

EASTERN EUROPE: Feminized migration, war-driven displacement and remittance dependency under strain

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Long-term emigration is feminized, while recent flows show diverging patterns between Moldova and Ukraine. Moldova and Ukraine continue to experience rising emigration, driven by poor economic conditions, instability and the full-scale war in Ukraine. However, while women from Moldova and Ukraine constitute more than half of emigrants abroad,¹ recent annual emigration statistics in Moldova are suggesting an increasingly male-dominated pattern.²

Labour migration sustains households and care systems abroad, while creating care and skills deficits at home. Prior to the full-scale war, Ukrainian labour migration to the EU exceeded 900,000 residence permits for work in 2021, and after a brief decline in 2022 has continued rising again in 2023 following the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive.³ Women now constitute a large share of Ukrainian workers abroad, often concentrated in services and care.⁴ Moldovan labour migration has remained more stable and highly

feminized, particularly towards Italy and Poland, where demand for domestic and elder care continues to rely heavily on women migrants.⁵ Together, these data illustrate how women's emigration from both countries underpins household survival and care systems abroad, while contributing to sustained labour, skills and care deficits at home. Educational migration further reinforces these trends, with the number of students – mostly women – studying abroad surpassing 10 per cent since the start of the full-scale invasion.⁶

¹ UNDESA. 2025. [International Stock Migration 2024](#). Table 2.

² National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova. 2025. [International Migration by Citizenship, Age Groups and Sex \(2014–2023\)](#).

³ Eurostat. 2025. [All valid permits by reason, length of validity and citizenship on 31 December of each year](#) [imigr_resvalid__custom_18266111].

⁴ IOM. 2024. [Poland: Economic Inclusion and Livelihoods of Refugees from Ukraine](#). DTM Quarterly Report, October–December 2024.

⁵ Toc, S., and D. Gutu. 2021. "Migration and elderly care work in Italy: Three stories of Romanian and Moldovan care workers." *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* 10(2), pp. 71–90; Cojocar. 2021. "In the back of my mind, time always ticks one hour forward: The transnational temporalities of Moldovan domestic workers in Italy." *Population, Space and Place* 27(5), e2406.

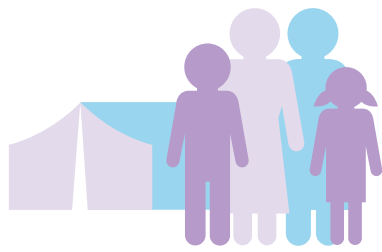
⁶ Stadniy, Y. 2025. "Student Migration to Western Universities: How Many Ukrainians Left between 2008 and 2023 — and Where." *Vox Ukraine*.

Women
make up over
50%
of emigrants

In 2021,
900,000+
Ukrainian work permits
issued in the EU



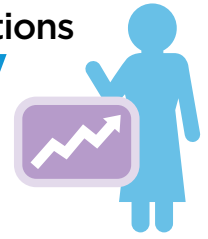
In Moldova,
remittances
dropped from
14% → 10.5%
of GDP



5.75M
Ukrainians fled
due to war (2025)

Asylum applications
increased by

25%
(2022–2024)



Remittance dependency remains high, offering limited security for women. Remittances remain a critical income source, even as their share of gross domestic product (GDP) declined between 2022 and 2024.⁷ While remittances have been central to Moldova's economic model, their recent decline has added pressure in a context of persistent rural poverty, limited services and low labour force participation.⁸ In this context, remittances continue to sustain household consumption but do not translate into stable or long-term economic security for women, particularly those engaged in low-paid and informal sectors abroad.

War-driven displacement has profoundly reshaped gendered mobility patterns. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 triggered one of the largest refugee crises in Europe, with **5.75 million** Ukrainians, mostly women and children, fleeing by October 2025, mainly to neighbouring EU countries and to Moldova.⁹ Most of the recently arrived Ukrainians rely on the EU Temporary Protection Directive, while a smaller share apply for asylum. From 2022–2024, asylum applications by Ukrainians increased by **25 per cent**,¹⁰ while applications from Moldovans declined slightly. Women dominate the Ukrainian refugee population, although the gender gap has narrowed, with Germany, Poland and Czechia hosting the largest shares. Moldova has received a disproportionately high number of refugees, mostly women and children, yet only **about half** of working-age refugee women are economically active,¹¹ reflecting care responsibilities, age composition and limited job

