OXFORD

Journal of Refugee Studies, 2025, **38(3),** 690–703

https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feae084
Advance Access Publication Date: 16 December 2024
Original Article

Motherhood on the move: forced migrant women from Ukraine

Jonna Rock [1,*] and Zeynep Yanaşmayan [1]

[1]Migration Department, German Centre for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM), 10117 Berlin, Germany

*Corresponding author. Migration Department, German Centre for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM), Mauerstraße 76, 10117 Berlin, Germany. E-mail: rock@dezim-institut.de

Abstract

Drawing on the experiences of thirty-two refugee mothers who fled Ukraine with their children to Germany—to Berlin and Frankfurt/Oder—this article traces the co-constitutive relationship of displacement and motherhood through the angle of temporality. First, it uncovers how displacement in motherhood is defined by mothers' urge and urgency to protect their children. Second, it shows how refugee mothers utilize different forms of 'active waiting' to rebuild their lives in search of stability for themselves and their children and affectively deal with the trauma of multiple losses. Last but not least, motherhood in displacement generates new forms of maternal subjectivity as the interlocutors 'spend their time' to patch the ruptures in their lives for the sake of their children, not only alone but also together with other refugee mothers through digital means. Negotiating motherhood thus provides room to productively navigate a temporal disorientation caused by the displacement.

Keywords: Ukraine; mobility decisions; motherhood; forced migrant women; temporality; Germany; Berlin; Frankfurt/Oder

> *When she was ten or eleven, her daughter liked to play a game of hypotheticals. She would begin with calling forth horrific scenarios and her mother would have to tell her what she would do in those situations. (…) 'What if my heart was failing and I needed an emergency transplant?' her daughter would ask at the very end. But Nadia always produced the right comforting answer. 'I would tell the doctors, 'Cut me open right away. Give my baby the heart'.* (Irina Reyn, Mother Country 2019: 237).

1. Introduction

As a result of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022, numerous civilians have been displaced.[1] According to the latest update from UNHCR (n.d.), close to 6.5 million

[1] The war often described as Russia's war against Ukraine is better described as a Russo-Ukrainian war, as the invaders encountered resistance from the regular army and partisans, as convincingly argued by Serhii Plokhy (2023).

Received: 27 January 2024. **Revised:** 6 September 2024.
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people have fled Ukraine and an estimated 3.5 million remain displaced within the country, including returns.[2] The case of Ukrainian newcomers to Germany, and to the EU at large, can be considered exceptional in that the displacement towards Europe took place very rapidly, and EU states developed a swift policy response by triggering the EU Temporary Protection Directive for the very first time since its adoption in 2001 (Council Directive 2001/55/EC).[3] Refugees from Ukraine in Germany received immediate access to a residence permit, the labour market, medical care, social assistance such as 'Bürgergeld'—unemployment support.[4] As of June 2024, around 1.1 million refugees from Ukraine have been registered in Germany, of which the majority were women (63%) and almost half of them (48%) with care responsibilities for children.[5]

Our paper is based on an analysis of original data collected between August and October 2022, consisting of thirty-two semi-structured in-depth interviews with forced migrant mothers who had very rapidly after the escalation of the war, in March 2022, fled Ukraine with their children and currently live in Germany, in Berlin and Frankfurt/Oder. At the time of the interviews, their residence was thus fairly recent in Germany, between 6 and 8 months.

We focus on mothers, not only because most Ukrainian men were not allowed to leave Ukraine due to mandatory conscription, but also because mothers are important bearers and transmitters of culture and language, who, at the same time, are often marginalized in societies in which they live, as feminist migration scholars have regularly pointed out (McClintock 1993: 63; Erel et al. 2018). Therefore, we consider it crucial to place the voices of mothers at centre of scholarly debates.

Literature points out how forced migrants may experience a 'permanent temporariness' (Brun and Fábos 2015: 12; Baas and Yeoh 2019: 165) as they find themselves in a limbo between longing for safety and a meaningful livelihood, on the one hand, and having to stay away from 'home' and deal with the temporariness of their stay, including their legal status and housing situation, on the other. The experience of feeling in a limbo has often been discussed in the context of 'waiting' during the asylum process and/or in accommodation/detention centres (Griffiths 2014; Rotter 2016; Jacobsen et al. 2021; Kirisciogl u and Van Heelsum 2024), which have not been the experience of Ukrainian refugees. Yet, recent studies (e.g. Maxwell et al. 2024) have shown how feeling in a limbo is nevertheless applicable to the case of Ukrainians. While we do not rebut the relevance of this experience, we concur with Brun and Fábos (2015: 10) that the terminology of 'being stuck in limbo' signals that the situation in which refugees often find themselves remains constant, disguising the various forms of resistance while 'being stuck'. Migrants question static arrangements, are productive, reflective, and engage in the process of living while waiting (Griffiths 2014: 5; Brun 2015: 20; Brun and Fábos 2015: 10; Baas and Yeoh 2019: 163; Etzold and Fechter 2022: 4308; Terzioglu 2023: 77).

