



PARTICIPATORY ASSESSMENT REPORT ON THE EMPOWERMENT OF UKRAINIAN WOMEN AND YOUTH. THE IMPACT OF LOCAL POLICIES ON THEIR RIGHTS IN ITALY

SWEETIE

Supporting Women and youth in Emergency
with Environment of Trust In Europe.

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THE SWEETIE PROJECT

SWEETIE promotes the integration of Ukrainian women and youth by improving access to rights, employment, and training, while enhancing the quality and gender responsiveness of public services in Italy, Greece, and Poland. Participatory mechanisms, including multi-stakeholder processes and orientation desks co-led by Ukrainians, have strengthened coordination and dialogue, delivering progress across three dimensions: empowerment, public services, and decision-making. This report presents the findings of the participatory assessment conducted in 2025-2026 in Italy under the SWEETIE project, analysing Ukrainian women's and youth's access to one-stop-shops (orientation desks) and local services, and assessing progress in their empowerment and capacity to navigate complex welfare systems.

Executive Summary

Italy currently hosts nearly 193,000 Ukrainian refugees, the majority of whom are women with caregiving responsibilities. While the Temporary Protection framework has ensured rapid legal access to rights, the assessment confirms a persistent gap between formal entitlements and effective access. Structural barriers - such as administrative complexity, fragmented information, language gaps, and uneven territorial implementation - continue to limit the practical exercise of rights, particularly in housing, employment, and access to advanced welfare services. Within this context, the SWEETIE intervention model has generated added value towards gender sensitiveness in public service provision. Through orientation desks co-led by trained peer mentors from Ukraine and russophone diaspora, and supported by participatory workshops, the intervention provides tailored, trust-based support that translates formal rights into accessible and actionable pathways.

Evidence from the assessment points to tangible progress in three key areas:

- » **Improved access to services:** 359 beneficiaries were supported through orientation desks, with high return rates indicating sustained trust. Participants report increased ability to identify and access services, particularly in healthcare, education, and employment pathways.
- » **Increased awareness of rights:** Over 80% of participants report improved understanding of their entitlements and administrative procedures, especially in health and education.
- » **Enhanced navigation capacity and empowerment:** Beneficiaries show a progressive shift towards greater autonomy, including increased ability to prepare documentation, attend appointments independently, and engage with institutions. However, a gap persists between awareness and full self-efficacy, particularly in complex domains such as housing and labour rights.

A key strength of the SWEETIE approach lies in combining individual support (orientation desks) with collective processes (workshops and focus groups), enabling both case resolution and systemic learning. The peer mentor model has proven particularly effective in building trust, facilitating communication, and promoting peer-to-peer knowledge transfer within communities.

At the same time, the findings highlight that improvements in access remain significantly mediated by project-based support. Persistent structural constraints within public service systems – including fragmentation, limited coordination, and insufficient user-centred approaches – continue to hinder autonomous access and risk perpetuating dependency on intermediaries. These findings point to a clear policy priority: shifting from formal provision of services to effective accessibility. This requires simplifying administrative procedures, strengthening coordination across sectors, expanding linguistic and cultural mediation, and embedding user-centred approaches within service design and delivery.

In this perspective, the SWEETIE model offers a scalable and transferable approach to enhance the inclusiveness and usability of gender-responsive welfare and labour systems across EU contexts. By bridging the gap between institutions and vulnerable rightsholders, it contributes to more gender responsive public services and supports the EU's broader objectives on social inclusion, gender equality, and the effective integration of displaced populations.

The evidence generated will inform the next phase of the project, including co-development processes with stakeholders aimed at translating findings into concrete policy recommendations and service improvements at both local and European levels.

1 - METHODOLOGY

The SWEETIE project's participatory assessment has been designed to generate an in-depth understanding of rightsholders' needs, barriers, and empowerment pathways, with particular attention to their capacity to navigate both formal and informal service systems. More specifically, SWEETIE identified the following specific objectives and indicators:

Specific Objectives	Indicators	Means of verification and frequency of data collection
SO1: To foster the integration of public services targeting Ukrainian citizens, especially women and youth, fleeing war.	70% of beneficiaries know what further service to refer to	- Intermediate and ex-post survey - Key Informant Interview s(KII) at the end of the project
SO2: To promote Ukrainian women and youth's enjoyment of rights.	70% of beneficiaries declare they are more aware of their rights in the country of destination	- Intermediate and ex-post survey - Key Informant Interview s(KII) at the end of the project
SO3: To guide and support effectively Ukrainian women and youth in accessing to services and enjoying rights.	70% of beneficiaries declare they can better navigate the welfare system	- Peer mentor's observation tool - Survey after each capacity building - Ex-post survey
SO4: To improve IT, GR, and PL welfare and labour systems inclusiveness and effectiveness.	The local welfare and labour systems in IT, GR, and PL plan to test one of the co-designed solutions or policy-asks	- Co-designed solutions or Policy-ask report - KIIs at the end of the project
SO5: To enhance the capacity of Ukrainians to address their needs and generate value across public services.	60% of the beneficiaries declare the services they were redirected answered their needs	- Ex-post survey - KIIs at the end of the project

