

# FRAGILE LIFE

stories of Ukrainians  
who suffered from  
human trafficking  
during the war  
(2014-2025)



Socio-political publication

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“Fragile Life” is a collection of the true stories of Ukrainian men and women who became the victims of human trafficking during a full-scale war. These are the voices of those who were tortured, forcibly detained, exploited physically, psychologically, and sexually. Those who survived the pain, humiliation, loss of home and dignity, but did not lose themselves.

The heroes of this book are women and men, children, and the elderly from different parts of Ukraine. Their destinies were shaken by the dark sides of the war: labor and sexual exploitation, forced deportation, and involvement in an armed conflict. But these people managed to go through the darkness and turn for help - to the specialists from the Caritas Ukraine network, who have been working with the victims of human trafficking for over 20 years.

This book was created not to simply talk about cruelty. Its goal is to raise awareness about this problem, to help the victims understand: they are not alone, they have somewhere to turn. “Fragile Life” is a testament to the strength of the spirit, humanity and hope. Because even a life that has cracked can be restored.

Life is fragile. But we are there.

Universal Decimal Classification 000000

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Human trafficking is a crime, a terrible violation  
of human rights and freedom of person



## Life Is Fragile – But Caritas Is Here

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This book brings together the stories of people from across Ukraine who have suffered from human trafficking during the full-scale war. These are people of different ages, genders, and social backgrounds. They have all been victims of violence, exploitation, blackmail, abuse, forced captivity, and violations of their rights and dignity. Many endured torture, physical, sexual, and psychological violence – yet somehow, they found the strength to preserve their humanity and dignity. These people, whose stories you are about to read, turned to Caritas benefactors and received support, assistance, and hope. Life is fragile – it can crack or shatter, especially now, in times of war. But we, people of goodwill and Caritas workers, are here to help piece together the broken fragments of life of the affected Ukrainians, restore their dignity, strength, and the will to live, support them emotionally, psychologically, and materially.

For over 20 years, Caritas Ukraine has operated a network of centres that support people affected by human trafficking. This crime is not new. It affects men, women, and even children in many ways. But during wartime, trafficking has become even more brutal, cruel, and terrifying. The stories of people who have suffered from exploitation and violence are just a few examples among countless cases that Ukrainians have faced during armed conflict, occupation, and displacement. Forced labour and sexual exploitation, recruitment into armed conflict, the forced deportation of Ukrainian children for

adoption or organ harvesting – these are tragically common forms of trafficking in times of war. People become easy prey for the occupiers. They don't need to be recruited or transported. They are simply captured, held, and used – as sex slaves or forced labour.

We collected these stories not to dwell on cruelty or evil, but to raise awareness about the reality of human trafficking. To encourage people who have been through similar things not to remain silent, but to reach out for help. Because human life is priceless. Every person deserves a decent and good life, deserves respect, understanding, and happiness.

Life is fragile – but we are here for you.

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*Natalia Holynska*  
*Project Manager for Anti-Trafficking*  
*Programs*

