

COMMUNITY OUTREACH VOLUNTEERS THEMATIC REPORT 2023

MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT UKRAINIAN COMMUNITY IN ITALY

INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVE OF THE REPORT

The current context of forced displacement across the globe has shed light on several challenges faced by forcibly displaced individuals, with one critical concern arising regarding access to mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) for refugees. MHPSS is unfortunately frequently overshadowed by more immediate practical needs of refugee communities, but when MHPSS is integrated into protection activities, it empowers and allows refugees to cope with and find solutions to the various challenges they face during displacement.

During this past decade, Italy has witnessed significant flows of refugees and asylum seekers, including the more recent arrival of large numbers of Ukrainian refugees since February 2022. For this reason, in 2022, UNHCR MCO Italy created the Community Outreach Volunteers (COV) programme with INTERSOS to help create a link between the Ukrainian diaspora in Italy and the newly arrived Ukrainians. This link would allow Ukrainians to support each other in protection and integration related activities. Throughout the various activities of the COV programme, the need to explore the needs and gaps regarding the Ukrainian refugee communities' access to mental health and psychosocial support systems arose. Hence, this report was drafted to provide insight into the Ukrainian communities' views on MHPSS in Italy.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was adopted to comprehensively examine this issue. **Five** specific focus group discussions were conducted across various locations in Italy (Milan, Bologna, Rome, Naples, Abruzzo) between June and November 2023, with the support of refugees and migrants working within the framework of the "Community Outreach Volunteers" Programme.

Focus group discussions (FGD) were chosen as the primary data collection method due to their capacity to facilitate dynamic and interactive conversations among participants. These discussions were guided by a semi-structured questionnaire which focused on:

- The recognition and identification of mental health and psychosocial support concerns and needs
- Coping strategies
- Most urgent needs of the community
- Knowledge of services related to MHPSS
- Access to services and related challenges

Three FGDs gathered additional information regarding the needs and concerns of Ukrainian refugee adolescents, and other FGDs covered the broader topic of access to services for refugee communities. The qualitative methodology used to compile this report aims to capture various experiences and perspectives, considering different contexts, ages, and genders.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were selected within the Ukrainian community, with a predominant representation of women due to the general high number of women in the community. Adults and children participated in the FGDs. **Five** FGDs on mental health and psychosocial support were carried out with **76 Ukrainian refugees** (88% women and 12% men) in **five** locations (Milan, Bologna, Rome, Naples, and Abruzzo).

FINDINGS

1. Recognition and identification of MHPSS concerns and needs

Refugees and asylum seekers who participated in the FGDs **acknowledged having a trauma**. Many mentioned experiencing nightmares, panic and anxiety attacks, and having a deep feeling of uncertainty. People in need of MHPSS may feel lost and sad, constantly find themselves in a state of worry, and reluctant to speak with other people. Despite the immediate recognition of needing MHPSS, many Ukrainian participants stated that culturally there is a prevailing **stigma** associated with seeking professional psychological help. Most individuals refrain from discussing their worries openly, as there is a common belief that consulting a specialist implies being considered “crazy”. Many prefer to rely on friends, contributing to the continuation of the stigma surrounding mental health issues.

Recognition of MHPSS needs and concerning behaviors were said to be easily detected in **children**:

“My niece, who directly experienced an attack, hides in a closet when she hears certain sounds.”

Many participants agreed that **trauma is particularly impactful and stressful for children**, who easily become irritable and frustrated.

According to some participants, especially in Abruzzo, children and adolescents are more vulnerable even because they have fewer social interactions with their peers, especially those who did not attend or who have **dropped out of Italian schools** because they could not keep up with what was being taught. Participants have reported that children who have continued to attend schools in Ukraine via distance online learning tools are constantly exposed to reliving the trauma they had experienced during the breakout of the war in Ukraine, as lessons are frequently interrupted due to bombings, power outages and other disruptions related to the conflict.

While some parents reported that they had noticed **visible signs of stress** in their children, others reported that this situation impacted their children in a different way, forcing their children to **grow up too quickly** and start approaching daily tasks as if they were adults instead of living as a child.

“My child always tells me: Mom, everything is fine, let’s go to Caritas today! It is painful when a 9-year-old has to think about what we have to eat today.”

Participants recognized that stress in children did not arise solely from trauma related to the war and constant changes, but also because their parents, particularly their mothers, were stressed and did not know how to handle the situation; thus, children started to **lose their point of reference**.

Many refugees reported that it took them a while to realize that they were stressed and traumatized:

“When I arrived, I claimed I didn’t need anything because I hadn’t realized I had lost everything back in Ukraine. There was a Ukrainian woman in this family who made me realize that I needed something. We were in such a state of shock that we couldn’t even grasp reality. Only with time, we began to understand and to adapt.”