In this article, we therefore show refugee mothers' various forms of being in active waiting to explain the dynamic and intersecting processes of displacement and motherhood. This allows us to account for their liminal position both in time and space. Drawing on this entanglement, we show how our interlocutors became mobile to protect their children due to the emergency situation caused by the war; how they seek stability in the imperative need to rebuild lives for their children and themselves; and how time in motherhood is marked by camaraderie, care, and support for fellow displaced mothers from Ukraine.

[2] UNHCR. https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/109336. Date accessed 20 June 2024.
[3] Throughout this text, we use 'forced migrant' and 'refugee' interchangeably, not relying on the legal definition of refugee status.
[4] Men could, however, leave the country under certain circumstances, for example, in the case of disability or if there are three or more children in the family (**Закон України про мобілізаційну підготовку та мобілізацію, ст.** 23 [Law of Ukraine on mobilization training and mobilization, art. 23]. https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/3543-12#top. Date accessed 9 July 2024.)
[5] Council Directive 2001/55/EC of 20 July 2001 on minimum standards for giving temporary protection in the event of a mass influx of displaced persons. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32001L0055.

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2. Displacement, motherhood, and temporality

We build our study on the extant literature that focuses on individual negotiation and decision processes that forced migrants undergo about remaining, returning, or re-migrating (e.g. Tezcan 2019; Gherghina et al. 2020; Al Husein and Wagner 2023), particularly in the intersection with their motherhood practices. *Women* are found to be less likely to migrate alone, but equally less likely to have return intentions once migrated (Stock 2012; Haddad and Caron 2023; King and Lulle 2022). In a similar vein, research has increasingly stressed the role of family dynamics and parenthood (e.g. De Haas and Fokkema 2010; Vlase 2013; Christou and Michail 2015; Haddad and Caron 2023; Al Mhamied et al. 2023) in (im)mobility decisions and intentions. For example, while the education of children in the 'host' countries is an important factor behind the decision to stay (Schiele 2021; Al Husein and Wagner 2023), lack of family support and childcare with grandparents and relatives often living in the home countries has been shown to raise return intentions and behaviour (Haddad and Caron 2023; King and Lulle 2022). Even though we perceive forced and voluntary migration as a continuum (Erdal and Oeppen 2018), we recognize that certain challenges impacting migration experiences can be more accentuated among forced migrants (see Hunkler et al. 2022). Literature, focusing specifically on forced migrants' experiences, has for instance noted that return aspirations can be overwhelmingly shaped by concerns of security in the home country (Kaya and Orchard 2020; Kayaoglu et al. 2022; Alrababah et al. 2023). Similarly, for forced migrant parents, due to the peril of returning, family reunification could be sought instead in the country of refuge. Yet, since support networks are not immediately available in the migration context, the experience of parenthood can be isolating and filled with despair and disillusionment (e.g. Christou and Michail 2015; Gilmartin and Migge 2016; Ashbourne et al. 2021; King and Lulle 2022; Al Mhamied et al. 2023).

Writing about migrant mothers in Ireland, where access to childcare has been unaffordable, which in turn forces mothers to stay at home with their children, Gilmartin and Migge (2016) argue that being a full-time mother prevents women from gaining a sense of belonging at a workplace in a new country. This is aggravated in the case of forced migrant mothers who also often suffer from (legal) precarity (e.g. Kelly et al. 2016; Hedstrom et al. 2021; Akdemir 2023; Suerbaum 2023), which usually intersects with their racialized minority status and economic marginalization (Erel et al. 2018; Benchekroun 2023). The material hardship can lead to depression, feelings of powerlessness, and can challenge the mothers' ability to support their child(ren) and be emotionally connected (e.g. Willen 2014).

Notwithstanding, scholarship has also noted that while being responsible for the well-being of family members can be a burden for forced migrant mothers, it may also be a driving force, namely when a woman's role as mother with responsibility for the survival and lives of her loved ones gives her the strength to cope in a new environment (Sossou et al. 2008; Krause 2022: 34). Grant and Guerin (2019), for example, show how African refugee mothers in Australia, despite feeling lonely and sad, perceive motherhood as a source of strength, which gives them courage to stand up against injustice, such as racism and poverty they face. Such expressions of resilience through motherhood are also prevalent in the perceptions of refugees in Poland in Kość-Ryżko's (2022) work. Even though the migrants in her study felt alone with no relatives or neighbours from whom they might seek assistance, they find a sense of equilibrium by dedicating themselves to learning Polish and finding employment. Under the concept of 'strategic mothering', Benchekroun (2023) collects and further illustrates strategies, practices, and daily routines of refugee mothers that serve to provide shelter, food, and material resources to their children as well as to protect them from the 'truth' about their fragile legal status.