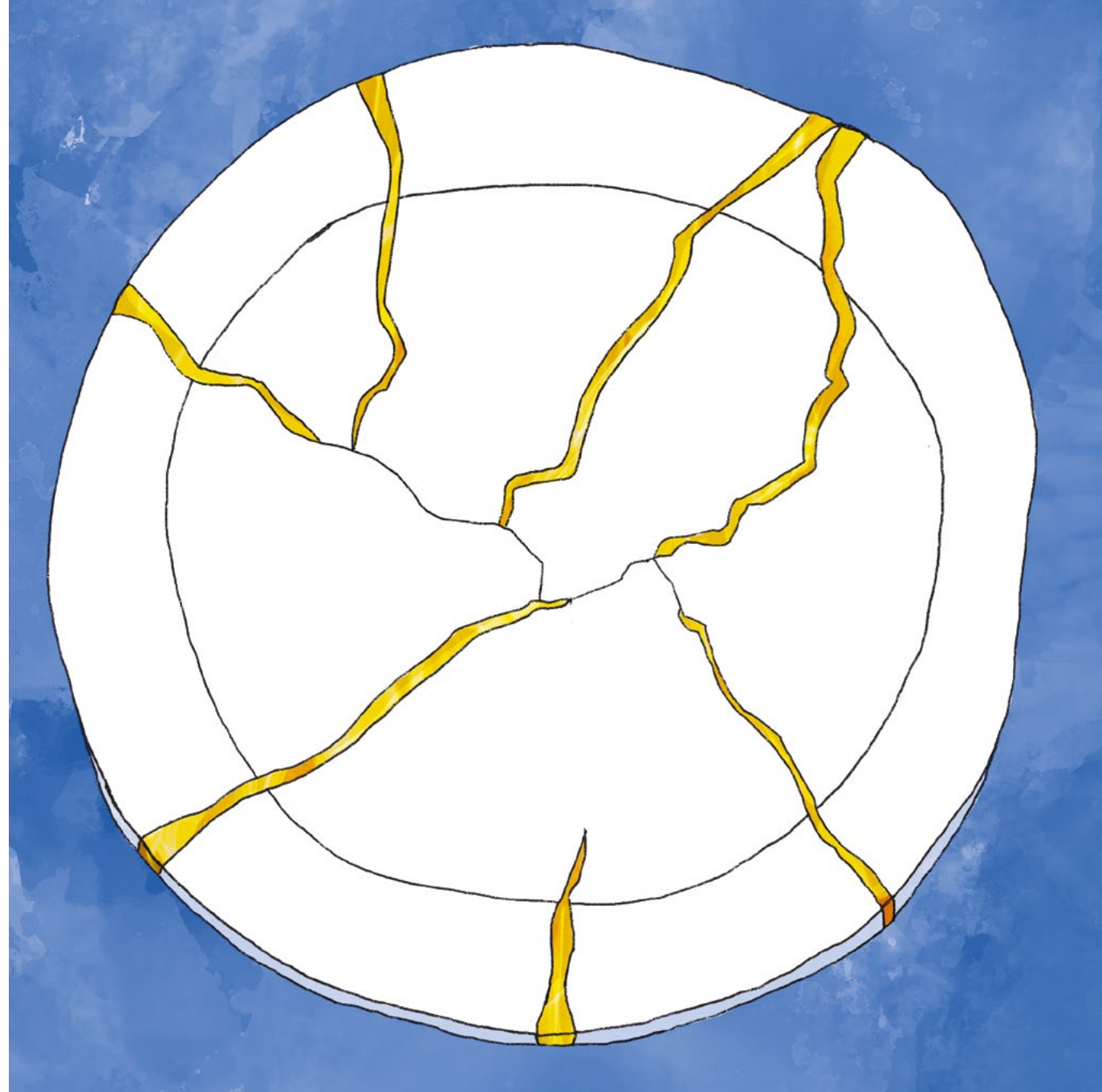
You can watch the feature  
documentary film “Fragile Life” here: >>>



Caritas Ukraine has been combating human trafficking for over 20 years. During this time, thousands of people who have suffered from various forms of modern slavery have received material, legal and psychological assistance.

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[caritas.ua](http://caritas.ua)



# Human Trafficking is a Crime Punishable under the Criminal Code of Ukraine

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The legal definition of “human trafficking” is established in the Law of Ukraine “On Combating Human Trafficking”, specifically in paragraph 15, part one, Article 1. It defines human trafficking as the unlawful transaction involving a person as an object, as well as recruitment, transportation, concealment, transfer, or receipt of a person for the purpose of exploitation – including sexual exploitation – through deception, fraud, blackmail, abuse of vulnerability, threats or use of violence, abuse of authority, or material or other dependence on another person, which are considered crimes under the Criminal Code of Ukraine.

