



# “I’ve lost the life I knew”

*Older people’s experiences of the Ukraine war and their inclusion in the humanitarian response*

## Summary



**HelpAge**

International



Bogdan Rozumny/HelpAge International

Lyudmila, 62, lives in a shelter with her husband and son, both of whom have disabilities.

## Summary

**The situation in Ukraine has been described as the oldest humanitarian crisis in the world, with 8.9 million people, or 24 per cent of the population, over 60. Older Ukrainians face disproportionate barriers to accessing essential items and support, due to poverty and the limited accessibility of assistance, services, and information.**

All older people, including older people with disabilities, have the right to life, food, water, adequate shelter, adequate healthcare, including essential medicines, information, and to humanitarian assistance, all on an equal basis with others at all times.

This report shows that older people's human rights are at risk as a result of the war in Ukraine, despite significant efforts to support them. In particular, this research finds that the experiences of older people during the war are diverse, and documents how specific sections of the older population face disproportionate risks.

These include older women of all ages, older people over 70, and older people with disabilities.

While there is a recognition among humanitarian actors and Ukrainian government officials that older people face particular risks, and there are certain International/Non-Government Organisation (I/NGO) initiatives targeting them, assistance remains insufficient, particularly in efforts to reach the most at risk.

Findings in this report are primarily from a December 2022 national survey of 400 older Ukrainians as well as focus group discussions and key informant interviews conducted by the Ukrainian research firm Info Sapiens and commissioned by HelpAge International. It is the first nationally representative survey of older people in Ukraine during the war. Data from some of Info Sapiens' 2022 nationally representative surveys of all Ukrainians, including older people, are also used, as well as testimony from HelpAge interviews with older Ukrainians. Where possible, findings are corroborated by other sources.

## Older women are more at risk

Older women in Ukraine are facing significantly more financial difficulties and barriers to accessing essential goods and assistance.

- 61 per cent of women report that they do not have enough money to cover their basic needs, compared to 46 per cent of men.
- Women's average pensions are 30 per cent smaller than those of men. While 22 per cent of older women live below the government's minimum monthly subsistence level of 2,093 UAH (\$57), only 13 per cent of older men do.
- 34 per cent of women live alone, compared to just 24 per cent of men.
- For those who live with others, women are less likely to be the head of their household, and therefore may have less power in decision-making, including control over finances and purchases.
- There are nearly three times as many internally displaced older women (14 per cent) than older men (5 per cent).
- More older men (22 per cent) reported receiving humanitarian assistance from NGOs and INGOs than older women (13 per cent).

There are a number of likely factors for this finding, including that there are more older women than older men in the population; older women more often live alone; are less likely to still be in the workforce and thus interacting with others; and report lower mobile phone and internet use, all resulting in less access to information and connection to networks and organisations providing assistance and support.

## Risks increase with age

The risks facing older people in Ukraine continue to increase as they age. Older people over 70 are more likely to be alone, face more obstacles to receiving information, and face greater risk of having insufficient money to make ends meet than those 60–69 years old.

- Older people over 70 (42 per cent) rely significantly more on modest government pensions, subsidies and payments compared those in their sixties (27 per cent).
- People over 70 are less likely to work and thus have salary income. Only 8 per cent had work in the last three months, compared to 25 per cent of those age 60–69.
- People over 70 have much greater difficulties accessing food: 8 per cent reported that they face obstacles compared to 2 per cent of people 60–69.
- Regarding medicines and assistive products, 14 per cent report barriers to accessing them, compared to 10 per cent of those 60–69.
- Older people over 70 are more than two times more likely to live alone (44 per cent) than those in their 60s (19 per cent).

- Only 40 per cent of people over 70 use the internet, compared to people 60–69 years old (70 per cent).

The fact that people over 70 more often live alone and use the internet less frequently puts them at risk of not accessing accurate and timely information about evacuations, available assistance, and news about the war on an equal basis with others.

*“I live with my 84-year-old husband who needs medicines for his condition after a stroke. A month ago, I fell while trying to carry him, and they had to put a cast on my leg. We both need treatment, but I have not received assistance apart from some food that volunteers have brought us. I don't know where I would even apply to receive medicine.”*  
Lidiya, 80, interviewed by HelpAge

## More barriers for older people with disabilities

Twenty-four per cent of older people identified as having a disability, compared to 13 per cent among the total population.<sup>1</sup> Twenty per cent of older people had physical disabilities that impact their mobility and 6 per cent said they were blind or had low vision.

People with low mobility with whom we spoke described particular barriers that they face as a result of the war, including access to food, medicine, and routine or emergency medical care including due to the lack of support to leave home.

- 16 per cent reported that low mobility impeded their access to medicines and assistive devices.
- 14 per cent said it was difficult to reach the doctor because of low mobility.
- 9 per cent said low mobility disabilities and limited their access food.
- People over 70 reported more obstacles related to low mobility than those 60–69.