opportunities. The proximity of Moldova to Ukraine was cited by around 37 per cent of women in some studies as the reason for relocating there, compared to only 17 per cent of men.¹² While host countries benefit from refugees' potential contribution to labour markets and demographic renewal, integration challenges persist, particularly for women, including language barriers, care responsibilities, risks of exploitation and uncertainty about long-term status. These challenges are especially acute for Moldovan women, who face standard asylum procedures, lower recognition rates and weaker support networks than Ukrainian beneficiaries of temporary protection. Women's regular immigration is therefore driven primarily by forced displacement, family reunification and education, reinforcing gendered constraints on labour market access and increasing pressure on social and care services, particularly in Moldova. In addition to those who have fled abroad, Ukraine continues to host a large internally displaced population.¹³ By 2024, the IDP population had stabilized at 3.66 million, with nearly **60 per cent**¹⁴ of IDP households female-headed. Patterns of return are similarly gendered: women constitute **68 per cent** of returnees,¹⁵ often driven by caregiving responsibilities and constraints in host countries, such as childcare shortages, high living costs and integration barriers, rather than by improved security or sustainable livelihoods at origin. As a result, many women return in precarious conditions, reinforcing fragile household arrangements and increasing exposure to economic insecurity and gender-based violence.

⁷ World Bank. 2024. [Personal Remittances, Received](#) (% of GDP). This figure changed from 14 to 10.5 per cent in Moldova, and from 10.4 per cent to 6.3 per cent in Ukraine between 2022 and 2024.

⁸ World Bank. 2025. ["Moldova poverty and equity brief." April 2025.](#)

⁹ UNHCR. 2025. [Ukraine Refugee Situation.](#)

¹⁰ Ibid.


¹¹ UNHCR. 2025. [Inclusion and Solutions Working Group – Moldova.](#) Meeting Note, 13 August.

¹² IOM calculations with data from IOM 2024 crossings back survey data.


¹³ UNHCR. 2025. [Refugee Data Finder.](#)

¹⁴ IOM. 2025. [Displacement and Return in Ukraine: An Analysis of Trends, Drivers and Movement Intentions.](#)

¹⁵ 72 IOM. 2025. [Displacement and Return in Ukraine: An Analysis of Trends, Drivers and Movement Intentions;](#) Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM). June.



**Only
50%**
of refugee women are
economically active



**Nearly
60%**
of IDP households
are female-headed

Trafficking risks remain gendered and are exacerbated by conflict and economic insecurity.¹⁶ Moldova and Ukraine remain trafficking hotspots, with risks heightened by war, displacement and economic insecurity. In Moldova, the number of identified victims decreased between 2020 and 2024, yet men accounted for **60 per cent**,¹⁷ mainly due to forced labour and criminal exploitation. Trafficking of women and children – especially for sexual exploitation and domestic servitude – remains underreported.¹⁸ In Ukraine, labour exploitation dominates trafficking cases, followed by sexual exploitation, with women and children facing the highest protection risks.¹⁹ Across both countries, gendered patterns persist: men are exploited mainly in construction and agriculture, while women and girls are targeted in informal care, domestic and hospitality sectors and through online recruitment, with weak detection and limited support leaving many survivors without protection.

Environmentally driven mobility is emerging but remains weakly measured and gendered in impact. In both Moldova and Ukraine, climate change and environmental degradation are increasingly interacting with economic fragility and conflict to shape mobility patterns, though these movements remain under documented in official statistics. In Moldova, recurrent droughts, soil degradation, floods and landslides undermine agriculture and rural livelihoods, often prompting male labour migration while women remain to sustain farms, manage households and absorb intensified unpaid care and subsistence responsibilities.²⁰ This dynamic reinforces feminized “left-behind” responsibilities and economic precarity.²¹ Meanwhile, in Ukraine environmental risks intersect with war-related destruction.²² Across both countries, these dynamics reinforce gendered inequalities, pushing women into precarious living and work arrangements and increasing exposure to poverty and gender-based violence.²³

¹⁶ UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime). 2025. [Study on Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Migrants in the Context of the Displacement Caused by the War against Ukraine](#).

¹⁷ Council of Europe. 2025. [Fourth Evaluation Round: Measures to Prevent and Detect Vulnerability to Human Trafficking](#).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ UNODC. 2025. [Study on Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Migrants in the Context of the Displacement Caused by the War against Ukraine](#).

²⁰ IOM. 2025. [Climate Change, Migration and Adaptation in the Republic of Moldova: A Case Study on the Contributions of Migration to Climate-Resilient Development](#).

²¹ Ibid.

²² WWF (World Wildlife Federation). 2024. [Assessing the environmental impacts of the war in Ukraine](#).

²³ UN Women. 2023. [Ensuring Safe and Regular Migration for Women and Girls in the Context of Climate Change](#).

UN Women exists to advance women's rights, gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. As the lead UN entity on gender equality, we shift laws, institutions, social behaviours and services to close the gender gap and build an equal world for all women and girls. We keep the rights of women and girls at the centre of global progress – always, everywhere. Because gender equality is not just what we do. It is who we are.