

Motherhood in exile:  
between Ukraine and Italy in wartime  
Maternità in esilio:  
tra Ucraina e Italia in tempo di guerra

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ABSTRACT

The armed conflict that has shaken Ukraine over the past year and a half is the second largest such event in Europe since the wars in the Western Balkans. This time, most of those forced either to resettle within the Country or to emigrate abroad are women, often accompanied by one or more dependent minors and the dream of return. In light of these developments, this contribution addresses the experience of women, mothers, and now also refugees who had to leave Ukraine because of the war: the content delves into the choices, expectations and hopes characterising their motherhood in exile, as part of a life suspended between here and there, today and tomorrow.

KEYWORDS

**Gender, war, motherhood in exile, dream of return, suspended lives.  
Genere, guerra, maternità in esilio, sogno del ritorno, vissuti sospesi.**

Il conflitto armato che ha stravolto l'Ucraina nell'ultimo anno e mezzo è il secondo più importante evento di questo genere avvenuto in Europa sin dalle guerre nei Balcani occidentali. Questa volta, la maggior parte di chi è stato costretto a spostarsi all'interno del Paese o di emigrare all'estero è rappresentata da donne, sovente accompagnate da uno o più minori a carico e dal sogno del ritorno. Alla luce di tali sviluppi, il presente contributo si interessa all'esperienza delle donne, madri, nonché profughe che hanno dovuto lasciare l'Ucraina a causa della guerra: i contenuti si addentrano nelle scelte, nelle aspettative e nelle speranze che caratterizzano la loro maternità in esilio, quale parte di un vissuto sospeso tra qua e là, tra oggi e domani.

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*Надія (Hope by Lesja Ukraïнка, 1880)<sup>1</sup>*  
Ні долі, ні волі у мене нема,  
Зосталася тільки надія одна:  
Надія вернутись ще раз на Вкраїну,  
Поглянути ще раз на рідну країну,  
Поглянути ще раз на синій Дніпро, –  
Там жити чи вмерти, мені все одно;  
Поглянути ще раз на степ, могилки,  
Востаннє згадати палкі гадки...  
Ні долі, ні волі у мене нема,  
Зосталася тільки надія одна.

## 1. Introduction

Motherhood in wartime is, alas, not an unheard-of occurrence. What is more, armed conflicts describe a perimeter of complex and destabilising circumstances, capable of pushing motherhood to its fullest potential: such a response is due to its “instinctive” forces that are activated with birth, and amplified at extraordinary moments, particularly those posing risks to one’s own good, and especially to the well-being of one’s children; more tangibly, it relates to the fact that it is – from a traditional point of view – usually men who are engaged on the frontline, whereas women are entrusted with the care of the family and its younger members.

Yet still, it is possible to identify some distinctive features with respect to what has happened in Eastern Europe over the past year and a half. First of all, the war event that has shaken Ukraine can be defined as exceptional as it occurred in Europe, a part of the globe where, following the wars in the Western Balkans (1990s), one would have imagined a more peaceful and more promising future in terms of geo-political stability. Another specificity is that, along with internal displacements, the majority of those who opted for emigration are, in this case, women often accompanied by one or more dependent minors, and by the dream of an imminent return home.

Against this background, the present contribution lies at the intersection of three key elements – gender, motherhood in exile and the idea of return: the latter, which for many delays materialising, outlines the reality enveloping the experience of Ukrainian women, mothers, and now also refugees who found themselves forced to emigrate due to the war. Turned into an inescapable factor in their daily routine, this desire to return affects their choices, as it dictates the pace of their lives, their expectations, their hopes – all claims as uncertain as they are characterising their motherhood in exile, the extent of their sociocultural adaptation, workable educational models, and the inclusion paths of their children, with whom they share this life of theirs, suspended between here and there, between today and tomorrow.

Wishing to contribute to this research field, the present work aims to provide an account of the war-motivated emigration that led Ukrainian mothers to the city of Florence where they had been hosted as refugees. The goal of this empirical study is to propose a reflection on motherhood in exile from a gender perspective, with a focus on the gender implications of the reception experience and integration paths of Ukrainian refugee women, and on their being mothers at this particular time in their lives.

