, the Unified State Electronic Database on Education listed 18 entities authorized to conduct doctoral education in the 231 “Social Work” specialty in Ukraine. These included 17 higher education institutions and one research institute, all holding valid licenses for training Doctors of Philosophy in social work (EDEBO, 2025). However, despite the availability of licensed programs, the number of PhD students in social work remains relatively modest. According to national educational standards, the educational component of these programs must comprise 30–60 ECTS credits (the full PhD program totals 240 ECTS).

An analysis of selected Ukrainian PhD programs in social work as of 2025 reveals that war-related topics and social work practice under martial law are addressed only minimally and mostly in a formal manner.

As of October 2025, **Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University** had 16 PhD candidates enrolled in its social work program, which comprises 60 ECTS credits. A selective component titled “*Current Issues in Social Work During Wartime and the Post-War Period*” (4 ECTS) has been added, while core courses focus on Philosophy and Methodology of Scientific Activity, Research Strategies, Scientific Communication, Higher Education Pedagogy and Psychology, Social Work Development, Research Infrastructure, and Research and Teaching Practice.

At **Mykhailo Drahomanov Ukrainian State University**, 9 PhD candidates are enrolled in the 48-ECTS program. Selective components address wartime topics, including Social Work with Internally Displaced Persons, Social Support for Military Personnel and Their Families, and Building Resilience Among Social Service Recipients. Core courses cover Research Planning and Data Analysis, Scientometrics and Research Management, Foundations of Social Work and Counseling, Methodology of Social Work Research, Project Design in Social Work, and Professional Training Methods for Future Social Workers.

At **Lviv Polytechnic National University** (Department of Sociology and Social Work), 8 candidates are enrolled in a 43-ECTS program that does not include any courses directly related to wartime issues. The program emphasizes developing academic and research competencies through courses in Philosophy and Methodology of Science, Foreign Language for Academic Purposes, Professional Pedagogy, Academic Entrepreneurship, Pedagogical Practice, Analytical and Quantitative Research Methods, Research Seminar in Sociology and Social Work, and Methods and Methodology of Social Work Research.

The PhD program at **Lesya Ukrainka Volyn National University** enrolls 4 candidates and comprises 60 ECTS credits. Core components include Philosophy and Methodology of Science, Academic Research Ethics, Social

Work Theory and Methodology, Research Methods, Pedagogical Practice, Foreign Language for Academic Purposes, and courses on Information Technologies, Project Management, and Social Process Modeling. No wartime social work topics are included in the curriculum, learning outcomes, or competency development.

The following **Table 11.1** summarizes the focus areas, total ECTS credits, and inclusion of war-related content in active social work doctoral programs in Ukraine as of 2025.

Table 11.1. Core Components and War-Related Elements of Ukrainian PhD Programs in Social Work (2025)

University	Total ECTS of the educational part	Focus/Core Components	War-related components
<i>Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University</i>	60	Philosophy & Methodology, Research Strategies, Scientific Communication, Higher Education Pedagogy, Social Work Development, Research & Teaching Practice	Elective course “ <i>Current Issues in Social Work During Wartime and Post-War Period</i> ”
<i>Mykhailo Drahomanov Ukrainian State University</i>	48	Research Planning & Data Analysis, Scientometrics & Research Management, Foundations of Social Work & Counseling, Project Design, Professional Training Methods	Elective courses: “ <i>Social Work with IDPs</i> ”; “ <i>Social Support for Military & Families</i> ”; “ <i>Building Resilience of Social Service Recipients</i> ”
<i>Lviv Polytechnic</i>	43	Philosophy & Methodology, Foreign Language,	None

<i>National University</i>		Professional Pedagogy, Academic Entrepreneurship, Research Methods & Seminar	
<i>Lesya Ukrainka Volyn National University</i>	60	Philosophy & Methodology, Academic Research Ethics, Social Work Theory, Research Methods, Pedagogy, Information Technologies, Project Management	None

Overall, these programs show limited integration of wartime-related social work content, with most curricula maintaining a traditional focus on academic, methodological, and pedagogical competencies rather than directly addressing the challenges of social work in a war context.

CONTENT ANALYSIS OF PhD DISSERTATIONS IN SOCIAL WORK (2022–2025)

During 2022–2025, dissertations were defended on topics approved prior to the full-scale invasion, although a hybrid war had been ongoing since 2014. These topics generally did not reflect wartime realities, such as the provision of social work under armed conflict conditions. Many studies remained oriented toward stable socio-economic circumstances, which no longer corresponded to the realities of war. After February 2022, previously relevant topics lost significance due to radical societal changes and emerging new priorities. Traditional

approaches to working with vulnerable populations, as described in these dissertations, often failed to account for contemporary challenges arising from armed conflict and collective trauma. This highlights a considerable gap between the presumed “novelty” of the research and the practical demands of social work practice (Semigina, 2024).

It is important to note that during 2022–2025, most dissertations were defended on topics approved prior to the full-scale invasion, reflecting earlier priorities that did not consider wartime social work conditions. Consequently, while some dissertations later incorporated discussions of war-related challenges in publications, the original topics often remained oriented toward pre-war socio-economic realities.

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From February 2022, when the information system for reporting the establishment of one-time specialized councils for PhD defenses became operational on the NAQA website, until December 2025, there were 35 cases of awarding the Doctor of Philosophy degree in social work. However, the system contains information on 39 cases, as 2 dissertations were withdrawn from defense and 2 candidates were awaiting their scheduled defense dates.

For further analysis, **19 dissertations prepared for defense during 2022–2025 were selected**, as they potentially address issues of social work under wartime conditions. Inclusion criteria: a dissertation was considered if it addressed a

problem directly, indirectly, or potentially related to the wartime context or armed conflict; and if the keywords of the dissertation or at least one of its published articles were related to wartime topics.

To identify the specific characteristics of the selected dissertations, their abstracts available in the NAQA database were analyzed, along with abstracts and/or full texts of individual publications related to the dissertation topics. Data structuring during the analysis was conducted using Gemini Pro.

Among the selected dissertations, **only three directly addressed issues related to the consequences of armed conflict**. These works focused on the problems of various target groups and were prepared in the traditions of different Ukrainian schools of social work, employing distinct methodological approaches. The dissertation *“Formation of the Socio-Psychological Readiness of Servicemen of the Armed Forces of Ukraine for Performing Assigned Tasks under Conditions of Hybrid Warfare”* (Labenok, 2024) was conducted according to the canons of social pedagogy research and aimed to identify the pedagogical conditions for ensuring the socio-psychological resilience of servicemen participating in hybrid warfare. The author also noted the applicability of the findings for the educational and methodological support of professional training for social workers, social pedagogues, and psychologists.

The dissertation *“Development of the Subjectivity of Forced Migrants as a Condition for Overcoming Career Crises”* (Holotenko, 2023) focused on analyzing personal responses to challenging life circumstances. Its author developed a theoretical model representing subjectivity as a combination of value-semantic, goal-setting, and proactive dimensions of personality. Using this model, the author studied the dynamics of coping strategies among forced migrants in Ukraine and abroad and tested methods for optimizing their awareness of professional identity, professional development, and career advancement in new conditions.

The dissertation *“Social Support by Non-Governmental Organizations for Families of Anti-Terrorist Operation Participants”* (Dulia, 2023) examined relevant NGO practices and proposed a program of social support for families of combatants. This program included the use of an assessment toolkit developed by the author to determine the needs and problems of the target group and to evaluate their psycho-emotional state throughout the provision of assistance.

The dissertation *“Formation of Future Social Workers’ Readiness for Patriotic Education of Youth through Socio-Cultural Activities”* (Babak, 2025) and the keywords of publications resulting from this research indicate relevance to wartime issues. In one publication, the author aimed to analyze factors influencing the readiness of future social workers for patriotic education of youth under martial law and to identify ways to optimize

patriotic education during wartime (Babak, 2024). Two other dissertations, whose topics did not have an obvious connection to the war context, contained the keyword “Russian-Ukrainian war” and addressed certain aspects of the war’s impact on the emergence of research problems or ways to resolve them (see, e.g., Palatna, 2022).

A number of dissertations did not explicitly reference war in their titles or keywords, yet were devoted to issues closely related to the wartime context. Their abstracts highlight the relevance of the research through the lens of wartime challenges, including empirical studies of the needs or problems of specific population groups significantly affected by the war, and/or recommendations for transforming social work practices in a wartime context. For example, one dissertation analyzed social changes causing crises, including those caused by the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, and developed a comparative table of main trends in volunteer activity before February 24, 2022, and after the full-scale invasion. Corresponding data were also presented in related academic publications (Kotelevets, 2022; Zhukov & Kotelevets, 2024). In two other dissertations addressing gender-based violence against women, war is identified as a factor increasing the risk and prevalence of violence (Sarnatska, 2025; Capasso et al., 2022). These cases highlight the need for new approaches to protecting women’s rights and testing effective interventions suitable for scaling nationally. In a dissertation focusing on the activities of the Ukrainian Red Cross Society,

the author identified directions for volunteer organization of charitable social services and defined the content of social assistance under wartime conditions (Fedorov, 2025).

Some socially and pedagogically oriented dissertations, which included experimental verification of pedagogical conditions for developing specific competencies in target groups (e.g., university students, psychological service staff), described training programs or projects designed to account for the characteristics of participants affected by the war, such as displaced students. One such study – *“Training of Psychological Service Staff for the Formation of Social Health of Primary School Students in Postgraduate Education”* (Zamazii, 2024) discussed the most effective forms and methods of preparing psychological service staff to promote social health among younger students. These included methodological colloquia for coordinators of psychological services in districts/cities/territorial communities, covering topics such as *“Psychosocial Support for Participants in the Educational Process under Wartime Conditions”* and *“Organization of Psychological Services in the Context of Ongoing Education System Reforms in Ukraine during Wartime and Post-War Periods,”* as well as lists of methods found to be effective under wartime conditions.