On the whole, this strand of literature has unearthed the entanglements of motherhood and migrancy as 'parallel, complex, and complementary practices' (Christou and Michail 2015: 79), pointing out not only how (im)mobility is gendered but also is gendering (Stock 2012). This means that women's migration trajectories are not only shaped by their gender, which might, for instance, render their journeys more perilous and fragmented, but women are also 'actively

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producing and reproducing their gender and motherhood roles' (Stock 2012: 1593) in relation to (im)mobility dynamics.

In this article, we aim to fruitfully bring the debates on the intersection of motherhood, migrancy, and displacement with the growing case for 'temporality' in migration (governance). While our focus is on the subjective experience of time in the lives of forced migrants as an emotionally and socially embedded phenomenon (Brun 2015; Wang and Collins 2020; Terzioglu 2023) rather than time as a governmental tool of migration control (Tazzioli 2018), asylum policies are undeniably infusing the sense of uncertainty, temporariness, and limbo in refugee lives.

Brun (2015: 20) addresses the affective experience of uncertain times, accompanying displacement, by linking such an experience to *waiting* and to *hope*, that is to, for example, be waiting and hoping to one day return to the place one has been forced to leave behind. The concept of 'agency in waiting' after displacement refers to an active waiting, an embracing of life in the present and in the future, despite precarious and uncertain circumstances. Having hope is thereby a way of engaging with uncertain time and make sense of it (Brun 2015: 24), whereby the experience of uncertainty can even be liberating as it is beyond the familiar and beyond our control (Griffiths 2014: 2002; Kiriscioglu and Van Heelsum 2024). In this context, the idea of hoping to one day return home can involve not only a physical sense of place but also an imaginary one, and at the same time, a nostalgia for another time, and thus a place different than the one in the present (Turner 1995; Griffiths 2024: 10). For obvious reasons, being a forced migrant implies having a constrained range of choices about where and how to live one's life. Thus, dreaming about returning one day implies winning back a choice and regaining control (Taylor 2013: 146).

Applying the concept of 'agency-in-waiting' to a group similar to the one under scrutiny in this article, namely to twelve middle-class Ukrainian refugee women in Berlin, Maxwell et al. (2024) describe three types: those who live in a state of limbo between Ukraine and Germany; those who are waiting to return to Ukraine but still embrace their presence in Germany; and those who have decided to stay in Germany and are actively working towards this scenario. The authors show that a social network in Berlin, German language skills, and a qualified job position boost the interlocutors' plans by helping them develop a capacity for 'agency in waiting'. We refrain from grouping our interlocutors into 'types' as we have noted that people's accounts are hybrid, changing, and contradictory. Following Etzold and Fechter's (2022: 4307) observation not to view displacement and emotional responses as fixed and to perceive displacement as a '(…) transition phase in individuals' life courses, a *liminal* experience'. (Etzold and Fechter (2022: 4308, italics authors), we rather draw attention to the variety of strategies that refugee mothers develop in the liminal space intersecting motherhood and displacement.

Terzioglu's (2023) study that looks at how Syrian refugees in Turkey reconstruct their conceptions of *time* in relation to their *gender* provides here an excellent example. The Syrian women interlocutors narrate that they make friends with Turkish women while *waiting* in schoolyards and at the hospital, based on their common interests, such as the children's health and education (Terzioglu 2023: 85–86). This gives a *gendered* meaning to temporality for the refugees, which, in turn, helps them to manage disempowering effects of trauma and of waiting and hope for a 'fully established life' in Turkey. Last but not least, she also draws attention to how refugee women embrace a circular sense of time with disrupted routines quickly being re-established in the displaced context, emphasising thereby continuity over rupture.

In summary, refugees and refugee *mothers*, as our case study underscores, are caught up in a process of displacement that entails ever-changing and constructive responses to making sense of their time, dealing with their past experiences, as well as planning for a future.

3. Method and data collection

Our sample for qualitative interviews consists of thirty-two refugee mothers aged between 20 and 45 years old who fled Ukraine with their children and are currently living in Berlin and Frankfurt/Oder. Interviews were conducted in August and October 2022 and conceived using the

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methodological tools of interpretative phenomenological analysis (Zahavi 2003; Smith et al. 2021). Thus, we intentionally reflect upon the individuals' subjective perspectives, adding interpretation to the interviewed mothers' experiences and explore in depth how these subjective accounts relate to forced migration and settlement in Berlin and Frankfurt/Oder.

In our search for interlocutors, we have used social media channels, especially Facebook and Telegram groups designed for Ukrainians in Germany. Moreover, we have identified interlocutors through snowball sampling, where some of the interlocutors provided referrals (Noy 2008); however, not more than one person was referred to by individual interlocutors.

