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To cite this article: Gulnaz Anjum, Laure Isaac, Halina Grzymala-Moszczynska & Karolina Mazurowska (2025) “My suitcases are still not fully unpacked”: Ukrainian refugee mothers under Norwegian temporary collective protection, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being*, 20:1, 2580074, DOI: [10.1080/17482631.2025.2580074](https://doi.org/10.1080/17482631.2025.2580074)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482631.2025.2580074>



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Published online: 14 Nov 2025.



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“My suitcases are still not fully unpacked”: Ukrainian refugee mothers under Norwegian temporary collective protection

Gulnaz Anjum^{a,b} , Laure Isaac^b, Halina Grzymała-Moszczyńska^c  and Karolina Mazurowska^d

^aDepartment of Psychology, University of Limerick, Ireland; ^bDepartment of Psychology, University of Oslo, Norway; ^cIgnatianum University in Kraków, visiting professor at SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Institute of Psychology, Warsaw, Poland; ^dSWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Institute of Psychology, Warsaw, Poland

ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study explores the lived experiences of Ukrainian refugee mothers who have resettled in Norway under the temporary collective protection scheme. In particular, the research investigates how structural integration mechanisms, psychosocial well-being, and individual aspirations intersect in shaping adaptation processes.

Methods: A qualitative design was adopted, using semi-structured interviews with ten Ukrainian refugee mothers residing across different Norwegian municipalities. Analysis was conducted within a critical-realist and contextualist stance using reflexive thematic analysis, with attention to both systemic constraints and agentic responses.

Results: Three overarching themes were identified. First, *Introduction Programme (IP) Misalignment* captures participants' frustrations with the one-size-fits-all integration model, with particular emphasis on language barriers and the non-recognition of pre-migration professional qualifications. Second, *the State of Limbo* reflects the psychological distress associated with temporary protection status, ongoing uncertainty, and dependency on welfare mechanisms. Third, *Commitment to Staying* highlights a future-oriented stance marked by resilience, maternal responsibility, and appreciation for Norwegian safety and values.

Discussion: The findings demonstrate that while Ukrainian refugee mothers in Norway face significant institutional and psychological challenges, they also exhibit high levels of motivation and adaptive resilience. Structural barriers compound feelings of liminality and hinder full participation in Norwegian society.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 26 July 2025

Accepted 21 October 2025

KEYWORDS

Ukraine war; mental health; refugee women; psychosocial support; refugee integration; Ukrainian refugees; life in limbo.

1. Introduction

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, resulting in widespread violence and triggering the largest migration wave in Europe since World War II. Millions of Ukrainians have fled to neighboring countries or become internally displaced due to extensive civilian harm and infrastructure destruction (UNHCR, 2024). More than two years into the conflict, the crisis showed no signs of resolution. Many refugees left Ukraine abruptly, without preparation, and remained uncertain about when or how they might return to their former lives.

As of December 2024, Norway hosted the highest number of Ukrainian refugees among the Nordic countries. A total of 90,245 Ukrainians have sought protection in Norway, a country with a population of 5.5 million, equivalent to 16 refugees per 1,000 residents (Statistisk sentralbyrå, 2024; UNHCR, 2024). Most of these refugees have been granted temporary collective protection, a legal status characterized by expedited processing times (approximately two weeks compared to nine months for individual asylum applications) and rights to healthcare, work, and education, with extensions possible for up to three years (Hernes et al., 2022; The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI), 2024).

While the initial phase of mass arrivals has subsided, new challenges have emerged for Ukrainian refugees by 2024, especially in the context of long-term integration. This necessitates research on their

CONTACT Gulnaz Anjum  gulnaz_anjum@fulbrightmail.org  Gulnaz.Anjum@psykologi.uio.no  Main Building, office 01-29, University of Limerick, Ireland; Harald Schjelderups hus, Forskningsveien 3A, University of Oslo, Norway

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evolving needs, particularly regarding their mental health and social support. This study focuses on Ukrainian refugee mothers who fled war and were resettled in Norway with their children, a group underrepresented in the literature.

Since 2022, research has increasingly focused on the psychological impacts of war and displacement on Ukrainians, with emphasis on the long-term consequences of trauma and sudden migration (Javanbakht, 2022; Kokun, 2022; Konstantinov et al., 2022). Initial studies, often survey-based or mixed methods, have assessed immediate psychological and public health needs, offering guidelines for trauma-focused interventions, mental health first aid, and navigating host country healthcare systems (El Arab et al., 2023; Javanbakht, 2022). However, less attention has been devoted to the post-migration stressors faced by Ukrainian refugees as they navigate their lives in new countries.

Research consistently highlights that refugee women are at greater risk of psychological distress than men, often due to gendered vulnerabilities and caregiving responsibilities (Silove et al., 2017; Tahir et al., 2022; Vallejo-Martí et al., 2021). Quantitative studies, such as Buchcik et al. (2023) research in Germany, report higher levels of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress among Ukrainian women compared to men. Conversely, qualitative research has challenged the narrative of refugee women as passive victims. For instance, Baran et al. (2024) describe Ukrainian women in Poland as resilient, actively managing their circumstances and advocating for tailored support based on their specific needs (Baran et al., 2024).

In the context of Ukrainian refugees, challenges such as housing insecurity, ongoing war trauma, and unmet basic needs have been identified as significant stressors (Seguin et al., 2023). Despite these risks, protective factors such as faith, perceived safety, and socio-environmental support, including the presence of pets and social networks, have been reported to improve well-being (Rizzi et al., 2023). Similarly, Rock and Yanaşmayan (2024) examined how Ukrainian refugee mothers in Germany navigate displacement through maternal urgency and “active waiting” to rebuild stability amidst trauma and uncertainty. They highlight collective efforts with other mothers to address ruptures in their lives, resonating with this study’s focus on Ukrainian refugee mothers in Norway and the interplay between caregiving, trauma, and adaptation.

