

# Hungary: The impact of Food Insecurity on Gender-Based Violence in the Ukraine Refugee Response

September 2022



# Executive Summary

The number of people facing acute food insecurity<sup>1</sup> is growing at an alarming rate in the European Union (EU) Member States of Central Eastern Europe. COVID-19 and the resulting disruption to global markets, trade, and food supply chains have negatively affected food security since 2020; now, this has been compounded by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Women and girls who have been displaced from Ukraine into Hungary are facing tremendous obstacles to their safety and wellbeing, particularly given the link between food insecurity and gender-based violence (GBV). Urgent policy responses and concrete actions are needed to support low-income households and vulnerable communities, particularly women and their families displaced from Ukraine, to stem this growing crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> The Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) describes that food insecurity in an individual occurs “when they lack regular access to enough safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life.” This can be due to unavailability of food and/or lack of resources to obtain food. Severe food insecurity is described as when someone has run out of food and gone a day without eating. For more information, see FAO (2021) “Hunger and Food Insecurity,” available at [www.fao.org/hunger/en/](http://www.fao.org/hunger/en/)

# Background:

Globally, more than 14 million people became moderately or severely food insecure from 2019 to 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup> Even prior to this, women in Central Eastern Europe experienced mild food insecurity more often than men<sup>3</sup> due to deep-rooted gender inequalities.<sup>4</sup> The war in Ukraine then led to an 8–20% price increase in the global food market, causing severe supply chain shortages in many sectors and throughout the EU. Member States in Central Eastern Europe that were already coping with high levels of acute hunger are particularly vulnerable to the risks created by the war due to their high dependency on imports of food and agriculture and their vulnerability to global food price shocks. The current global rise in food insecurity disproportionately affects women and has a range of gendered impacts, including well-established links to GBV.<sup>5</sup> Worldwide, women have a higher probability of being food insecure relative to men.<sup>6</sup> Even when women have the same level of income and education and live in

similar areas as men, their access to food is more restricted.<sup>7</sup> Specific constraints to equal food access for women and girls include: lack of access to legal rights and information; being disproportionately represented in lower-paying and insecure employment; and discriminatory gender norms that burden women with unpaid care responsibilities.

Just as these constraints exacerbate food insecurity for women and girls, they also increase the risk of GBV. Growing evidence shows that women responsible for feeding their families may be at increased risk of GBV and domestic violence during times of food shortages if they are not seen to be fulfilling their domestic duties. Women and girls living in food-insecure households are often more financially dependent on the men in their families, increasing their risk of exploitation and abuse from intimate partners, family members, or others offering assistance.<sup>8</sup> In some instances, lack of food not only drives different forms of violence, but is itself an expression of GBV: women in violent and exploitative relationships may be food insecure because their partners control their access to food and other essentials.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>2</sup> FAO (2021) Europe and Central Asia – Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2021: Statistics and trends. Budapest, <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb7493en>

<sup>3</sup> Dudek, H. and Myszkowska-Ryciak, J. (2022) Food Insecurity in Central-Eastern Europe: Does Gender Matter? Sustainability 2022, 14, 5435.

<sup>4</sup> Allen, P. and Sachs, C. (2007) Women and food chains: The gendered politics of food. International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food, 15(1), pp 1–23; Johnson, C.M. et al (2018) Relationship of food insecurity to women's dietary outcomes: A systematic review. Nutr. Rev., 76, pp. 910–928.

<sup>5</sup> Ahlenback (2021) "Brief Overview of Research, Evidence and Learning on the Links between Food Insecurity and Gender-Based Violence in Conflict-Affected Settings."

<sup>6</sup> Broussand, N. H. (2019). What explains gender differences in food insecurity? Food Policy, 83, 180–194.

<sup>7</sup> Dudek et. al. (2022)

<sup>8</sup> CARE (2020) "Left out and Left Behind: Ignoring Women will Prevent us from Solving the Hunger Crisis," <https://bit.ly/31YeEBs>

<sup>9</sup> Fraser (2020) "Food Security, VAWG and Nutrition," <https://bit.ly/3F46flg>

The war in Ukraine has left a staggering 12.8 million people displaced, the majority of whom are women and girls.<sup>10</sup> Displacement, lack of livelihoods, and food insecurity in the Ukraine refugee response has exposed displaced women and girls to a range of exploitation and abuse. Because most male family members have been forced to stay in Ukraine, a high number of female-headed households are struggling to meet their basic needs with little or no resources. Women in charge of their households face protection risks at food distribution sites; risks associated with travel to and from distribution sites; and risks of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) by aid workers, volunteers, and others engaged in the provision of food and basic assistance. These risks sometimes prevent women from going to distribution sites, which further impacts their vulnerability. Being unable to meet their families' basic needs places women at an increased risk of sexual exploitation,<sup>11</sup> dependence on abusive relationships (including with partners and in housing and labor arrangements), trafficking,<sup>12</sup> and other forms of GBV.