The researcher who conducted the interviews and the first author of the article is fluent in Russian but has neither a Ukrainian nor a Russian or German background. During the interviews, she found this to be an advantage, as she was perceived as an 'outsider' and her position was therefore 'neutral' by default. In our experience, the interviewer's family background and her fluency in Russian helped to allay any concerns and reservations the interlocutors might have had about the research. The interviewer also shared with the interlocutors her first-hand experience of being a migrant in Germany and a mother—which, according to the interviewer's observation, made it easier for them to share their experiences with her.

The interviewer was sensitive to the language question and wanted to accommodate the interlocutors' wishes. Before the interviews, it was communicated that the interviewer had better knowledge of Russian than of Ukrainian and would therefore have a preference to speak in Russian or in English/German if the interlocutors would prefer. The interviews took place in public places, usually in a café near the interlocutors' residences. They were always conducted in quiet public places, where neighbouring guests could not overhear the conversations. Due to the 'neutral by default' background of the interviewer, who, as already mentioned, is neither Russian nor Ukrainian, conducting interviews in Russian in public spaces did not seem to have negative effects on the interview situation. On the contrary, the interlocutors expressed that they felt comfortable talking about their experiences to the interviewer in Russian.

It is noteworthy that Ukrainian refugees coming to Germany have, on average, a very high level of education. Almost three quarters of them (72%) are considered highly qualified, that is they have a university degree or a degree from a university of applied sciences (Brücker et al. (2022: 9). Van Tubergen et al. (2024: 85) show that Ukrainian women with a high level of education were more likely to leave Ukraine when the war escalated. They also found that in their sample, which consisted of 2,400 Ukrainian refugee women in nine countries (including Ukraine), those who came to Germany had an especially high level of education (van Tubergen et al. 2024: 89–90).

The varying socio-demographic parameters of our interlocutors show how heterogeneous our sample is, with the exception of educational level: they come from different professional backgrounds in Ukraine, including a museum director, a hotel director, medical doctors, lawyer, journalists, marketing and IT professionals, a hairdresser, veterinarian, and a waitress. Most of the interlocutors have a university/polytechnic degree, while three of them have completed secondary education. The higher education degrees are diverse: business, engineering, psychology, journalism, law, cooking, nursing, education, philology, finance/IT, chemistry, sociology/media, veterinary medicine, accounting, and medicine. The interlocutors come from all over Ukraine, from the eastern, western, and central/southern parts of the country. All but one individual indicates that they are religious, rather passively, through following religious customs. Three women are members of religious communities (one Christian Orthodox and two Jewish Orthodox) and three of them are Jewish. Our sample thus reflects Ukraine's complex historical, political, linguistic, ethnic, and religious make-up. All but one of the thirty-two women are trying to find adequate accommodation in Berlin and Frankfurt/Oder that is not short-term, at private homes, a garden house, (apart-)hotels, refugee shelter, etc.

During interviews, the interviewer posed preformulated questions but also asked relevant follow-up questions where appropriate. In this manner, the preformulated questions served as an initial basis for discussion and a way for the interlocutors to freely elaborate on them, rather

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than as strict conversational boundaries formulated as responses. The semi-structured interviews included questions about the interlocutors' recent experiences of fleeing Ukraine, their experiences after coming to Germany, in Berlin and Frankfurt/Oder, as well as the future mobility considerations. We transcribed, translated and coded the interview data, and in addition to recording interlocutors' testimonies, we also took notes of our own reflections during interviews, so that we would be able to reconstruct the quality of our interactions and analyse them in depth later (cf Heyl 2001: 377). The names of the persons interviewed are changed to protect their privacy/identity.

While we can describe perceptions of our interlocutors, we cannot, epistemologically speaking, know how they came to form them. We nevertheless work to map both the spoken and unspoken parameters that frame the interlocutors' narratives, for the purpose of identifying any latent content in the statements (Amit 1999: 11; Heyl 2001: 373; Lamnek 2010: 14). Therefore, we consider verbal content as well as moments in which there are shared nonverbal impulses—emotions, as these are intertwined in the dynamics of interview work (Gammerl 2015). Quotes from the interlocutors are incorporated into our paper, and while we analyse their accounts, we characterize the main thematic relating to their settlement experiences in Germany, and their plans in terms of mobility. The decision about what was relevant from the interview data and not was based on discussions we have had, and the coding work of the data, for which we also used MAXQDA (a software for qualitative data analysis). All interlocutors signed a declaration of consent, including the consent to the transfer of anonymized interview data.

4. Displacement in motherhood

4.1 Mobility as an urgency to protect

The urgency to protect one's children is seen as *the* fundamental mothering task by our interlocutors, which have led to their mobility out of Ukraine. For example, this urgency in the decision to leave Ukraine is evident in Alisa's account. She is 29 years old, from eastern Ukraine, and came to Berlin in March 2022 with her pre-school-aged daughter.