Although most of the analyzed dissertations were planned prior to the full-scale invasion, a trend is evident in publications by PhD candidates to highlight the impact of

martial law on various aspects of the research problem, even when the dissertation topic did not directly relate to the war context. For example, one publication addressed the optimization of social adaptation of internally displaced persons, particularly children and youth with disabilities, aiming to assess the influence of museum pedagogy on social rehabilitation during wartime and to justify its application in educational processes (Pesotska, 2022). Another publication associated with a dissertation discussed barriers to services faced at the onset of the full-scale invasion by injection drug users participating in rehabilitation programs (Mazhnaya et al., 2023).

In conclusion, the analysis indicates that the wartime context is represented unevenly and mostly fragmentarily in the dissertations submitted for defense during 2022–2025. Only a small portion of doctoral research specifically addresses problems caused by the war and develops practical recommendations for optimizing socio-pedagogical activities or social services for individuals affected by the conflict. More commonly, war is reflected indirectly as a contextual factor that exacerbates social risks, transforms the needs of target groups (internally displaced persons, women, children and youth with disabilities, families of combatants, persons with addictions), and highlights the need to adapt social work practices. In such studies, wartime realities are reflected through the presentation of the complex life circumstances of

target groups, increased vulnerability, and the need for psychosocial support and volunteer development.

A distinct group of research comprises socially pedagogical and educational studies, in which war is reflected through adaptations in professional training for wartime and post-war conditions, the use of distance and blended formats, and the focus on working with children, youth, and other participants in the educational process affected by the war.

Overall, wartime content is represented in some form in roughly half of the dissertations in social work submitted for defense during 2022–2025. However, in the vast majority of these works, the challenges of wartime are not presented as the main research problem, but rather as a powerful social backdrop that alters professional conditions, worsens the quality of life of vulnerable populations, and stimulates the development of new approaches in social work practice in Ukraine.

■ DISCUSSION

The development of social work PhD education in Ukraine reflects a tension between Soviet legacies and Eurocentric reforms. In the 1990s, many post-socialist countries inherited centralized Soviet models for awarding research degrees. While states oriented toward European integration fully

incorporated the third cycle of higher education into university programs (Lyons, 2019; Zaviršek, 2010), countries seeking to preserve Soviet traditions, such as Belarus and the Russian Federation, continue to use the Candidate of Sciences degree (Huisman et al., 2018). Ukraine's trajectory has been incremental and often chaotic, balancing between eurointegration aspirations and post-Soviet legacies reinforced by Russian influence and nepotistic practices (Gomilko et al., 2016; Hladchenko et al., 2016). As Kvit (2020) argues, a decisive break from Soviet political culture and social interaction practices is necessary to build a modern educational system, including doctoral education. However, formal reforms alone have not eliminated entrenched informal practices, and state institutions—including the Cabinet of Ministers, the Ministry of Education and Science, and the newly established NAQA—continue to exert control over universities, indirectly limiting their autonomy (Polese, 2010).

Although Ukraine adopted the Bologna Process and introduced the PhD degree in 2015, the defense procedures largely replicate Soviet-era norms, emphasizing bureaucratic compliance and documentation over research quality (Zakharchuk, 2020). Doctoral education in social work faces additional constraints: the discipline remains an “unfinished professional project” (Semigina & Boyko, 2017), professionalization occurred relatively late, and integration across politics, education, practice, and personal motivation is limited (Povidaichyk et al., 2022). As a result, most research

follows domestic social pedagogy traditions, relies on local publications, and focuses on improving the professional competence of educators, practitioners, and local authorities using socio-pedagogical interventions (Karagodina & Pozhydaieva, 2017). Emancipatory and development-oriented paradigms prominent in international social work (Dodd et al., 2024; Felder, 2025; IASSW, 2014) rarely influence Ukrainian doctoral training.

Quantitative and descriptive methods dominate doctoral research in social work, with limited use of participatory, narrative, or action research approaches (Boyko, 2017; Karagodina & Semigina, 2022). Ethical oversight for research participants is inconsistent, diverging from international standards (Karagodina et al., 2019a; IASSW, 2014). Many dissertations remain descriptive reports of state programs or international projects rather than evidence-informed interventions, reflecting a gap between research and real-world social work needs.

The full-scale war that began in February 2022 has further exposed these structural weaknesses. Wartime conditions have radically changed societal priorities and created unprecedented challenges for social work, including collective trauma, displacement, gender-based violence, and vulnerabilities among children and youth with disabilities (Pesotska, 2022; Semigina, 2024; Slozanska et al., 2025). Most dissertations submitted during 2022–2025 were planned prior

to the invasion and thus did not fully account for these realities. Many topics remained oriented toward stable socio-economic conditions, highlighting a persistent gap between the presumed novelty of research and the practical demands of social work practice under wartime conditions. Nevertheless, some dissertations began to incorporate empirical studies on the war's impact, including psychosocial needs, volunteerism, and the adaptation of social work practices to conflict-affected populations.

Key lessons and open questions emerge from these observations.

1. *The Persistence of Soviet Legacies Limits Innovation.*

Structural inertia, formal compliance, and local socio-pedagogical traditions restrict the adoption of participatory, evidence-based, and international research methods, limiting the relevance and impact of doctoral research (Lyons, 2019; Huisman et al., 2018; Karagodina & Semigina, 2022). How can Ukraine's doctoral programs balance historical legacies with the need for methodological innovation and global compatibility in social work research?

2. *Wartime Conditions Expose Gaps in Research Relevance and Methodology.* The war highlights the urgent need for adaptive, trauma-informed, and participatory approaches in social work research.

Current doctoral studies largely fail to address displacement, psychosocial needs, or gender-based violence, revealing a misalignment between research content and societal demands (Karagodina & Pozhydaieva, 2017; Pesotska, 2022; Semigina, 2024). What mechanisms can ensure that doctoral research in social work is responsive to rapidly changing social realities, including armed conflict and collective trauma?

3. *Opportunities Exist to Align Doctoral Education with Practice and Global Standards.* Despite challenges, some dissertations have begun to integrate evidence-based methods, contemporary theories, and post-positivist approaches. The wartime context provides a catalyst for rethinking research priorities, fostering applied and participatory methodologies, and strengthening international collaborations (Drisko et al., 2015; Franklin et al., 2021; Karagodina & Semigina, 2022). How can Ukrainian PhD programs systematically embed applied, practice-oriented research while maintaining academic rigor and international alignment?

The analysis of doctoral education in social work during 2022–2025 demonstrates both resilience and vulnerability. Eighteen licensed institutions continued to provide training and 35 PhD

degrees were awarded under challenging conditions, including restricted access to research populations, rapid methodological adjustments, and unstable institutional regulations. Wartime realities, although unevenly integrated, are gradually shaping research agendas, emphasizing the importance of adaptive, evidence-informed, and contextually relevant doctoral education. Strengthening ethical oversight, fostering innovation, and expanding international cooperation are critical to closing the gap between theory and practice in Ukrainian social work, particularly under conditions of war.

CONCLUSIONS

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Doctoral education in social work in Ukraine is evolving within a context shaped by both historical legacies and unprecedented contemporary challenges. Since the introduction of PhD programs in 2016, significant progress has been made, but the field continues to face structural, methodological, and cultural obstacles. Early programs varied widely across institutions, often retaining a strong emphasis on traditional social pedagogy rather than aligning with contemporary international social work standards.

The shift from the Soviet legacy toward Eurocentric academic models has been gradual and inconsistent, highlighting the need for a decisive break from entrenched political and educational practices to modernize doctoral education. Research methods in early dissertations largely reflected

domestic socio-pedagogical traditions, with minimal use of evidence-based, participatory, or post-structuralist approaches. Ethical oversight and the protection of social work clients' rights were often insufficient, raising concerns about the rigor and relevance of doctoral research.

The full-scale war in Ukraine since 2022 has further disrupted doctoral education but has also acted as a catalyst for innovation. PhD candidates have had to adapt their research to wartime realities, including limited access to target populations, the displacement of communities, and the necessity of digital methods for data collection. These circumstances have prompted new approaches to fieldwork, research design, and intervention strategies, emphasizing flexibility, resilience, and responsiveness to social crises. Wartime conditions have underscored the urgent need for research that addresses collective trauma, the protection of vulnerable populations, and the evolving social work practice under extreme conditions.

Despite these challenges, there are encouraging signs of progress. Some dissertations now incorporate modern social work theories, evidence-based methods, and international research practices, with findings published in reputable journals. Collaboration with foreign scholars and exposure to diverse methodological frameworks can help bridge the gap between Ukrainian and global social work research.

In sum, doctoral education in social work in Ukraine stands at a pivotal crossroads, balancing traditional approaches with the adoption of modern, internationally aligned standards. Moving forward requires broader use of evidence-based methodologies, participatory and ethical research practices, and strengthened international collaboration. The challenges imposed by wartime conditions, while severe, offer opportunities to rethink and innovate doctoral research and training, ultimately enhancing the relevance, quality, and impact of social work scholarship in Ukraine.

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Chapter 12

Preparing Ukrainian Social Work: Adapting Higher Education to Wartime Requirements¹

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Abstract

This paper examines the transformative impact of armed conflict on social work education in Ukraine, drawing on interviews with academics from Ukrainian higher education institutions. It explores the profound challenges and adaptive responses that have reshaped social work pedagogy and professional preparation in the context of the ongoing war. The disruption of traditional classroom-based learning has accelerated a shift toward alternative and flexible educational models. At the same time, curricula have been revised to address urgent conflict-related issues, including trauma, forced displacement, and humanitarian response.