1.1. The concept of limbo in refugee experiences

We conceptualize limbo as an institutionally produced condition of prolonged uncertainty that constrains homemaking, life-planning, and belonging under displacement. In the present study, limbo is not a lexical category but a conceptual lens for interpreting Ukrainian mothers’ accounts of planning, caregiving, and integration under temporary collective protection. Anjum et al. (2023) described the protection status-seeking process as “living in a state of limbo,” where uncertainty about the future exacerbates psychological stress, potentially leading to trauma. This state of existential immobility prolongs the mental health challenges of conflict as refugees remain unable to plan their futures.

Recent research has shown that the inability to envision tangible opportunities such as education, work, or social connections further heightens vulnerability among refugees and asylum seekers (De Leo et al., 2021). For instance, Steel et al. (2011) found that prolonged asylum procedures and temporary protection status significantly increase mental distress, isolation, and acculturation difficulties (Steel et al., 2011). Similarly, Willmann-Robleda (2022) explored “existential immobility,” where individuals feel unable to “make a home” or progress in life during long asylum procedures. Women in Norwegian asylum centers reported powerlessness, demotivation, and anxiety about wasting time while awaiting permanent residency decisions.

Brun and Fábos (2015) extended this concept by examining “homemaking” during displacement. They argue that the uncertainty and instability inherent in displacement redefine the notion of “home,” complicating both the process of return and the creation of new homes. These challenges are particularly acute for refugees subjected to restrictive policies and spatial limitations, underscoring the profound impact of uncertainty on their well-being and identity formation.

1.2. Reception of Ukrainian refugees in Norway: policies and challenges

Ukrainian refugees in Norway face distinct challenges owing to their temporary collective protection, which is markedly different from individual asylum-seeking processes. This status allows for expedited processing

and grants access to healthcare, work, and education but limits long-term planning due to its temporary nature (Brekke, 2001; Hernes et al., 2022; The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI), 2022).

The Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research has produced two reports analyzing Ukrainian refugees' reception and settlement experiences (Hernes et al., 2022; Hernes et al., 2023). The first report focused on the initial four months following the mass influx, while the follow-up examined refugees' perspectives 18 months later. These reports highlight the systemic strengths and areas for improvement using mixed methods, including semi-structured interviews and surveys. Key findings indicate gaps in addressing psychosocial needs, including acculturation challenges, cultural appropriateness of local interventions, and specific issues related to child-rearing. While comprehensive in assessing logistical and policy aspects, reports lack sufficient exploration of refugees' mental health and integration challenges. This omission underscores the need for more nuanced research to inform policies aimed at fostering the well-being and long-term integration of Ukrainian refugees in Norway. This policy configuration sets the conditions under which integration is pursued, particularly for mothers responsible for children's schooling and care.

1.3. *To stay or return? navigating uncertainty*

The Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (Hernes et al., 2022; Hernes et al., 2023) highlights the ongoing uncertainty faced by Ukrainian refugees regarding their futures in Norway. In 2022, 26% of respondents expressed a desire to return to Ukraine after the war, while more than 50% were uncertain and 19% preferred to stay. By 2023, more refugees had leaned toward staying in Norway, yet the majority (54%) remained unsure. Notably, research from the early reception phase indicated that many Ukrainians in Norway and Sweden intended to stay long term, even if the war ended soon (Tyldum et al., 2023). The qualitative findings of Hernes et al. (2023) identify the key factors that influence decisions to stay or return. Refugees from heavily damaged regions, especially in eastern and southern Ukraine, often lack viable homes. Additionally, the presence of children strongly shapes decisions, as parents prioritize stability, education, and opportunities for their families (Rock & Yanaşmayan, 2024).

1.4. *Temporary collective protection status and the introduction program (IP)*

In November 2024, the Norwegian Government introduced a bill to the Storting to extend the temporary collective protection period from three to five years, anticipating that the first Ukrainian arrivals would reach the three-year limit by March 2025 (Government.no, 2024). Although the enabling legal amendment took effect on 1 January 2025, authorities had not yet confirmed whether Ukrainians would receive the extension, stating that a decision would be made before March 2025 (The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI), 2024). Designed for a mass-influx scenario and premised on eventual return once safety permits, the scheme embeds temporariness into reception (Hernes et al., 2022; Hernes et al., 2023; Tyldum et al., 2023). In practice, ongoing war and policy ambiguity produce a state of limbo that complicates future planning. This uncertainty is visible in family strategies: 37% of respondents with children reported dual enrollment in Norwegian schools and online Ukrainian schooling to preserve educational ties while adapting to Norway (Hernes et al., 2023). Further, UDI's 2023 guidance restricted travel to Ukraine to exceptional circumstances (e.g., funerals, visiting critically ill relatives), intensifying constraints on mobility and family decision-making (UDI, 2024).

Within this reception regime, the Introduction Program (IP) is the primary integration instrument for adults aged 18–55, combining parental guidance, Norwegian language training, civic/life-skills modules, and work-oriented components; participants receive an allowance set at 39% of the national median income, with provisions for part-time participation and breaks for those under temporary collective protection (Hernes et al., 2023; Tyldum et al., 2023). Implementation, however, varies markedly by municipality: larger municipalities tend to offer a broader menu of courses and work placements, whereas resource constraints in smaller ones limit access to internships (Hernes et al., 2023). Moreover, B1/B2 language targets within one year, a central IP objective, have been widely criticized by Ukrainian

participants as unrealistic and stressful given caregiving responsibilities, prior qualifications, and uncertainty about long-term residence (Hernes et al., 2023). Thus, even as Norway provides rapid and comparatively generous access (e.g., swift IP entry), the temporariness of legal status structures a distinctive chronopolitics of integration, especially for mothers balancing care, language learning, and employability (Hernes et al., 2022, Hernes et al., 2023; Government.no, 2024; Tyldum et al., 2023; Tyldum et al., 2023; UDI, 2024). This study offers an in-depth, mother-centered account of how such temporariness shapes day-to-day decisions and sense-making under temporary collective protection.