> *I didn't want to until the last day. But then there was that day, when they bombed us very heavily, and we packed everything up and left within half an hour, first to the railway station in Kharkiv. We spent one night with friends in Lviv and one night in Poland. We left on 19 March and were already here on the 21st.*

A similar urgent decision is reflected by Alina, 35 years old from southern Ukraine, who came to Berlin in March 2022 with her three children of pre- and middle-school age and her father.

> *Our rabbi wanted to evacuate our community, and he spoke seriously with my father and husband, explaining that I also had to leave. I didn't want to travel alone, it was very dangerous for me, but my husband told me that if the Russians take Odesa … We made all these decisions very quickly, packed our belongings in 2-3 hours, and by 6-7am we were already at the station.*

We see in both Alisa's and Alina's accounts that their decision does not reflect their individual choices. The decision to flee was taken as a family for the sake of the family and there was no question mark within the context of the war that it would be women's task to leave. We also understand the rapidness in the decision to leave, which left little scope to consider anything else but the emergency of the war. In Alina's case, the fact that the rabbi organized the evacuation of the Odesan Jewish Community, of which she was a member, gives her less to say about where to go, as others had already organized the route. Thus, she was not only forced to migrate but also, later in our interview, she expressed that she felt forced to go to Berlin, as she was not the one who decided where the evacuation would take her.

Yuliya is a 41-year-old mother from northern Ukraine who came to Frankfurt/Oder in March 2022 with her preadolescent son. In her account, the heavily gendered nature of this decision becomes very explicit.

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> *I believe that as mothers we must save our children. Therefore, my job was to get my child out of the war. As a mother, I must bring my child to safety. That was my job. To take my child and bring him out of the war and far away. I must protect my child. It's the men who defend the fatherland anyway. We mothers raise the children, feed them, give them security in this situation.*

Yuliya's response transpires a matter-of-fact attitude with very clear boundaries on the motherhood that at that very moment and time entails fleeing the country in order to protect her child. In contrast to the reasoning of the Moroccan mothers in Stock's (2012) study, however, the refugees from Ukraine we interviewed did not see having children as a means to improve their life in the migratory context, which mainly have to do with the differing (and more favourable) legal conditions they have found themselves in. Yet, in both cases, children have overwhelmingly shaped migration strategies and reaffirmed their role as mothers, essentially gendering migration processes. Mirroring Benchekroun's (2023) 'strategic mothering', Yuliya, like many other Ukrainian mothers, re-invented her motherhood by bringing her son immediately—after the very sudden invasion and escalation of war—to safety.

Thirty-six-year-old Larissa from central Ukraine came to Berlin in mid-March 2022 with her pre-school-age child and her middle-school-age child. While her story is another case in point for how her migration process has been gendered and underpinned by her role as a mother, she also shows how this is not limited to the first move.

> *We were taken to a refugee shelter [in Ukraine]. There was no hot water and no place to sleep, no pillows. If I had been alone, I would still have managed somehow. But when you have children … It was cold and the children had to be washed. (…) I have accepted this city [Berlin]. now, maybe this country, on the condition that it's my chance to start a new life, because there's no alternative. We simply have no reason to return home. I no longer have a flat, it was bombed. If we went back now and lived somewhere, I wouldn't know where to go. And you can't do that to your children. As a mother, I think of my children first and foremost.*

Larissa gives voice to the confluence of forced migration and motherhood: she was forced to leave war-torn Ukraine in her role as mother and protector. Accepting Berlin as her new home shows her embracing life here and now and making plans for the future, echoing Brun's (2015) reference to 'active waiting'. While it was motherhood that caused the urgency to leave, it is also motherhood that pushes her to engage in such active waiting.

The recurring 'active waiting pattern' that goes hand in hand with the interlocutors' urge to protect their children shows how they identify as more than mothers—with professional identities, identities as partners/wives, friends, sisters, etc., all of which they feel forced to leave behind—and some of which they are hoping to rebuild in their new environment.

4.2 Rebuilding life in search for stability

While 'active waiting' has been a prominent feature of the strategies of all the women interviewed, different from Terzioglu's study (2023), their accounts emphasized rupture much more than continuity, which was underpinned by a strong sense of loss. Interlocutors in both cities have experienced loss of brothers, including death, as early as during the 2014 conflict and have had to separate from partners, parents, and in some cases, even older children who have stayed in Ukraine. Therefore, the theme of loss has been central and tangible through their nonverbal expressions. We could see that beyond feelings of loss, their crying registered our interlocutors' shock and trauma from the war, in particular because of seeing their own children and other family members exposed to the war's frightening and upsetting sounds and images. The affective response through crying has thus been another expression of their active waiting, as they process their experiences of the past in the present while also articulating aspirations for the future. Forty-year-old Maria from northeastern Ukraine came to Berlin in March 2022 with her middle-school-aged daughter expresses her feelings of emptiness.

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Here I have nothing at all [crying]. I had my own flat, a car, and a great job. Here I have no plans, no dreams … My brother died in the war. He was 21 years old, only just married and his child was one year old. I want to return home, but it's dangerous. I fear for my child.