The study highlights several innovative strategies adopted to navigate these changes, notably the growing demand for short-term, non-formal education programs.

Key words: *social work education; armed conflict; Ukraine; curriculum adaptation; non-formal education; resilience; humanitarian response.*

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■ INTRODUCTION

[...]

The Russo-Ukrainian war, which began in 2014 with Russia's annexation of Crimea and escalated in February 2022 with a full-scale invasion, has significantly impacted these programs. The conflict has inflicted severe consequences on Ukraine, its people, and its armed forces, resulting in numerous military and civilian casualties and displacing millions of Ukrainians both within and outside the country (Ukraine Recovery Conference, 2024). The demand for social services has increased tremendously, necessitating new approaches and competencies in social work.

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Social work education institutions had to adapt to the ongoing war. Some relocated to safer areas, while others shifted to distance learning, especially after the full-scale invasion. The HEIs experienced disruptions in their educational ecosystems (Kurapov et al., 2023; Lavrysh et al., 2022). Simultaneously, the crises caused by the war and martial law stimulated diverse innovations in educational institutions (Cuadra et al., 2024).

This chapter highlights adaptations in Ukrainian social work higher education during armed conflict, emphasizing the profound impact of war on pedagogy and the preparation of future social workers, shedding light on the evolving landscape of social work education in Ukraine amidst the ongoing conflict.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study draws on several comprehensive concepts related to social work education and its transformations in times of extreme crises.

Initially, **Systems Theory** provides a lens through which social work education can be viewed as an integrated system composed of interrelated and interdependent components. This theory emphasizes the system's adaptivity and responsiveness to external changes and can be fully applied to the construction of the educational process (Ballantine et al., 2021; Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024).

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In the context of Ukrainian higher education, which is marked by bureaucratic constraints and fixed educational standards (Semigina et al., 2023), **Systems Theory** facilitates an examination of how various parts of the educational system—such as administration, faculty, students, and curriculum—adapt to the wartime environment. This approach aids in comprehending the holistic impact of the conflict and the systemic responses required to maintain functionality and effectiveness.

Moreover, the concept of *bifurcation* (Hazy & Ashley, 2011) becomes relevant when examining how war causes a significant split in the trajectory of social work education. Bifurcation, in this context, refers to the point where

educational systems face a divergence: one path leading towards maintaining traditional educational frameworks and the other pushing towards radical transformation and innovation (Shen, 2023). War, as an extreme crisis, acts as a catalyst, forcing educators to explore new methodologies and adapt their curricula to address the realities of conflict. This divergence is seen in how educational institutions navigate between conventional practices and the urgent need for crisis-responsive, trauma-informed, and technology-driven educational models.

As Archer-Kuhn with co-authors (2020), Morley and Clarke (2020), who studied the responses of social work education to the COVID-19 pandemic, pointed out, crises have forced openness to innovation, providing educators with the strength to move forward. Similarly, Latzer and Shklarski (2024) argue that evolving realities necessitate significant curricular adaptations. Ukrainian scholars (Lugovyi et al., 2023; Semigina et al., 2022; Sibruk et al., 2023) have expressed comparable views, highlighting the significant changes and trends in the educational system prompted by both the pandemic and the ongoing war. At this critical juncture, bifurcation theory serves as a useful framework to assess the choice between preserving existing paradigms and pursuing transformative changes to address the challenges of war.

In this vein, *Social Innovation Theory* explores the development and application of new ideas, practices, or

products designed to address social needs and challenges. As noted by Payne (2020), this theory highlights the significance of creativity, collaboration, and the scaling of innovative solutions. Additionally, new approaches introduced in the educational field, particularly those informed by international experience, can lead to more effective and efficient social services for the population (Garthwait, 2015) and social practices to tackle war-induced vulnerability (Revko, 2023).

In the constrained environment of Ukrainian higher education, Social Innovation Theory aids in identifying and analyzing key, though limited, innovations in social work education. It emphasizes how educators and institutions implement creative solutions to meet the pressing needs of students and communities impacted by the war.

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Our study also draws on key publications addressing **social work in both short-term and protracted conflict settings** (Goelitz, 2023; Ramon, 2008; Semigina, 2017). These works emphasize that social workers are often on the front lines during times of community trauma, where they not only support affected individuals but also experience the trauma themselves. This overlap can blur the boundary between the social workers' personal experiences and those of their clients, creating unique emotional and professional challenges (Stoliaryk & Semigina, 2024a).

Such circumstances have profound implications for social work education. Training programs must address the dual role

of social workers as both caregivers and individuals impacted by the same traumatic events. This requires curricula that focus not only on professional resilience and coping strategies but also on fostering self-care and emotional intelligence (Aburn et al., 2016; Patel et al., 2017; Van Breda, 2018). Incorporating these elements helps future social workers navigate the complex emotional landscapes they encounter in conflict zones and build the necessary skills to manage their well-being while effectively supporting their clients.

The **objective** of the study was to explore the specific experiences and challenges faced by academic staff involved in training social workers and social pedagogues during the full-scale war in Ukraine. The research aimed to identify key adaptive strategies, resilience factors, and changes in educational processes, as well as to assess the implications of these changes for the future of social work education in a crisis context.

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The research was conducted from May to June 2024. It was based on semi-structured interviews with academic staff from departments and institutes training students in "social work" and "social pedagogy".

The interview guide featured key questions focusing on responses to the war, adaptive coping mechanisms, resilience factors, changes in educational processes, and the future of social work education.

Spanning nine regions and 12 institutions across Ukraine, the

study ensured diverse experiences, including universities affected by occupation and conflict. Participants included eight department heads and four faculty members. Interviews were conducted via phone and Zoom, and lasted from one to two hours each.

Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring themes and patterns. This method facilitated the exploration of how social work education is adapting to the wartime context, focusing on both the challenges faced and the innovations introduced in response to the crisis. The themes were derived manually without the aid of any software.

The research strictly adhered to **ethical principles**. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and the measures in place to ensure confidentiality.

To protect participants' privacy, all responses were anonymized, and sensitive information was handled in accordance with best practices in research ethics. Participation was voluntary, and interviewees were assured that their identities would not be disclosed in any published material.

■ KEY THEMES

Rapid Adaptation and Educational Adjustments to the Full-Scale War

Ukrainian society, including the academic and student communities, was unprepared for the full-scale invasion of Russian troops into Ukraine, which occurred at dawn on February 24, 2022. Higher education institutions lacked ready-made response plans for such crisis situations, relying primarily on media sources for information. Communication with students and staff was carried out through telephone connections and social networks where possible. By 9:00 AM, university administrations had published information on their official websites and corporate emails, announcing the suspension of the educational process until a better solution could be found under the circumstances.

One respondent described the initial chaos:

“...we woke up to explosions nearby. Everyone was glued to their televisions and internet networks, waiting for instructions on how to proceed... the educational process was suspended for two weeks, and then the organization of 'new' learning began...”.

This quote encapsulates the immediate confusion and subsequent adaptations made by educational institutions in response to the crisis.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ukraine became crucial guarantors of student safety. Academic staff was tasked with determining each student's location and threat level, as well as providing information about available support through various communication channels. One respondent from a university in Melitopol highlighted the gravity of the situation:

"...there was a humanitarian catastrophe the day after the occupiers entered the city—markets and shops stopped working, communication was unstable... We were responsible not only for ourselves and our families but also for our students: we had to establish contact with each student, determine their location, assess the safety of their environment, and address their basic needs..."

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Despite the uncertainty and frequent threats, both academic staff and students showed remarkable resilience. They overcame numerous challenges through adaptive coping mechanisms that allowed them to continue functioning under extraordinary circumstances. One respondent from Odesa described the initial resistance to resuming education but later recognized its value:

"...when the decision was made to return to the educational process, everyone protested, but now I understand—it was the right decision because communication energized us..."

In Lutsk, the emphasis during the early days of resuming education was on mutual support and communication rather than traditional lectures:

"...the first classes didn't start with lectures but with the familiar question for Ukrainians, 'How are you?'... At that time, it seemed more important... Everyone was in a state of 'this will end in 2-3 days,' and we all understood that to speed it up, we needed to work harder and better than before the war..."

Overall, adaptive coping mechanisms involved maintaining communication, mutual support, and a flexible approach to the educational process. These strategies helped mitigate the psychological impact of the conflict and fostered a sense of community and resilience among both staff and students.

Universities also provided humanitarian aid and helped staff secure life insurance contracts. Regular communication between university leadership and all organizational levels ensured that support and assistance were constantly available.

Moreover, universities established crisis support mechanisms focusing on well-being, social, and mental health. Psychological services offered crisis counseling, mental health recovery, and self-help training. Student self-support services like "How Are You?" in Lviv, the student help desk in Poltava, and the Social and Cultural Development Center in Melitopol were actively engaged.

Resilience was further bolstered by strong patriotism and belief in victory. One respondent from Melitopol highlighted how students demonstrated their patriotism by participating in pro-Ukrainian rallies despite the risks. Another from Lutsk noted:

"...we weren't afraid – we acted, not because of the circumstances but despite them..."

Volunteerism played a crucial role in maintaining morale. In Lviv, the initial days were sustained by volunteering efforts, from assisting internally displaced persons at the train station to university-based activities like setting up shelters, making volunteer nets, and collecting humanitarian aid.

Mobilization efforts also united communities. In Kyiv, after a blast damaged part of the university building, everyone came together to repair it. In Lviv, when a social work student was severely injured on the frontline, the entire faculty mobilized to raise funds for his treatment and rehabilitation.

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These combined efforts of universities in ensuring safety, providing essential support, and fostering a strong sense of community and purpose were critical in maintaining resilience during these challenging times.

