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Gendered flight constellations and family-reunion intentions of female refugees from Ukraine: Evidence from a representative survey in Germany

Abstract

Since the outbreak of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, about one million people have fled to Germany in 2022. Due to the gender-specific policies for staying and leaving Ukraine, the socio-demographic composition of the refugees differs markedly from previous refugee migrations to Western Europe and from forms of voluntary migration. In particular, it stands out that about three quarters of the adult refugees arriving in Germany were women. Our paper explores systematically the family constellations of the Ukrainians who have fled their country and analyses their family-reunion intentions. We use representative data from the first wave of the "Ukrainian Refugees in Germany (IAB-BiB/FReDA-BAMF-SOEP-Survey)". About 11,000 refugees aged 18 to 70 years participated in the survey. Only about 23 percent of the women arrived together with their partner in Germany, another 42 percent were single women and 35 percent of the women arrived without their partner. Descriptive analyses reveal ambiguity and uncertainty regarding their stay and family reunion. Multivariable analyses reveal that among these spatially separated women, intentions for family reunion in Germany are particularly high in constellations where the partner lives in more war-affected regions, and when the respondents express their intention to stay in Germany.

Keywords: Forced migrants, family, integration, quantitative data, Ukraine

Acknowledgements

We thank the guest editors and reviewers for their constructive comments on this paper.

1. Introduction

For most refugees, the decision to flee means to temporarily or permanently leave behind close family members in their countries of origin. The separation from the nuclear family (partner and/or children) is particularly challenging as it can have far-reaching consequences for refugees in many areas of life (Löbel & Jacobson, 2021). Between February 24, 2022 and December 2022, more than one million Ukrainian refugees were registered in Germany (Sauer et al., 2023). An initial analysis on refugee patterns of Ukrainian refugees in Germany has detected, that the

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legal situation in Ukraine since Russia's invasion with the general mobilisation and the travel ban for men of military age (BMI, 2023) precisely causes such separations of nuclear families. However, the current influx of Ukrainian refugees differs from previous refugee cohorts. While previous refugees to Western Europe, e.g. from Syria from 2013 to 2016, tended to be mainly young men with their families or single men (Buber-Ennser et al., 2016; Kraus et al., 2019; Schon, 2019; Brücker, 2022), the demographic composition of the Ukrainians is different. The group of Ukrainian refugees mainly consists of women, their children and a larger amount of older people (Tyldum & Kjeøy, 2022; Brücker et al., 2023; Duszczyk et al., 2023). Moreover, there are substantial gender differences in the family constellations: Very few male respondents from Ukraine reported to have arrived in Germany without their partner, whereas a large share of women arrived without their partner, or that they were single. Only every fifth woman from Ukraine came to Germany with their partner and about every third woman was spatially separated from her partner due to the flight (Brücker et al., 2023).

From previous literature we know that longer involuntary separations from the partner do not only have negative effects on mental health and well-being of the separated partners and other family members (Porter & Haslam, 2005; Beiser & Hou, 2017; Gambaro et al., 2018), spatial separation also limits the chances of "getting by" in the destination country, e.g. social integration or participation in the labour market (Rousseau et al., 2004; Kraus et al., 2019; Spörlein & Kristen, 2019; Spörlein et al., 2020; Jacobsen et al., 2020; Kosyakova et al., 2022). The situation is further exacerbated by the fact that about half of the refugee women from Ukraine have minor children in Germany indicating that many of the refugee women are – at least temporary – lone mothers (Brücker et al., 2023). Research has also shown that especially female refugees and in particular single-parenting mothers are in disadvantaged positions. In the past decades, growing attention has been paid to gendered migration patterns and the role of the extended household as the behavior of migrant women cannot be fully understood without considering their family situation and their roles within them (Zlotnik, 1995). For example, women often have to additionally fulfill the role of a caregiver but may be less familiar with administrative or financial issues than men (Goodson & Phillimore, 2008). International migration, let alone in the context of forced migration, may change gendered patterns in families, also across generations (Aybek & Milewski, 2019). Involuntary separations usually go along with mental stress and the intention to reunite the partnership or family as fast as possible (e.g. Löbel & Jacobsen, 2021). Family-migration patterns, or reunification patterns are gendered (Kraus et al., 2019) and depend on the legal conditions for migration, which in itself are not gender-neutral and thus may reproduce gender-role patterns (Bonjour & Kraler, 2016).