Almost all interlocutors cried during the interviews, and if we observe carefully, Maria is accepting the peril of the war that forces her to stay where she has fled to. An active waiting is reflected in her affective response of feeling the pain of loss; yet she understands that she must remain resilient to ensure achieving the goal of finding stability for her child.

Thirty-six-year-old Oksana from northern Ukraine came to Frankfurt/Oder in May 2022 with her middle school-aged and teenage children. Oksana similarly pulls herself together and understands that it is not possible to return to Ukraine and shows strength by being there for her son, who faces his own struggles of adjusting.

The difficulty was with my older child. He's going through puberty and he's totally uncomfortable with the situation. He doesn't understand German. He tells me: 'I won't learn anything; I don't want to be here. As soon as the war ends, we'll leave right away'. But well, how can I put it … I see that the war isn't over, and it's not clear how long it will last. So I say: 'Yes, yes, yes, of course, darling'. And what I really understand is that we're probably going to be here for a long time and it's going to be fine. It's just a matter of not pushing it emotionally.

Oksana engages in a strategic mothering as the mothers in Benchekroun's (2023: 3327) study do too—by hiding the truth and telling her son that they will soon be leaving Frankfurt/Oder. She is, however, aware of the reality of the war, which makes her 'choose' stability instead. With this choice, she negotiates her motherhood, weighing pros and cons, and finds scope for decision-making amidst the difficulty of going against the will of her child. This envisioning of a 'longer perspective' shows that time is in her hands to a certain degree. Or she activates her time and resists its otherwise passive state.

While it is impossible to make up for certain losses that war has brought into the lives of our interlocutors, they are very keen to re-establish a routine when it comes to their professional identity, in their search for stability that would offer better future perspectives for their children. The drive to re-establish professional identities shows that the refugee mothers are doing vital work to rebuild their lives by building on the roles and resources they developed before displacement—as mothers with professions. Again, the mere imagining of a future in Germany—with a professional anchorage—gives the interlocutors access to a degree of choice and comfort and goes hand in hand with hope, as we see it, to find stability and regain a sense of perspective and meaning. It is motherhood that provides this strength and determination.

The feeling of not belonging due to unemployment and the loss and uncertainty that forced migrants often face is reflected in the scholarly literature (Gilmartin and Migge 2016; Kelly et al. 2016; Hedstrom et al. 2021; Suerbaum 2023; Akdemir 2023). We see this circumstance clearly in the account of Elizaveta, a 31-year-old woman from eastern Ukraine, who arrived in Berlin in March 2022 with her two middle-school-aged daughters. Her story reflects the so-called bordering aspect of Benchekroun's (2023: 3318–3319) 'strategic mothering' as her temporary status as a forced migrant excludes her from attaining a decent job and housing.

We live in a small studio, 15 sqm. Since there are three of us, me and two children, it's very hard to live without wall separation. And we are together all the time … (…) I'm here to protect my children. My job is to stay alive and healthy so I can raise my children. Here I'm a mother only. But I dream of being employed somehow. (…) I'm trying to get my mother-in-law to Berlin so that she can help with my two daughters because when school and kindergarten start, I have the German course, and I really want to find a job. (…) I will go back when the war is over. I never intended to emigrate. Maybe if I live here for a few years and find a good job, if my children integrate into this society, maybe something will change. But right now, I want my children to grow up with their father, with their relatives.

Elizaveta's intersecting identities as a mother and a forced migrant confronted with various inequalities render her constrained in her mothering practices, as she cannot provide for her

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children in the same manner as she used to prior to the forced migration. At the same time, the temporal protection, allowing access to immediate childcare and language instruction, provides Elizaveta a chance to make future plans shortly after her arrival, even while she simultaneously longs to be back home. Responses of resilience while being a displaced mother complicate any kind of 'free choice', even though thinking about different future case scenarios seems to give Elizaveta a sense of control and purpose (Taylor 2013: 146; Griffiths 2014).

We noticed that for the women in our study who were not so well-established professionally in Ukraine—predominantly women currently living in Frankfurt/Oder—the loss of a professional identity was less dominant. They were therefore more open to build new lives in Germany. Contrastingly, similar to the refugees in Kaya and Orchard's (2020) study, our interlocutors who were more established in Ukraine were more likely to consider really returning to Ukraine, not only after the end of the war but also when the economy in the country has recovered. They therefore were engaged to a higher degree in active waiting *to return*, whereas most of the interlocutors in Frankfurt/Oder imagined a future in Germany. Thus, despite the temporal rupture in the lives of the refugee mothers in this study, which creates a sense of temporal disorientation (Griffiths 2014; Brun 2015), the women in Frankfurt/Oder are more likely to productively use such ruptures when thinking about a future in their new space.

4.3 Mothering–alone and together

Motherhood experiences in displacement are marked by loneliness and socialization. Thirty-four-year-old Ana from eastern Ukraine came to Berlin in the beginning of March 2022 with her middle-school-aged daughter.