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<sup>10</sup> [https://voiceamplified.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/REGIONAL\\_ASSESSMENT\\_REPORT.pdf](https://voiceamplified.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/REGIONAL_ASSESSMENT_REPORT.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> IASC (2015), Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action: Reducing risk, promoting resilience and aiding recovery – Livelihoods; FAO (2021); Ahlenback (2021); CARE (2020); and Fraser (2020).

<sup>12</sup> Some international standards, such as The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children (UN Protocol), recognize that traffickers often use subtle forms of “deception or the abuse of power or a position of vulnerability” to ensnare their victims.

# Case Study:

## Hungary

Food insecurity is a rising issue for refugee populations displaced in Hungary. Prices for most staple goods have increased 30–40%, and caps have been placed on the quantity of key items (such as oil and flour) an individual can buy at the grocery store.<sup>13</sup> The latest price increases only add to Hungary's already high food prices, which some reported were at a 10-year high and were the third-highest in the EU before the war.<sup>14</sup> Women-headed households, low income households, and vulnerable groups are now in a desperate situation.

In July and August of 2022, VOICE conducted a survey at food distribution points as well as site observations, discussions with local partner organizations, and discussions with displaced Ukrainian women themselves. At one women- and Ukrainian-run food distribution center, VOICE spoke to 23 women about their experiences. The following are key findings from this outreach:

- **Many displaced Ukrainians are not receiving assistance.** Temporary protection status (TPS) payments, which are made by the Hungarian government, are not reaching many of the refugee families. Of those who have received their TPS payments, many reported that the amounts are too small to cover their basic needs, including purchasing weekly groceries. Of the 23 women VOICE spoke with at the food distribution site, all but one woman were registered for TPS, yet only 52% had received cash assistance from the government—despite some having been registered since March. Of the respondents, 35% were staying in private temporary accommodations offered by volunteers or in shelters, and the rest were renting their own flats, with fears about how much longer they could afford to do so. They told us:

*“We don't have any means of subsistence. We are from Mykolaiv, we cannot return home.”*

*“We are a big family, there are eight of us, four of us are children. We don't know anything about our future accommodation or about the education of our children. It is getting colder and we need more clothes and shoes.”*

<sup>13</sup> <https://tradingeconomics.com/hungary/food-inflation>; [www.dw.com/en/hungarians-feel-the-sting-of-rising-prices/av-62670367](http://www.dw.com/en/hungarians-feel-the-sting-of-rising-prices/av-62670367)

<sup>14</sup> <https://dailynewshungary.com/hungarian-food-prices-third-highest-in-the-eu/>; [www.agroberichtenbuitenland.nl/actueel/nieuws/2022/03/25/hungary-war-food-prices](http://www.agroberichtenbuitenland.nl/actueel/nieuws/2022/03/25/hungary-war-food-prices); <https://dailynewshungary.com/food-shortages-in-hungary-here-are-all-you-need-to-know/>

52% of women told VOICE they meet their basic needs by living in free or sponsored accommodation and receiving donations and humanitarian assistance. One woman said: *“We live in a house of a Hungarian family until the end of August. We ask for some everyday hygiene products at volunteer organizations.”* Only 30% reported that they have some savings, which—combined with humanitarian assistance and frugal shopping decisions—helps them meet their needs:

*“We pick up food at distributions instead of buying food [to save money for an accommodation].”*

57% reported that the food assistance they receive from the center, though very welcome, is not enough to meet their needs. 52% had never received any kind of assistance from any other organization before. A few women—20%—reported getting food vouchers once before from Lidl, KIK or Tesco; only 30% had received assistance before at other distributors, which have since closed down, or at places that periodically provide assistance. When asked about their future and how they were going to cover their basic needs, most women did not know how to answer. One woman told us plainly: *“We are waiting for the end of the war.”*

- Compounding this issue is the fact that **refugees are largely unable to access the labor market** to provide or supplement their income. Many of the newly arriving women and children are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds with fewer resources to begin with,<sup>15</sup> and face additional obstacles in finding suitable work. Language barriers and caretaking responsibilities, especially for female-headed households, also contribute to refugees’ financial strain and inability to access work:

*“We left Kharkiv after the 40th day of the war. We have problems [accessing services] because of the language.” -Refugee mother*

*“It is hard to find a job, because my daughter is 6 years old and I don’t have anyone to help me with her. She will [hopefully] go to the kindergarten [in the Fall] and it will be easier.” - woman at food distribution site*

*“I need support because I have two children and I don’t have the opportunity to work full time.” - woman at food distribution site*

<sup>15</sup> UNHCR has documented an increase in internally displaced persons (IDP) arrivals from the Transcarpathian region. A historically poorer region in Ukraine, families who were internally displaced there before coming to Hungary are at increased risk of food insecurity.