1.5. The current study

This qualitative study uses reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) to explore how Ukrainian refugee mothers in Norway experience life under temporary collective protection. We focus on three areas: (a) experiences of the Introduction Program (IP); (b) how temporariness and uncertainty shape planning, belonging, and wellbeing; and (c) how children's needs anchor decisions and aspirations. Our overarching research question is: How do Ukrainian refugee mothers experience settling into Norway under temporary collective protection? Two sub-questions guide the analysis: (1) *In what ways do uncertainties related to war, legal status, and caregiving responsibilities shape mothers' aspirations and plans?* (2) *How do participants' accounts refine understandings of living "in limbo" within this reception context?*

This paper contributes uniquely to literature in two ways. First, Norway's reception of Ukrainians combines unusually rapid and comparatively generous access to integration measures, such as swift entry into the Introduction Program, with the legal temporariness of collective protection. Examining this context allows us to illuminate how institutionalized uncertainty (what has been termed the chronopolitics of limbo) shapes refugees' everyday planning and wellbeing. Second, by centering the voices of mothers, we highlight how integration and future-oriented decisions are refracted through caregiving responsibilities, children's educational trajectories, and maternal aspirations. In doing so, the study not only refines conceptual understandings of living "in limbo" but also advances debates on how refugee reception regimes organize wellbeing and belonging. As part of our interpretive analysis, we also developed an analytic model to translate participants' accounts into a communicative tool for policy and practice audiences.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design and approach

This study employed reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) to examine the lived experiences of Ukrainian refugee mothers in Norway. Qualitative approaches are well suited to investigating complex and under-researched phenomena situated in specific social, political, and cultural contexts (Smith, 2015; Charmaz, 2006). Semi-structured interviews prioritized participants' voices, enabling them to define their own journeys and concerns while challenging preconceived notions about refugees (Baran et al., 2024). Following Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2022), RTA was applied to identify and interpret patterned meanings in the data, with coding and theme development conducted inductively and guided by reflexivity rather than pre-existing theoretical frameworks (Braun et al., 2015).

2.2. Ethical considerations

This study adhered to the "Do No Harm" principle and was approved by the Data Protection Services of Sikt (February 22, 2024; reference number: 222594) and the Internal Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology at the University of Oslo (March 5, 2024; reference number: 29881530; see Appendix A in supplement information). All procedures were performed in compliance with Norwegian law and the university's institutional guidelines. To mitigate potential distress during data collection, participants were provided mental health resources translated into Ukrainian and Russian. They were also offered

access to a network of Ukrainian psychotherapists from Norway. None of the participants used this resource during the study.

2.3. Participants

The study included 10 Ukrainian women aged 26–55 years who arrived in Norway as refugees with their children between 2022 and 2023 under temporary collective protection. Participants resided in Norway for at least one year, ensuring sufficient insight into their integration experience. A purposive sampling approach was used to select participants who met these criteria rather than aiming for representativeness. Pseudonyms were assigned to ensure anonymity, and identifying details were removed during transcription, for more details, see [Table I](#). We considered information power when evaluating sample adequacy. Given our focused aim (Ukrainian mothers under temporary collective protection), the specificity of the sample, the richness of interview dialog, and our interpretive analytic strategy, a sample of ten participants was sufficient to yield patterned, in-depth insights. This aligns with reflexive thematic analysis, where the goal is not numerical saturation but analytic depth and richness.

2.4. Recruitment and data collection

Participants were recruited via networks of Ukrainian colleagues from Mental Health Human Rights Info (MHHRI) and through snowball sampling. They were briefed about the study and provided with detailed project information before providing informed consent. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Interviews were conducted between March and May 2024, either in person in Oslo or remotely via Zoom. Participants could choose to speak Ukrainian or Russian. The semi-structured guide (Appendix B in supplement information) was iteratively refined with input from two Ukrainian refugee advisors and a bilingual assistant; their feedback added prompts on schooling/childcare and moderated potentially triggering content. Each interview lasted 30 minutes to one hour, following a semi-structured interview guide that covered four main areas:

1. Background information and arrival in Norway.
2. Adaptation and building a future in Norway.
3. Possibility of returning to Ukraine.
4. Current needs and challenges.

Participants received a compensation of 400 NOK (voucher or bank transfer).

2.5. Transcription and translation

Audio recordings were transcribed using OpenAI Whisper software. The transcripts were reviewed and anonymized by a Ukrainian research assistant fluent in the interview language. Translations into English were conducted by certified Ukrainian translators specializing in humanitarian, psychological, and legal contexts (De Vos & Nokele, 2021). The translations were verified by Ukrainian colleagues in Norway to ensure their cultural and contextual accuracy.

Table I. Characteristics of the Participants.

| Fictional Name | Age Range | Employed in Norway | Region of Origin in Ukraine | Age of Child(ren) |
|----------------|-----------|--------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Antonina | 35–45 | No | East | 10 years, 7 years |
| 2. Bohdana | 35–45 | No | East | 8 years |
| 3. Darina | 45–55 | No | Capital | 18 years |
| 4. Ekaterina | 35–45 | Yes | East | 14 years, 12 years |
| 5. Julia | 35–45 | No | East | 22 years |
| 6. Lyubov | 35–45 | Yes | Capital | 13 years, 7 years |
| 7. Maria | 35–45 | No | West | 15 years, 8 years |
| 8. Nikolina | 25–35 | No | East | 8 years |
| 9. Ruslana | 35–45 | Yes | Capital | 4 years |
| 10. Viktoriya | 35–45 | Yes | Capital | 4 years |

2.6. Data analysis

Analysis was conducted within a critical realist and contextualist stance using a reflexive thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006, Braun & Clarke, 2022), emphasizing the researcher's reflexivity and engagement with the data. Coding was inductive, with themes emerging inductively from the content. NVivo 14 software was used to manage and analyze the data. The participants and the research assistant provided feedback on the preliminary findings to ensure validity and resonance with their experiences. Our stance informed inductive coding, interpretive themes, and the later development of an analytic illustration as an aid to integration of patterned meanings.