Moreover, family migration is one of the quantitatively most important drivers of chain migration (Massey et al., 1993; Tienda, 2017). Recent research has pointed

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out, that policy should be more focused on realising the unity of refugee families in order to improve wellbeing (Morris et al., 2021). Therefore, robust evidence on reunion potentials, possible determinants and barriers is essential for targeted policy interventions. However, the quantity of such chain migration processes is very difficult to accurately predict. The best data available in early processes of fleeing are reunification intentions. Here, research has already shown, that mobility intentions are a rather good predictor of future behavior (Fouarge et al., 2019; Van Dalen & Henkes, 2013). Hence, knowledge about such intentions allows to estimate such potentials for further immigration and also possible determinants and barriers. Yet, regarding the group of Ukrainian refugees little is known about their intentions to reunite with their family members in Germany.

Therefore, our paper aims at exploring such intentions for family reunion in Germany; we focus specifically on female refugees. Our study pursues the following research questions: What are the patterns of intentions for family reunion in Germany with respect to partner and/or children? Which factors are related to Ukrainian refugee women's desire to reunite with their partner and/or children in Germany? Previous literature on migrant family reunion intentions and refugee mobility behavior suggests that a number of factors may be at play (Kraus et al., 2019). First, these are socio-demographic factors such as age, family structure, and education (Baizán et al., 2014; Birgier et al., 2018; Guichard, 2020; Spörlein et al., 2020; Aksoy & Poutvaara, 2021). Here, we would expect a relationship between the desire to reunite with the partner and/or children in Germany and a younger age, a higher educational level and the presence of (other) children in Germany. Second, the different regions in Ukraine vary in the extents they had been – and still are – affected by the war. While regions in the East and the South, and the capital Kiev are most affected and report the highest numbers of victims, loss and damage, regions in the west of the country have been to date much less affected by direct violent acts of the war (Brinks, 2023). Previous research on the relation between experiences of violence and flight mobility points to a significant association to mobility behavior (Melander & Öberg, 2007; Duszczyk & Kaczmarczyk, 2022; Ruhe & Kuhnt, 2023). Therefore, we assume that refugees originating from regions more affected by the war and its violence state a stronger intention to reunite with family members. Third, the intention to permanently settle in Germany are also supposed to be strongly related to partner reunion intentions (Wilmsen, 2013; Baizán et al., 2014).

2. Data, method, and sample

The data we use comes from the IAB-BiB/FReDA-BAMF-SOEP Survey on Ukrainian Refugees in Germany. The survey is a probability-based sample relying on two administrative registers in Germany – the Central Register of Foreigners (Ausländerzentralregister – AZR) and the population register (Einwohnermeldereg-

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ister – EMR) – which are regularly used in similar studies (Babka von Gostomski & Puppeter, 2008; Brücker et al., 2018; Ette et al., 2021). The combination of both registers allowed for the construction of a high-quality sampling base within a short time frame. For the sampling of Ukrainian refugees in Germany, a two-stage procedure was implemented. On the first stage, 100 cities and counties across the 16 federal states in Germany have been randomly drawn, considering daily updated information on the regional distribution of Ukrainian refugees registered in the AZR. The EMR was utilised in the second stage. In particular, a gross sample of 48,000 Ukrainian nationals aged between 18 and 70 years who first registered in Germany not earlier than February 24, 2022, was drawn (for detailed information on the sampling approach see Steinhauer et al. forthcoming).

The IAB-BiB/FReDA-BAMF-SOEP Survey on Ukrainian Refugees in Germany was realised based on a sequential push-to-web mixed-mode design (Dillman, 2017). A similar design was previously used for other spatially mobile populations in Germany within the framework of the German Emigration and Remigration Panel Study (GERPS) (Genoni et al., 2021) or in large general population surveys such as FReDA – The German Family Demography Panel Study (Gummer et al., 2020; Schneider et al., 2021). This design combines the advantages of postal register-based recruitment with those of an online survey (Genoni et al., 2021; Torregroza et al., 2023). The questionnaire covered a selected range of topics such as education, employment, individual financial situation in Ukraine and Germany, participation in integration measures, family situation and social contacts, accommodation, needs and intention to stay in Germany, as well as the health situation of respondents and their children (Brücker et al. 2023, Torregroza et al., 2023).