*“I am alone with my children so I cannot work.” - woman at food distribution site*

Only one refugee surveyed had a job at the time; she was the breadwinner in her family trying to provide for her sick husband and child, and told us: *“My husband got injured on the job, so he cannot work. My daughter also had a leg operation on the 18th of July. We don’t have money. We have been asked to move out of our flat. There is also a problem with finding a school for our daughter.”*

Women with disabilities and elderly persons in their family reported similar difficulties, highlighting the often-unspoken burden of care placed on women:

*“I am disabled since childhood, my mum has been a pensioner since 2009, I can’t work.”  
- woman at food distribution site*

*“We don’t have anything, because of my health conditions I cannot work.”  
- woman at food distribution site*

*“My son is disabled due to a congenital genetic abnormality and two strokes. I can’t leave him and go to work. After the second stroke, his memory has not recovered, and I have to be there for him at all times.” - Refugee mother*

- **Minorities face compounded difficulties due to discrimination and institutionalized racism.** It has been documented that members of the Roma community are being denied assistance registering for TPS and accessing other social and humanitarian services, even though many speak Hungarian and are able to directly communicate with service providers. It has also been well-documented that without the presence of any legal assistance, members of the Roma community are often denied their basic human rights.<sup>16</sup>
- **Service providers and volunteer groups are reaching their limit.** Support for refugees from the general Hungarian population was initially high at the beginning of the war. Hungarian volunteers met refugees at the borders and train stations with pre-made sandwiches and supplies, and there was an eagerness to welcome people into their homes. However, the sustained pressure of new arrivals has impacted this good will. Though the numbers of refugees crossing the border has decreased from the peak of the displacement, over 100,000 people continue to cross weekly, with over 75% of these being women and children. As can be expected, the volunteer groups have reached their operational capacities, reporting burnout, low funding, and declining public interest in their works. Media presence and interest has gradually declined as well, as has the visibility of refugees, particularly after the relocation of a major reception center in the Budapest central train station. Many in the public perceive the worst of the displacement crisis to be over and that large-scale assistance is no longer required.

<sup>16</sup> Kinga, Júlia Kiraly, et al. (2021) “Roma in Hungary: The Challenges of Discrimination.” Minority Rights Group, 31 Mar. 2021, <https://minorityrights.org/publications/roma-hungary/>.

*“Hungarians are now very much aware of the economic problems they will be facing this autumn and winter. They are beginning to think, ‘Why should we help Ukrainians, when we have our own problems?’” - Hungarian volunteer*

- Service providers, however, have noticed a demonstrable increase in demand for food assistance over the month prior to the survey—mostly from single mothers, mothers with multiple children, and the elderly. One local food distributor serving around 115 people each week has a waiting list of more than 100 people—and that number increases each day, despite not advertising their services. Mothers and children who were previously relying on these hot meal programs and grocery distribution assistance are now faced with limited options. One refugee mother described: *“All the money we have from ‘part-time work’ and savings are used to pay the rent, and we are trying to save for a deposit on a flat [for long-term accommodation]. So, there is a catastrophic lack of money for proper food at the moment.”* Many local service providers do not have the capacity to meet current demand and are running out of funding. Women in the refugee community report concerns about how to manage and finance childcare, meals and accommodation. Mothers are therefore at increasing risk of being forced into unsafe employment, exploitation, abuse, and sex trafficking.
- **It is hard to gather reliable information on how many refugees are in Hungary and where they are staying.** There is a large discrepancy between the reported number of border crossings (>1,940,000) and the total applications for TPS (>28,000).<sup>17</sup> Border movements are complex, and only about 40% of those crossing into Hungary report intending to stay in the country. This lack of reliable data impacts service planning and delivery, as key organizations do not have the necessary data to organize strategic interventions. As women and girls are often moved from temporary reception centers in cities to more remote shelters in the Hungarian countryside, their access to information and outside support is even further limited. Coupled with a disjointed and sometimes disconnected humanitarian response, it can lead to misunderstandings about the context and what is needed. For example, in a recent meeting between VOICE and a local partner, a well-financed, women-led initiative said, *“We have not seen many refugees, and people stopped calling us and offering to collaborate. We have money to prepare hot meals and support hot food distribution, but it does not seem like many people need it.”* This conversation occurred one day after more than 750 refugees (300 families of mostly mothers and children) showed up at a food and non-food items (NFI) distribution point, overwhelming the service; at one point, extra security was called as people were becoming aggressive and fighting over supplies.