2.7. Epistemological position

We adopt a critical-realist and contextualist stance compatible with reflexive thematic analysis. We treat participants' accounts as credible access points to lived realities while recognizing that meanings are co-produced through interaction, language, and context. Analytically, we prioritized inductive coding and interpretive theme development; during theme refinement, we created an analytic illustration to integrate relations among themes for communication and reflection. This approach aligns with contemporary guidance on reflexive TA and qualitative quality. The researchers' positionality and reflexivity are integral to the process, aligning with established qualitative research practices (Braun et al., 2015). By focusing on participants' explicit accounts, this study aims to capture a nuanced understanding of their integration processes, psychosocial well-being, and future outlook in the Norwegian context.

3. Results

3.1. Theme 1: The Introduction Program: Supportive Yet Misaligned with Ukrainian Needs

The Introduction Program (IP) emerged as a central topic in the interviews, shaping much of the participants' initial experiences in Norway. While the program was intended to provide structure and support, participants expressed a mix of gratitude, frustration, and recommendations for improvement.

For many, IP had a reoccurring mention as *A Necessary but Insufficient Starting Point*. The existence of the IP itself was a source of relief and appreciation. The participants acknowledged that the program reflected the Norwegian government's efforts to support refugees, especially given the psychological strain of acculturation and war-related stress.

"It can be quite difficult [to adapt] due to cultural differences, and big worldview differences. Refugees, in general, are in a difficult psychological state, so an integration program is very much needed. We were pleasantly surprised to have it, but of course, we expected more from it than what it turned out to be." (Julia, Participant 2)

However, despite this initial optimism, the participants highlighted significant shortcomings in how the program was designed and delivered. For example, a clear subtheme was *Misaligned Content and Unrealistic Expectations*. Seven of the ten participants felt that the program often failed to address their specific needs, such as providing practical information on Norwegian administration, healthcare access, and job market entry. Instead, some courses focused on activities deemed less relevant, such as hikes, songs, and craft.

"With the introduction program, I would like to focus more on language learning rather than on activities like hikes, songs, or crafts. Those activities are fine, but they should be once a week or for a couple of hours. The main focus should be on learning the language." (Ruslana, Participant 9)

Participants interpreted such content as infantilising and misaligned with their prior expertise and urgent needs (credential recognition, job search), and in some cases as trauma insensitive. These interpretations, rather than isolated reactions, patterned across accounts and contributed to perceived time-waste and frustration with IP.

Participants also criticized the IP's language proficiency requirements, with five finding it unrealistic to achieve the expected B1/B2 Norwegian level within six months to one year. *"Even teachers say it's physically impossible [to reach B2]; the brain can't absorb information that quickly, and of course, practice is needed."* (Antonina, Participant 1)

Several interviewees found some of the course material to be overly simplistic, particularly the *Helse Kurs* (health course) and parts of the parenting course. For example:

"We had to do a lot of studying by ourselves, and there was a lot of information that we already knew, like about healthcare, about paperwork, what NAV¹ is, where to go. We already knew all this, and then they taught us things like how to brush our teeth, what's healthy, like apples are good, cookies are not." (Ruslana, Participant 9)

This perceived lack of depth left participants feeling that the courses were "not enough," "obvious," "hollow," or even "wasting time." One participant noted that overly simplistic information could be condescending or even offensive.

Grouping refugees with diverse educational backgrounds and needs often leads to mismatched instructions. Participants often referred to it as *Challenges of Group Composition and Emotional Triggers*. Several participants suggested organizing classes based on education level to improve their relevance.

Additionally, the psychological sensitivity of some course contents has emerged as a concern. For instance, a participant described a distressing experience during an ICDP² course, where a video showing children meeting their fathers retraumatized her: *"There was quite good support from other people, but that particular psychological course played a negative role for me, even though it was supposed to help."* (Viktoria, Participant 10)

This incident highlights the importance of trauma-informed approaches in program design. This illustrates how ostensibly supportive content can inadvertently re-trigger distress when not delivered with trauma-informed safeguards.

The IP's mandatory nature, combined with financial incentives, was seen as both a benefit and a limitation. Many participants referred to this subtheme as *Mandatory Attendance as a Double-Edged Sword*. While the participants appreciated financial support, they felt restricted in how they could allocate their time. *"We could have (.) spent our time in a different way, but we were obliged to attend these courses because otherwise, our financial support would be reduced."* (Julia, Participant 2)

For some, leaving the program offered a sense of relief and autonomy, even at the cost of financial support. *"I'm glad we got off the payments because it brought more freedom."* (Darina, Participant 3)

The introductory program represented an important step in the integration journey for Ukrainian refugees in Norway. While its existence was appreciated, participants identified key areas for improvement, including tailoring the content to suit Ukrainian cultural and practical needs, adopting a trauma-informed approach, and providing greater flexibility in participation. For mothers, IP scheduling and content interacted with childcare demands and children's schooling, intensifying time-pressure and decisions about attendance and self-study. These insights suggest that a more customized and thoughtful program design could significantly enhance refugees' integration experiences.

3.2. Theme 2: Navigating a Perpetual State of Limbo

This theme captures the ongoing uncertainty and emotional strain experienced by Ukrainian refugee mothers in Norway despite the support offered by the Norwegian government and institutions. The state of limbo that these women face is explored through two subthemes that highlight the challenges of maintaining independence and planning for the future.

There was a *Wanting to be Independent* for many of our participants, for example, Lyubov, Participant 6, said: *"I want to be independent. I'm used to being financially independent, supporting myself and my children. Not everyone likes walking around with an outstretched hand! Honestly [being on welfare] was a trauma for me at first, a real trauma. I wasn't used to it... We are adults..."*

While deeply grateful for Norway's support, many participants struggled to reconcile this reliance with the cultural values of self-reliance and hard work. They expressed a desire to contribute to society, even if it meant taking jobs for which they were overqualified. However, the inability to work in their professional fields due to unrecognized qualifications and insufficient Norwegian language proficiency was a significant barrier. For example, Ekaterina, Participant 4 said:

"I couldn't see any future for myself in Norway. (.) It's probably a problem for many people who have higher education, held managerial positions, or worked intellectually... It's been tough for me here, because I understand that the level of Norwegian taught in the integration courses isn't enough to continue the same kind of work as it was in Ukraine. (.) For example, you need your education to be formally recognized. In my case as a veterinarian, I don't just need my diploma approved; I also need authorization." (Ekaterina, Participant 4)

In some cases, this loss of professional identity contributes to depression. Maria, a psychologist unable to work in her field, explained: *"I was very upset when I had to finally stop this remote work in Ukraine. I was very depressed, precisely because I do not feel myself, let's say, useful to society." (Maria, Participant 3)*

The inefficiencies of the support system left the participants feeling stuck and unable to fully integrate or reclaim their independence. This sense of limbo extends beyond employment to a broader feeling of exclusion from Norwegian society.