## 2. Methodological framework

Most of the scientific (and non-scientific) literature published in Italy in this year and a half of the war in Ukraine has – for obvious reasons – paid more attention to some issues: namely, the situation following the conflict, the

1 Lesja Ukraïнка (born Larysa Kosach-Kvitka, 1871-1913) is considered the first great Ukrainian poetess and writer, and one of Ukraine’s earliest feminists; she was an important figure, especially in the artistic and linguistic field, as well as a civic and political activist; Lesja knew how to synthesise the multifaceted Western culture with the historical and social vicissitudes of her people; besides, she had also established cultural contacts with the Italy of her time, a country Lesja had visited and admired (cf. IEU). *Nadija (Hope, 1880)* was Lesja’s first published poem, written at the age of nine: “It was written under the deep impression made upon her by the news that her aunt Lesyna, her father’s sister, had been banished to Siberia for alleged subversive activity” (Lesya Ukraïнка, 1950, p. 23).

*Hope. No more can I call liberty my own, To me there’s naught remains but hope alone: The hope to see once more my loved Ukraine. To come back in my native land again. To gaze once more on Dnieper’s azure wave – I care not if alive or in the grave. To view the steppe, its ancient funeral mounds, To sense the ardent strength which there abounds... No more can I call liberty my own, To me there’s naught remains but hope alone. (ib., p. 57). [Nadija. Ni dolji, ni volji u mene nemà, Zostaslasja tiljky nadija odnà: Nadija vernutys’ šce raz na Vkraïnu, Pobljanuty šce raz na ridnu kraïnu, Pobljanuty šce raz na synij Dnijpro, – Tam žyty čy vmyerty, menji vse odnò; Pobljanuty šce raz na step, mohylky, Vostannje zhadaty palkiji hadky... Ni dolji, ni volji u mene nemà, Zostaslasja tiljky nadija odnà].*

resulting geo-political and socio-economic scenarios, demographic and environmental disasters, Ukrainian population movements, etc. – all themes that are adopted as a macro-background, against which the topics proposed herein are reflected upon and analysed.

Less appears to have been written so far in a more strictly pedagogical domain: certain questions, such as the use of pedagogical professions in emergency, the socio-psychological effects caused by wars or other emergencies, the importance of promoting peace education, the rights of children and minors, etc., have been tackled, albeit often in rather generic terms without going into the details of the case. Concurrently, interesting pedagogical initiatives and suggestions arising from the Ukraine crisis have been produced by various actors: educational institutions and territories, school newspapers and periodicals (e.g. Edscuola, GiuntiScuola, Orizzonte Scuola, Scuola7, Tecnica della Scuola, Tuttoscuola, etc.), Ministries (guidelines, circulars, bilingual and multilingual information, etc.), as well as by the world of research (Ferro Allodola, Ulivieri, 2022; De Angelis, 2022; De Maria *et al.*, 2023; Maddalena, 2023).

Yet, the need to collect concrete experiences relating to educational processes in wartime, notably this war, calls for further research efforts: these should focus on the extent and nature of the transformations that educational practices are driven to undergo at organisational, planning, teaching, relational, social or other levels when they come to intertwine with the destiny of those who personally suffer the fractures caused by the loss of physical, social and existential security. The topic requires in-depth studies serving a twofold purpose: to document, on the one hand, the experiences – of forced migration, reception, integration etc., and the socio-pedagogical offer made available to the concerned actors; on the other hand, these studies should help identify good practices to incorporate into pedagogical models in order to increase and consolidate knowledge of a pedagogy that is increasingly touched and affected by emergency, reception and inclusion phenomena (Annacontini *et al.*, 2022, 2023).

Based on the above remarks, empirical research (Mantovani, 1998) has proved to be an indispensable form of investigation, as it practically traces the only possible way to novel data on the topic addressed in this study, i.e. motherhood in exile during the war in Ukraine: in fact, most of the content proposed herein draws on primary sources, such as the narratives shared by the persons contacted for research purposes. In order to gather pieces of evidence recalling episodes significant for the reconstruction of life stories, the witnesses were involved in in-depth and structured interviews (Robles, 2011). Besides, this qualitative research (Demetrio, 1992; LeCompte *et al.*, 1992; Mantovani, 1998; Khan, 2014) has made use of two other data collection methods: spontaneous conversations (Feldman, 1999; Swain, Spire, 2020) and ethnographic observation (Gobbo, Gomes, 2003; Mills, Morton, 2013; Postic, De Ketele, 1993; Spindler, Spindler, 1987; Watson-Gegeo, 1997), both being exploratory strategies that allow researcher to interact directly with relevant social actors, and acquire additional data and information useful for the study. The selected body of meaningful qualitative data from the primary sources (interviews, conversations, observations, field notes, etc.) were combined with additional information gained from secondary (though meagre) data sources i.e. literature. Finally, the narrative approach constitutes the most widely used qualitative method that has been employed for reading and analysing the collected data (narrative or text/story analysis) (Khan, 2014, p. 226).

