

The experiences of older women in forced migration remain largely absent from academic research — both in Poland and globally. Although women over 60 make up a significant part of the Ukrainian refugee population, their voices are rarely heard, and their needs are often overlooked. This project addresses a critical gap by focusing on the autobiographical narratives of Ukrainian women who found refuge in Poland after February 24, 2022. By analyzing their life stories — past and present — the study seeks to understand how war, migration, and aging intersect in the reconstruction of personal identity.

The research is based on in-depth autobiographical interviews conducted in the participants' native languages — Ukrainian, Russian, and surzhyk (a hybrid vernacular combining elements of Ukrainian and Russian, whose various forms can be found across different regions of Ukraine). This approach enables the researcher to access the emotional and semantic nuances that are often lost when a person is required to speak in a non-native or secondary language. The project investigates how older refugee women talk about their lives: how they interpret the past, understand the present, and imagine the future from the perspective of exile.

This is a pioneering initiative. For the first time in Poland, autobiographical accounts of older refugee women will be treated not as victim testimonies but as active forms of memory-making, meaning construction, and identity negotiation. The analysis draws on biographical methods and incorporates postcolonial and sociolinguistic perspectives. Here, language is not just a means of communication but a carrier of memory, emotion, and resistance to marginalization.

The project responds to the growing call for epistemic justice — the recognition of knowledge produced by historically marginalized individuals and groups. Its findings will be relevant not only to migration and aging studies but also to the development of more appropriate policies and support systems for older people in displacement. More broadly, the study deepens our understanding of how language, identity, and biography are shaped by forced migration and war.

The collected narratives have the potential to change how society — institutions, media, and local communities — perceives older refugee women. They may help challenge the stereotype of older people as passive, dependent, or “invisible” in the refugee landscape. This project encourages a more sensitive and respectful way of speaking about aging and displacement — one that acknowledges the dignity, agency, and complexity of women's lives, especially those who now serve as caregivers, cultural mediators, and living witnesses.