



**The Voice of Women:
Experiences of WeWorld Colleagues in Ukraine**
We Begin with People, Not Temperatures

February 2026

*This document does not begin with degrees below zero or missile strikes.
It begins with the people who continue to work through them*

Listening as Practice, Not Symbol

At WeWorld, listening is not only directed toward communities. It is also a commitment toward our own colleagues.

The experiences of staff – especially women working in crisis settings – are not considered anecdotal, but essential knowledge for shaping programming, duty of care, and organizational culture. Over the years, this practice of listening has informed:

- research on gendered impacts of crisis (*Her Future at Risk*)
- narrative testimony from field colleagues (*In Rivolta*)
- internal staff consultations shaping our Gender Action Plans

This document continues that approach: recognizing that those who deliver humanitarian response also live within the same systems of fragility, inequality, and resilience. Across Ukraine, WeWorld and partner staff describe winter not as a temporary emergency, but as a prolonged condition of living and working in scarcity. Homes are cold, electricity is uncertain, water must be stored, and daily life is organized around blackout schedules. These are not distant or abstract frontline humanitarian challenges – they are the daily realities of the same people delivering assistance. As Kseniia Kulynych, WeWorld Programme Manager in Ukraine, explains:

*“Since February 2022, when Russian forces invaded my country, my life has intertwined with that of thousands of women and girls I have met in cities under attack, in overcrowded shelters, in reception centres. Every day I see how deeply this conflict marks women’s bodies and lives.” **

#Duty of Care Is Not Optional

Staff well-being is not a private matter.

Energy and water insecurity become:

- a staff welfare issue
- a gender equality issue
- a protection and dignity issue
- a duty-of-care responsibility

#Winter as a Condition of Living and Working

January 2026 combined extreme cold – temperatures reaching -20°C and below – with continued attacks on energy infrastructure. This intersection of climate and conflict reshaped daily life across the country. For staff, winter is not only a seasonal hardship. It enters homes, bodies, routines, and emotional well-being.

“I have to postpone everything and deal with household issues first.”

