



România

Until we are all equal

# Invisible Wounds

**Navigating  
Mental Health  
Challenges  
and Support  
for Ukrainian  
Adolescent  
Boys and  
Young Men.**

**Study report  
March 2025**

**Executive summary**

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Photo: Isaccea border crossing staff wait for the next boat to arrive. © Plan International / George Calin



The full-scale war in Ukraine has profoundly disrupted the lives of all Ukrainians, affecting families, communities, and social structures both within the country and in host countries such as Poland, Romania, and Moldova. The war has led to mass displacement, endangered lives, health and safety, exposed civilians to violence, and severely disrupted education, employment, and essential services.

While much of the humanitarian response has primarily focused on women and children, the MHPSS needs of adolescent boys and young men have often remained **overlooked**. As the war persists, they encounter **distinct mental health and psychosocial challenges** shaped by displacement, gender expectations, exposure to violence, and structural barriers to accessing care. These include restrictive gender norms that discourage help-seeking, movement limitations due to military mobilisation concerns for those over 25, and financial instability limiting access to support. This research highlights how **structural and cultural barriers** influence their mental health experiences and aims to provide actionable recommendations to improve service accessibility.

Conducted across Ukraine, Poland, Romania, and Moldova, it draws on qualitative data from adolescent boys and young men, parents, mental health professionals, educators, and humanitarian actors. Although the primary focus of this study is adolescent boys and young men, it also considers **broader gender dynamics**. It examines how societal expectations around masculinity – such as self-reliance and emotional restraint – affect help-seeking behaviours and service uptake. While this research does not explicitly contrast male and female perspectives, it acknowledges **the influence of gender norms on mental health access**. Some qualitative findings reflect insights from young women and service providers, highlighting how gender roles shape mental health experiences for boys and young men.

Moreover, addressing the mental health needs of adolescent boys and young men is essential not only for their own well-being, but also for their families and communities. Unaddressed psychological distress can contribute to emotional withdrawal and strained relationships. In some cases, unprocessed distress manifests in maladaptive coping mechanisms, **potentially perpetuating cycles of violence** that negatively impact broader social cohesion.

By identifying these gaps, this research contributes to the development of MHPSS programs that are **inclusive, trauma-informed, and responsive** to the unique needs of adolescent boys and young men. Strengthening support systems for this population not only enhances **their well-being but also fosters healthier family and community dynamics** as Ukraine navigates the ongoing war and its long-term consequences.



Family board on a busy train in Bucharest in the middle of the night. © George Calin, Plan International



# Key findings



## MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS AND COPING MECHANISMS

Adolescent boys and young men reported experiencing **emotional numbness, grief, exhaustion, and identity conflicts**, shaped by their exposure to war, displacement, and shifting responsibilities. Many struggled with **difficulties concentrating** and uncertainty about their futures. However, the impact of the war was not uniform, as young men navigated different challenges based on their circumstances. Some who have been closer to the frontline experienced intense psychological stress and loss, while others who have relocated described feelings of **guilt and alienation**. Several felt torn between personal survival and societal expectations, compounding their emotional distress.

Despite these challenges, young men have adopted **various coping strategies** to navigate their circumstances. **Some engage in volunteer work, community initiatives, or online peer support networks** to regain a sense of purpose. **Physical activity, sports, and creative outlets** provide emotional relief. However, others have **withdrawn socially, engaged in risk-taking behaviours, or used alcohol and online gaming as an escape**, highlighting the need for interventions that provide **healthier alternatives for managing stress**.



## BARRIERS TO ACCESSING MHPSS SERVICES

Several factors prevent young men from seeking MHPSS services, ranging from **social and cultural barriers to structural and financial constraints**. Traditional **masculinity norms emphasise self-reliance**, discouraging help-seeking behaviours.

Many young men believe they must handle problems alone to avoid appearing weak, reinforcing **deeply ingrained stigma around mental health services**.

Beyond social and cultural challenges, **structural barriers** also play a significant role. **Language differences** make it difficult for young men living outside Ukraine to communicate with mental health professionals, while **an insufficient number of tailored mental health services** further limit access to appropriate care. **Financial constraints** present yet another obstacle – **private psychological support is often unaffordable**, and as **humanitarian funding declines**, fewer free or subsidised services are available.

Additionally, **a lack of accessible information** prevents many young men from knowing where to seek help. Without clear guidance on available services, many do not engage with MHPSS interventions, further **exacerbating feelings of isolation and emotional distress**.



## GENDER NORMS AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS

Traditional masculinity norms pressure young men to be **protectors and providers**, discouraging vulnerability and help-seeking. Many suppress emotions to avoid appearing weak, reinforcing isolation and reluctance to access mental health support.

Displacement has **altered family roles**, with young men often taking on financial and emotional responsibilities. While some find this **empowering**, others experience **stress and isolation**. Relationships with **peers and romantic partners** have also shifted, with social pressures, uncertainty, and changing dynamics leading to **frustration, emotional distance, or aggression**.

## INTEGRATION AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

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Displacement has fractured **friendships and peer networks**, with many adolescent boys and young men struggling to form new connections due to **language barriers, cultural differences, and emotional withdrawal**. Some reported experiencing **survivor's guilt**, feeling a sense of unearned privilege compared to peers who remain in Ukraine.

Family roles have also **shifted significantly**, with adolescent boys taking on **new responsibilities** in the absence of fathers, which can both strengthen family bonds but also increase emotional pressure. Many feel a duty to **protect and support their mothers and siblings**, while strained relationships with extended family – especially due to **external pressures or social stigma** – add further stress.