A total of 11,763 persons took part in the survey – of whom 9,525 persons (81 percent of the net sample) participated online and 2,238 persons (19 percent of the net sample) by letter post – resulting in an overall response rate of about 25 percent (AAPOR Response Rate 1, further Information on AAPOR survey standards see AAPOR, 2023), which is comparable to studies with similar research designs or target groups (Ette et al., 2021, Kroh et al., 2017; Lynn, 2020; Cornesse et al., 2022). The survey lasted a median time of 19.7 minutes. Comparisons of the distribution of key demographic characteristics of respondents with the distribution of all Ukrainian refugees registered in the AZR between February 24, 2022, and September 30, 2022, revealed little evidence of systematic bias in the sampling, indicating a high quality of the survey data. Remaining differences were additionally compensated by a weighting procedure, e.g. accounting for the selective survey participation willingness. Hence, overall, information provided by the IAB-BiB/FReDA-BAMF-SOEP Survey on Ukrainian Refugees in Germany can be generalised to Ukrainian nationals who fled to Germany during the initial months of the war. The data can thus be used to provide reliable evidence for this group (Brücker et al., 2023).

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In our analyses, we focus on female refugees from Ukraine in Germany. With our data we are able to reconstruct the cross-border family/ household constellation of 8,604 women aged 18 to 70 years. About 23 percent of them arrived together with their partner in Germany, while 42 percent were single. With our approach, we are especially interested in the women who are spatially separated from their partner. This subsample consists of 3,606 women (35 %). In a first step, we show a descriptive overview on the socio-demographic characteristics of these partnered women who came to Germany alone and compare these to those who arrived together with their partner and to single women (Table 2). Then we zoom in the group of temporarily separated women and focus on family reunion intentions, by relying on the question: "Do you plan to bring your partner to Germany?" The answer categories were "I cannot answer", "I do not want to answer", "yes", and "no". Note: due to small case numbers in the categories, "I cannot answer" and "I do not want to answer" were combined in one category. For the multivariable analyses, we recategorised the answers on intentions into a dichotomous variable distinguishing between all respondents who said "yes" (1) and all others, including those who could not or did not want to answer (0). We carry out a binary logistic regression, which models the relationship between a binary outcome variable (0/1) and some predictor variables. It estimates the probability of the outcome belonging to a particular category compared to a reference category. We display the results as odds ratios, with values below zero indicating smaller odds as compared to the reference and values above 0 indicating higher odds (Best & Wolf, 2014). The analyses are presented within stepwise approach, beginning with socio-demographics, adding region of origin and context of reception, and finally intentions to stay in Germany (Table 3).

3. Results

Table 1 shows the family constellation of all refugee women in our sample. We find that women who arrived without their partner to Germany and who have minor children are the biggest group with about 24 percent. About 12 percent of the sample are those who arrived with partner and minor children, and 14 percent are lone mothers.

Third countries do not play a large role in cross-border constellations of refugee women. Asked about the location of their partner at the time of the interview, 95 percent of the women who were separated from their partner indicated Ukraine. About 5 percent mentioned another country including a small number in Poland (results not displayed).

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Table 1: Family constellation of female refugee from Ukraine in Germany (%)

	With spouse/ partner	Spouse/ partner abroad	Single
Underage children in DE	11.9	23.9	13.6
Adult children in DE	6.1	6.5	11.4
Childless	4.5	4.9	17.3

Source: Own calculations based on the IAB-BiB/FReDA-BAMF-SOEP survey, 2022 (weighted data). N=8604. Note: DE=Germany.

Table 2 compares the characteristics of women who arrived without their partner in Germany to those that arrived with a partner and single Ukrainian women. With about 68 percent the share of those who arrived with minor children is higher among the spatially separated mothers than among those who arrived with their partner (53 %). While the socio-demographic patterns of these three groups do not vary substantially, their intentions to stay in Germany and/ or to return to Ukraine differ significantly across these groups. The share of women who said that they intend to stay in Germany "until the end of the war" is the most frequently chosen answer in each group, but it is highest within the group of temporarily separated women (45 %), compared to 30 percent in the group of women who arrived with their partner and 31 percent single women. In line with that finding, among the women who arrived together with their partner, with about 30 percent, we found the largest share of those who intended to stay in Germany "forever". This corresponds to 25 percent among single women, and only 16 percent among the women spatially separated from their partner. It also becomes apparent that uncertainty plays a role within each of the groups as a bit less than 30 percent stated that they "don't know" how long they intend to stay in Germany. The answers to the question about return intentions to Ukraine produced a largely corresponding pattern: Between 17 and 20 percent of the women stated that they "don't know", also validating the notion of uncertainty. About 44 percent of the women spatially separated from their partner wanted to return to Ukraine, but 38 percent indicated not to. Of the partnered women, only 29 percent wanted to move back to Ukraine and 53 percent did not want to return at all.

Regarding their intention to family reunion (Table 2), 46 percent of the women spatially separated from their partner said that they intend to bring their partner to Germany. Regarding children, in all three groups of women, less than 5 percent indicated that they intend to bring children to Germany. In the majority of cases, this would be only one child. Only few women indicated two or more children.