<sup>17</sup> UNHCR, Hungary Daily Fact Sheet, August 2022. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/dataviz/229?sv=54&geo=10783>



- **Coordination is lacking and key voices are missing from the conversations.** Coordination structures are focusing on providing quantitative updates rather than coordinating strategic planning of humanitarian assistance.<sup>18</sup> Attendance in UN-led coordination meetings<sup>19</sup> has also decreased in recent weeks, and key actors are often missing from the discussions. In the food sector especially, most work is carried out by Ukrainian-led organizations and local groups; however, none of these organizations regularly attend coordination meetings, and some of the last remaining representatives from community initiatives are deciding the working groups are not worth their already limited time:

*“What a waste of time. When key issues are raised (at the Basic Needs Working Group), they say they are just getting caught up to speed on these issues and we should discuss more later. Then when you follow up, no one responds or they say it is not in their mandate. I’m never attending these meetings again.” - Local volunteer at a women’s organization*

Building on this, many women’s rights organizations feel sidelined, tokenized, and frustrated with the top-down approach of the humanitarian response. Instead of feeling supported and listened to, women’s rights actors report feeling overwhelmed by reporting requirements and other demands. Despite calls for refugee inclusion, women-led Ukrainian organizations are notably missing from coordination structures.

This lack of coordination is occurring at a time when food insecurity is growing and access to services is decreasing. Organizations have been sounding the alarm for months about the growing divide between their dwindling resources and the number of refugees applying for assistance. In the month of July 2022 alone, four local organizations previously providing hot food and groceries to more than 750 refugees (primarily women and children) either temporarily stopped distributing food or closed down entirely. Local organizations, believing international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) should be taking care of this basic need, are looking for INGO leadership and financing to fill these gaps.

<sup>18</sup> UNHCR and its new leadership are beginning to take steps to address this issue. In response to community concerns and the topic of food insecurity dominating Working Group meetings in the last week of July, UNHCR is planning an ad-hoc meeting with food distribution actors in August.

<sup>19</sup> Such as the Inter-agency Working Group, the PSEA Task Force, the Protection Working Group, the Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Task force, the Child Protection and Education Sub-Working Groups, and the Basic Needs Working Group; for more information, see <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/91521>

# Recommendations

Based on the findings above, VOICE makes the following recommendations:

- **Support the role and leadership of women-led organizations in the basic needs sector and humanitarian response.** Women and girls are best placed to understand and speak to the issues they face—including GBV and SEA in the food distribution process. Women’s participation and leadership in all food security initiatives is key to bringing greater attention to these issues and intensifying action for solutions.
- **Fund local initiatives focused on food and NFI distribution, especially those that are women- and Ukrainian-run.** With decreasing donations, volunteers, and visibility, civil society organizations are struggling to meet the demands of the refugee community. Their response efforts need to be bolstered with funding and capacity-building assistance.
- **Increase and improve TPS assistance to women-headed and minority households.** The provision of adequate cash assistance and access to long-term accommodation is an essential step in addressing the food insecurity crisis.
- **Include the voices of women and girls impacted by this crisis in all aspects of decision-making.** Whenever possible, they should be invited directly to the decision-making table; whenever this isn’t possible, concrete steps should be taken to ensure their consultation and the collection of their input.
- **Coordinate across sectors to ensure key information on GBV is shared;** this will help support timely decision-making and planning to mitigate GBV risks linked to escalating food insecurity conditions.
- **Lead the uptake of the IASC Guidelines for Integrating Gender-based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action.**<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> <https://gbvguidelines.org/en/>

## Conclusion

It is clear that food insecurity is disproportionately impacting the lives of refugee women and girls in Hungary. Particular care and attention is needed to provide them with sufficient and targeted assistance. Special considerations must be made for remote and hard-to-reach populations, as well as minority groups who face additional barriers and discrimination. More scrutiny is also needed in collecting data of refugees' profiles to provide more targeted assistance.

Ensuring women and their children have access to food and basic needs is not only an essential goal of humanitarian aid—it is critical to preventing violence against women and girls in all its forms. To effectively respond to the needs of women and girls, and to prevent exploitation and other forms of GBV, the voices of refugee women and girls and the organizations that serve them must be heard and centered.