


# Sexual and reproductive health rights of Ukraine's young sanctuary seekers: Can we pre-empt risks and uncertainty?

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During the 10 weeks since 24<sup>th</sup> February 2022, over 4.6 million Ukrainian people ([UNHCR 2022](#)) have sought sanctuary in neighbouring and more distant countries. More than two million are children and young people (CYP) ([UNICEF 2022](#)), suffering extreme trauma due to separations, losses and living with ongoing fear, in addition to poor physical health caused by injuries, lack of food and sleep. CYP are especially vulnerable during humanitarian crises, and abrupt family separations at Ukrainian borders and travel hubs are possible triggers for poor psycho-social outcomes ([Frounfelker et al., 2019](#)). Young women are at increased risk of sexual assault and of being trafficked; both sexes may be involved in risky sexual behaviours due to needing emotional and/or financial security ([Jennings et al., 2019](#)). While many CYP fled with their mothers, others travel with older or distant relatives, and unknown numbers are unaccompanied ([OHCHR 2022](#)).

Following re-settlement, separated young sanctuary seekers are particularly vulnerable to potential abuse and mistreatment from caregivers, neighbours, strangers and members of their own refugee communities ([Lay and Papadopoulos 2009](#)). European guidelines frame how separated young sanctuary seekers should be supported; however, national implementation varies, thus determining separated young sanctuary seekers' vulnerability to sexual abuse ([ChildHub, 2015](#)). Accommodation arrangements which create risk include having to share with members of the opposite sex and with inadequate supervision, being placed in facilities with adult sanctuary seekers. European Union guidelines recommend appointing a designated guardian to oversee the care of every separated young sanctuary seeker. However, in the UK, this has not happened ([ChildHub, 2015](#)).

We authors are an interdisciplinary team of UK-based health, social work and social policy academics, formerly practitioners in health and social work (two of us retain our professional

registration). We share concern for CYP rights, recognising and acknowledging the resilience and strengths of young sanctuary seekers. Despite multiple vulnerabilities (Spiers, 2000), many of them survive forced migration and re-settlement, flourishing, thriving and contributing positively to life in their new locations (Otto and Kaufman 2020).

Sanctuary-seeking CYP are CYP first (Crawley 2006) with rights to develop and express their sexuality, accessing appropriate supportive services relating to their sexual and reproductive health. Sexual and reproductive health (S&RH) incorporates issues of autonomy and sexual identity, trusting relationships, sexual activity, contraceptive use, partnerships and parenthood (World Health Organization, 2018). Sanctuary-seeking CYP differ from one another in relation to age and gender, and in how they wish to express their sexuality: and Ukrainian young people are far from homogenous (United Nations Population Fund, 2020). They may experience additional vulnerabilities which impact upon transition – being members of a minority group such as Roma, having been institutionalised, being long-term displaced from conflict-affected areas in Eastern Ukraine, being LGBTQ+ or living with HIV – may mean stigma and extra challenges (Ukraine, 2020). They need, and will continue to need, informed and sensitive S&RH services.

Currently, the context in which young sanctuary seekers will be developing different lives, new relationships and transitioning to adulthood is one of ‘unconditional hospitality’ (Worth 2006), being offered by many individuals and families across the world to Ukrainian sanctuary seekers. This prevailing welcoming attitude provides opportunities for health and social work practitioners to make a difference.

While we authors are heartened by the international response to Ukrainian sanctuary seekers, our attention now is moving to mid- and longer-term outcomes. War’s impact potentially will manifest in both physical and mental health traumas, for which many parents and children who are offering home-sharing will be unprepared and mostly unsupported, due to existing pressures within health, social work and education services (ADCS 2022). Many offering home-sharing spaces anticipate welcoming CYP who will be grateful for somewhere to stay, and considerate of their hosts. Home-sharers may underestimate cultural and social norms and expectations which shape trajectories to adulthood within different societies. While they are dealing with intertwined issues of separation, changes in culture, language use, living situations and schools, sanctuary-seeking CYP will be ageing and developing and wanting choices in expression of their sexuality. Both CYP seeking sanctuary, and home-sharing parents and children, will experience multiple relationship changes and challenges (Titmuss 1950), negotiating young sanctuary seekers’ control of their futures, within appropriate protective frameworks.

Drawing from our current and former practice experiences, we believe that we and all current practitioners must share our knowledge and understanding with Ukrainian CYP and their new carers, taking account of the unique needs – and strengths and coping skills – of separated young sanctuary seekers, while working with them to meet their S&RH needs with informed and sensitive S&RH services.

Risks can be pre-empted through anticipation; this requires us all to respond supportively to Ukrainian CYP, building trust and confidence with understanding and with consideration; without making assumptions. We encourage ourselves, and our practitioner colleagues, to leave our comfort zones; looking – and seeing – beyond the ‘sanctuary seeking’ label, recognising that supporting young sanctuary seekers in sourcing their S&RH rights is not optional, but essential: required now, not some day.

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