### 3. Sample and interviews

In an attempt to paint an overall picture of the situation, the idea was to identify witnesses capable of responding to this need from various angles, giving an insight into the vision of both reception promoters and beneficiaries. The initial goal was to reach a larger sample of female respondents who had fled Ukraine since spring 2022: in fact, in addition to the 5 refugees interviewed, contacts were made with 4-5 other Ukrainian mothers to be involved; yet, during the fieldwork, they stated not to feel like talking about their war experience for the time being. Segments of their stories have, however, emerged through the accounts shared by other interviewees.

The reflections and observations provided by the respondents, especially those shared by Ukrainian women – mothers, mediators, teachers and activists, constituted important data sources. These endeavours allowed our research to be enriched with novel information by delving deeper into the topics and evoking fragments of life stories. Likewise, the testimonies collected in the field made it possible to recognise recurring events that, in reflecting significant elements common to the experiences under consideration, re-emerge in almost all the narratives while acting as guiding landmarks in the present study: emergency, escape, distances, (dream of) return, bewilderment, disquiet, waiting, uncertainty, reception, and several others.

Dictated by the facts, the selection of witnesses resulted in a sample dominated by a marked presence of women (13), all but one: Ukrainian linguistic-cultural mediators (3); Ukrainian language teacher and volunteer (1); Ukrainian activist (1); Ukrainian parents with temporary protection status (5); Italian as a second language teachers and facilitators (2); educator and social worker engaged in the reception of Ukrainian refugees (1). Accordingly, three interview guides were prepared, corresponding to as many categories of witnesses: 1) people who arrived from Ukraine in the last year and a half as refugees, basically mothers with dependent children; 2) mediators, ac-

tivists, teachers, and language teachers/facilitators; 3) educators and social support workers engaged in the reception of Ukrainian refugees. The thematic areas covered by the interviews were: personal data and short personal history; arrivals and reception in Italy; specific services made available to Ukrainians, esp. to Ukrainian women/mothers; reception of Ukrainian children at school; motherhood in exile (family management, children's upbringing, schooling, etc.); the will to integrate versus the dream of return.

A few more words about the sample of 5 Ukrainian parents interviewed, namely 4 mothers (F) and 1 stepfather (M), all temporary protection holders hosted in Florence. As for their age, place of origin, period of arrival in Italy, and dependent children, they are: F, aged c. 44-45, native to Dnipro, arrived in May 2022 with a 12-year-old son; F, aged 28, native to Kyiv, arrived in June 2022 with a 5-year-old son; F, aged c. 39-40, native to Stebnyk (Lviv Region), arrived in February 2022 with 3 sons aged 6, 14 and 19; F, aged 45, native to Žytomyr, arrived in March 2022 with 3 sons aged 6, 10 and 17; and M, aged 38, native to Ternopil', arrived in March 2022 with his 11-year-old stepdaughter (daughter of his wife, after whose death he had become the girl's legal guardian).

The interviews were conducted in Florence during the months of June, July and August 2023. They lasted about 45-60, up to 70 minutes or even longer, and with some witnesses we met more than once. In order to make verbal interaction easier for Ukrainian women, esp. for mothers/parents with dependent children, various communication channels were used: the talks took place in person, remotely (via call or video call) or in writing; besides, these conversation options were complemented by the possibility to interact in a multilingual setting that gave the interviewees the opportunity to express themselves in the language of their preference, i.e. Italian, Ukrainian, Russian or English.

#### 4. From Ukraine to Italy: origins, departures and trajectories

In a *status quo*, overwhelmed by war scenarios triggering large-scale destruction and devastation that inevitably end up leading to serious humanitarian crises, flight often turns out to be the only viable alternative, hence one of the most frequent solutions: as a matter of fact, the number of Ukrainian citizens who had fled their lands and moved across national borders since the end of February 2022 exceeded 6 million<sup>2</sup>, plus more than 5 million internally displaced persons<sup>3</sup> – altogether, over one quarter of the population (UNHCR, 2023). These facts allow the occurrence to be defined as “one of the fastest-growing humanitarian and displacement emergencies in recent history” (ib.). The largest portions of this exodus found refuge in Poland (over 1,600,000) and Germany (c. 1,080,000), followed by the Czech Republic (c. 550,000), the United Kingdom (c. 210,000), Spain (c. 180,000) and Italy (c. 167,000) (UNHCR, August 2023), less in other neighbouring States (Bulgaria, Moldova, Romania and Slovakia, between 160,000 and 105,000), and finally in other national realities. With 167,525 new arrivals (compared to 230,373 Ukrainian citizens residing in the Country before the conflict; Istat, 2022, p. 5), Italy ranks 6<sup>th</sup> among the countries hosting refugees from Ukraine (UNHCR, August 2023).

