



## Entrepreneurship a pathway for female refugees

COMMENTARY BY CHERYL NOVAK \*

Russia's invasion of Ukraine commenced just a month ago, yet it is already evident that fleeing Ukrainians, 90% of whom are women and children, will not be returning home to a safe Ukraine anytime soon, if at all. As Ukrainian women have become acting heads of their households overnight and the European Union discusses integration support packages, it needs to add the promotion and support of female migrant entrepreneurship and self-employment to the mix.

Standing in stark contrast to the EU's handling of the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis and continued arrivals of third-country nationals, the EU's policy response to Ukrainian refugees is applaudable. The Temporary Protection Directive grants the already over 3.1 million and growing Ukrainian refugees residency in the EU for three years and promises much needed access to the job market, education and social services.

As more concrete proposals are in the making, European Commission Vice President Margaritis Schinas told Politico's Playbook the Commission is working to "align the rights to the reality."

The "reality" that Schinas mentions involves the will and ability of EU member-states to implement the directive, and the ability of Ukrainians to access the programs the EU is drafting. Any cautious enthusiasm is justified as language, bureaucracy and EU market dynamics have historically proven to be severe barriers to integration for female migrants.

Guidance on how to make entrepreneurship and self-employment (collectively referred to as Female Migrant Entrepreneurship, or FME) a viable option to Ukrainian refugees can be found in research programs such as the EU-wide Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF)-funded ATHENA project. Third-country female migrants and relevant stakeholders across Belgium, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania and Spain told interviewees that FME is attractive because it enables them to capitalize on their unique skills despite language obstacles, maintain a work-life balance where they lack essential child-care support, and be financially independent.

But the same women note that



A Ukrainian refugee is seen working in a restaurant in Warsaw last week.

in their pursuit of FME, they have faced discrimination, challenges obtaining and renewing residency and work permits, and cannot access common sources of startup funding as they lack assets. They also say that they need additional support including: local language training programs, help navigating complex national bureaucracies, targeted skills development and marketing programs, childcare services and easy-to-access funding.

Interestingly enough, the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor shows that European passport-holding female entrepreneurs echo many of the same challenges and needs.

So if FME is such a tough option for female migrants, why should it be a policy priority for the EU now?

For starters, we are seeing tremendous solidarity in Europe; Ukrainians are largely being welcomed by states and citizens. Secondly, programming will be facilitated by the relatively homogenous profiles of Ukrainian female refugees in terms of language and culture, and the fact that they are highly educated/skilled.

Thirdly, on account of the Covid pandemic, there are high digital literacy rates and it is easier than ever for self-starters to work from anywhere. Fourthly, startup funding is still tough to come by, but female-favored funding options like microfinance are growing daily. And finally, there is already an existing footprint of FME support programs to build off of from the Entrepreneurship 2020 Action Plan and AMIF programs.

To make this stick, however, existing best practices will have to

be revamped and modified for the Ukrainian female population migrating under Covid.

This means that training, coaching, mentoring and other support related to their legal situation needs to be done online and in Ukrainian. Tailor-made administrative support can also be offered to help them with local bureaucratic processes. Ideally, these efforts should be coordinated at member-state levels to ensure a holistic and integrated approach.

The result of the above is the creation of an EU-wide digitized FME mechanism that can be strategically adapted to support any and all FME.

Despite the importance of FME as a tool for improving integration outcomes of third-country female migrants, it has failed to live up to expectations in many EU countries. Some northern countries perform better, but in the case of Greece, the reality is that migrant entrepreneurship is not a priority, and services are offered by nonprofits and international organizations who try to target a bouquet of women with varying skill levels and cultural considerations primarily from Albania, Ukraine, Georgia, African countries, the Philippines, North America and now Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan, according to the Hellenic Statistical Authority and UNHCR.

The result is a fragmented and unsustainable FME ecosystem and the reality is that migrants face basic challenges including excessive delays with the issuing and renewing of residency permits, restrictions opening bank accounts, problems accessing bank loans and other bureaucratic hurdles, according to a report on FME in Greece by ELIAMEP. And as the World Bank ranks Greece near the bottom of the EU deck for ease of doing business, it is no wonder that female migrant self-employment rates in Greece are in the teens while independent research shows FME in the single digits.

\* Cheryl Novak is an expert in sustainability at the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) and project manager of ELIAMEP's ATHENA project, focusing on entrepreneurship and migrant women in Europe.