Participants described feeling *Not Allowed To Understand What Our Future Is*, expressing cautious optimism about staying in Norway while emphasizing that their temporary collective protection status remained a major obstacle to long-term planning.

"Every year we sit on pins and needles, not knowing if our stay will be extended or not, and what will happen. We, Ukrainians, are essentially hostages of the situation. (.) If, hypothetically, tomorrow they tell me to pack my things and leave, it would be very difficult for me to accept because I am currently investing a huge amount of time in learning the language, adapting to a new company." (Viktoria, Participant 10)

The uncertainty surrounding their protection status hindered participants from fully investing in integration, education, or career development.

"They constantly remind us everywhere that you are here temporarily. And that stops many things, even going to study or to confirm a psychology degree. (.) What if you spend time on it now, and then you return without finishing your studies and without getting it, just wasted time?" (Maria, Participant 3)

This precarious status also restricts family mobility. UDI regulations prevented refugees from visiting Ukraine without a "legitimate purpose" under the threat of losing their protection status. This rule exacerbated separation from loved ones and increased feelings of confinement.

"As soon as this rule appeared in Norway, I wanted to leave because you feel like you're being confined within some framework. (.) Why can't I go home? Because of the fear that I won't be allowed back here or that I'll lose my residency status, protection." (Darina, Participant 7)

For refugee mothers, these challenges are compounded by their impact on their children. Many participants reported that their children felt torn between Ukrainian and Norwegian identities, with some struggling to adapt or desiring to return to Ukraine. *"She still wants to go back to Ukraine for some reason. She can't even explain the reason to herself, but that's just how she feels." (Bohdana, Participant 2)*

To maintain educational continuity, three participants kept their children enrolled in Ukrainian curricula alongside Norwegian schooling despite the additional stress that was created.

"We continue to stick with the Ukrainian school because, again, this temporary status makes it very difficult for the children. But given that I understand if we take our documents from there and collective protection ends, we return to Ukraine, it's uncertain how our grades will be translated." (Maria, Participant 3)

Uncertainty about future residence was often framed through children's prospects—school friendships, language, and safety. While the Norwegian support system provides vital assistance, its inefficiencies and

temporary protection constraints create significant barriers to integration. Addressing these challenges (through clearer pathways to permanent residency, recognition of qualifications, and more flexible family reunification policies) would help mitigate the psychosocial toll of sustained uncertainty.

3.3. Theme 3: “Tying Our Lives Here”: Hopes and Prospects for the Future

This theme explores the aspirations and motivations that drive Ukrainian refugee mothers to build their futures in Norway. Despite challenges and uncertainties, participants highlighted several factors that anchored their decision to stay, revealing beacons of hope and practical reasons for adapting to their new lives. These insights are discussed in the following three subthemes:

For many participants, there was a clear sense that *There’s This Support, and When You Feel it, You Become Much Calmer*. Norway represented safety, stability, and recovery. Four participants associated their lives in Norway with a sense of calm, while eight highlighted the kindness and generosity of local Norwegians, including neighbors, acquaintances, and aid workers.

“I really appreciate how the Norwegians support us, and I don't think we would have received such open and kind support in any other country in the world—it's very touching, sometimes to the point of tears. What makes me feel truly at home here is that I find many aspects of Norway very relatable, (.) and I realized that we are not different at all.” (Antonina, Participant 1)

As Antonina's experience shows, this openness fostered a sense of belonging and cultural similarity, thus easing her adaptation.

Participants who were employed appreciated Norway's work culture, particularly its emphasis on work-life balance, which contributed to their sense of well-being.

“I always had a lot of work and responsibility, but here it's 'Ikke stress' [Norwegian: 'No stress']. You work at your own pace, and you are calm. This calm atmosphere at work means that when you come to work, you are more relaxed, and when you come home, you're not irritated.” (Ruslana, Participant 9)

A Better Life and a Brighter Future for Their Children emerged as central motivators for participants to remain in Norway. For many, their children's happiness and safety served as a “lighthouse” guiding them through the challenges of displacement.

“I came here for her, went through all of this for her, and we are here now for her. So, when I think about how hard it is for me, when I start to break down again, cry, and want to go home because I really miss my parents, my friends, and my home, I look at her. I see the happiness in my daughter's eyes.” (Viktoria, Participant 10)

Eight participants specifically noted that their decision to stay in Norway was “for the sake of the children.”

“I'm nobody here with two degrees and it's very hard for me to find myself. But the priority is the children because they feel very comfortable here. That's why I know that if I return to Ukraine with them, it will be a big trauma, a huge trauma for them.” (Lyubov, Participant 6)

Participants also expressed trust in Norwegian institutions such as the education system and childcare services, seeing them as instrumental in their children's positive adjustment and overall happiness.

The process of adaptation to life in Norway created a growing concern, which the participants described as *The Longer You Live Here, The Less You Want To Go Back*. This is making it increasingly difficult to consider returning to Ukraine.

“Well, I think if we live here another year or two, then no one will want to return anymore. (.) Our lives will be tied here, already tied to everything because there will be friends, community, work, and all.” (Ekaterina, Participant 4)

For many, returning to Ukraine felt unrealistic due to the destruction caused by war, the loss of homes, and the uncertain timeline for postwar recovery.