Despite efforts to foster **social integration**

through **community hubs, sports programs, and peer-led initiatives**, these remain **inaccessible for many**. While some young men feel welcomed and safe in their host countries, others perceive **growing hostility** and feel pressured to return to Ukraine despite the risks.



## EFFECTIVENESS OF MHPSS INTERVENTIONS & ECOSYSTEM CHALLENGES

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MHPSS interventions have had **varied effectiveness**, with **low uptake among adolescent boys and young men**. Service providers note that young men are more likely to **engage in informal peer support, community-based initiatives, or structured activities like sports and volunteering**. The **mental health ecosystem faces systemic challenges**, including **funding gaps, shortages of trained professionals, and fragmented service delivery**.



Train carrying Ukrainian refugees to Bucharest. © George Calin, Plan International



# Key recommendations

To effectively support adolescent boys and young men affected by the war in Ukraine, **governments, MHPSS service providers, humanitarian organisations, and host communities** must take targeted actions to reduce barriers, improve accessibility, and foster resilience.

## 1. Strengthening mental health systems

- **Expand mental health services** by increasing investment in national frameworks and integrating MHPSS into public healthcare to remove financial barriers.
- **Train professionals on gender-sensitive, trauma-informed approaches** to address the psychological impact of war, including displacement stress and loss.
- **Diversify access points** by embedding MHPSS services within education, employment, and humanitarian programs to reach young men in familiar settings.

## 2. Addressing barriers to employment and stability

- **Simplify legal and bureaucratic processes** for employment and vocational training to help young men transition from informal work to stable jobs.
- **Ensure legal protections for displaced young men** by extending asylum and residency options to reduce uncertainty and promote long-term stability.

## 3. Tackling gender norms and social stigma

- **Challenge restrictive masculinity norms** through awareness campaigns that promote help-seeking and emotional resilience.
- **Encourage shared caregiving responsibilities and emotional openness** to reshape gender norms positively in crisis settings.
- **Engage male role models, educators, and community leaders** in mental health advocacy to normalise emotional expression and peer support.



Nikita, 14, draws the Ukrainian flag in a heart on t-shirt. © George Calin, Plan International

#### 4. Improving social integration and support networks

- **Expand mentorship and peer-led programs** to connect displaced young men with local communities and social networks.
- **Invest in youth-led initiatives and volunteering opportunities** to empower young men and enhance their sense of agency.
- **Create culturally inclusive programs** that foster long-term belonging rather than treating displaced persons as temporary outsiders.

#### 5. Strengthening community-based and digital outreach

- **Develop family-centred MHPSS programs** to equip parents and caregivers with tools to support adolescent boys and young men experiencing distress.
- **Leverage digital platforms and social media** for mental health awareness, reducing reliance on informal and unmoderated online communities for emotional support.
- **Expand sports and arts-based therapy programs** as accessible, stigma-free entry points for mental health services.



Children have fun together at Ludobus play session in Moldova. © Plan International



# Call to action

- Prioritise mental health in humanitarian response: Ensure MHPSS services are widely **available, youth-friendly, and gender-responsive**.
- Expand service delivery models: Use **digital platforms, mobile teams, and community hubs** to reach at-risk groups.
- Combat stigma and promote help-seeking: **Challenge harmful gender norms** through awareness campaigns and youth engagement.
- Foster youth participation: **Involve young men in designing** programs that reflect their experiences and needs.
- Strengthen coordination and accessibility: Improve **collaboration across stakeholders** and ensure clear, widely available service information.
- Address intersectional needs: Tailor interventions to **support marginalised youth**, ensuring culturally sensitive and inclusive programming.
- Invest in service provider training: Equip professionals with **the tools to deliver gender-sensitive and trauma-informed care**.



# A collective responsibility

Addressing the mental health needs of adolescent boys and young men is not just a matter of individual well-being but a broader societal imperative. Unaddressed psychological distress can perpetuate cycles of violence and

social exclusion, impacting families and communities. A coordinated, inclusive, and well-funded response is critical to fostering resilience, well-being, and long-term stability.



One of the lawyers from Ukraine working at the legal centre. © Kasia Strek, Plan International



## About Plan International

Founded in 1937, Plan International is a development and humanitarian organisation that works together with children, young people, supporters and partners to strive for a just world, where we are all equal.

To do this we tackle the root causes of the challenges and inequalities that children and young girls face. We're there for children from birth until adulthood and we enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity.

Plan International Eastern and Central Europe has worked in Ukraine since August 2022 to deliver immediate humanitarian aid to children and their families affected by the war that has caused thousands of civilian casualties, widespread destruction and has forced millions to flee their homes. Our work in Ukraine is a part of regional response to the Ukraine crisis which also includes programmes in Poland, Moldova and Romania.

## About The Federation of Non-Governmental Organizations for Children (FONPC)

Founded in 1997, FONPC exists with and for its members, about 75 NGOs, for the benefit of children and the community, guided by the principles and statutory provisions and promoting the following values: identity/ autonomy of members, effectiveness in communication and action, democratic decision, solidarity, openness, trust, mutual respect, equity, consistency/ continuity, partnership, transparency, participation and involvement. In order to achieve its objectives, FONPC works in close partnership with donors, funders, local and national authorities and non-governmental organisations, international organisations, European institutions, civil society, the community and other actors involved in promoting respect for children's rights.

## About CARE International

CARE International is a humanitarian organisation leading the fight to end poverty in the world's most challenging situations. Women and girls are at the centre of our work, because we cannot overcome poverty until all people have equal rights and opportunities. We know that when a crisis erupts, women are often the first to pick up the pieces, so we work alongside women so they have the power to make change where it's needed most.