Under Article 149 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine, human trafficking is a punishable offense (from 3 to 15 years of imprisonment, with or without confiscation of property).

## **Human trafficking can take various forms, including:**

- Labor exploitation;
- Sexual exploitation, including prostitution and pornography (including online);
- Forced begging;
- Forced involvement in criminal activities or armed conflicts;
- Trafficking in persons for the purpose of organ removal;
- Forced surrogacy;
- Illegal adoption for profit;
- Mixed or combined forms of exploitation

Conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) includes acts such as rape,

sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, forced sterilization, castration, genital torture, forced marriage, forced nudity, threats of sexual violence, and being forced to witness acts of sexual violence, and other forms of sexual violence committed against women, men, girls, or boys, directly or indirectly linked to war or armed conflict. This term also includes human trafficking for the purpose of sexual violence and/or exploitation when it occurs in the context of war.

CRSV is often used as a method of warfare and as part of deliberate military strategy. Its aim is to humiliate survivors, inflict physical pain, spread fear, shame victims, and crush any resistance or disobedience. According to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, recently ratified by Ukraine, CRSV can be prosecuted as a war crime, a crime against humanity, or an act of genocide.

CRSV has devastating effects not only on victims but on the entire society. The trauma of trafficking and CRSV can last for years, and support and rehabilitation are essential.

This crime has no statute of limitations. You can report it at any time, even if it happened years ago.



*Iryna Boiko*  
*Head of the Caritas Kyiv*  
*Anti-Trafficking Centre*

# For my daughter, I got stronger

the story of a mom who escaped from labor  
exploitation abroad

The war forced Olena and her five-year-old daughter to flee their hometown of Lysychansk. Olena needed nothing but a normal safe life for her child. However, instead of salvation, the woman fell into the trap of labor exploitation abroad.

She survived barbed wire, fear and lawlessness, to hug her daughter again and start life anew. This story is about maternal strength, human dignity and the path to hope.

With my daughter, we fled from the war but got behind the barbed wire

I am Olena. I am 29 years old and a mother of five-year-old Emma. My daughter is the most precious thing that remained after the war.

We lived in Lysychansk. At first, our city disappeared from the map unofficially, and then literally. After months without electricity, heating, and water, with explosions that served as an alarm clock and children's cries breaking the silence, I realized that we had to escape.

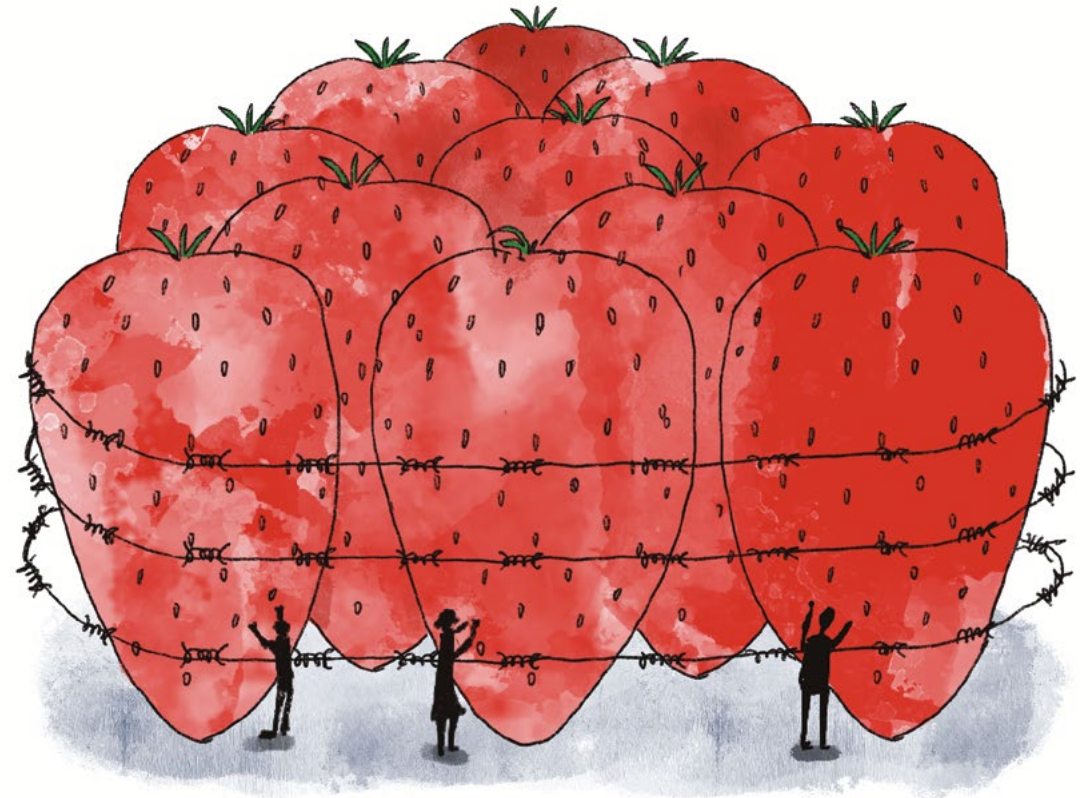
A neighbor helped us. We drove through shelling, fear and death. I still don't know how we stayed alive. Anyway, we reached the border in Western Ukraine and left for Poland. At that time, I thought that a new life was beginning for us.