"I used to think that we would return immediately after the war ends. But now I realize that even after the war, it will take I don't know how much time (...) for us to be able to live there safely again." (Julia)

This theme reveals how hope for a better life, particularly for their children, anchors Ukrainian refugee mothers to Norway. The safety, stability, and support they find in a country provide a foundation for adaptation and integration. Across accounts, children's schooling, language acquisition, friendships, and apparent flourishing simultaneously anchor decisions to remain in Norway and constrain alternatives. Participants described prioritizing children's continuity over their own professional trajectories, even when careers stalled. Temporariness thus acquires immediate practical significance: investments in language learning and credential recognition appear rational only if a future in Norway is plausible.

To read a summary of all themes and subthemes, see [Table II](#).

3.4. A framework for pathways to adaptation and integration

Together, these themes highlight systemic misalignments and potential levers for support, which we later integrate into an analytic illustration (see Discussion 4.4). During theme refinement (RTA Phase 5), we constructed an analytic illustration to integrate patterned relationships among the three themes. We propose a conceptual model ([Figure 1](#)) which is an analytic illustration and an interpretive, non-causal model that illustrates the lived experiences of Ukrainian refugee mothers in Norway.

4. Discussion

This study examined the lived experiences of ten Ukrainian refugee mothers under temporary collective protection in Norway, focusing on their integration, psychosocial well-being, and future outlook. Our contribution is twofold. First, we provide a mother-centered analysis of how rapid access to integration supports co-exists with legal temporariness, shaping everyday decisions under temporary collective protection. Second, we refine the concept of limbo as a patterned, institutionally produced uncertainty that organizes planning, belonging, and care work in this reception context. The findings shed light on key challenges such as language acquisition, employment barriers, and the adequacy of the Norwegian

Table II. Summary of the themes and subthemes mentioned in the results.

| Theme | Subtheme | Description |
|---|--|--|
| Theme 1: The Introduction Programme: Supportive Yet Misaligned with Ukrainian Needs | Subtheme 1: "A Necessary but Insufficient Starting Point" | Participants appreciated the existence of the program but felt it failed to address their specific needs effectively. |
| | Subtheme 2: "Misaligned Content and Unrealistic Expectations" | The program was criticized for simplistic content and unrealistic expectations, particularly regarding language proficiency and job readiness. |
| | Subtheme 3: "Challenges of Group Composition and Emotional Triggers" | Grouping refugees of diverse educational backgrounds and emotionally triggering content were noted as barriers to integration. |
| | Subtheme 4: "Mandatory Attendance: A Double-Edged Sword" | While financial incentives were appreciated, mandatory attendance reduced participants' sense of autonomy. |
| Theme 2: Navigating a Perpetual State of Limbo | Subtheme 1: "I want to be independent—being on welfare was a trauma for me" | Participants struggled with a loss of professional identity, unrecognized qualifications, and a desire for independence from welfare. |
| | Subtheme 2: "Not allowed to understand what our future is" | Uncertainty about temporary protection status hindered participants' ability to plan for their future or feel a sense of belonging. |
| Theme 3: "Tying Our Lives Here": Hopes and Prospects for the Future | Subtheme 1: "There's this support, and when you feel it, you become much calmer" | Safety, stability, and kindness from Norwegian society contributed to participants' feelings of calm and belonging. |
| | Subtheme 2: "A better life & a better future for my children" | Children's well-being and opportunities in Norway were strong motivators for participants to stay despite challenges. |
| | Subtheme 3: "The longer you live here, the less you want to go back" | Adaptation to life in Norway and the destruction in Ukraine made returning increasingly unrealistic for many participants. |

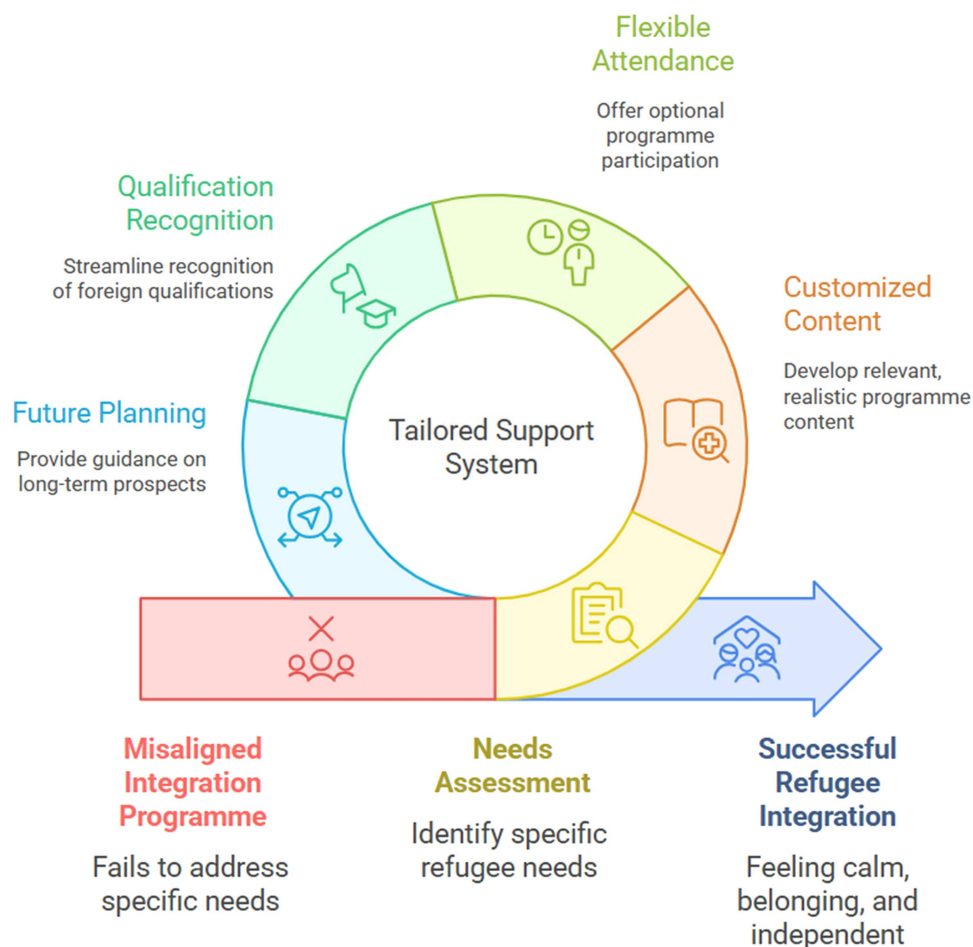


Figure 1. Refugee integration pathways: improving Ukrainian women’s integration in Norway.

reception system. These challenges align with the broader literature on refugee experiences, underscoring the systemic factors that impact integration and mental health.