According to information provided by the media and various reports, as well as confirmed by accounts gathered among Ukrainian nationals within the context of this survey, the segments of the population opting to flee come from *all over* the Country: that is to say that the exodus had affected practically all regions of the Ukrainian state, with a slightly greater impact on the central-eastern areas (UNHCR, 2023).

In order to offer a less anonymous description, the following is an overview of the geographical areas from which the Ukrainian nationals hosted in the city of Florence come from. Starting from the refugees interviewed during the fieldwork, the mapping opens with the cities of Dnipro, Kyiv, Stebnyk (Lviv region), Ternopil' and Žytomyr as their native places. Other people find a voice in the narratives of the Ukrainian female linguistic-cultural mediators, who are involved in the reception of families and the schooling of Ukrainian minors: their accounts add further toponyms to the list of places of origin, including erkasy, Kharkiv, Kherson, Kyiv (and environs, esp. Bu a and Irpin'), Lviv, Mariupol', Melitopol', Mykolaiv, Odesa, Truskavec' (Lviv region), Zaporizžja... To these are finally added erkasy, Izjaslav/Khmelnyckyj, Kyiv, Luhansk and Vinnycja, which are the hometowns of the Ukrainian female professionals (mediators, teachers, activists), residing in Florence for several years, i.e. since before the outbreak of the conflict, and who contributed to the research.

The journey was faced in various ways: reports and testimonies often speak of travelling by train or bus within national borders and to neighbouring countries, with the western Ukrainian city of Lviv as one of the main hubs in this panorama; from the sorting points, created along the western Ukrainian borders, many groups of refugees, including those heading to Italy, opted for buses; less frequent are accounts of journeys made by one's own means i.e. cars.

2 There are 6,203,300 refugees from Ukraine recorded globally, out of whom 5,834,100 in Europe, and 369,200 beyond Europe (UNHCR collation of statistics made available by the authorities – UNHCR, 2023).

3 Estimates speak of 5,088,000 internally displaced persons in Ukraine (ib.).

The interviews reveal how a clearer demarcation line could be drawn between those who had made their way to neighbouring territories, and those who managed to move to more distant destinations. Individuals, families or groups of people who set off in the first days or weeks of the conflict, many of whom arrived in Italy and Florence too, come from segments of the population socially definable as “middle/upper-middle” class, usually native to urban centres and surroundings, often educated and having a (good) job: 73% of Ukrainian refugees who fled abroad reached their host countries in the period between February and April 2022; the same percentage (73%) of them can boast a good level of education (bachelor, master, doctorate, technical or vocational training) (UNHCR, 2023). They were the first to move precisely because their social status allowed them to rely on the availability of information they could access, but also on the ability to interpret it. On the other hand, displaced persons coming from the most devastated areas, i.e. from eastern regions of Ukraine, as well as from smaller towns and rural areas, were for the most part resettled within the national borders, or in nearby countries, mainly in Poland.

## 5. Woman, mother, refugee: gender implications

Traditionally defined by a high proportion of women, Ukrainian emigration of the last 2 to 3 decades, usually unfolding along east-west trajectories, was strongly feminised (Vianello, 2009): in fact, Ukraine could be qualified as one of the “carer-exporting nations”, overwhelmingly women employed in the domestic and care sector, and Italy has not been immune from the phenomenon either (MLPS, 2021, 2022).

The Ukrainian community ranks among the top ten largest immigrant communities in Italy: on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022, i.e. prior to the conflict, it numbered 230,373 members, 79% of whom were women, and the remaining 21% men. Thereby, immigration from Ukraine to Italy is predominantly female, and work has always been a central reason for migrating (Istat, 2022, p. 5).