The format of the educational process had to swiftly adapt to the challenges posed by the war, including direct threats to the population's lives and mass migration of students and university staff abroad. After a two-week hiatus, education resumed using distance learning technologies. This approach, while beneficial in terms of accessibility, also presented challenges, especially regarding connectivity with Ukraine.

For instance, participants noted that both students and staff could participate in the educational process from anywhere

they were at the time. However, this transition also brought challenges, particularly in maintaining connections with Ukraine. For example, after March 18, education resumed with invitations extended to staff and students who could participate under their current circumstances. Many had migrated abroad, facing unstable connections.

One respondent highlighted the difficulties faced by some educators teaching remotely from Egypt. To bypass restrictions, they used VPNs to access Zoom, risking exposure to cyber-police scrutiny.

This adaptation underscored the resilience and determination of educators and students to continue the educational process amidst challenging circumstances, leveraging technology while navigating legal and logistical hurdles.

The educational process adapted to asynchronous, synchronous, and hybrid formats, considering the security situation, capabilities, and resources of higher education institutions (HEIs) and the sensitive needs of learners. This flexible approach was crucial amid ongoing armed conflict and its impact on civil infrastructure and HEIs.

During the war, education faced challenges beyond regular shelling of civilian infrastructure, including HEIs, which necessitated suspending classes and seeking shelter. Regular blackouts further complicated matters, as they disrupted essential services like heating, lighting, and internet connectivity necessary for educational continuity.

Despite these adversities, universities persisted in their operations, adapting to the circumstances. For instance, observations highlighted that communal presence among students during air raids provided a specific form of therapy, aiding in stress and anxiety management. HEIs endeavored to maintain operations under difficult conditions, sometimes conducting exams online in neighboring cafes where electricity was available.

In occupied territories, repression intensified with equipment confiscations and communication disruptions. Students resorted to seeking high points in communities to access Ukrainian network signals, enabling them to inform instructors of challenges or submit assignments.

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The priority remained ensuring safety, necessitating flexible adaptations to educational processes within secure parameters.

Further Evolution of Educational Programs Amidst War

In wartime, Ukraine's bachelor and master educational programs have swiftly adapted to meet the demands of local communities and respond effectively to situational challenges. For instance, updates to program content have been substantial, focusing on integrating knowledge pertinent to new client groups and advanced tools for social work interventions. These changes, though not always reflected in course titles, are clearly visible in the enriched content of various disciplines.

Since 2014, there has been a deliberate integration of specific components and topics related to armed conflict and its aftermath, reflecting the role of social workers as agents of change in these dynamic contexts.

According to interviews, some universities have maintained educational disciplines rooted in general social work technologies and methods rather than targeting specific groups or emerging situations. This approach poses challenges in anticipating future needs and vulnerabilities amid evolving societal conditions.

As a result, educational programs are increasingly oriented towards societal needs, with universities actively embracing their role in benefiting communities. Graduates are equipped not only with theoretical knowledge but also with practical skills, including a nuanced understanding of local contexts and the professional challenges they may face.

The full-scale invasion was a critical point, influencing the specialization of educational programs, their components, and the content of specific disciplines. From answers of interviewed academics, this shift has prioritized directions crucial in wartime conditions:

- ***Recovery and Rehabilitation:*** Educational programs now prioritize preparing future social work professionals to actively participate in the recovery and post-war rehabilitation efforts of individuals, families, and communities

affected by conflict. This includes training in strategies to restore social cohesion, rebuild community infrastructure, and support the mental and physical health of those impacted.

- ***Crisis Social Work:*** There is a heightened focus on equipping social work students with specialized skills to manage crises resulting from large-scale population movements triggered by wars, natural disasters, and technological catastrophes. This training emphasizes rapid response, community resilience building, and adaptive decision-making in unpredictable and high-stress environments.
- ***Trauma and PTSD Social Work:*** Educational curricula now emphasize comprehensive support for all segments of society experiencing trauma due to conflict. This includes training in trauma-informed care, methods to address post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and interventions aimed at promoting healing and resilience among affected individuals and communities.
- ***Trauma-Informed Education:*** Programs are incorporating modules to educate social work students on preventing professional burnout, promoting self-care practices, and fostering resilience. These components address the unique challenges faced by social workers dealing with high-stress environments and demanding client case-loads, ensuring sustainable and effective service delivery.

- *Clinical Social Work:* There is an expanded emphasis on clinical social work practices to meet the growing needs of traumatized populations. This includes training in clinical assessment, therapeutic interventions, and case management tailored to address complex psychological and emotional challenges arising from conflict-related trauma.
- *Mediation and Conflict Management:* Educational programs are now preparing social work professionals to effectively mediate and manage conflicts arising from identity-based tensions, political divisions, and cultural differences exacerbated by conflict. This training equips practitioners with skills in conflict resolution, intercultural dialogue, and peacebuilding to foster community reconciliation and social cohesion.
- *Social Inclusion:* In response to conflict-induced changes and disabilities among social groups directly involved in combat and civilian populations affected by shelling and displacement, educational programs focus on adapting physical environments and societal attitudes. This aims to create inclusive conditions for the reintegration of affected individuals into community life, promoting equity and participation.
- *Human Rights, Social Protection, and International Humanitarian Standards:* There is an increased emphasis on educating future social workers about international

human rights frameworks, social protection mechanisms, and humanitarian standards. This knowledge equips professionals to advocate for and uphold the rights of vulnerable populations affected by humanitarian crises, ensuring ethical and effective intervention practices.

Respondents noted,

"...current events in Ukraine impose new demands on future social work professionals, who will serve as frontline workers in the recovery of individuals, families, and communities, providing post-war rehabilitation";

"...our Master's program addresses the challenges of war by including disciplines aimed at restoring, supporting, and preserving social and psychological health".

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These adaptations underscore the critical role of social work education in preparing professionals to address the evolving needs and challenges of populations affected by conflict, emphasizing new knowledge and practices essential for effective intervention and support.

The experience of HEIs indicates that the war has significantly influenced the structure of student internships, making them more student-centered and adaptable to situational needs. There has been a notable emphasis on mobility in internship placements, allowing students to intern in locations convenient to them. This expansion has been facilitated by new partnerships with civic organizations and international services.

Additionally, student volunteerism plays a pivotal role in enhancing internships by providing practical relevance to future careers and boosting professional motivation. This integration not only prepares students better but also increases their prospects for employment post-graduation. As emphasized by a respondent from Odesa National University,

"Volunteering allows students to immerse themselves in the realm of their future professional activities, influencing their professional motivation and the likelihood of future employment."

So, the internship evolution prioritizes mobility in internship placements, enabling students to intern conveniently and effectively.

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It can be stated that social work educational programs demonstrate a certain degree of flexibility and sensitivity, yet withinin strict requirements and highly regulated academic landscape.

Development of Informal Education

In Ukraine, the importance of informal (non-degree) education programs for social workers cannot be overstated. As the field continues to evolve amidst dynamic social challenges, these programs serve as vital tools for enhancing professional competencies, responding swiftly to emerging issues, and equipping practitioners with the latest methodologies and interven-

tions.

As the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war continued, HEIs introduced a range of short-term and long-term educational programmes. These programmes are designed not only to meet the educational needs of students and practitioners but also to address emerging societal challenges promptly. An educator from Sumy State University emphasizes the critical nature of continuous education, stating that timely training is essential for responding effectively to evolving social issues without delay, making short-term educational programs a cost-effective solution for rapid skill acquisition.

Across various social work departments, specialized educational initiatives have been introduced to address mental health, resilience, recovery, self-support, and preservation. These programs serve social work professionals and other interested parties. Notable examples include:

- "Art Therapy in the Social Sphere" at Bohdan Khmelnytskyi National Pedagogical University,
- "Veteran Social Work" and "Social Support for Persons with Disabilities" at Lesya Ukrainka Eastern European National University,
- "Community Resilience Development" at Pavlo Tychyna Uman State Pedagogical University,
- specialized training for candidate caregivers at Ivan Franko National University of Lviv.

These educational initiatives are integrated into formal and informal educational frameworks, serving as components of professional development or standalone educational modules. They are characterized by their flexibility, allowing rapid adaptation to societal demands, economic efficiency, intensive learning formats, and often feature contributions from guest lecturers.

Reshaping Social Work Research in Ukraine's HEI

Transformations in research and expert activities within Ukrainian universities reflect significant developments in the field of Social Work, which is relatively new in the country, with the first PhD programs established as recently as 2017. The ongoing war and its profound impact on the population have reshaped academic demands and priorities, particularly in terms of research agendas within educational institutions. Both students and academic staff emphasize that research directions are intricately linked to issues arising from the armed conflict and its aftermath. This has presented various challenges, including the need to ensure the relevance of research topics in wartime conditions, difficulties in accessing research samples due to physical constraints, and the absence of appropriate research tools.

For instance, educators from Odesa National University have innovatively tackled these challenges, as illustrated by a graduate student's research on social stigma among disabled war

veterans. The lack of suitable measurement instruments prompted the development and validation of novel methodologies to complete the study effectively.

Despite these obstacles, Ukrainian universities remain committed to accommodating the educational and professional backgrounds of students when selecting research topics. The establishment of research centers focusing on national issues related to war, post-war recovery, and reconstruction efforts underscores their dedication. As noted by a respondent from Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, faculty members are actively engaged in projects funded by the National Research Fund of Ukraine, specifically targeting the development of post-war social services.

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There is a growing demand for research contributions from governmental bodies, civil society organizations, and international funds. Moreover, collaborative international interuniversity research initiatives are leveraging Ukraine's unique experiences gained during the war, positioning the country as an experimental hub of interest for European counterparts.

In sum, these developments highlight how Ukraine's research community has persevered and thrived amidst adversity, showcasing professionalism, ingenuity, and specialized expertise within specific departments and institutes. The role of social work departments as expert environments within academia is increasingly pivotal, fostering advancements through research, education, and practical application in social service

delivery. This evolution not only enhances the academic landscape of social work education but also underscores Ukraine's growing prominence as a center for innovative research in challenging socio-political contexts.