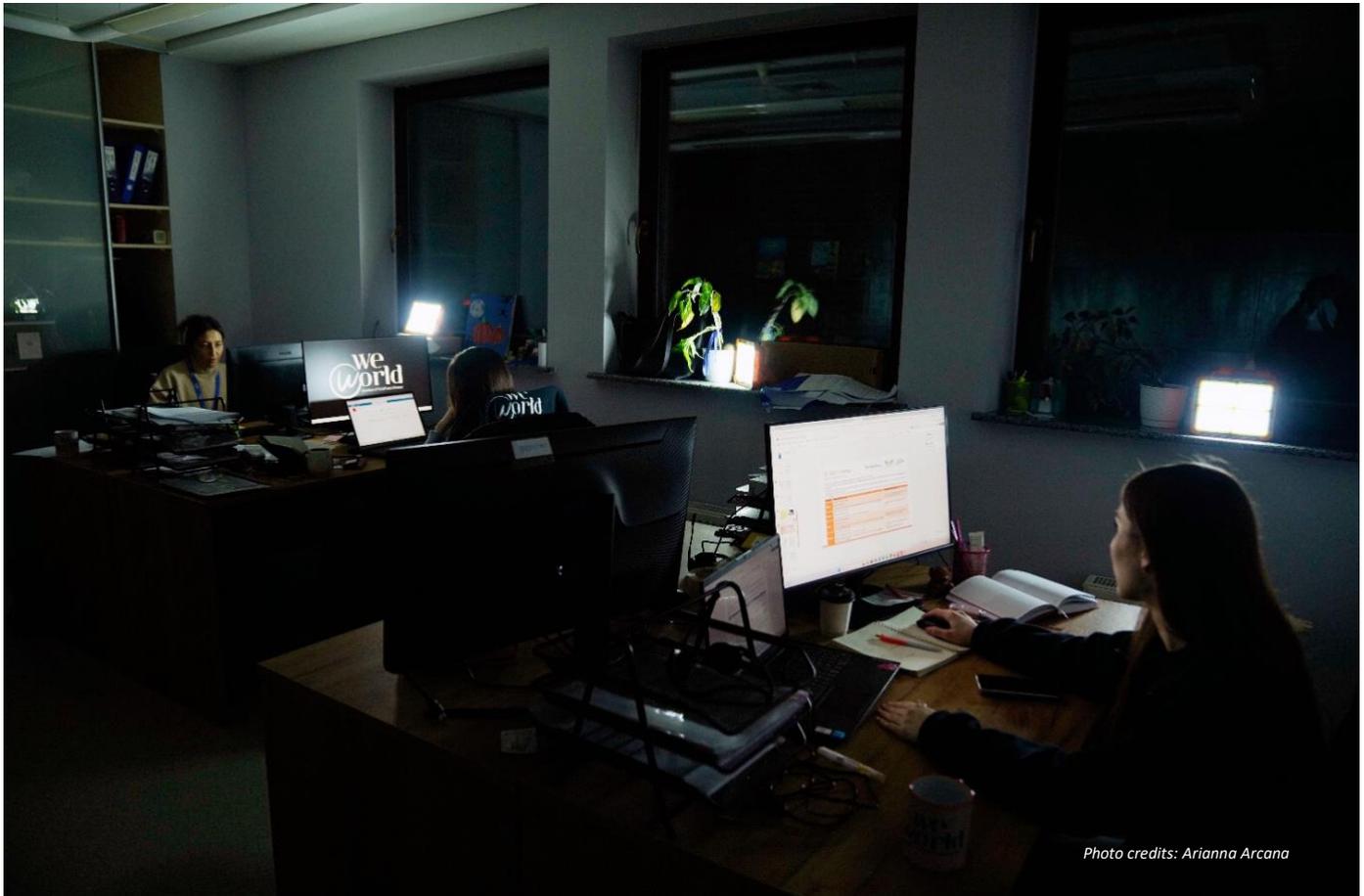
Electricity cuts structure the day. Cooking, washing, charging devices, heating water, and cleaning must be planned around unpredictable windows of power. Daily life becomes a logistical operation.

#Living the Same Crisis as the Communities We Support

Humanitarian staff are not external observers. They live inside the same fragility.

“The child has a cold.” “We are freezing.”

Cold is not discomfort – it is illness, fatigue, anxiety, and reduced resilience. As Kseniia reflects:
*“The crisis is not only bombs and material destruction. It is invisible fears, violence that happens in the shadows, trauma engraved in bodies and minds.” **



#When Coping Means Enduring

Many staff say they are 'coping.' But coping often means endurance under pressure.

“Very influential, but bearable.”

“Difficulties happen, but I manage.”

Behind this language are exhaustion, emotional drain, anxiety, and apathy. Resilience here reflects survival, not absence of impact.

#Women Carrying the System at Home

Winter and infrastructure collapse magnify existing gender inequalities.

“Carrying water, heating it to wash the dishes.”

“Sometimes I forget that I am a woman... survival becomes the priority.”

Women describe the explosion of domestic labour, hygiene management, and childcare when services fail. With many men mobilized, care, decisions, and emotional stability of families rest heavily on women. Kseniia’s field experience echoes this:

*“With men called to the front, the entire burden of family and community support falls on women’s shoulders. They must maintain both productive and reproductive work – economic survival and emotional care. This dual responsibility weighs enormously on their physical and mental health.” **

#Hygiene, Health and Dignity Under Scarcity



Water shortages and cold reduce the frequency and ease of personal hygiene.

“I feel dirty.” “Hair washing becomes challenging.”

Wet wipes and stored water are coping tools, not solutions. This is not only practical – it is a matter of dignity.

#Listening Is Not Symbolic – It Shapes How We Work

Listening to staff is not an occasional exercise at WeWorld. It is part of how the organization examines power, gender, and responsibility. An internal consultation with Ukraine-based staff conducted within 'Her Future at Risk' confirmed that gender shapes both programming and staff experience.