With the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine in February 2022, the dynamics of the said feminisation process have become even more pronounced, and the Ukrainian community in Italy has seen its ranks swell: determined by the specific social and economic conditions that plagued pre-war Ukrainian society, the pre-existing gender issues that had driven thousands of women out of the Country were joined by new ones, prompted this time by weapons and hostilities. Of course, these have been two different phases of Ukrainian emigration in every sense: different push and pull factors, migration projects, goals, perspectives, expectations, quality of the process, etc.

According to media reports since the early days of the war, then empirically reconfirmed in the destination countries, and finally by the present fieldwork, the situation that has arisen makes it possible to observe the exodus from Ukraine as another highly gendered event.

[The] stable presence [of the Ukrainian community in Italy] also explains the pull effect exerted by our country on refugees fleeing Ukraine since the war broke out [...]. According to data from the Ministry of the Interior, the number of applications for temporary protection received from people fleeing war is, as of September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022, 158,812.

The peak of applications was recorded between February and May, while only 26,7% were submitted from June onwards. In 39,4% of cases, these are children and young people under the age of 18, while women account for 71,6%, but close to 86% considering only adults (Istat, 2022, p. 5). [... By October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022], 113,692 women arrived from Ukraine seeking protection. The minors number 62,575 (ib., p. 1, T.d.A.).

Demographic aspects of the phenomenon aside, the circumstance is further characterised certain gender implications involving different levels of analysis:

1. first of all, the phenomenon of human mobility caused by armed conflict hinges on the binary approach: consistent with the unwritten tenets of a universally widespread distribution of gender relations and roles (cf. Ulivieri, 1995; Kimmel, 2000; Burgio, 2015), women and children were – in the case of the ongoing conflict too – sent to safety, while the vast majority of men stayed behind, in Ukraine<sup>4</sup>, some on the front, others contributing to the defence in other ways;
2. it further means that the current wave of emigration from Ukraine mainly affects women, i.e. 88% of the total (UNHCR, May 2023): these are mostly mothers with one or more dependent children who are compelled to experience their motherhood fleeing and in exile; quite the reverse, less frequent in these flows are fathers with other family members or alone with dependent children, or unaccompanied minors;

4 Most of the male population remained in Ukraine due to the ban on expatriation for adult men of conscription age (18-60). Men are exempt from the ban if they fulfil certain requirements regarding their: age (minors and over 60); health (serious diseases, disability); family status (parents of three or more under-age children, single fathers with one or more under-age children); assistance to persons in need; higher education (students and doctoral students enrolled abroad); and some specific professions.

3. in addition to these aspects, the reception system provided to Ukrainian refugees in Italy, and in Florence, has seen a wide both formal and informal participation of women: these were Ukrainians (mediators, teachers, activists, etc.) who had immigrated to Italy before the war, Italian citizens (teachers, language facilitators, educators, social workers, activists, etc.), and other willing women who contributed to both organisational and management activities;
4. to boot, it was about dealing with situations and managing issues commonly classified as “female”, i.e. care and education, which would be responsibilities pertaining to womanhood and motherhood, hence the respective roles and tasks have been entrusted to Ukrainian mothers; on the other hand, the same reason, i.e. the massive presence of women (and minors) amid Ukrainian refugees, has stimulated the creation of a reception characterised by a strong involvement of female mediators, teachers, facilitators, etc., of either Ukrainian, Italian or other nationalities;
5. the arrival of refugee women from Ukraine has implied the need for reception arrangements, including the activation of services specifically dedicated to women; concomitantly, this presence has generated the need for more information on the phenomenon. 1) As far as the former is concerned, temporary protection status guarantees Ukrainian nationals healthcare throughout their stay on the national territory; in addition, Ukrainian women were offered services in the field of women’s and maternal health (medical examinations, check-ups, etc.) during the first months of their stay in Florence with specific timetables set up for them. The mediation service has been strengthened in general, and for Ukrainian women and mothers in particular. 2) As for the latter, a special mention goes to cultural and information events organised by the Ukrainian community of Florence: not seldom, these events are staged together with the refugee women who willingly offer their contribution being “*mothers themselves, as well as teachers, musicians, painters...*”, i.e. holders of multiple knowledge and skills. In this regard, one event in particular should be recalled as it was “*dedicated to the image of mother ... to mothers, [and thus to the mother figure] as motherland*” (Ukrainian language teacher and volunteer).

It is possible to observe how an almost all-female environment and several women’s networks have been created in and around this context, practically a chain made up of alliances between women.