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Table 2: Descriptive overview of sample of female refugees, by family constellation (%)

	With spouse/ partner in DE	Spouse/ partner abroad	Single
Underage children in DE			
Yes	53.1	67.6	32.1
No (including childless)	46.9	32.4	67.9
Age (in years)			
18–29	19.7	14.3	29.6
30–39	33.6	37,0	24.0
40–49	20.3	31,5	19.7
50–59	10.6	13,1	14.0
60–70	15.8	4,1	12.8
Marital status			
Not married	13.8	11,8	52.1
Married	80.3	84,9	0.0
Divorced	4.9	3,1	36.7
Widowed	0.7	0,2	11.1
mv	0.2	0,1	0.2
Region of origin			
Kiev	16.5	20,1	20.9
North	12.7	13,9	12.1
West	10.8	9,3	7.5
Center	10.8	15,0	13.2
East/ South/ Crimea	49.3	41,8	46.3
Region of living			
East-DE	19.5	19,2	19.3
West-DE	80.5	80,8	80.7
Education			
ISCED>=2	2.5	1,7	2.2
ISCED3/4	26.7	22,3	32.0
ISCED5/6	70.6	76,0	65.7
mv	0.2	0,0	0.0
Employment in DE			
Not employed	86.6	84,6	84.6
Fulltime	5.6	6,6	6.2
Parttime	4.4	4,8	4.9
Marginal/ trainee	3.1	3,8	4.0
mv	0.3	0,3	0.4

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	With spouse/ partner in DE	Spouse/ partner abroad	Single
Intentions to stay in DE			
A couple of years	12.6	12,1	15.1
Forever	29.5	16,2	24.5
I don't know	27.1	26,0	28.8
Till the end of the war	30.1	44,8	31.1
mv	0.7	0,9	0.5
Intentions to return to UA			
No	53.2	38,4	49.3
Yes, to Ukraine	28.7	44,1	29.2
To another country	0.5	0,5	1.0
I don't know	16.9	16,3	20.4
mv	0,7	0,7	0,1
Intention to bring partner to DE			
Yes		46.3	
No		51.5	
I cannot/ do not want to answer		2,13	
mv		0.12	
Intention to bring child to DE			
Yes	4.4	5.3	4.4
No	12.6	9.5	11.0
I cannot/ do not want to answer	0.2	0.1	0.3
na	82.8	85.1	84.3
total	*100,0*	*100,0*	*100,0*
n	*1969*	*3036*	*3599*

Source: Own calculations based on the IAB-BiB/FReDA-BAMF-SOEP survey, 2022 (weighted data). N=8604. Note: mv=missing values, na=not applicable, DE=Germany, UA=Ukraine.

Table 3 displays the results of the stepwise multivariable analyses. Model 1, accounting for socio-demographic factors, shows that the intentions to bring the partner to Germany decreases by age and are higher among refugee women originating from the regions in the East and South of Ukraine and Crimea. The presence of minor children and the family status are not statistically significantly related to reunion intentions. Model 2 additionally controls for the context of reception in Germany; refugees who arrived to the eastern part are less likely to intent family reunion in Germany. Importantly, however, the inclusion of region of living and employment situation hardly affects the relations between the variables included in the first step. Model 3 additionally accounts for the intention to stay in Germany. While this does hardly affect the results of the other variables (except for the presence of minor children in Germany), the intentions to stay prove themselves as strongest predictor of family reunion intentions. Those who plan to stay in

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Germany "forever", are three times more likely to wish to bring their partner to Germany as compared to those who assume that they may stay "for a couple of years". Women, who said that they want to stay "till the end of the war", were also less likely to say that they wanted to bring their partner to Germany. Note: the results were basically similar when we used the variable of return intentions instead of intentions to stay and by this corroborate the robustness of our findings. However, as return and stay intentions are highly correlated, we do not use both variables in the presented model.

Table 3: Intention to bring partner to Germany – results of multivariable analyses (OR)

	M1		M2		M3	
Underage children in DE (ref: no)	1.10		1.10		1.22	°
Age (ref: 18–29 years)						
30–39	0.95		0.95		0.97	
40–49	0.67	**	0.67	**	0.63	**
50–59	0.64	**	0.64	**	0.62	**
60–70	0.48	**	0.49	**	0.57	*
Married (ref: not married/ divorced/ widowed)	1.03		1.02		0.97	
Region of origin (ref: Kiev)						
North	0.88		0.89		0.89	
West	1.16		1.17		0.98	
Center	1.38		1.38		1.21	
East/ South/ Crimea	1.27	*	1.27	*	1.15	*
Tertiary education (ref.: no)	1.08		1.07		1.14	
Living in East-DE (ref: West-DE)			0.84	*	0.84	°
Employment in DE (ref.: no)			0.99		0.99	
Intentions to stay in DE (ref: a couple of years)						
Forever					3.23	***
I don't know					1.21	
Till the end of the war					0.38	***

Source: Own calculations based on the IAB-BiB/FReDA-BAMF-SOEP survey, 2022. Binary logistic regression. N=3606. Note: significance *** p<,001, ** p<=,01, * p<0,05, °p<0,1. OR=odds ratio, DE=Germany.