Participants also highlighted that their need for psychosocial support does not arise only from the trauma of war and of their journey, but also from what they were experiencing in Italy, as they experienced **constant changes** in housing and employment conditions. Additionally, many women reported that they felt **overwhelmed by the responsibility of the household**, which they previously used to share with their husbands.

“The difficult thing I am experiencing is the overwhelming responsibility that fell on me. I used to decide everything with my husband, now I am alone in making choices”.

However, it is crucial to mention that delving into the topic of mental health and psychosocial support has not been immediate and simple. Many participants stated that the need for psychological support is not the most urgent matter and **cannot be adequately addressed** until after other needs, such as housing and employment, that allow them to sustain themselves, are addressed.

2. Coping strategies

Coping mechanisms reported by Ukrainian refugees are diverse.

Participants reported that they found relief by socializing. Even simple everyday routines such as going to cafes with friends helped. Establishing a routine has been reported to be beneficial, such as walking in parks and organizing visits to the city.

Engaging in forms of self-expression, such as music and art, also emerged as a coping mechanism. Participants also highlighted the importance of externalizing their thoughts and feelings, with some finding comfort in sharing and listening to the opinions of those they consider significant. Participants mentioned having recognized the emotional challenges children face, especially the feeling of being homesick. Participants stressed the importance of hugging and cuddling their children on those occasions.

Some participants shared that they have participated in psychosocial support group activities but felt that there are not many activities of that nature for adults. One participant also reported that she delved into psychological literature as a form of self-help.

Other participants reported to have sought professional support but have encountered difficulties which will be explained in the following paragraphs. Various participants reported feeling very frustrated and discouraged and have started focused entirely on fulfilling more practical needs, forgetting about their mental health, or focusing on work in order to get distracted.

3. Main needs and concerns expressed by the community

The significance of **social interactions** and connections, both within the Ukrainian community and with the Italian community, is widely recognized. Facilitating communication and organizing gatherings with the **Ukrainian community** is deemed crucial. Participants stated they would need an environment where they can speak their native language, fostering a sense of home. Regarding children, the language spoken is a priority, as communicating in Ukrainian allows them to feel a connection and comfort. Moreover, many participants specified that they would like to have the occasion to speak and share experiences with people who had undergone similar challenges and faced the same difficulties, to feel listened to and fully understood.

Cultural mediators that participated in FGDs noted that gatherings where participants did not have to answer precise questions but were able to speak freely about themselves, were very beneficial and positive for the persons who participated. Despite the general acknowledgment of the utility of shared moments, it has also been noted that sometimes speaking among each other with no cultural mediator or predefined activities might even amplify stress, as community members were prone to carrying each other's burdens. Furthermore, during a FGD with adolescents, participants pointed out that, while at the beginning they preferred to stay with their fellow citizens, now they understood the importance and feel the need to **engage with Italians** in order to not feel isolated by the host society.

Participants reported that engaging in activities is crucial for adults and children alike. Participating in activities conducted in their mother tongue was perceived by participants of the FGDs as being beneficial. This is especially true for adolescents whom participants thought would benefit greatly from participating in recreational activities with children of their same age.

One of the teenage participants to a FGD in Rome stated "*I have my mother, I have a place to stay, I just would need some more occasions to spend time with friends*". For this reason, many participants stated that they would need additional support from schools, such as the organization of focused support, more cultural mediators and more extra-curricular activities to foster integration.

In Naples and Abruzzo, participants identified the need for one-to-one support with mental health professionals who had working experience with **post-traumatic stress**. On the contrary, in other locations participants seemed to request for more group activities rather than receive individualized support. It is interesting to note that in Abruzzo the need for greater individualized support was identified as this might depend on the fact that community support mechanisms and interactions were already present as there was a strong reception system in hotels, that did not necessarily include professional and tailored support.

Participants called for more **one-to-one support mechanisms for children** with mental health professionals specialized in MHPSS for minors. This call was made during all FGDs. Participants recognized that children were the most vulnerable category from a psychological point of view.

Additionally, refugees mentioned wanting more **comprehensive** psychosocial support; a sort of counseling that also provides information about their overall possibilities of protection and integration in Italy.

4. Knowledge of services related to mental health and psychosocial support

The majority of participants in Milan and Bologna do not have any knowledge of available MHPSS services. Some also reported that, in their opinion, the services are not tailored to what they really need. In Rome, FGD participants knew about the existence of non-governmental organizations that ran psychosocial support activities, but participants stated that they usually prefer to be referred to services conducted by members of their community. In Naples, many participants know how to access the services related to the National Health Care Service (NHS), but the knowledge of services related to psychological support and access to specific services remains very limited.