All things considered, the composition of our sample of respondents was not random either: namely, involving exclusively women in research activities was certainly a preference driven by the interests and objectives of this study; nonetheless, this choice was further motivated by a greater availability of women both among the reception, education and school professionals, and among the Ukrainian beneficiaries of the Italian reception system.

## 6. Wartime implications on motherhood

This analysis takes us back to the protagonists of this study: Ukrainian women and mothers who, after fleeing their war-torn Country, took refuge in Florence. It means dialoguing with them, or talking about their experience with other people, better still with other women – mediators, activists, teachers, exponents, representatives, etc. – who have welcomed them as refugees and assisted in their integration process in this year and a half of their stay in Florence.

Accordingly, this section develops by following the questions and answers revolving around the concerns and expectations expressed by the Ukrainian nationals interviewed during the survey. In terms of the methodology adopted, we relied on the method of narrative analysis (Khan, 2014) while processing the fieldwork and interview data (Robles, 2011). As main research findings, the narratives shared by the Ukrainian refugee mothers and other women are proposed in the form of reflections and observations, subdivided into 7 thematic subsections, whose contents are mutually intertwined, and variously related to the experience of motherhood in exile. The introductory questions to each subsection are not taken from the questionnaire: although they may have been used as interview sub-questions, some of them are rather representative of the issues that emerged most clearly from the conversations, thus shifting the focus to the theme of motherhood at the time of war in Ukraine.

1. *Who are we?* “We” are women, mothers, usually educated, workers, professionals, and now also temporary protection holders. In terms of age, refugees from Ukraine who fled abroad are on average young: the main age group represented among them is between 35 and 59, 57% of whom are women, and 7% men (UNHCR, May 2023); similarly, the persons interviewed in Florence were between 28 and 45 years old. As already highlighted, many of the Ukrainian refugee women are also mothers, not alone, but with one or more dependent children, some even born here. All in all, a perfect image of motherhood in exile. To complete the picture, a social worker and educator engaged in the reception of Ukrainian refugees in Florence remarks as follows: “*they are very capable women, very smart, strong, proud, yet humble, always well-groomed despite all the tragedy...*”
2. *What is important to me?* The most recurrent answer to this question was the following: “*What is important to me at this very moment is that my child is well.*” A thought shared by the mothers with other family members,

first of all husbands, before leaving Ukraine. All witnesses agreed upon this point, and to this extent the reaction is easily generalisable. The whole perspective changes when the risks entailed by exile under the threat of bombing and destruction are added to the picture: this implies an increased degree of concern and anxiety for loved ones, first of all daughters and sons, for their physical, mental and existential safety, as well as for those who remained in Ukraine. Meaning, trauma is shared both up close and at a distance (Armitage, 2022; Kaufman *et al.*, 2022). With this in mind, the interviewed mothers (i.e. parents) expressed a strong desire for peace: first, so that the war stops; second, so that they can return to their usual lives and enjoy the fruits of peace with their dear ones.

3. ***What do I want for my child?*** All witnesses, both parents and other interviewees, affirmed that Ukrainian families attach great importance to education, hence they make every effort to ensure that their children regularly attend school even during their stay in Italy. “*It is important that my child attends school, that s/he studies and acquires new knowledge and skills, learns a new language*”; “*It is important to invest in your children’s education ... whereupon, we will see how useful it can be for his/her educational and professional future either in Ukraine or abroad, in Italy or elsewhere.*” Suffice these brief interview excerpts to illustrate the recognition of Ukrainian mothers in exile towards the opportunities that education presents for their children; at the same time, these reflections reveal the interest and will of mothers to benefit from the time spent in Italy so that their children can gain fruitful experiences for their future. And every channel that was conducive to the acquisition of knowledge about Florence, Italy, the Italian language and culture, also in terms of adaptation and integration, was welcomed and appreciated. It is in this sense that many mothers attend, at least on Sundays, the Ukrainian church in Florence, where their children can study Ukrainian language, culture and/or religion; yet, this is not the only reason, as the words of one of them illustrate: “*Father Volodymyr organises excursions around Florence for adults and children. We learnt about Italian history and culture. He showed us how beautiful Florence is.*”
4. ***What would I like to achieve?*** What would be the main goal of the Ukrainian mothers hosted in Florence as refugees? What would they want to achieve? And how far would they go in their attempt to reach their goals? Any possible answer depends on how things will develop: “*We miss our homeland, our home... children miss their friends and school*”; “*Of course we’d like to go home, to return to Ukraine... yet, if the situation, unfortunately, does not get better soon, we’ll be forced to stay here longer and start integrating more.*” The words of the respondents convey a clear awareness of their condition, and the actions to be taken while in exile in Florence: basically, the need to recognise both the necessity and the importance of trying to adapt by following the paths of integration into Italian society is strongly perceived.