4. Conclusion

Our paper provides an in-depth description on family and household structures of Ukrainian refugees in Germany and an explorative overview of the factors involved in the intention to reunite families in the destination county. We used a large representative dataset of refugees who arrived in Germany in the first months of the Russian invasion in 2022. These Ukrainians have specific socio-demographic patterns compared to other migrant groups. The majority of adult refugees are

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female, and many of them are either single or spatially separated from their partner. Around half of the female refugees live with children or adolescents; in the age groups younger than 50 years this share is even higher. Caused by gendered patterns of flight from Ukraine, a large share of refugee women are lone mothers – which is different compared to previous refugee migrations to Germany (Kraus et al., 2019). Within an overall vulnerable population, this group deserves attention because they are faced with more adverse conditions and higher risks than refugees in general, e.g., with respect to physical and mental health, social participation, and economic circumstances. Additionally, migration theories focus much on voluntary and economic migration, while less is known about the perpetuation of migration and family-migration patterns in contexts of forced migration (Massey et al., 1993; Kraus et al., 2019).

Against the background of this specific situation of many separated couples and families with children, we analysed women's plans to reunite with their partner and children in Germany. For children, we found that only about up to 5 percent of the women in our sample intended to bring one (further) child to Germany, only few of them two or more children. About 10 percent stated that they did not intend family reunion with children in Germany. These numbers seem to be rather low compared to other migrant groups – yet, we think that they provide valuable estimates of further family migration with respect to children because the overall number of children in Ukraine is lower, compared e.g., to that in the Middle East region, and many of the mothers arrived already with their minor and adult children that were legally allowed to migrate. In line with that interpretation, the majority of the refugee women in our sample said they do not have (further) children living abroad.

With respect to the partner the situation is different. The legal situation of family reunifications may appear more restricted or unclear. The individual journeys may be illegal, more dangerous, and therefore in many cases family reunion intentions may even be impossible to realize. Yet, less than half of the women who were separated from their partner by their flight said that they plan a family reunion in Germany. With a more fine-grained view, such reunification intentions appear to be stronger when minor children are in Germany as well, which separates the children also from their fathers. Moreover, reunion intentions are higher in younger ages and among those from regions, which are largely affected by the war. At the same time, settlement intentions matter even more, in a way that those who wish to stay in Germany forever, as well intend to reunify with their partner in Germany.

Overall, our findings suggest that the intentions of family reunion do not only depend on individual attributes, but also on developments in both countries: the intensity, length and locality of the war in Ukraine and the situation and social participation which refugee women have – or anticipate to have – in Germany. Both may change in the course of the next months and years. Perhaps the longer

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the war lasts and the longer female Ukrainian refugees live in Germany, their intention for family reunion may increase. Evidence from previous studies suggests that family reunion is also associated with refugees' well-being, their social integration, and intention to stay. The adaptation process including learning the German language and labour market participation of adults as well as day care and school enrolment of children (Bujard et al., 2020) may contribute to the intention to have a family reunion in Germany. At the same time, different scenarios appear likely with individuals struggling with the loss of their former life causing refugees to return to their home country.

In future, the panel structure within the framework of the BiB/FReDA Survey on Ukrainian Refugees and by this the data of the forthcoming waves will allow us to investigate the developments in the intentions to stay, to return, and of family reunion over time. Moreover, it will be possible to link these intentions to real behavior because further waves of data collection will follow within the next years. Therefore, in future studies we may be able to not only rely on cross-sectional data from the first weeks after the refugees' arrival in Germany, but also to rely on additional information e.g. on integration processes in Germany as well as data on onward migration and cross-border networks and activities.

To sum up, our study provides first quantitative insights on the family structure and family reunion intentions of Ukrainian refugees in the first half year after their flight to Germany based on unique representative data. Our analyses show the factors associated with a high desire in this group to reunify their families in Germany. The high share of women, many of them de facto lone mothers, and children of the Ukrainian refugee population suggests that tailored policies – e.g. child care, full-day school, language courses, employment counselling, housing, mental health services – need to be tailored for their specific situation.

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