Therefore, the activities related with the issue that this report is tackling for Italy are:

- » Service and right information and orientation desks for Ukrainian women and youth in Italy, Greece, Poland, including both Information and orientation desks (desklog1) and 2 workshop per field held per intervention area.
- » Capacity building programme for women and youth from Russophone countries already established in Italy, Greece and Poland as peer mentor
- » Capacity building programme for staff from relevant services (i.e., school staff, General Registry officers, healthcare professionals) and policymakers.

A mixed qualitative approach was adopted, combining focus groups, participatory workshops, and semi-structured interviews. These methods enabled participants to articulate their lived

experiences, as well as the challenges they encounter in accessing services. Additional insights were gathered through ongoing helpdesk activities and in-depth assessments conducted by peer mentors.

The participatory design of the assessment also included workshops, dialogue sessions with local institutions, and orientation activities, which created spaces for exchange among beneficiaries, public service providers, universities, and civil society actors. This multi-stakeholder engagement ensured that participants lived experiences were placed at the center of the analysis and systematically translated into actionable knowledge.

Overall, the assessment contributes to a deeper understanding of how tailored interventions – such as the peer mentor-supported helpdesk – affect beneficiaries' knowledge of available services, their awareness of rights, and their practical ability to act autonomously. The evidence generated provides a robust foundation for the co-design of future community-based initiatives and for the adaptive refinement of support mechanisms to maximize impact.

2 - CONTEXT OVERVIEW

As of 2024, approximately 192,760 Ukrainian refugees are hosted in Italy (OECD), within a broader European displacement of over 5.9 million people (UNHCR). The inflow is highly gendered, with women representing more than 70% of arrivals, often accompanied by children, thus requiring tailored, gender-sensitive policy responses.

Following the activation of the Temporary Protection (TP) Directive in March 2022, Italy granted immediate access to protection, welfare, housing, healthcare, and education. National authorities expanded reception capacities; however, the overall response has relied heavily on informal mechanisms. Notably, only around 10% of Ukrainian refugees have been accommodated within the formal reception system, while the vast majority depend on the Ukrainian diaspora – the second largest in Europe – for housing and initial support.

While this community-based response has ensured rapid and flexible assistance, it has also exposed structural shortcomings in the public system. **Ukrainian refugees face persistent barriers in accessing services due to administrative complexity, language gaps, limited institutional capacity, and uneven implementation across territories.** The absence of structured feedback and complaint mechanisms further weakens accountability and limits the ability to identify and address systemic failures.

Critical gaps emerge in healthcare and labour market integration. The Italian healthcare system, already under pressure, lacks sufficient intercultural mediation and gender-sensitive services, constraining effective access. In parallel, labour market integration remains largely segmented: Ukrainian refugees, particularly women, are concentrated in low-wage, low-skilled sectors such as domestic and care work, regardless of their relatively high educational attainment. This reflects systemic barriers in the recognition of qualifications and limited access to upskilling pathways.

Housing represents a further structural vulnerability. Dependence on informal accommodation arrangements – often without formal contracts – restricts access to residence registration, which is a prerequisite for accessing essential services, including healthcare. Combined with low wages and discriminatory practices in the rental market, this contributes to persistent housing insecurity.

Overall, the **Italian response highlights a dual dynamic:** while the TP framework has ensured rapid legal access to rights, its implementation has been uneven and insufficiently supported by adequately resourced public systems. The heavy reliance on diaspora networks risks institutionalising informality and transferring pre-existing vulnerabilities to new arrivals, thereby perpetuating cycles of precariousness, labour exploitation, and limited access to rights. Strengthening institutional capacity, improving service accessibility, and formalising support mechanisms remain key policy priorities to ensure sustainable inclusion.

3 - ACCESS TO SERVICES AND RIGHTS: MAIN BARRIERS

The evidence collected across Italian territories, based on approximately 359 Ukrainian beneficiaries, highlights a structural gap between the formal provision of public services and their effective accessibility. While a broad range of services is available across sectors, multiple and recurring barriers continue to limit their practical uptake and the full exercise of rights.