War-Induced Incremental Innovations: Challenges and Future Directions

Despite the ongoing war in the country, the requirements for the educational process and educational programs have not changed. Teachers continue to fulfill the same scope of professional duties and academic standards as they did before the war. Alongside existing responsibilities, new ones have been added, including supporting students studying from abroad, accommodating sensitive trajectories of students, and dealing with difficulties in accessing reliable sources of electricity and stable internet connections.

The majority of respondents pointed out that Ukraine's HEIs strive to maintain legitimacy and meet the demands of the wartime context while adhering to rigid standards.

It is worth mentioning that public discourse often leans towards a mythologized notion of returning to a pre-war state, but it is increasingly clear that neither social work nor social work education can revert to their previous conditions. This recognition underscores the necessity of embracing change. As noted by educators, the experience of conflict has forced a

reevaluation, emphasizing the need to adapt and learn from the lessons presented.

Looking forward, there is a call for innovative approaches in Ukraine's social work education. This includes the development of interdisciplinary educational programs to meet the growing demand for comprehensive social services. A respondent, Bohdan Khmelnytsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University explained this in the following way:

"...we are witnessing rapid growth in integrated social services, which requires the development of educational programs at the intersection of specialties and scientific fields. This will help create sensitive and competitive educational programs..."

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Additionally, the adoption of dual education models is considered essential for effectively preparing future social workers. This approach necessitates specific decisions and regulatory frameworks within governmental educational policies. As articulated by a respondent from Taras Shevchenko National University in Kyiv:

"It would be beneficial to establish mechanisms for compensating stakeholders who host student internships. This would increase their motivation to participate in educating students, and the implementation of dual education would better prepare future social workers for employment without interrupting their academic progress."

Digitalization also plays a pivotal role in transforming education, with proposals to expand access through licensed distance learning programs accessible around the clock. These initiatives aim to enhance flexibility and responsiveness in educational delivery, addressing current limitations while aligning with global trends in educational innovation.

In conclusion, navigating these challenges requires a forward-looking approach that acknowledges the transformative impacts of conflict while leveraging opportunities to innovate and strengthen Ukraine's social work education system.

DISCUSSIONS

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The onset of war, a profound and complex emergency, marks a pivotal moment for social work education, disrupting peacetime norms and reshaping educational practices and priorities. This transformative event compels substantial changes to curriculum design, teaching methodologies, and institutional strategies. As noted by McLaughlin, Scholar, and Teater (2020), such upheavals prompt enduring shifts within social work education, highlighting the necessity for intentional reflection on emergent issues and a proactive stance towards future crises.

At the same time, analysis reveals that many dissertation studies in social work remain focused on topics approved before the onset of the full-scale war and often fail to address the cur-

rent needs of society (Семигіна, 2024). Furthermore, the state standards for higher education in the Social Work specialty have remained unchanged and do not adequately reflect contemporary competencies.

In this context, the concept of 'incremental innovations' in social work education, as articulated by Zuchowski with co-authors (2018), is especially relevant to the situation in Ukraine. Incremental innovations refer to small, gradual improvements that are implemented step-by-step within existing frameworks, rather than through radical, sweeping changes. These incremental adjustments may seem minor in isolation, but collectively, they contribute to substantial long-term improvements. In the face of ongoing challenges, such as those posed by the war, these smaller innovations enhance the overall adaptability and resilience of educational systems.

By promoting continuous, small-scale advancements, Ukrainian social work educators can foster an environment that values innovation, even within constrained conditions. As Fuad et al. (2022) highlight, this gradual approach not only improves immediate responses but also cultivates a sustainable culture of innovation that benefits both students and the broader educational landscape over time. Thus, incremental innovations offer a pragmatic path forward, balancing the need for urgent change with the capacity to maintain stability amid ongoing uncertainty.

Findings from this study, along with relevant scholarship from

Ukraine and beyond (Campbell, 2021; Gusak et al., 2024; McKendrick & Finch, 2017; Palatna & Semigina, 2024; Paul, 2023; Seifert, 2021; Sonnenberg & Ghaderi, 2021; Stoliaryk & Semigina, 2023; Stoliaryk & Semigina, 2024b) offer critical insights for social work education amid conflict.

Foremost, the impact of war necessitates a comprehensive reassessment of educational priorities. The profound social, economic, and psychological challenges of conflict compel social work educators to reevaluate core competencies and skills required to serve war-affected individuals and communities. This realignment demands an emphasis on crisis intervention, conflict resolution, and resilience-building strategies within curricula. Additionally, educators must prioritize self-care and mental health resilience for students and practitioners engaged in frontline social work, who face significant emotional (Chuiko et al, 2024).

In further adaptations of social work professional education, special attention should be directed towards **trauma-informed care**. This approach equips future social workers with essential skills for recognizing and addressing the complex impacts of trauma, which are especially prevalent in war-affected populations. By embedding trauma-sensitive practices into curricula, educators can ensure that practitioners are better prepared to foster resilience and provide compassionate, effective support to individuals and communities impacted by the war.

The key competencies required for social workers to provide effective trauma-oriented social support include expertise in evidence-based approaches such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), trauma recovery models, trauma-risk management, and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy. Additionally, proficiency in mindfulness-based therapies and the ability to apply a strengths-based approach are essential (Stoliaryk & Semigina, 2024b). These competencies enable social workers to address the multifaceted impacts of trauma, promote resilience, and empower clients to rebuild their lives. By incorporating training in trauma-informed approaches, future social workers can be better equipped to address the complex needs of trauma-affected populations, ensuring effective and compassionate support in both crisis and recovery contexts.

The integration of **the service-learning model** (Cuadra et al., 2024) also proves invaluable, bridging academic theory with hands-on application. This model allows students to engage directly with communities, building practical skills while deepening their understanding of the complexities involved in working within conflict zones. When combined with trauma-sensitive approaches, service learning strengthens the capacity of social work programs to address wartime challenges, ensuring that future professionals are equipped to manage the increasing demands on social services.

Moreover, war and other extreme situations act as catalysts for innovation and experimentation within social work education. Educators and institutions are compelled to explore new methodologies and approaches to effectively prepare students for the multifaceted challenges of social work in wartime. This includes the integration of technology-driven learning platforms, which offer flexibility and access to critical training despite disruptions.

Additionally, fostering cross-disciplinary collaborations enhances students' problem-solving skills and broadens their understanding of complex, crisis-driven environments. Community-based participatory research methods are also being increasingly utilized, allowing students to engage directly with affected populations, thereby enhancing their practical skills and building resilience for future professional challenges.

These innovations often extend beyond immediate wartime applications, creating a legacy of enhanced preparedness and resilience within social work education. By embedding these advancements into their programs, educators ensure that future professionals are well-prepared to address a broad range of crises, from natural disasters to complex emergencies, with competence and empathy.

The **bifurcation** induced by war in social work education brings to the forefront **ethical imperatives and dilemmas** that practitioners in conflict zones must navigate. In such contexts,

issues like neutrality, human rights advocacy, and cultural sensitivity become intensified. These heightened concerns directly shape both the educational discourse and the development of practice guidelines. Educators are tasked with guiding students through these complexities, ensuring they grasp the critical importance of social justice, equity, and human dignity—values that are essential for social workers, particularly in conflict and post-conflict settings.

Lastly, the **bifurcation** brought about by war also prompts critical reflection on the role and responsibilities of social work institutions in crisis response. Institutions are not only expected to uphold academic and professional standards but are also required to cultivate **adaptive leadership**, build organizational resilience, and establish governance structures that can effectively respond to rapidly changing environments. This dual responsibility—addressing immediate crises while maintaining long-term educational goals—pushes institutions to rethink their frameworks, ensuring that they remain responsive while adhering to ethical principles that guide the profession.

Additionally, the focus on incremental innovations, as opposed to sweeping changes, provides a practical, sustainable path forward. This approach ensures adaptability and resilience, preparing social work professionals to face not only the immediate demands of war but also future crises. Educators and institutions, meanwhile, must navigate

heightened ethical concerns, such as the importance of neutrality and cultural sensitivity, which are critical in supporting human dignity and social justice in these challenging contexts.

The convergence of these elements fosters a progressive and resilient framework for social work education, one that responds effectively to the current needs while building a foundation for future challenges in the profession.

Several **limitations** should be noted. First, the sample size, while diverse in terms of geography and institutions, was limited to 12 institutions, which may not fully capture the breadth of experiences across all social work education programs in Ukraine. Second, conducting interviews remotely (via phone and Zoom) may have affected the depth of the data collected, as the absence of face-to-face interaction can sometimes limit rapport and spontaneous insights. Lastly, the ongoing conflict situation posed challenges for scheduling and conducting interviews, potentially leading to the exclusion of some valuable perspectives.

CONCLUSIONS

In essence, war serves as a pivotal moment for social work education, highlighting its transformative potential and the urgent need for proactive changes and innovation.

The disruption caused by conflict compels educators, institutions, and practitioners to rethink traditional approaches and embrace new methodologies that can better prepare future social workers for the complex realities of crisis intervention and post-conflict recovery.

The ongoing adaptation of social work education in the context of war in Ukraine highlights several key priorities. Trauma-informed care becomes essential, equipping students and practitioners to recognize and address the deep, often complex impacts of trauma within conflict-affected populations. The emphasis on service-learning models also adds value, as students apply theoretical knowledge directly to real-world situations, gaining insights into the intricacies of frontline social work in conflict zones.

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Beyond immediate crisis response, the ongoing evolution of social work education during conflict represents an opportunity to establish more resilient, responsive, and ethically sound systems that can endure and thrive in post-conflict recovery efforts. This adaptability not only supports societal healing but also enhances the profession's capacity to address future crises effectively.