I wanted a normal life for my daughter

At first, I was glad that I was safe with my daughter. Volodymyr, a distant acquaintance, hosted us. He was a kind elderly man. He was sick and could barely walk, but he gave us his room.

So, I decided that I needed to take this chance and be strong. I wanted to provide for

There was not freedom or humanity.



There was only barbed wire, cells,  
a strict supervision and fear

my daughter and give her peaceful normal life without air raid alerts.

I came across a job offer: they needed someone for picking strawberries. It seemed like nothing complicated, as I thought at the time. I called the number and they answered me in Ukrainian. They promised me decent conditions and fair pay. The next morning, having left Emma with Volodymyr, I went to work with the hope for the best.

*However, nothing was as promised. There was no freedom or humanity there. Only barbed wire, cameras, strict surveillance and fear. Everyone worked non-stop because the “employers” threatened with fines and not paying salaries at all.*

When I returned home, my hands were shaking, my back was hurting, and my heart was breaking, because the whole time I was working, my little daughter was with an almost unknown, sick elderly man. But in the morning, I went to work again, because we needed money to survive.

*In a week, the conditions became even worse: the demands were increased, the working day was extended to 12 hours. They stopped feeding us and took away our passports: they promised to return them after the strawberry picking was finished.*

I worked for two more weeks, but instead of the promised 5,500 zlotys, I received only 800.

Finally, I managed to get my passport back by threatening them with the police. However, when they gave me the documents, they warned me to keep quiet.

After that, I returned to Ukraine. I didn't have any money. I didn't believe in myself. I had nothing but my daughter in my arms. I was devastated and didn't know where to start.

I went to Caritas – that's where they helped and supported me

In Ivano-Frankivsk, someone advised me to contact the International Charitable Foundation “Caritas Ukraine.” It is an organization that helps victims of labor exploitation.

It was there that I saw not just help for the first time in a while, but humanity and compassion.

No one asked, “Why did you fall into this trap?” They just listened. They hugged me. They helped with things, warmth, and hope.

I still don't know how to pull myself together. But I know for whom it's worth doing it: for Emma. Now I know for sure that I'm not alone. Because there are those around me who won't let me break down.

Over the three years of the full-scale invasion, 446 people received the status of the victims of human trafficking from the National Social Service of Ukraine.

# They didn't break me

the story of a journalist who spent half a month in russian captivity

He is a journalist, actor, and truck driver. He has a degree in psychology. He spent years teaching others to understand the world, and then was forced to fight for his own survival in captivity.