Key cross-cutting challenges include language barriers, fragmented and inconsistent information, and high levels of administrative complexity. These are compounded by limited coordination among institutions and significant differences between administrative systems in Italy and those of beneficiaries' countries of origin. As a result, access pathways remain difficult to navigate, particularly for newly arrived populations and those with limited institutional familiarity.

Sectoral analysis confirms that housing represents the most critical area of concern. Structural constraints – such as high costs, limited availability, restrictive landlord requirements, and discriminatory practices – significantly hinder access to stable accommodation. Similarly, gaps persist in access to legal assistance beyond residence permits and in services for minors, where limited availability, low awareness, and procedural burdens reduce effective coverage.

Even in relatively well-functioning sectors, including education, healthcare, and residence-related legal assistance, systemic inefficiencies persist. These include bureaucratic delays, lack of clarity in procedures, and insufficient guidance mechanisms. Employment-related services are further constrained by labour market precarity, low trust in public institutions, and limited understanding of contractual frameworks. Overall, these factors contribute to a situation in which rights are formally guaranteed but remain only partially exercisable in practice.

Local-level findings reinforce these structural issues. In Naples, for instance, beneficiaries demonstrate general awareness of key public services but lack detailed knowledge of access criteria and procedures. Administrative processes are perceived as complex and inconsistently applied, particularly in areas such as qualification recognition and access to employment services. In addition, communication barriers and the absence of culturally and gender-sensitive approaches reduce the effectiveness of service delivery and weaken trust in institutions. In Reggio Calabria, access to basic services is generally ensured; however, knowledge and uptake of more complex welfare measures – such as family benefits, housing subsidies, and advanced healthcare services – remain limited. Informal community networks play a significant role in information dissemination, partially compensating for gaps in institutional outreach. Structural barriers include limited mediation services, perceived institutional distance, and irregular employment conditions that restrict access to social protection mechanisms. In Bari, although service provision is relatively comprehensive, key challenges persist in terms of accessibility and efficiency. Healthcare services are broadly available but affected by long waiting times, while access to housing remains constrained by structural shortages and high costs. Administrative complexity, particularly in housing and labour-related procedures, continues to limit effective access to entitlements. In Naples, targeted interventions implemented within the project – such as helpdesks, peer mentoring, and thematic workshops – have demonstrated measurable improvements in beneficiaries' awareness and capacity to navigate public services. These

mechanisms have proven effective in strengthening access to healthcare, education, and employment pathways, as well as in facilitating referrals and institutional engagement. However, their impact also underscores the extent to which access currently depends on intermediary support rather than on system-level accessibility.

Despite these positive outcomes, significant structural gaps remain. Persistent barriers include complex administrative procedures, fragmented service provision, insufficient coordination among institutions, and limited user-centred approaches. These factors continue to constrain service uptake and reduce the overall effectiveness of public welfare systems.

From a policy perspective, the findings point to several priority areas for intervention. These include:

strengthening coordination and information-sharing among public institutions and service providers;

- » simplifying administrative procedures and clarifying access pathways;
- » expanding linguistic and cultural mediation services;
- » improving outreach and communication on available services and welfare measures;
- » enhancing user-centred and gender-sensitive approaches in service delivery;
- » addressing structural shortages in critical sectors, particularly housing;
- » and consolidating community-based and peer-led support mechanisms as complementary tools to institutional provision.

Overall, improving access to services requires a shift from formal provision to an intersectional approach for effective accessibility, ensuring that rights are not only guaranteed in principle but can be exercised in practice through inclusive, coordinated, and user-oriented systems.

4 - EMPOWERMENT AND NAVIGATION CAPACITY

Basic levels of autonomy are generally adequate. However, when addressing more complex needs, individuals continue to rely on informal networks (notably compatriots) or private intermediaries. Territorial knowledge remains limited – even among long-term residents – and mobility is largely confined to routine pathways linked to employment and family responsibilities.

Findings from the participatory assessment indicate that the helpdesk intervention contributed significantly to improving beneficiaries' awareness of their rights in Italy, including those related to residence status, healthcare, education, employment, and family protection. Peer mentor feedback confirms measurable progress in beneficiaries' understanding of both their entitlements and the administrative procedures required to access them. Notwithstanding these improvements, the effective exercise of rights remains uneven. While confidence in accessing services has increased, substantial barriers persist in navigating complex administrative systems, particularly in the domains of housing and labor rights.

Autonomy in service navigation thus emerges as a key policy issue. Evidence suggests that limited access is not primarily driven by a lack of motivation, but by structural constraints that hinder independent and informed engagement with public services. Addressing these constraints requires not only the provision of information, but also improvements in the clarity, continuity, and accessibility of institutional pathways. This includes ensuring that users can clearly understand service functioning, eligibility criteria, procedural steps, and referral mechanisms across different offices, without facing repeated administrative discontinuities.