> *My daughter doesn't communicate with anyone here. I want her to be integrated, to find new friendships, to have activities so that she doesn't always stay at home. I have to organise everyday life for my daughter. (…) I can describe my situation as isolated. Either I take care of some bureaucratic things, or I organise my life, or I do something for the household with my daughter. Unfortunately, I have neither time nor energy to communicate with anyone right now.*

While Ana herself cannot engage in active waiting in the form of breaking out of isolation, at this moment in time, she deems it essential for her daughter to become less isolated and engage in activities outside their home. Her wishes constitute another form of active waiting, which involves the desire to normalize everyday life for her child.

Anastasia is a 37-year-old woman from southern Ukraine, who came to Berlin at the end of March 2022 with her pre-school-aged son. Her account shows how longing for socialization is intrinsically linked with a sense of loss as she and many interlocutors emphasize the importance of extracurricular activities in which their children participated in Ukraine as an important factor in the quality of their daily lives. We therefore see here, similar to Terzioglu (2023), how motherhood can serve as an active strategy against passive waiting. Reintroducing extracurricular activities or reflecting upon the wish to do so in their children's or their own lives gives the mothers a sense of 'normality', quality of life, and a common ground, all of which bring them together.

> *I couldn't find a kindergarten or a school for my child, so I have to learn German alone because my child is with me all the time. It's also difficult for him. He has no friends here and doesn't know the language. In Odessa he attended a very good kindergarten, he had a social life … He took lessons in karate, swimming, drawing. I also had my hobbies … I went dancing, worked out at the gym. Here [in Germany] I don't have that possibility; I can't leave him with anyone. I would also like to go to the gym here, or to work, because I need that. It's hard for me, too, that I can't do anything here.*

Given the political upheavals of the war and the temporal aspect of having been in Berlin for only 4 months, Anastasia is unable to organize her son's life in a way that would be mutually beneficial for both of them. Still, at this juncture, she thinks ahead, and imagines what she

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wants for herself and her child, in relation to the life she left behind, and this gives her the opportunity of formulating wishes for the future.

In the case of 38-year-old Xenia from central Ukraine, who came to Frankfurt/Oder while heavily pregnant at the end of March 2022 with her pre-school age son and her parents, being a mother gives her the strength that Krause (2022: 34) and Sossou et al. (2008) refer to in their works, namely, the ability to be resilient in a new environment. Xenia's role as a mother in displacement incentivizes her to reach out to other mothers in the 'same boat'.

> *We are in a rush all the time because of the documents … Because I have two children, I have to manage so many papers that I don't meet anyone or only have time to meet Ukrainian people here. Just like me, they have to organise their life here and we all have this task at the moment. So when we meet, we ask each other what to do with this, what to do with that. (…) They [my parents] want to go home, but they understand that I can't stay here alone. And if I get sick, for example, where can I leave my children? It's just impossible, I simply don't have anyone who can help me with them. So they stay here for that reason.*

Because Xenia's parents were able to accompany her along the journey to Germany, the family remained together, meaning that in her case, there was no extended period in which they were forced apart—a factor that provides her a significant amount of support. This circumstance manifests another form of active waiting specific to Ukrainian refugees, as their legal status, provides an opportunity for the grandparents to immediately accompany them, even while they are simultaneously usually separated from their partners. This also seems to generate a pattern where they reach out to each other, as predominantly single mothers with similar rupturing experiences and concrete basic needs in the present time are providing for their children and establishing foothold anew.

Interlocutors also mentioned that they have enrolled their children in online classes in Ukraine parallel to attending school in Germany. These women say that online schooling provides input in their children's mother tongue and that a possible return in the future will be easier if they attend online schooling, a mothering strategy to keep their children connected with peers as well. Our interviewees also express that social media platforms are helpful for them in an endeavour to break out of isolation, and perhaps as a strategy for condensing time and space to compensate for the physical distance to friends and family in Ukraine. Thus, meeting with each other online, sharing tips and experiences, has a healing function, as it makes time spent mothering less lonely. This strategy also proves once again how mothers in our study are not necessarily stuck in displacement, but are rather productive and reflective, as they engage in the process of liminality in reaching out to each other while waiting (Griffiths 2014: 5; Brun 2015: 20; Brun and Fábos 2015: 10; Baas and Yeoh 2019: 163; Etzold and Fechter 2022: 4308; Terzioglu 2023: 77).

Forty-one-year-old Natalija from eastern Ukraine came to Frankfurt/Oder in the beginning of March 2022 with her middle-school-aged son.

> *I'm in a social media platform group designed for Ukrainians in Germany and everyone asks questions there. We help each other out. And my son keeps up with Ukrainian school online, parallel with his German school lessons. I decided to support his Ukrainian schooling because he doesn't understand the German school … So at least let the teachers explain something in Ukrainian so he will understand something in his language. I don't want him to fall behind because of the language barrier.*

Natalija's story on the significance of digital networks also resonates with the recent studies on migrant maternal online communities that posit them as dynamic spaces of interaction and social support (Veazey 2022).