5. Finding regarding access to services

- While some have reached out to psychologists, there is a general reluctance due to the **perceived difficulty of exposing oneself** to a mental health professional, especially when an interpreter is involved. The reluctance involves accepting therapy when many refugees' simply go to psychologists and psychiatrists to ask for prescription sleeping pills or tranquilizers. Participants stated that in Ukraine, it is quite common to refer to a specialist for such prescriptions.
- **Language** remains one of the main obstacles to accessing MHPSS services. Throughout various FGD, participants referred to the need to have more Ukrainian mental health professionals. Many participants reported feeling stressed because they had to talk about their experiences and problems in front of a third person (the interpreter), while others reported having found comfort in the presence of an interpreter speaking their language.
- **Cultural barriers**: some of the participants stated that they believed that they would not be deeply understood by an Italian psychologist.
- **General lack of interpreters** and cultural mediators in MHPSS services.
- **Attending and focusing on a psychosocial support program can be difficult when other primary needs are unmet**. Those who managed to participate in one-to-one or group support activities admitted that their attendance was more easily guaranteed because they already had a job.
- **Lack of psychosocial group activities**, especially for adults.
- **Transportation**: participants living in small towns reported that they could not reach the cities where the services are rendered.
- **Insufficient knowledge** of the services available in each location.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT MECHANISMS

Participants highlighted the significant role of communication amongst peers and the **sharing of experiences** within their own community. Through these interactions, Ukrainians have created a supportive environment that resembles a home away from home. The exchange of experiences and community support becomes a vital coping strategy, emphasizing the importance of community cohesion. This is particularly true for children, who found comfort and a sense of belonging by engaging with fellow peers. FGDs participants in Abruzzo, who were hosted in hotels, reported having mainly received support from the diaspora community and the community living in hotels. Additionally, they had the possibility to interact with refugee psychologists who offered their support. Moreover, the support of the community is made evident when analyzing **referrals to psychosocial support services**, as many participants stated that they trust services recommended by members of their community.

Community members have made the following suggestions to increase MHPSS:

- Increase the involvement of Ukrainian psychologists in MHPSS activities
- Establish joint therapy groups for mothers and children
- Focus on the mental health of children and adolescents
- Ukrainian adolescents reported wanting to attend psychosocial support groups together with their mothers and a cultural mediator
- Develop a comprehensive counseling approach, which includes the provision of information on critical aspects of life in Italy such as housing, finding a job, and obtaining documentation

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Support programs that address and shed light on this critical aspect of the refugees' and asylum seekers' well-being, which is oftentimes deprioritized due to pressing concerns and issues.
- Increase advocacy for a **comprehensive approach** that addresses practical and psychosocial needs.
- Organize **information sessions** with parents while also considering parallel activities for children so that they may socialize and interact with peers.
- Recognize and build on the importance of community networks and established members of the community, such as **community outreach volunteers**, cultural mediators, and diaspora members, to serve as focal points and informational resources for refugees and asylum seekers, act as facilitators for orientation to services and participate to institutional consultative initiatives or other activities as advocates of the community's concerns.
- Recognize and leverage **refugee-led organizations'** significance in proposing solutions and approaches. For instance, in 2023, the UNHCR-INTERSOS programme PartecipAzione supported the refugee-led organization (RLO) *Ucraina CreAttiva*, which proposed and carried out recreational activities for adults, such as painting, decorating eggs, guided tours, providing moments of leisure and socialization while also highlighting the importance and the bond of the Ukrainian culture. Similarly, the RLO *Madrelingua* has organized activities dedicated to children and adolescents, including summer camps to facilitate socialization and theater courses to encourage self-expression. Thirdly, the RLO *Sguardo Amico* has set up psycho-social support seminars with a refugee psychologist.
- Promote **social interactions** among individuals in informal settings and encourage the mutual exchange of experiences. However, the importance of **online** activities should also be considered, especially considering the potential stigma associated with in-person engagements.
- Support programs that promote **meaningful interactions between mothers and children**, which may play a crucial role in restoring a bond of trust that would re-establish a solid point of reference for the child.
- Mentorship or mutual socialization programs, such as the **Community Matching programme**, that connects newcomers with individuals who have successfully integrated into the community, allowing for the refugee to be guided through various aspects of life in Italy.
- Support programs that involve the direct engagement of **Ukrainian psychologists**, also given the significant presence of this professional category among Ukrainian refugees, who often provide informal support to their fellow citizens.
- Ease the recognition of qualifications, enabling professionals to practice their work effectively.
- Establish feedback mechanisms in collaboration with community representatives and service providers, to regularly assess the effectiveness of support programs, considering the refugee population's diverse needs.

REFERRALS BY COMMUNITY OUTREACH VOLUNTEERS

From September 2022 to September 2023, Community Outreach Volunteers provided **169** referrals to psychosocial support services for individuals within their community.

Referrals have been made using two different modalities:

- **Self-referrals:** when community outreach volunteers provide information regarding a specific service to a member of the community in need.
- **Referrals facilitated by Community Outreach Volunteers:** when the volunteers directly facilitate access by supporting with booking visits, accompanying members of the community in need, and providing for linguistic and cultural mediation.