In addition, service provision should incorporate a more user-centered approach that recognizes individuals' prior experiences, qualifications, and life trajectories. Current systems are often perceived as opaque, fragmented, and overly procedural, limiting users' ability to navigate them autonomously without external support. Strengthening system transparency and coherence is therefore essential to enhancing effective access.

Overall, the needs analysis highlights a structural tension between beneficiaries' willingness to access rights and opportunities, and the systemic barriers that constrain their effective utilization. Individual helpdesk activities enabled the identification of needs at case level, while focus groups allowed for their validation and aggregation into broader trends. The findings point to the need for policy responses that address not only individual capacity gaps, but also systemic barriers affecting access, comprehension, and autonomous navigation of public services.

5 - ROLE OF LEADERSHIP, PEER MENTORING AND ORIENTATION DESKS IN ACCESSING RIGHTS

Within the Italian context, **the intervention of orientation desks and peer mentors has generated significant and observable improvements**, particularly in terms of users' functional autonomy, knowledge acquisition, and engagement with services.

The first major improvement is the progressive increase in autonomy. Beneficiaries who initially required intensive support (such as accompaniment or direct mediation) gradually develop the capacity to navigate services independently. This is evidenced by their ability to attend appointments autonomously, prepare required documentation, and interact more confidently with service providers.

A second key improvement concerns the quality and depth of users' understanding. Repeated interaction with peer mentors leads to a shift from generic, often confused requests to more precise and targeted questions. Beneficiaries demonstrate a clearer grasp of administrative procedures, timelines, and institutional roles. This is particularly visible in areas such as employment services, where step-by-step guidance and comparative explanations between Italian and Ukrainian systems help clarify complex pathways, and in education, where users increasingly engage in training, enroll in CPIA courses, or initiate recognition of qualifications.

A third, more advanced level of improvement is reflected in the ability of beneficiaries to re-elaborate and transmit information. Users begin to explain procedures and share knowledge within their communities, indicating not only comprehension but also a degree of empowerment. This peer-to-peer diffusion of information partially mitigates the risks associated with fragmented official communication, although it also underscores continued reliance on informal networks.

The desks and peer mentors also play a critical role in bridging systemic gaps through practical, tailored support. This includes simplified explanations, visual tools, direct accompaniment, and mediation with institutions. In the health sector, for instance, such support reduces inappropriate use of services and improves navigation of the national health system. In legal assistance, the desks effectively differentiate between simple and complex cases, providing direct support where possible and ensuring referrals to specialized services when needed. In housing, while structural barriers remain largely unresolved, the intervention helps beneficiaries access temporary solutions and better understand available options.

Importantly, **support within SWEETIE contributes not only to service access but also to increased awareness of rights across multiple domains**. The most significant improvements are observed in awareness related to health (4.06/5) and education (3.91/5), where beneficiaries develop a clearer understanding of entitlements and available opportunities. However, this increased awareness does not systematically translate into full autonomy. The dimension of "concrete enjoyment of rights" remains comparatively low (2.92/5), highlighting a persistent gap

between knowledge and effective self-efficacy. Many refugees continue to rely on intermediaries due to linguistic insecurity, fear of making mistakes, and limited confidence in interacting with institutions. A particularly relevant added value of the project emerges from the workshop component implemented in Bari, which achieved an exceptionally high average score (4.78/5). These group-based activities complement individual support by fostering collective learning, peer exchange, and critical reflection on systemic barriers. Workshops have proven effective in strengthening understanding of labour rights, healthcare access, and qualification recognition, while also enhancing participants' capacity to engage with institutions and perceive themselves as active stakeholders. The collective identification of challenges further reduces isolation and reinforces a shared understanding of structural constraints.

Overall, the **final key finding for the Italian context** is that the project successfully addresses a critical intermediary gap within the public service ecosystem. While services are generally available and structurally defined, their accessibility, usability, and inclusiveness remain limited for vulnerable groups such as Ukrainian refugees. Orientation desks and peer mentors act as enabling mechanisms that translate formal rights into practical access, improving navigation, comprehension, and initial empowerment.

The project

Supporting Women and youth in Emergency with Environment of Trust In Europe

SWEETIE aims to facilitate the social inclusion of refugees fleeing Ukraine, particularly women and youth, and to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public services. It achieves these objectives by influencing specific areas of the welfare and labour systems (i.e., job access and inclusion, education, healthcare) in each country for these to become gender-responsive and culture-sensitive public services. SWEETIE replicates an intervention model tested in Italy (SWEET) by transferring it to Greece and Poland and by scaling it up in Italy at a political level.

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