The first four are leading to the next three questions, which introduce the discussion to the main issues faced by Ukrainian refugee mothers in Italy, and Florence.

5. ***Suspended lives: planning or managing?*** All of a sudden, the war emergency broke out and everything was suspended, fully overturned: daily routine, school, professional life, relationships, friendships, living, everything. And with no migration project at all. Ukrainian mothers (along with the rest of Ukrainian citizenry) became overnight victims of a catastrophic event, then refugees and beneficiaries of reception programmes: such a combination of factors have implied a whole series of unprecedented situations, unimaginable before February 2022. From a socio-pedagogical point of view, it meant dealing with relations that had turned into distances: distances that have added further worries, stress and anxiousness to the pre-existing issues. Besides, many families have been halved, as has parenthood, and so the care and education of children. What can one ever plan in such a situation, and how? Or should it rather be about managing the situation? The interviewees say they did not expect the conflict, neither their stay in Italy, to last so long; but it did. And this wait has affected all segments of their lives, with specific reference to family management: children’s upbringing, educational models, motherhood... This uncertainty led refugee parents to wonder how to plan things and how much to invest in their integration in Italy, especially in the education of their children. In fact, the narratives collected in the field reveal that a part of the Ukrainian refugees initially did not apply themselves to their stay in Florence. After a few months, mainly in the summer of 2022, it became more evident that the conflict was escalating: accordingly, the refugees, or rather Ukrainian mothers, began to focus more on their lives in exile and to regain their “lost time”. And the task was far from being simple and easy to solve: it was a matter of finding the strength to face new challenges, and to start resuming suspended processes. More concretely, it meant learning a new language, investing more in children’s school life, seeking employment.
6. ***Employment: why it is important to work?*** First of all, it is important to note that Ukrainian refugee mothers need and want to work: thereby, some of them have been seeking employment since their arrival in Italy, some others have done so at a later stage. In light of their current living conditions, they do not hesitate to seek even temporary jobs, without refusing menial or casual work: “*we look for work in Italy, but it is difficult to find a job that matches our professions*” (one of the mothers). Nevertheless, they try to put into practice and make use of the professional skills acquired in their home country: it is in this sense that the Ukrainian mothers hosted in

the city of Florence strive, wherever possible, to carry on their online jobs and smart working, on the one hand, and to offer their help to the Ukrainian community, on the other. Or in the words of a Ukrainian language teacher and volunteer at the Ukrainian parish in Florence: besides being mothers, they are also workers, “*teachers, musicians, painters...*”, or rather holders of many talents, skills and abilities. Work means autonomy, as far as one can speak of autonomy in such a circumstance: still, for women who used to work, a situation of stalling and waiting is difficult to accept. Finally, besides allowing them to earn some money, work can provide refugee women a form of escape from their daily life in exile, that is a distraction from their worries and concerns, exceptionally intense at the moment.

Education and employment are two variables that strongly influence the life projects, at both family and individual levels, of Ukrainian refugees, and thus the willingness to return to their native country or to stay and experience integration paths abroad, i.e. in Italy: seeing the context, it is vital to add prospects for peace and future to the discourse.