4.1. Settling and integration into Norway

The first research question is, *How are Ukrainian refugee mothers experiencing settling into Norway?* highlighted the significant hurdles in language acquisition and employment, both of which play crucial roles in fostering a sense of belonging and independence. Participants struggled with unrealistic expectations of achieving B1/B2 language proficiency within a year, consistent with concerns raised by Hernes et al. (2023) regarding the Introduction Program’s (IP) capacity to meet refugees’ needs.

Additionally, the non-recognition of professional qualifications emerged as a critical barrier to employment, amplifying resettlement stress and feelings of “uselessness.” Ellis et al. (2013) identified financial strain, loss of status, and limited access to resources as major stressors for refugees, all of which were echoed in participants’ accounts. Employment was repeatedly emphasized as a protective factor, providing not only financial stability, but also purpose and agency. Similarly, Hocking et al. (2015) found that work is instrumental in alleviating psychiatric symptoms and fostering resilience among asylum seekers.

While the IP was appreciated for its existence, participants expressed frustration with its content and structure, which they felt was misaligned with their immediate needs. Participants also critiqued the inclusion of culturally Norwegian activities, such as hiking, which they perceived as irrelevant given their urgent need to establish stability. This dissatisfaction aligns with prior findings that integration programs often fail to adequately address the specific cultural and professional needs of refugees (Hernes et al., 2023; Porter & Haslam, 2005). Tailoring program content to align better with participants’ backgrounds and

immediate concerns could alleviate some of the stress associated with resettlement and facilitate more effective integration.

The loss of professional identity and barriers to employment were central to participants' experiences, with many reporting a profound sense of status loss and frustration over their inability to meaningfully contribute to society. These findings are consistent with those of Ellis et al. (2013), who identified the intersection of economic stressors and loss of status as the key components of resettlement stress. Participants expressed that work provided them with an avenue to reclaim their identity and integrate it into Norwegian society. Porter and Haslam (2005) similarly reported that access to economic opportunities positively correlates with mental health among refugees, further underscoring the importance of addressing employment barriers. This aligns with Hocking et al. (2015) argument that employment may be more effective than psychological interventions in mitigating distress and fostering resilience among displaced populations.

4.2. Perceptions of the future in Norway

In addressing the second research question, *How do Ukrainian refugees perceive their future in Norway?*, the findings reveal that despite significant challenges, participants expressed a strong motivation to remain in Norway. Their primary motivation stems from ensuring a better future for their children, consistent with the findings of Hernes et al. (2022) and Hernes et al. (2023) that refugee parents prioritize stability, education, and safety for their families when deciding to stay.

Children emerged as pivotal to mothers' integration decisions. Continuity in schooling, language acquisition, and the building of new friendships were described as central to choices about whether to invest in Norway despite ongoing temporariness. Several mothers emphasized that their own employment prospects and professional recognition were often deprioritised to safeguard children's educational stability and wellbeing. This created tensions between maternal aspirations for career continuity and the immediate imperative to support children's adjustment. In this way, children's experiences both anchored families to Norway and constrained flexibility, intensifying the psychosocial weight of legal uncertainty.

Participants highlighted Norway's stability, safety, and societal support as key factors influencing their decision, emphasizing that their children's well-being and opportunities were central to their integration efforts. Similar findings by Albers et al. (2021) and Trąbka (2019) emphasize the role of place attachment in influencing refugees' decisions, including forms of place dependence (seeing Norway as a safe and stable place) and place discovery (finding enjoyment in Norwegian culture). However, the participants also conveyed feelings of place isolation, marked by a sense of disconnection from Norwegian society and nostalgia for Ukraine, where they felt a stronger cultural bond (Hummon et al., 1992). While place attachment can evolve, as participants and their children integrate further into Norwegian society, this duality of attachment and isolation highlights the ongoing tension between adapting to Norway and longing for Ukraine.

4.3. Experiences of limbo

The third research question, *How can these prospects inform our understanding of the 'in-limbo' state of Ukrainian refugees?* reveals that participants experience a persistent state of limbo that is deeply tied to the temporary nature of their collective protection status. This aligns with findings by Anjum et al. (2023), who discuss the psychological stressors of conflict and resettlement, noting that uncertainty over one's future exacerbates psychosocial challenges. Participants reported that their inability to plan for the future hinders integration and jeopardizes psychosocial well-being despite efforts to build place attachment (Albers et al., 2021; Trąbka, 2019). The temporary nature of their protection status fosters feelings of existential mobility (Willmann-Robleda, 2022), whereby individuals feel unable to move forward while fearing the potential loss of their efforts to integrate.

Recent restrictions on travel to Ukraine imposed by the UDI regulations (The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI), 2024) further intensify this uncertainty. These policies effectively confine refugees to

Norway, while expecting them to prepare for an eventual return, creating a contradiction that undermines both integration and psychosocial stability. The inability to maintain familial bonds contributes to the rupture of family and community ties, which is a well-documented risk factor for refugee well-being (De Leo et al., 2021).

The sense of limbo extends to the participants' children, who navigate dual educational systems and mandatory Norwegian schooling alongside Ukrainian online schooling. This duality reflects parents' efforts to keep their children connected to Ukraine, while adapting to Norway. However, this also creates stress for families who remain uncertain about whether to fully invest in Norway or prepare for a potential return to Ukraine. This dual-system approach mirrors the findings of Rizzi et al. (2023), who identified communication with loved ones and maintaining cultural ties as protective factors for refugees. At the same time, participants' inability to reunite with their family due to travel restrictions undermines these protective factors and adds layers of grief and uncertainty.