Future research should delve deeper into the efficacy of these adaptations, exploring trauma-oriented methodologies and their long-term impact on both education and practice. Comparative analyses across conflict-affected regions and innovative studies on the integration of technology in

education could offer valuable pathways for global knowledge exchange and further strengthening of social work's role in building peace and resilience.

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Chapter 13

Non-Formal Social Work Education in Ukraine for Building Competence in Crisis

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Abstract

The concept of non-formal education plays a central role in lifelong learning and professional development in social work, particularly in contexts of rapid social change and crisis. The International Leadership and Development Centre (ILDC) has been operating in Ukraine since 2007 as an institution specializing in non-formal social work training. Over time, ILDC has demonstrated significant adaptability in responding to the evolving educational needs of social work professionals, especially during the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war. This paper examines the integration of best practices and innovative pedagogical approaches within ILDC's non-formal training programs, with a focus on their alignment with internationally recognized standards and competence-based models. The analysis explores how these practices support social workers operating in high-stress and crisis-affected environments, enhancing professional effectiveness, resilience, and retention. Based on ILDC's experience, the paper identifies key lessons and practical insights for the development of responsive and sustainable non-formal social work education in contexts shaped by armed conflict and political instability.

Keywords: *non-formal social work training, competence model, adaptability, Ukraine, wartime educational needs, best practices.*

INTRODUCTION

The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War, which began in 2014 and escalated in 2022, has resulted in widespread humanitarian crises and significant disruptions across Ukraine. This conflict has displaced millions of people, devastated infrastructure, and severely strained social services. The war has created unprecedented challenges for social work practitioners, necessitating innovative and adaptive educational responses. Specialists providing social services, social assistance, and support during emergencies face a lack of professional competencies and risks of emotional burnout (Better Care Network, 2023; Gusak et al., 2024). Traditional educational systems, with their inherent rigidity and slow adaptation to new realities, have struggled to address these emergent needs effectively.

In response to these pressing challenges, non-formal education has emerged as a critical and flexible approach, offering the ability to rapidly adapt to the changing landscape of social work practice during wartime. This chapter presents the experience of the International Leadership and Development Centre (ILDC), a Ukrainian non-governmental organization. As Ukraine's traditional educational systems have struggled to address the emergent needs induced by the war (Karagodina, 2024), ILDC has implemented targeted training programs to equip social workers with essential skills to respond to the complex challenges posed by the armed conflict.

The research methodology utilizes a **single case study approach** (Horner et al., 2005), focusing on ILDC as a representative example. This method allows for a comprehensive examination of ILDC's non-formal education initiatives a characteristic of non-formal learning can be identified through systematic observation, interviews with trainees and trainers, or analysis of curricula and educational plans. With regard to that, the preparation of this chapter involved a review of ILDC's educational projects, training materials, including routine training assessments, and a specially arranged focus group with eight trainers and methodologists. This methodology provides a robust framework for analyzing ILDC's pedagogical strategies, demonstrating how their adaptive training methods have significantly strengthened the capacity and resilience of social work practitioners.

■ CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

The Russo-Ukrainian War presents significant challenges for Ukrainian social workers as they strive to provide social welfare and mental health services. As a “complex emergency,” the war imposes daily stress on Ukrainians through life-threatening conditions that severely disrupt the population's capacity to survive. These include rocket and artillery shelling, drone attacks, the seizure of settlements, occupation, forced deportations, constant information warfare,

nuclear threats, attacks on energy infrastructure leading to “blackouts,” and surges of internally displaced persons and refugees.

ACLED’s Ukraine Conflict Monitor has recorded over 42,000 incidents of political violence (ACLED, 2025). Access to essential health and welfare services is significantly hindered, yet social work professionals and volunteers persist in their efforts amidst the evolving, protracted armed conflict and political instability (Semigina & Stoliaryk, 2024).

Studies indicate a sharp increase in the traumatic nature of working conditions, with high levels of burnout and compassion fatigue reported among social workers (Butylina & Buhai, 2022; ; Gusak et al., 2024; Kolleda, 2024). Civilians face numerous short- and long-term consequences of living through war, including severe trauma (Anjum et al. 2023). Families and communities are deeply affected, but children experience the most severe impacts. These include immediate stress responses, heightened risk for mental health disorders, distress caused by forced separation from parents, and fears for personal and familial safety (Bürgin et al., 2022).

Research from other countries affected by armed conflict highlights the importance of trauma-informed social work practices, particularly in addressing developmental trauma caused by childhood exposure to violence (Harrop, 2020; Knight, 2015).

In response, Ukrainian social workers must develop and implement multilevel, need-oriented, and trauma-informed approaches to support individuals and communities in regaining and sustaining both external and internal security during wartime emergencies and in the aftermath of war-related trauma.

■ THE CONCEPT OF NON-FORMAL LIFELONG LEARNING

The concept of lifelong learning has gained significant attention in the context of social work education, particularly in light of the rapidly changing social, economic, and political environments. Lifelong learning encompasses all learning activities undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills, and competencies from a personal, civic, social, and employment-related perspective (Commission of the European Communities, 2001).

Non-formal learning is defined as learning activities that occur outside of formal education or training institutions and typically do not lead to certification. Despite this, non-formal learning is intentional and systematically organized to develop specific skills and competencies (Grajcevci and Shala, 2016). Various forms of non-formal learning, such as workshops, seminars, mentoring, and peer learning, provide flexible and accessible methods for enhancing professional skills. Non-

formal learning opportunities, especially online courses and webinars, can reach a wider audience, including those in remote or underserved areas. Berman (2020) underscores the value of informal learning spaces, which contribute to the overall learning experience by providing a more relaxed and interactive environment for skill development and knowledge sharing.

For social workers, this approach is crucial in maintaining the relevance and effectiveness of their practice, especially in times of crisis. It provides opportunities for continuous education and skill enhancement, essential for addressing the complex and dynamic nature of social work. Non-formal learning plays a crucial role in building community resilience and capacity (Semigina et al., 2024). This is particularly important in times of crises, such as the Russo-Ukrainian War, where social workers face unprecedented challenges that require immediate and effective responses. Randall, Brooks, and Heck (2022) highlight that both formal and informal learning can serve as deterrents of turnover intentions among frontline workers during a crisis. This underscores the importance of providing diverse learning opportunities to support the retention and effectiveness of social work practitioners.

In sum, non-formal lifelong learning is a vital component of professional development in social work. Unlike formal education, it occurs outside structured academic programs but is intentionally designed to enhance specific knowledge, skills,

and competencies. For social workers, these practices are essential for maintaining professional relevance, responding effectively to crises. **Figure 13. 1** presents a conceptual overview of this framework, which underpins the subsequent analysis.



Figure 13.1. Conceptual Framework of Non-Formal Lifelong Learning in Social Work

CASE OF INTERNATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND DEVELOPMENT CENTRE (ILDC)

ILDC's mission and pedagogical approach

The International Leadership and Development Centre (ILDC) is an international non-governmental organization established in Ukraine in 2007, dedicated to advancing professional training in social work. ILDC's mission revolves around enhancing the competence of professionals and the organizational capacity of entities involved in safeguarding children's rights. This mission underscores the importance of ensuring safety, stability, and well-being for children within familial contexts. By developing a training system rooted in a competency-based approach and informed by scientifically grounded best practices, ILDC aims to provide systematic and high-quality training for professionals and bolster the overall capacity of organizations engaged in child protection.

ILDC offers both closed and open training programs, including custom training sessions for organizations and publicly accessible webinars and training sessions. This dual approach ensures that training is tailored to specific needs while remaining accessible to a broader audience. The key principle guiding ILDC's educational approach is "Right participant – right trainer – right training program," ensuring that the training provided is relevant, effective, and impactful (ILDC, 2024).

ILDC's pedagogical approach is grounded in a competency-based model developed by the Institute for Human Services, a US non-profit organization (Rycus & Hughes, 2001). This model outlines key competencies required for effective child safety and welfare practice, guiding the creation of training programs to enhance the skills and knowledge of social workers, foster parents, guardians, and adoptive parents. The model includes defining professional functions, analyzing job tasks, identifying required competencies, and outlining the knowledge, skills, values, and beliefs needed to achieve them. Competency acquisition occurs in stages:

- Recognizing: Gaining basic understanding, minimal facts, and acknowledging the topic's relevance.
- Knowing: Acquiring facts, theories, and concepts, and applying them through critical analysis.
- Being able to: Learning strategies for behavior in specific situations.
- Mastering skills: Applying learned strategies to develop practical skills.

ILDC also integrates the Experiential Learning Cycle model (Kolb, 1984) which emphasizes practical experience and interactions, further enhancing the effectiveness of training programs. Thus, ILDC's programs combine theoretical and practical elements, allowing participants to apply learned concepts in real-world scenarios. This approach deepens

understanding and equips participants with the practical skills necessary for effective social work practice.

Combining online and offline training gained significant momentum during the pandemic, proving effective for professional development in social work, and was further elaborated in the wartime. One exemplary case is the "Organization and Facilitation of Support Groups" program developed by ILDC. The program begins with an organizational meeting where participants are introduced to the experts and fellow trainees. This initial session alleviates tension and ensures all participants understand the training process, assessment criteria, and certification requirements, setting a collaborative and supportive learning environment.

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Participants are required to apply their acquired knowledge by facilitating support groups themselves, ideally under the supervision of an ILDC's supervisor. This hands-on experience consolidates their learning and provides valuable practical insights. After the practical sessions, participants reconvene in small supervisory groups to discuss and reflect on their experiences, receive feedback, and refine their skills. The training concludes with a question-and-answer session and post-tests to assess their understanding and mastery of the course material.