Female colleagues described how their gender identity enables deeper community connections and more empathetic programming approaches – operational strengths aligned with WeWorld's feminist humanitarian commitments.

At the same time, women noted that professional expertise, especially in technical sectors, is not always equally recognized, highlighting the need to strengthen mentorship pathways and leadership development. Male colleagues' responses reflected varying levels of engagement with gender issues. Rather than resistance, these patterns are understood as signals for structured dialogue and continued capacity strengthening. Transforming attitudes around gender, privilege, and power requires safe spaces and sustained reflection. The consultation also identified the need for stronger integration of menstrual health, hygiene management, and childcare support, for both communities and staff.

Listening, therefore, becomes governance.

Staff insights directly inform:

- gender training curricula
- HR policies, including flexible work arrangements
- programme design tools with stronger gender markers
- accountability systems monitoring gender parity.

Listening has also led to concrete workplace transformations. The WeWorld office in Ukraine is certified as a **Period Positive Workplace**, recognizing menstrual health as a matter of dignity, inclusion, and staff well-being. This reflects a broader commitment to ensuring that gender-sensitive practices are not limited to programming but are embedded in organizational life.

Together with local partners, we co-developed the *Maria Diary*, a contextualized menstrual diary that supports girls and women in managing menstrual health and breaking taboos. Listening to women's experiences shapes both our programmes and our workplace culture.



#Women in Humanitarian Work: Living the Crisis, Shaping the Response

Women in Ukraine are not only affected by war – they are central to humanitarian action.



Without proper shelters in schools and kindergartens, many women are forced to stay home with children who continue learning online. This isolates them from the workforce and community life.

Kseniia Kulynych, Ukraine
Project Supervisor at WeWorld



Testimony included in the report "Her Future at Risk"



Gender discrimination is still a major issue. It limits access to education, healthcare, employment, and leadership.

Olena Ostapenko, Ukraine
a Cash Officer in Kharkiv



Testimony included in the report "Her Future at Risk"

Women's presence in the sector improves response quality:

"Women are often more attuned to the needs of other women—especially in sensitive areas like hygiene, protection, and childcare."

#Women's Voices from Inside WeWorld

Across testimonies, women highlight their contribution:

"The inclusion of women in humanitarian teams often leads to a more comprehensive approach to working with communities."

Women's involvement is crucial in GBV response, psychosocial support, and reproductive health.

#From Receiving Support to Providing It: Nataliia's Story

Nataliia arrived in Italy with her children and was hosted in WeWorld's Women Space in Milan. She later chose to support other Ukrainian women as a linguistic-cultural mediator.



"I moved here from Ukraine with my 8-year-old son. The first days of Italian school were difficult for him. He met so many new people and children, new rules, a new environment, a new language. He cried. He often told me that he did not understand what they were telling him and that was why he wanted to stay home. I explained to him that it is important to go on and study. My parents decided to stay in Ukraine, I call them every morning to find out how they are. They often hear alarms and must take refuge in the basement. I try hard not to think about the war, I will use this moment as an opportunity to make a new life for myself."

She later returned to Ukraine to support the Ministry of Social Services – moving from beneficiary to humanitarian actor.

#Closing: Bodies as Battlefields, People as Resistance

"The female body is a battlefield, but also a place of resistance."

Humanitarian staff in Ukraine are not just responding to crisis. They endure it, manage it, and continue to care for others within it. Recognizing this is not only about vulnerability – it is about responsibility: to listen, to adapt support systems, and to ensure that care extends also to those who provide it.

* This contribution is taken from the volume *In Rivolta: Manifesto dei Corpi Liberi. Voci collettive per WeWorld*, edited by Martina Albini and published by Castelvécchi (Rome) in October 2025 [Dal 10 ottobre in libreria e sull' e-shop di WeWorld: In Rivolta. Manifesto dei corpi liberi - WeWorld Ucraina-HFAR-02-web-1.pdf](#)
[WeWorld-WomenHumanitarianCrises-05-002.pdf](#)