Our interlocutors in Frankfurt/Oder did not consciously choose this city, but rather ended up there by chance. Most of the women interviewed in Berlin, however, chose the German capital specifically because they had relatives and/or acquaintances there or because of their religious communities in Ukraine, which had organized their flight there; leaving the women in Frankfurt/Oder more isolated and without support structures, at least in the initial stage of their arrival when we interviewed them. Our interlocutors in both cities, however, express feeling

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camaraderie with other Ukrainian forced migrant mothers, whether online or offline, and mention that they reach out to each other, for example, to organize playdates for their children, which shows that socialization also takes place both for themselves and their children through motherhood. Motherhood is therefore performed in the context of feeling a sense of 'belonging' via social connections with other forced migrant mothers from Ukraine.

5. Conclusion

This paper has sought to advance the literature on the intersection of motherhood and displacement by not only demonstrating their co-constitutive nature, which render mobility processes both gendered and gendering but also, by bringing it in conversation with the 'temporality' turn in migration studies, specifically drawing on the concept of active waiting (Brun 2015).

We uncover how displacement in motherhood, or motherhood in displacement, is defined by mothers' urge to protect their children and rebuild their lives in search of stability. Motherhood is thereby reconfigured by utilizing forms of active waiting to achieve these goals. First, it is the very motherhood that prompts the urge to leave Ukraine, and it is also motherhood that leads to an embracing of life in Germany here and now. As the interlocutors visualize a future for themselves and/or their children with various possible outcomes, this circumstance gives them a sense of control and purpose. Second, the loss theme is of central significance in our interlocutors' accounts, of partners, families, homeland but also of a professional identity. The affective response of crying seems to help them to process past experiences and also to articulate future aspirations. This becomes apparent when interlocutors express feeling determined to 'move on' and build lives in Germany, for the sake of their children. It is motherhood that lends them the strength to be resilient and deal with the hardships of the new environment. Last but not least, motherhood in displacement generates new forms of maternal subjectivity as the interlocutors actively use their time to reach out to other refugee mothers who have undergone similar rupturing experiences and concrete needs to provide for their children in the present time. Their common struggles of displacement in motherhood and the peculiarity emerging out of this intersection is the very foundation of this social support that is mostly digital.

On the whole, despite the differential legal framework that has been established as a response to the refugee arrivals from Ukraine, our data show that they face similar challenges as other forced migrant mothers and employ similar strategies of motherhood to survive, protect, and provide (see Stock 2012; Benchekroun 2023). Yet, their temporary protection status seems to nevertheless save them from the overwhelming legal precarity reported by other forced migrant women and gives them some scope to reconfigure their motherhood. Their active waiting therefore also takes different forms as they are not stuck waiting in the asylum system or in transit sites; yet, they still experience an inability to conduct their lives as they used to due to the enormous rupture caused by the ongoing war. Negotiating motherhood in displacement provides room for decision-making and resilience to productively navigate a temporal disorientation, caused by displacement and actively wait, while considering a future in Germany, and/or imagining a homecoming in Ukraine.

As it is intrinsic to many social inquiries, our study is limited to offering a temporal snapshot, collecting Ukrainian refugee mothers' experiences quickly after their arrival. It is therefore important to further explore not only how their reflections on motherhood and displacement alongside emplacement processes have developed over time but also to inquire how their timelines intersect and synchronize with temporal borders of migration governance. Given the rapidly changing political circumstances and the temporary nature of the residence title given to the Ukrainian refugees, it remains to be empirically explored whether they will gain more temporal autonomy and diverge even further from other displacement experiences or whether they will be pushed towards a state of limbo.

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Acknowledgements

Above all, we thank the interviewees for sharing their reflections with us. We, moreover, wish to express gratitude to Dr Ramona Rischke, whose support and feedback throughout our research process has been very rewarding. We would also like to thank Agnès Bouché and Polina Semyonova for their student assistance. In addition, we are grateful for the invitation to organize the panel 'Forced Migrants from Ukraine: Negotiations of "Here and There"' at the conference 'Contesting 21st Century B/Orders' (September 2023), European University Frankfurt Oder. We were also pleased to have had the opportunity to discuss our work at the '4th Networking Meeting on Migration and Gender' (May 2023) at the Research Institute of the Federal Employment Agency in Nuremberg. We would like to thank the participants, and in particular Professor Dagmara Jajeśniak-Quast and Dr Katrin Menke, among others, for the constructive criticism we have received. Finally, we are indebted to the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth for its generous financial support of our work.

Conflict of interest. None declared.

Funding

The German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth financially supported this work.

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Journal of Refugee Studies, 2025, 38, 690–703
https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feae084
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