The program's blended learning approach allows for flexible participation, catering to professionals with varying schedules and responsibilities. By engaging in practical exercises and

real-world applications, participants not only understand theoretical concepts but also learn how to apply them effectively. The program includes multiple stages of support and supervision, providing ongoing guidance and feedback throughout the learning journey. Covering critical aspects of organizing and facilitating support groups, ILDC's program serves as a model for implementing best practices in social work pedagogy, particularly in settings characterized by armed conflict and political violence.

Training content is developed in collaboration with local and international experts to incorporate global best practices and address current needs. A critical component of ILDC's approach is the careful selection of trainers based on their expertise, experience, and alignment with ILDC's mission. Trainers are chosen for their extensive backgrounds in social work and their ability to convey complex concepts in practical and engaging ways. All experts selected by ILDC must pass the Training Course for Trainers (ToT). This ensures that training is rooted in best practices and tailored to the unique context of Ukraine's social work environment. The trainers at ILDC are not just experts; they are skilled communicators who are specifically prepared for modern training methods.

Through these well-rounded and expertly delivered programs, ILDC aims to build a robust and competent workforce capable of addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by children and families in Ukraine.

Rapid response to the full-scale war

During the focus group discussion, ILDC's trainers and methodologists emphasized the substantial challenges faced by practitioners due to the war. They noted the significantly large increase in the number of clients, coupled with an expansion of client categories and the emergence of new groups, such as military personnel, their families, and internally displaced persons, among others. Additionally, the trainers highlighted the dual role practitioners must navigate—providing professional support while being personally affected by the war—raising concerns about the need for sustained professional support to maintain a professional stance and manage the risks of secondary traumatization. Furthermore, the necessity for practitioners to learn and acquire new competencies under the stress of ongoing conflict was underscored, with trainers observing a corresponding decline in cognitive functions due to both acute and prolonged stress.

Since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, ILDC has initiated the project “Providing Psychological and Social Help and Support to Ukrainian People During War.” This project encompasses various activities aimed at supporting individuals affected by the conflict. Key initiatives include training programs for specialists on organizing psychological support groups, providing supportive groups for professionals experiencing burnout, and enhancing

competencies in social work during wartime. Implemented in the early months of the war, when the situation was unclear, uneven, and dynamic, the project addressed urgent needs under rapidly changing circumstances.

The training program consists of five online sessions, during which participants learn to conduct support groups either online or offline. Additionally, supervisory meetings are held to review the outcomes of these groups and provide further guidance. Participants gain a thorough understanding of crisis, stress, and trauma, acquiring foundational knowledge of these concepts and their impact on individuals affected by war. They also learn resilience approaches, gaining techniques to help build resilience in those affected by war, thereby promoting psychological stability and recovery. Furthermore, participants develop skills in facilitating support groups, obtaining practical knowledge on how to work with and effectively facilitate such groups to ensure a safe and productive environment for all involved.

The program was initially developed based on the results of the first training sessions, feedback from participants, and registration forms that included questions about education, job position, work functions, experience, and learning needs. It was found that many potential participants already had or were obtaining relevant education, so the program was adjusted to focus on specific methods and tools. There was also a significant need for supervision among participants,

leading to a careful revision of sessions on methods and tools for preventing emotional burnout and on supervision and intervision as paths to professional growth. An additional session was added for organizational leaders on how to work with teams to prevent burnout.

When preparing to deliver this training program for an organization working with military personnel and their families, the program was again adapted to meet the participants' needs. Topics on secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, the effects of prolonged stress, psychological first aid (PFA) and support in the face of loss, and models for maintaining resilience were expanded. This adaptivity ensured that the training remained relevant and effective in addressing the unique challenges faced by different groups.

In July 2022, ILDC opened the *BeProfi* online training platform, designed to offer competency-based training for child protection workers. This platform provides flexible and accessible learning opportunities that can be immediately applied in practice. Participants register on the platform, undergo needs assessment tests, select appropriate courses, complete pre-tests, engage in online learning, and apply their newly acquired skills in their professional roles. The platform also tracks progress and conducts post-training assessments to measure the impact of the training on participants' work.

BeProfi functions similarly to traditional MOOC platforms, facilitating a comprehensive and structured training process.

In September 2022, ILDC launched the project "Building Capacity of Organizations and Specialists to Provide Social Services and Socio-Psychological Help and Support to Ukrainian People During the War." The goal of this project is to develop and strengthen the capacity of organizations and specialists who provide social services to the population during the war by enhancing professional competencies and preventing emotional burnout.

The project encompasses several key activities. First, it focuses on developing the professional competencies of specialists in the social sphere for working with children and families both during and after the war. This includes conducting webinars for specialists and parents, as well as training courses aimed at developing necessary skills such as working with trauma, understanding resilience, supporting bereaved families, handling crisis communication, and providing family support during wartime.

Second, the project addresses the prevention of professional burnout among specialists. In the summer of 2023, a team of seven experts and methodologists developed and implemented the training program "Support for Children and Families Coping with War-Related Loss." Within two months, the program was launched. It is based on classical theories describing loss as a traumatic event, explaining the impact of

potentially traumatic events, the process of grieving, factors complicating mourning, and the primary focuses, tasks, and methods of providing psychosocial support to families experiencing loss. The program developers are recognized experts in grief support who, even before the war, worked with children, families, and youth dealing with "non-war-related losses". Their profound understanding of the subject matter, enriched with real-world examples from their practice, has made the program highly relevant to the current needs of Ukrainian children and families facing various losses due to the ongoing conflict. In response to the demand for enhancing the competence of social workers dealing with families of missing persons, a dedicated session on working with children and families experiencing ambiguous loss was included.

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All these ILDC's rapid responses demonstrate ILDC's adaptability and dedication to mitigating the effects of war on vulnerable populations by enhancing professional competencies, preventing burnout among social workers, and ensuring effective support mechanisms are in place for both specialists and those directly impacted by the armed conflict.

Evidences of effectiveness

The effectiveness of ILDC's training programs is demonstrated by significant improvements in participants' knowledge, skills, and competencies, as shown by pre- and post-training evaluations. For instance, in the program "Help and Support for Children and Families Experiencing War-Related Losses,"

the average pre-test score was 5.38, increasing to 7.31 post-training (t-test $p=0.0005$). Similarly, in the "Organizing and Conducting Psychological Support Groups" program, there was a statistically significant improvement in scores, with participants confirming the practical application of the learned material. New facilitators successfully led multiple support groups, with some reaching over 240 individuals. Participants cited several factors that supported the application of new skills, including structuring their experiences through knowledge systematization, participating in support groups, receiving supervision, using a handbook, and sharing insights with colleagues.

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The effectiveness of ILDC's programs is also evidenced by testimonials and case studies from participants and organizations. Participants have shared their transformative experiences, illustrating the real-world impact of our programs. One trainee noted, "The training exceeded my expectations, providing me with invaluable support and a clear structure for conducting support groups."

Another participant highlighted the practical benefits, saying, "Each session was a revelation, and the BeProfi platform made the learning process engaging and effective. This training opened up new opportunities for communication and collaboration."

Additionally, participants have found the training crucial for their professional development. One trainee remarked, "The

knowledge gained about working with children who have experienced loss and adults dealing with ambiguous loss was particularly valuable for my work."

Organizations have also reported significant improvements. A team leader shared, "Our employees and volunteers gained high-quality practical skills and knowledge. We now better understand how to support families in crisis, ensuring the safety and well-being of children. These changes have made our work more effective and impactful."

These testimonials and case studies demonstrate the substantial positive impact of our training programs, reinforcing their effectiveness and real-world applicability.

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Another significant indicator of the effectiveness of ILDC's approach is its alignment with best practices.

Initially, ILDC adopted a US model (Rycus & Hughes, 2001), known for its robust framework and effectiveness in social work and child protection. This foundational model provided a comprehensive, competency-based approach, which has been adapted to meet the specific needs of Ukraine's social work environment. By incorporating this model, ILDC ensured that its training programs were grounded in methodologies that have been proven effective in many other contexts (McDonald et al., 2022; Toland, 2006). This alignment with a globally respected standard provided a solid foundation for the development and implementation of

training programs that address the unique challenges faced by social workers in Ukraine.

Research by Karagodina et al. (2021) highlights the positive outcomes achieved through ILDC's adaptation of the competency-based model. Their findings demonstrate significant improvements in the training and performance of social workers, showcasing the effectiveness of a structured, competency-focused approach.

ILDC's ongoing commitment to best practices is reflected in its continuous improvement processes. The training programs are regularly updated based on participant feedback, new research findings, and evolving best practices in social work and child protection globally. This ensures that the training remains current, relevant, and effective. The quick response to the emerging needs of social work practitioners during times of war further demonstrates the effectiveness of non-formal education in addressing real-world challenges efficiently.

In summary, ILDC's training programs align with globally recognized best practices by initially employing a proven international model and continuously adapting it to fit the local context. This approach guarantees that social work professionals are equipped with the skills, knowledge, and support necessary to provide high-quality services to children and families in Ukraine.

LESSONS LEARNED

ILDC's experiences during the ongoing war in Ukraine provide valuable lessons for developing effective pedagogical practices in social work within challenging contexts. The organization's swift adaptation to the needs of a war-affected population highlights several key insights that can serve as recommendations for educators globally.

1. *Flexibility and Responsiveness.* In regions facing extreme situations like armed conflict and political violence, the ability to swiftly adapt training programs to emerging needs is essential. ILDC's experience in rapidly modifying its curriculum to address the evolving circumstances in Ukraine underscores the importance of being responsive and flexible. Training programs should be designed to allow for quick adjustments based on the changing realities on the ground.
2. *Integration of Technology.* Leveraging online platforms and digital tools ensures the continuity and accessibility of training programs, even in challenging contexts. ILDC's successful use of BeProfi demonstrates how technology can overcome physical and logistical barriers, allowing social workers to continue their professional development in real-time. Notably, group learning on these platforms has proven highly effective, optimizing the combination of platform resources and

group interaction. This approach is particularly valuable when traditional in-person training is not feasible, fostering a collaborative learning environment that enhances skill acquisition and application.

