



Until we are all equal

Adolescent Girls in Crisis

Voices from Ukraine,
Poland and Romania

Executive Summary

Summary Report

This report is part of the Plan International research series **Adolescent Girls in Crisis** which captures the voices and experiences of adolescent girls aged 10 to 19 in protracted crises. The series seeks to amplify their voices and perceptions of crisis contexts and presents their views on how the international community should respond.

This report presents findings from research carried out in Ukraine, Poland and Romania between August and October 2023 with 135 adolescent girls, 36 adolescent boys, 30 caregivers of adolescents, and 15 key stakeholders. Read the full report here.

Research locations



All names used in this report are pseudonyms. No photographs were taken during the course of this research. Girls featured in images in the report are not the same as those who participated in the research.



What did the girls tell us?

- > **Girls are struggling to access the mental health support that they need.**



Adolescents in Ukraine, Poland and Romania demonstrate signs of lasting psychological impacts of their experiences of the war, including high levels of stress and anxiety, difficulties with sleeping and fluctuating emotions. Adolescents and caregivers in all three countries reported a major gap in access to vital specialist mental health services, highlighting in particular the limited awareness of and access to free services.

“Sometimes, it feels like the war isn’t just outside, but inside my head too.”

Olesya, girl, 15–19, Ukraine

- > **Girls feel unsafe, both due to active conflict and gender-based violence.**



Adolescent girls living close to the frontline in Ukraine face heightened security risks, while adolescent girls across the country every day navigate the risks of air raids. In Poland and Romania, refugee adolescent girls report experiencing alarming rates of sexual harassment and assault both online and in public spaces. Their exposure to these forms of gender-based violence is happening to such an extent that their experiences seem normal to them.

“I’m afraid to walk alone because of the stories about attacks.”

Jisu, girl, 10–14, Poland

➤ **The long-term impacts of disrupted education is a major concern for adolescents and their caregivers.**



This is the fifth consecutive school year where students from Ukraine have faced continued disruption to their education, starting with the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Adolescents and their caregivers are growing increasingly concerned about the long-term impacts of this disruption and how it will influence their access to further academic and employment opportunities. Online classes are still a security necessity for many in Ukraine, but adolescents reported experiencing serious challenges with this mode of learning. For those displaced across borders, difficulties in learning the local languages are a major barrier to academic achievement.

“I wasn’t able to participate in school for months when we were displaced. I didn’t have [a] laptop or [the] internet. We left everything behind. There was nothing left.”

Hanna, girl, 15–19, Ukraine

“I have very bad grades since I arrived to Poland. Although I study so hard, particularly Polish, all my grades are still F.”

Alexandra, girl, 10–14, Poland

➤ **Girls need support to access comprehensive sexuality education and quality, affordable sexual and reproductive health services.**



Taboos and misinformation around sexual and reproductive health persist since before the escalation of the war in Ukraine. Sexual education is being limited even further by online classes. Adolescents in all three research countries reported not knowing where to access affordable SRHR services or adequate information about their sexual and reproductive health, with many seeking information online.

“We had SRHR as one of the topics in our biology class. However, our teacher simply decided to skip this topic. Most of [the] teachers even avoid giving very limited information during biology classes.”

Yuliya, 15–19, girl, Ukraine

➤ **The war is both reinforcing traditional gender roles and presenting opportunities to challenge them.**



The disruption to households due to the war has created additional burdens, particularly for girls taking on traditional caregiving roles. Yet, it has also demonstrated women’s capacity to be household heads, decision-makers and breadwinners, challenging traditional gender attitudes.

“... now many men have gone to the frontline, so civilian life is now largely on women... And I think this helps women realise their own independence, their ability to act.”

Emiliya, girl, 15–19, Ukraine

➤ **Adolescents want to contribute to the reconstruction of a more inclusive Ukraine.**



Going beyond the practicalities of post-war reconstruction, adolescent girls and boys from Ukraine want to prioritise mental health, education and the creation of a more inclusive society where people in all their diversity can thrive. So often excluded from decision-making processes, adolescent girls demonstrated the crucial role that they should play in shaping the reconstruction of Ukraine.

“I wish a future where there is more societal acceptance and fewer prejudices against each other.”

Oleksa, girl, 15–19, Romania



Conclusion and recommendations

The research found that while adolescents are navigating this crisis with determination and resilience, there are key gaps in their access to essential, quality services for their mental health, sexual and reproductive health, and education. Already dealing with high levels of stress and anxiety driven by the experience of war and displacement, adolescent girls are also facing multiple stressors including threats to their safety and alarming rates of sexual harassment, devastating learning losses, social isolation, challenges with integration, and a stark interruption of their adolescence with the burden of adult responsibilities. Adolescent girls from Ukraine know what they need – not just to endure the war but to build a safe, healthy and more equal future for all. As such, they must be included in decision-making processes.



The **recommendations** that follow are based upon girls' priorities

See [the main report](#) for the complete list of recommendations.

In Ukraine, Poland and Romania:

- Donors working with national and local authorities should **strengthen the resilience of child protection, education and health systems**.
- National and local governments, with donor support should **urgently scale up freely available mental health and psychosocial support** (MHPSS) services for adolescents and their caregivers in Ukrainian and Russian. A **widespread, multi-language information campaign** should be implemented on social media to increase public awareness of MHPSS services.
- Local education authorities, with guidance from the national education ministries and local education service providers, need to develop **localised strategies** to address significant learning losses, which are particularly acute in remote areas, and to provide **in-person activities** to improve socialisation skills and social cohesion among adolescents. This includes identifying transition pathways to allow school-aged children from Ukraine to reintegrate into the formal Ukrainian education system.
- International donors and national authorities need to **continue supporting education programming** as a key platform for social cohesion within Ukraine and in host countries.
- As part of their commitment to address GBV, national authorities must **extend GBV prevention to online safety awareness programmes** to keep adolescent girls safe from growing risks of online and in person sexual exploitation and abuse and trafficking.
- Education authorities should **mandate comprehensive sexual education, respectful relationships and the prevention of gender-based violence** from a young age as standard elements of the school curriculum.
- National health and education authorities should **support and initiate projects that expand access to comprehensive sexuality education** in multiple languages, as well as free and confidential online, via phone, social media and in person access to SRHR information.
- International donors and national authorities should promote the **direct participation of adolescent girls and young women in all their diversity** across all decision-making forums, including through the establishment of dedicated consultative mechanisms. Participation must be ensured for those who are most marginalised, such as from the Roma community, LGBTIQ+ individuals and young people with disabilities.



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Cover photo: Two sisters and a friend who are living in an accommodation centre for internally displaced families in Ukraine. Photo credit: Albina Vinar © Plan International

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About Plan International

Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organisation that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child but know this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected.

Working together with children, young people, supporters and partners, we strive for a just world, tackling the root causes of the challenges that girls and vulnerable children face. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and we enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge.

For more than 85 years, we have rallied other determined optimists to transform the lives of all children in more than 80 countries.

We won't stop until we are all equal.

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