4.4. Implications for well-being and integration

The uncertainty of temporary protection and restrictions on family reunification have significant psychosocial consequences, with participants expressing frustration and helplessness over their inability to plan the long-term. This aligns with research showing that prolonged uncertainty undermines mental health and integration efforts (Ellis et al., 2013; Silove et al., 2017). Addressing these issues requires revising protection policies to offer clearer pathways to residency, allowing travel to Ukraine for family visits to maintain familial bonds, and enhancing integration programs that foster connections in Norway while respecting ties to refugees' homeland. These findings highlight the complex interplay among temporary protection, place attachment, and mental health, underscoring the need for targeted interventions to support integration and psychosocial well-being.

To communicate the study's findings in a policy-relevant format, we developed an analytic model as illustrated in Figure 1. The model integrates participants' accounts of challenges and needs into a pathway from a misaligned integration program toward successful refugee integration. At the core is the need for a tailored support system, which emerges when specific refugee needs are identified and addressed. Key elements highlighted by participants include: flexibility in program attendance (especially for mothers with care responsibilities), recognition of foreign qualifications, realistic and relevant program content, and structured guidance for long-term planning. The illustration demonstrates how misalignment between program design and lived needs perpetuates uncertainty and frustration, while a tailored approach can foster feelings of calm, belonging, and independence. This interpretive tool does not claim causality but rather integrates patterned meanings from participants' narratives into a visual synthesis for practitioners and policymakers.

4.5. Strengths and limitations

Involving Ukrainian women in key stages of the research, including developing the interview guide and translating transcripts, ensured authenticity in reflecting participants' experiences. Validation by participants and research assistants enhances reliability, while the study's bottom-up approach prioritizes refugees' voices, which are often overlooked in policy discussions. However, the small sample size of 10 highly educated women, primarily in the capital, limits generalizability, and the variation in IP content across municipalities adds complexity. Although translation ensures cultural accuracy, the researcher's inability to fully back-check the transcripts may introduce bias (De Vos & Nokele, 2021). Despite these limitations, this study offers valuable insights into Ukrainian refugees' experiences in Norway, and informs their future.

4.6. Future research directions

Future research should include participants from diverse demographics, such as varied socio-educational backgrounds, genders, and children to better understand how these factors affect integration and

uncertainty under temporary protection. Comparative studies across countries and groups can reveal the shared challenges and policy effectiveness. Investigating public institutions such as the Norwegian Labor and Welfare Administration (NAV) and exploring refugee interactions with Norway's healthcare system are essential given participants' concerns. The cultural differences in child-rearing practices noted here also merit further study in order to inform tailored services. Finally, reanalysing these data could explore themes such as trust in institutions, resilience, and long-term integration outcomes.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights how Ukrainian refugee mothers in Norway navigate integration under the dual conditions of accelerated support and legal temporariness. While rapid access to the Introduction Program provides valued resources, its misaligned design and ambitious language demands often clash with mothers' caregiving responsibilities and professional trajectories. At the same time, the indeterminacy of temporary collective protection permeates everyday life, shaping decisions about education, employment, and long-term settlement. Children's wellbeing emerged as both an anchor to Norway and a constraint on mobility, underscoring how maternal futures are inseparable from children's prospects. Conceptually, our findings refine understandings of limbo as an institutionally produced chronopolitics that structures belonging, planning, and wellbeing. Practically, they suggest that reducing administratively produced uncertainty (e.g., through clearer residency pathways and predictable mobility rules) may offer psychosocial benefits comparable to improvements in program content. Aligning integration measures with refugees' lived needs, particularly those of mothers, is essential for fostering not only participation but also a sense of calm, belonging, and independence.

Endnotes

1. The Norwegian Labor and Welfare Administration
2. The Introduction Program's parenting course is based on the International Child Development Program

Notes on contributors

Dr. Gulnaz Anjum is an assistant professor of psychology at the Department of Psychology, University of Limerick, Ireland. She is also a Researcher at the Solidarity Hub, Department of Psychology, University of Oslo, Norway. Dr. Anjum works on women's health in the context of migration and climate crises.

Ms. Laure Isaac is a research associate with Solidarity Hub, Department of Psychology, University of Oslo, Norway. Laure works with migrant populations in Norway. Ms. Isaac works on social and cultural issues among migrant populations in Norway.

Professor Dr. Halina Grzymała-Moszczyńska is a professor of psychology at the Ignatianum University in Kraków, visiting professor at SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Institute of Psychology, Warsaw, Poland. Dr. Grzymała-Moszczyńska is an expert on refugee's mental health. Google Scholar: <https://scholar.google.pl/citations?user=X-mRdJQAAAAJ&hl=pl>; ORCID: 0000-0003-2751-3204

Dr. Karolina Mazurowska is an Associate Professor at the SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Institute of Psychology, Warsaw, Poland. Dr. Mazurowska is an expert on cultural issues among migrant populations in Europe. <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=pfOv6AgAAAAJ&hl=en>

Author contributions

All authors contributed to all aspects of this paper, including conceptualization, data collection, writeup, and review of all drafts of the manuscript. All authors have approved the final version of this paper.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article. There are no known conflicts of interest associated with financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome.

Funding


This research was funded by the Solidarity Hub (formerly Ukraine Initiative) at the Department of Psychology, University of Oslo; the Ignatianum University in Kraków's institutional grant [grant number: DS/2023/WF/14/B]; and the SWPS University of Humanities and Social Sciences research grant. GA received financial support from PSI, University of Oslo for writing this paper [sub-project number 102603241].

Availability of data and materials

This is a research paper based on qualitative interviews. The interview guide associated with this research, which was anonymized and collected for this research, will be provided upon request. Additional information about the project can be found here: https://osf.io/4d3j7/?view_only=72b9871d41e2487aac6b7cc31fe876dc

ORCID

Gulnaz Anjum  0000-0002-2589-7884

Halina Grzymała-Moszczyńska  0000-0003-2751-3204

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