3. ***Emphasis on Practical Application.*** Providing social workers with opportunities for hands-on experience and the immediate application of learned skills enhances the effectiveness of training programs. ILDC's focus on practical sessions and supervisory meetings helps reinforce theoretical knowledge and build practitioners' confidence. Training should include simulations, role-playing, and supervised practical activities to ensure that participants can effectively translate learning into practice.
4. **Holistic Support Systems.** Supporting the well-being of social workers is crucial, especially in extreme situations. ILDC's approach to providing emotional and professional support through support groups and supervision has proven effective. Ensuring that social workers receive comprehensive support helps maintain their resilience and effectiveness. Training programs should incorporate elements that address the mental health and well-being of practitioners, fostering a supportive and sustainable professional environment.
5. **Structured Competency-Based Training Process:** The implementation of a competency-based approach has

proven crucial for developing specialized skills in social work professionals. By focusing on defined competencies and structuring training around specific skills and knowledge areas, ILDC has enhanced the effectiveness of its programs. The clear delineation of competencies—ranging from recognizing basic phenomena to mastering practical skills—ensures that training is targeted and actionable, ultimately improving professional practice.

These insights and recommendations demonstrate how strategic non-formal educational approaches can serve as best practices in social work pedagogy, particularly in settings characterized by armed conflict and political violence.

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Afterword

Knowledge, Responsibility, and Social Work in a War That Has Not Ended (Yet)

Tetyana SEMIGINA, Olena KARAGODINA

REFLECTIONS ON KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

In Ukraine, war is not an abstract concept—it is the lived reality of millions. Cities under bombardment, families uprooted, and communities fractured form the backdrop against which social workers continue their daily labor of care. Every intervention carries weight; every decision can ripple through lives already marked by trauma and loss. And yet, amid destruction, knowledge is still produced. Researchers and practitioners alike document experiences, reflect on practice, and generate insights with immediate relevance and long-term significance. This volume is a testament to that extraordinary endeavor: the production of understanding and action under conditions that would overwhelm most. It bears witness to resilience, ethical courage, and the unrelenting commitment of social work to human dignity, even in the midst of war.

Research conducted under conflict demands extraordinary adaptation. Contributors to this volume are largely social work educators, yet also include students and representatives of informal and international networks. Being insiders—living and working within the realities they study—affords rich contextual understanding but requires constant reflexivity regarding positionality, ethical responsibility, and emotional proximity. War simultaneously constrains resources and enables a “meta-position”: the immersion in crisis allows for insights unbound by traditional methodological or institutional constraints.

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Conducting research amid conflict exposes practical limitations—restricted access, disrupted institutions, and shifting priorities, but also unique opportunities to observe social processes in real time. Adaptive methodologies (e.g. rapid appraisals, photovoice, diary analysis, digital and remote methods, and community-engaged approaches) illuminate tensions inherent to wartime research: urgency versus ethical safeguards, participation versus protection, and methodological consistency versus flexibility demanded by rapidly changing contexts.

In social work, research is never just about protocols or instruments; it is about encountering lives in flux, making ethically charged decisions, and learning from the humanity in front of you. Sometimes the “data” speak louder than any questionnaire; sometimes the conversation in a shelter, the

silent tears, or a fleeting act of care, becomes the truest measure of understanding.

■ UKRAINIAN SOCIAL WORK IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

War functions as an “*ideal storm*” (Finkel, 2014): crises of social, economic, and political systems accelerate innovation, heighten professional intensity, and lower barriers to experimenting with new practices.

The knowledge generated here informs the evolution of Ukrainian social work in multiple dimensions: professionalization, education, and practice under pressure. Gendered and community-focused studies highlight how social work is enacted in formal networks, informal grassroots initiatives, and community-led innovations. They reveal resilience, solidarity, and creative responses to complex social needs. Trauma-informed approaches must be central: every person affected by the conflict is treated as having lived trauma, demanding professionals capable of emergency response, psychosocial first aid, and complex crisis management.

Yet, the profession navigates profound contradictions. Persistent bureaucracy and institutional inertia often resist innovation, while localized, small-scale initiatives emerge as points of stability for affected communities. This dynamic resonates with *Theory U* (Scharmer, 2018): systemic change

arises not from incremental fixes, but through deep observation, presencing, and co-creation of solutions attuned to the needs revealed by crisis. Local innovations – the establishment of IDP councils, community-based psychosocial programs, or peer-support networks – illustrate the “bottom of the U,” where awareness of systemic constraints meets emergent collective action. The challenge lies in scaling these initiatives without co-optation or dilution, recognizing them not as threats to system stability but as essential nodes of resilience.

War accelerates professional identity formation. New roles (crisis management, veteran support, community and people reintegration) demand competencies in trauma-informed care, risk management, digital literacy, and intersectoral collaboration. Yet formal education and professional preparation have historically lagged behind these emergent needs. Social work in Ukraine must embrace dual imperatives: responding to immediate humanitarian crises and cultivating transformative capacities that endure beyond the emergency. This framing echoes insights advanced by other scholars (Dominelli, 2025; Popova & Bondarchuk, 2025).

Anyway, life itself, and the practice of social work, will never again be what they were before the war.

CONFRONTING ETHICAL TENSIONS AND REALITIES

International discourse on social work often emphasizes peacekeeping, neutral humanitarianism, and universal human rights, framing social work in pacifist terms (Beck et al., 2022; Sewpaul, 2024; Zaviršek, 2024; Zaviršek, 2025). Some global associations, at the outbreak of Russia's full-scale invasion, equated Ukrainian victims with Russian aggressors (International Federation of Social Workers. (2022) Yet in practice, when confronted with aggression, the profession must negotiate a more complex ethical terrain: supporting self-defense, protecting victims, and advocating for accountability, while upholding core social work values.

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War renders some idealistic standards—neutrality, universalism, unconditional pacifism—ethically insufficient when survival, protection, and resistance are imperative. The Ukrainian experience exposes the limitations of global policy frameworks that are often inconsistent, slow to respond, or shaped by competing political priorities. In some instances, international actors and leaders appear unmoored from the realities on the ground, advancing agendas that fail to adequately recognize the asymmetry of harm, the urgency of protection, or the legitimacy of resistance. This creates a striking tension between global ideals and local necessities, requiring Ukrainian social workers to navigate ethical responsibilities with pragmatism, courage, and discernment.

This tension reflects a deeper professional dilemma: social workers are not abstract “builders of ecosocial harmony” or “guardians of utopian social orders”. They operate in a field of systemic injustice, moral hazard, and ongoing threat. Their work requires pragmatic ethical frameworks: balancing assistance with security, neutrality with advocacy, and immediate relief with long-term integration (Mwapaura, 2024; Segal, 2025). These situationally grounded standards are forged in crisis and responsive to the lived realities of affected populations.

Despite ongoing uncertainty – war continues, victory remains unclear, and millions endure daily suffering – the profession must persist. Building systems capable of long-term resilience, cultivating partnerships, expanding trauma-informed practice, and integrating lessons from localized innovations are essential. Ethical standards must evolve from idealistic “pink pony” paradigms to real-world pragmatism, recognizing the dilemmas of neutrality, safety, and moral responsibility in active conflict zones.

This reflective, critical, and forward-looking perspective contributes to both Ukrainian social work and global debates on practice in crisis contexts. It demonstrates that even amid protracted conflict, knowledge, ethical engagement, and human connection endure. Social work, at its best, remains a profession capable of navigating contradictions, generating

insight, and sustaining hope—even when the storm shows no sign of abating.

Finally, the volume underscores that defending one's country, protecting the vulnerable, and resisting aggression are legitimate and necessary dimensions of social work practice in wartime. While international associations provide guidance, the Ukrainian experience reveals the limits of universalist or pacifist frameworks in contexts of ongoing occupation and violence. Social workers must therefore integrate realistic, trauma-informed, ethically nuanced, and contextually grounded standards, balancing care with courage, neutrality with accountability, and intervention with justice, even when global guidance is inconsistent or absent.

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And yet, amid the rubble, the sirens, and the daily fear, social workers keep moving – handing blankets, offering words, evacuating families, holding children who have seen things no child should see. They make impossible decisions, face moral dilemmas, and bear witness to suffering that no protocol fully anticipates. Ukrainian social work today is inseparable from this lived reality: it is courage in the face of aggression, presence in the face of loss, and action in the absence of certainty. No textbook, no international guideline, and no global policy can substitute for the weight of these moments, nor for the unshakable responsibility that falls on those who stand between harm and hope.

War will end. History tells us that it always does. But the social consequences of violence endure far longer. Social work therefore cannot afford paralysis in the face of uncertainty. Paraphrasing the Mad Hatter from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the focus must shift from speculating about what will happen next to thinking clearly about what needs to be done. What sustains the profession in such moments is not foresight, but responsibility, commitment to human dignity, resilience, and social justice.

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***Social Work in Wartime Ukraine:
Changing the Professional Landscape***

offers a comprehensive and reflexive exploration of how social work theory, practice, and education are being reshaped under conditions of prolonged war.

KEY THEMES

- **Social work professionalization under conditions of war**
- **Post-socialist welfare transformation and Europeanisation processes**
- **Targeted social support responses for internally displaced persons and war veterans**
- **Gendered dimensions of crisis, care, and resilience**
- **Community-based and feminist approaches to social work practice**
- **Ethics, advocacy, and practitioner well-being in prolonged emergencies**