7. *Peace and future: to return or to stay?* As in all wars, there are far too many people forgetting about peace. The other way round, the possibilities of returning to Ukraine in the near future are directly associated with the chances for peace. Thus framed, the reflection goes back to the distances that have entailed another feeling running through the thoughts of Ukrainian expatriates – the dream of return: “*as soon as the war is over, we will return home to Ukraine*” (one of the mothers). And this is not always the case: not all migration experiences arouse similar feelings, nor do these occur with the same intensity. This strong desire to return home can be explained with the situation in their Country prior to the conflict. Taking into account the social and economic transformations that have taken place – amid ups and downs – over the last two decades, and especially in the period 2001-08, it is possible to recognise the pre-war Ukraine as a growing economy (Sutela, 2012, pp. 5, 19-20; World Bank, 2017, pp. 5, 14; Minakov *et al.*, 2021): this concise observation takes us back to personal stories of many of the women, mothers and now refugees in Florence, who can boast of having studied and having had a (good) job in Ukraine (cf. also UNHCR, May 2023). On the one hand, they feel safe, having found a refuge from the likelihood of tragic and traumatic incidents that could have jeopardised their own physical and mental integrity, and that of their loved ones (Armitage, 2022; Kaufman *et al.*, 2022). On the other hand, the feeling of being far from “everything” leads them to never stop cherishing the hope of returning to Ukraine: unlike those who want to leave the drama of war and related memories behind *forever*, the Florentine (or other) shelter is neither perceived nor experienced by Ukrainian refugees as a last stop offering ultimate salvation. What remained behind was a reality of peace, of relative prosperity, of future. For all that, the idea underlying the dream of return is that of being able to rediscover suspended opportunities, and at the same time contribute to the reconstruction of their Country. As one of the interviewed mothers stated: “*I see no future for my sons in Italy. In Ukraine, there are more prospects for their future.*” Under the current conditions, some Ukrainian refugees chose to migrate back home, whereas many did not: the latter case, prevalent at the moment, involves people who remain living abroad in the daily hope of an imminent return to Ukraine. Among them, many are Ukrainian refugee mothers, forced to stay in Italy and invest in their future and that of their children here and now. Meanwhile, some begin to adapt, also on an affective-relational level: “*my family likes living in Florence, we have learnt the language a little and continue to learn... We have many Ukrainian and Italian friends here.*”

## 7. Conclusions

It is worth opening the conclusions by noting that the adventure of the Ukrainian refugee women has not come to an end: indeed, it goes on travelling through a whole series of not very comforting events and circumstances. On the macro level, Peace is not in sight. On the micro level, which instantly turns into a macro for those experiencing it personally, the reality does not look serene at all: in fact, several of the Ukrainian mothers, some of whom were interviewed or “met” through others in the context of our research, view their condition with trepidation as they risk being transferred from Florence to other Italian regions or cities. In other words, not only have they not returned to Ukraine (yet), but, while in exile, they are obliged to change abode in accordance with the guidelines on the Ukraine emergency and the reception of Ukrainian refugees.

These technical-formal hints help us to link back to the phenomenon of motherhood in exile. Given the operational forecasts regarding their stay in Italy, Ukrainian mothers are worried, certainly for themselves, but above all for their daughters and sons, for their schooling, for their future, perhaps more uncertain than ever.

The following is, by way of illustration, one last update piece in this regard, representative of many other stories. The paths of two 18-year-old twin sisters, who have successfully and with sacrifice completed their school year in Florence, have reached a crossroads: one, disheartened by exile and life in a reception facility, who had attended classical high school, decided to return to Ukraine so as to pursue her university studies; her sister remains here



and continues to study at the music high school. The latter, together with their mother (their father is on the war front in Ukraine), now risks being relocated to who knows where: in practical terms, this would mean the need for another readjustment to a new social, educational and relational milieu; and if the daughters are worried, their mother is desperate and struggles to find space within the previously accumulated anxieties for this further adventure with one daughter here in the precariousness of exile, and the other there, in Ukraine, distant and potentially exposed to the risks of war.

Well, this, like countless other Ukrainian (and not only) stories, well illustrates how women, mothers, displaced from their lands, and finally fled beyond the borders of their own Country, are “condemned” to live: in constant uncertainty, expectation and worry for themselves and for their children, at the same time as they dedicate part of their thoughts to those who remained in Ukraine. In summary: with these elements, each of their stories outlines a perfect case of motherhood in exile.

It is, thereby, vital to close the conclusions by retrieving some passages of this study, which take shape through a series of *importances*, as follows: the importance of reception and support services, with particular reference to those specifically dedicated to refugee women; the importance of alliances between women (and not only), be they of Ukrainian, Italian or other nationalities, which is beneficial to reception in the strict sense, as well as beyond this humanitarian undertaking itself; this way, we finally move on to the importance of relationships, and the opportunities to interact, meet new people, learn new things, expand one’s resistance abilities, and thus not succumb to the challenges of a forced and involuntary exile.

These are all important actions as they help refugee women find strength to carry their motherhood and parenthood in exile on: these very strengths should offer them that “minimum” of hope of re-embracing peace, and with it the favourable conditions that, as such, would allow them to return to their Country, or to stay abroad where deemed more appropriate. Rediscovering peace would make it possible to create the preconditions for a renewal on multiple individual and collective levels, specifically that of refugee women’s motherhood and their life projects.

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