*“The Russian soldiers had a barricade in our yard. My sister and I were in the cellar, and my husband, who is 73, remained in the house because he is in a wheelchair, and we simply could not take him with us.”*  
Lyubov, 76, interviewed by HelpAge

## Mental health under strain

The mental health and psychosocial impacts of the war for older people are persistent and worrisome. Fifty-five per cent of older people said that the war had impacted them emotionally because of separation from their loved ones, loneliness or isolation, disagreements with relatives or friends, and loss of loved ones.

In the last month:

- 82 per cent said they often or sometimes felt distress.
- 76 per cent of older people reported often or sometimes feeling anxious.
- 42 per cent said that they found it difficult to cope, and that they felt often or sometimes unable to perform daily tasks.

*“The most difficult thing was to leave my home, though only ruins were left. But leaving the place where you were living for so many years. This was difficult, and not everyone will understand. My son took me from there. Everything seems to be good here. But I see this house in my dreams every day. Well, it’s hard to talk about this.”*

Lidiya, 69

*“No more usual routine, I’ve lost the life I once knew. It changed, both psychologically and – not physically and financially, but psychologically – for sure.”*

Volodymyr, 64

## Older people stayed behind

This study finds that older people are less likely to evacuate from their homes and communities – a trend observed in other research on the war in Ukraine and research from other conflicts. Eleven per cent of all internally displaced people in Ukraine are older, while 18 per cent of the total population is internally displaced. Older people can thus remain in hard-to-reach areas and in difficult conditions more often than others.

Older people surveyed for this report overwhelmingly remain in their own homes (84 per cent), about equally in private houses and private flats. Among them, 59 per cent reported poor living conditions: 12 per cent said that their home had been damaged or destroyed, and 13 per cent said they need urgent repairs. Many also report severe problems due to blackouts, which can lead to disruptions in electricity and water. While blackouts impact nearly everyone in Ukraine to varying degrees, older people can be more at risk in cold temperatures and may face more obstacles to finding, buying, and/or carrying water and other essentials into their homes.



Oleksandr, 73, lives in a shelter after losing his home in the war.

Bogdan Rozumnyi/HelpAge International

## Basic needs going unmet

The majority of older people surveyed (56 per cent) report that their income does not cover their basic needs, including food, clothes, hygiene items, utilities, medicine, and healthcare. The share of older people who reported cutting back on food to save money increased from 23 per cent in February 2022 to 35 per cent in December 2022. While the majority (54 per cent) of older people surveyed said they had easy access to necessary medicines and assistive devices, of those that didn't most (78 per cent) said that they cannot afford them.<sup>2</sup> Pensions have historically been low in Ukraine and difficult to survive on. In 2022, the government raised pension rates by 14 per cent, yet 27 per cent inflation over the course of the year decimated older people's purchasing power.<sup>3</sup>

*“Medicines are the number one need, because we can't live without them. Food and clothes are at the end of the list. We take clothes, or food. It's possible to eat what's available – potatoes, sour cream, milk – and it's enough. But medicines are, of course, essential.”*

Volodymyr, 64

## Lack of access to information and assistance

Thirty per cent of older people said that they need access to information about available humanitarian support and assistance but cannot access such information. Information is frequently distributed via messenger apps on smart phones and the internet. However, older people are three times less likely to use mobile phones and smart phones than the overall population and can have less access to the internet, particularly older women and those over 70. Nearly half of the older people surveyed received crucial information by word of mouth. Twenty-eight per cent said they would prefer information about assistance to be communicated via television.

In our survey, 84 per cent of older people stated that they had not received support from NGOs and international humanitarian organisations during the war. Of those who did, more than half (55 per cent) said it was very easy to do so, though women found it more challenging than men. People most often received cash assistance and food.<sup>4</sup> As of December 2022, older people received less financial assistance from various sources, including government, NGO, and private business or persons, on average compared to the amount received by the total population. Older people received a total of 2,063 UAH (US\$56) compared to 5,294 UAH (US\$144) for the total population.<sup>5</sup>

Government officials and NGO and UN representatives interviewed demonstrated awareness of the particular concerns for older people and described programmes to provide assistance and support to them. At the same time, they corroborated the key findings of this report: that there is insufficient assistance reaching older people.



Jonathan Moore/HelpAge International

**Lyubov, 85, lives by herself in Zaporizhzhia and volunteers everyday to support internally displaced families.**

## Older people supporting their communities

Older people have remained active and engaged in their communities, as people interviewed for this report described.

For example, one woman, 70, said she actively volunteers to support others in different ways, including assisting displaced people with clothes and providing blankets and bed linens to the local hospital. She said she really wants to be useful to the community and to Ukraine:

*“I feel like a part of the community, I like volunteering. I feel better because I work as a volunteer. And I try to do this even more. And in the future, even when the war is over, I will be involved in the volunteer movement.”*

Tetyana, 70

Another woman, 65, who has been displaced from eastern Ukraine, volunteers to help other displaced older people by offering them guidance on available assistance and services and providing emotional support:

*“Both my husband and I were inspired by volunteers who helped us when we first moved to a new place. Having gone through the same experience as them, being around the same age, we realised that we are in a unique position to extend the same kindness to others.”*

Nataliia, 65

## The way forwards

### A human rights based approach

To ensure the equal treatment and dignity of older people, principles that underpin all human rights, humanitarian actors, including the Ukrainian government, must consider the particular support and actions that enable older people to fully realise their rights. For example, in order to ensure the right to health, officials and others should provide dignified forms of support for older people with low mobility to leave their homes to reach a hospital or pharmacy or arrange for goods and services to be delivered at home. To ensure the right to an adequate standard of living, older people may require additional financial or other forms of support as well as greater access to existing financial assistance compared to others. Those who do not use mobile phones or the internet nevertheless have the right to information on an equal basis with others, and thus phones may need to be distributed or information should be published in accessible formats and disseminated through other means.

