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Agency in a Liminal Position: The Displacement of Ukrainian Mothers in Slovakia

Abstract:

The mass displacement of Ukrainians following the 2022 Russian invasion produced one of the largest and most distinctly gendered refugee populations in recent European history, with women and children comprising the overwhelming majority of those seeking protection abroad. While existing research has primarily examined the initial phases of this displacement, far less attention has been paid to how agency is shaped and reshaped as displacement becomes protracted. In particular, the role of motherhood in structuring agentic practices under conditions of prolonged uncertainty remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by examining how Ukrainian single mothers navigate agency, identity, and future orientations across the extended timeline of forced displacement. Drawing on thematic analysis of 15 in-depth interviews with Ukrainian single mothers residing in Slovakia, the study applies Hitlin and Elder's multidimensional temporal framework of agency — spanning pragmatic, identity-based, existential, and life course dimensions. The findings demonstrate that pragmatic agency is the dominant form across all phases of displacement, persisting and adapting continuously as participants responded to shifting personal circumstances and frequent administrative changes within the temporary protection regime — a dynamic corresponding to Vigh's concept of 'motion within motion.' Displacement significantly eroded professional identities, leading motherhood to become the predominant identity underpinning agentic practices. Participants engaged in 'strategic mothering,' combining breadwinning and caregiving while supporting children's adaptation and compensating for the losses of displacement. Motherhood also structured life course agency, with children's best interests emerging as the decisive factor shaping orientations along the stay-return axis. As displacement protracted, future-oriented strategies shifted from anticipating return toward actively constructing a life in the host country, though some participants continued to 'live in limbo,' governed by ongoing uncertainty and the temporality embedded in temporary protection regimes. Theoretically, the study moves beyond framing displaced persons' agency solely as 'agency in waiting,' demonstrating instead that protracted displacement can foster the strengthening of existential agency. Liminality may thus function as a 'zone of becoming' — a space of gradual personal transformation and empowerment — particularly for single mothers for whom the protection and provision of their children constitutes the central motivation driving agentic action. By theorizing agency, motherhood, and liminality as interrelated processes, this study contributes to refugee and gendered migration scholarship and offers a nuanced account of how protracted displacement can simultaneously generate uncertainty and foster empowerment.

Keywords: liminality, agency, Ukrainian refugees, single mothers