These types of responses are the necessary means to ensure equal enjoyment of fundamental human rights and to adequately apply humanitarian principles, which states and organisations are obligated to ensure.

### Strengthening humanitarian systems for inclusion

The experience of older people in Ukraine is not entirely unique. HelpAge’s research in countries around the world has found that older people are not sufficiently included in humanitarian response and can be particularly at risk of human rights violations, including freedom from violence, neglect, abuse, hunger, and others.<sup>6</sup>

Due to failures among governments and humanitarian agencies to consider their specific requirements and ensure accessibility and equal treatment, older people often face barriers in accessing accurate and timely information, evacuations, humanitarian aid, and services.

This research is the first of its kind during the war in Ukraine: a nationally representative survey of older people from across the country, with data disaggregated based on age and gender to better understand the specific concerns and hardships for different cohorts of older people. This is unusual for a humanitarian crisis where data and information on the particular experiences of older people are rarely captured. The findings illustrate that typical data collection, which either excludes older people or only considers people over 60 as a single cohort, risks missing key information that is essential to inform policy-making and programming. The same is true when there is a failure to examine the specific experiences of older women and older people with disabilities.



Jonathan Moore/HelpAge International

**Michail, 65, says volunteering has given him a purpose and helped managed the psychological effects of the war.**



Dmytro Maksymenko/HelpAge International

Lidiya, 80, in her apartment in Bucha.

## Key recommendations

**These recommendations provide a guide to those working in Ukraine and for strengthening humanitarian systems more broadly.**

- 1. The Government of Ukraine, UN agencies and I/NGOs must uphold the rights of older women and men and proactively address their needs in the humanitarian response to the war in Ukraine.**
- 2. Humanitarian actors' projects should prioritise support for older people, in particular older women, and people over 70, due to the specific risks they face and the barriers to accessing essential goods and services and humanitarian assistance, including access to financial assistance, information, food, medicines, healthcare, transportation, in-home care and support services, and psychological support services.**
- 3. Consistent with their human rights obligations and accountability to affected populations, humanitarian actors should actively support the engagement and participation of older people and incorporate their perspectives into decision-making, programming, and implementation.**
- 4. Humanitarian actors should regularly collect, analyse, report, and use data on older people disaggregated by age cohort, gender, and disability.**
- 5. Humanitarian actors should develop and implement policies and hire and train staff with the skills and knowledge to deliver age, gender and disability responsive approaches, in close consultation with older people.**
- 6. Information about assistance should be communicated via multiple mediums and in a variety of accessible formats.**



Stefan Trappe/HelpAge International

Helena, 91, fled to Lviv with four generations of her family; they now live together in what was a school classroom.

Find out more:

[www.helpage.org/ukraine](http://www.helpage.org/ukraine)

**HelpAge International is a global network of organisations promoting the right of all older people to lead dignified, healthy and secure lives.**

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Front cover photo: Some social care centres offer a place for older people to receive and share information about available assistance. Bogdan Rozumnyi/HelpAge International

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#### Endnotes

1. Thirteen percent of all adults surveyed in Info Sapiens December 2022 telephone survey of 1,000 Ukrainian citizens aged 16+, including 285 (29 per cent) people over 60, using CATI methodology. The fieldwork took place from 12–18 December 2022.
2. Info Sapiens surveys, February 2022, and December 2022. Sample size constitutes 1,000 Ukrainian citizens aged 16+. The methodology of February 2022 survey was face-to-face interview at the respondent's home, and the methodology for the December 2022 survey was CATI.
3. Rivne Regional State Administration, *Recalculation of pensions from December 1: to whom the payments will increase and by how much*, 2 December 2022, <https://www.rv.gov.ua/news/pererahunok-pensij-z-1-grudnya-komu-pidvishchat-viplati-i-naskilki>; Pension Fund of Ukraine, "Results of pension calculations," 19 October 2022, <https://www.pfu.gov.ua/2154318-rezultaty-provedenyh-pererahunkiv-rozmiriv-pensij/?fbclid=IwAR3zk6n1AivDIEM6le9m8l8V6YjKvnZ6BeCAcl6CgKYmBHRS4szZkKPXOuM>
4. Info Sapiens December 2022 telephone survey of 1,000 Ukrainian citizens aged 16+, including 285 (29 per cent) people over 60, using CATI methodology. The fieldwork took place from 12–18 December 2022.
5. Ibid.
6. HelpAge International & Age international, *If not now, when? Keeping promises to older people affected by humanitarian crises*, 2020. <https://www.helpage.org/what-we-do/if-not-now-when/>