Half a month of torture, abuse and humiliation did not destroy the essential in him: the will to live. Today, he is back in Ukraine, gradually coming back to life. He believes that even after the darkest night, one can find a path to the light.

I was going to Kherson on vacation but ended up under occupation

In my 45 years, I have changed careers several times: I worked in the media, volunteered, and traveled to Poland as a truck driver. I have a degree in psychology, so I am used to observing, listening, and understanding. But what I experienced in captivity does not fit into any theory.

In January 2022, I returned to Kherson: I was going on vacation, but ended up under occupation. I participated in manifestations, passed information to journalists, and hid from the russians. I managed to evacuate my wife, but I did not have time to leave myself. When I "broke down" I decided to escape through Crimea.

The russian occupiers locked me in a metal container without water, food, or a toilet

At one of the checkpoints, russian soldiers detained me. They immediately took my documents and phone. The FSB received printouts from my phone: contacts of activists and information about my posts on social networks.

I started lying, saying that I was an actor and a driver in Poland, and that I was not a journalist anymore for a long time.

More than anything in the world, I wanted to survive. I was playing out my legend in my head - like an actor creating his role



*However, it didn't help. They locked me in a metal container without water, food, or a toilet. Then, security officers with machine guns put a bag over my head and wrapped it with tape. They drove me somewhere with other prisoners.*

I counted songs on the radio to figure out how long the journey would take; it turned out to be about 45 minutes. When they removed the bag from my head, I saw a pit of bodies. Eight or ten corpses half-buried in the ground.

“Do you want to join them?” the russian “liberators” asked.

I said I didn't want to. In response, I heard the gunfire and someone hit me on my back.

For half a month they kept me in the basement with a bag over my head, handcuffed to a stove

During the day, the “captain” would come to me to interrogate me, and at night, the “torturer” would come. He would give me electric shocks, kick me, and humiliate me.

*They were beating me not just to get information but because they enjoyed the process. They were beating me not hard enough for me to die, but I couldn't breathe. They stripped and abused me. I experienced sexual violence.*

At such moments, you want to disappear. To fade away. But most of all I wanted to survive.

I replayed my cover version in my head, like an actor learning his role. I told the russians that I didn't speak Ukrainian, that I had lost my job because of “Ukrainization,” and criticized the Ukrainian authorities.

They believed me. They even offered me a “job” — to run a pro-russian Telegram channel. I agreed, but immediately turned on geolocation and sent a screenshot to my sister.

I knew that my loved ones were looking for me and that I had a chance to survive

I clenched my teeth and went on with my role. I created bots and told my torturers that the Telegram channel was growing.

However, every day I heard new prisoners being brought there. At first, they screamed, then, just moaned. Over time, I began to convince my guards that my work would be more useful if they let me go.

They released me on August 25.

*The day before my release, two russian security officers forced me to hold the flag of the aggressor country and to say on camera that I agreed to “cooperate with the armed forces of the russian Federation in the fight against terrorists and bandits”.*

After that, they put a bag over my head again and put me on a minibus on the outskirts of Skadovsk. When I reached Kherson, I gave the FSB some insignificant information, and then I realized that the Armed Forces of Ukraine were about to arrive.

Now I live in Odesa; a friend hosted me in at his dacha, and my acquaintance created a charitable organization for prisoners from Kherson in the city. Thanks to this organization, I learned that I could get help from the Caritas Charitable Foundation.

The foundation's employees and volunteers gave me care and respect that I haven't felt for a long time. It was here that I first received what I really needed: the tools to get behind the wheel of a truck again and set off on a journey. And, what is even more valuable, a psychologist to share my story with.

I am still putting myself together piece by piece. Slowly, step by step. But I am alive, and that is the most important thing.

**Human trafficking, as a particularly serious crime, is punishable by the Law of Ukraine by imprisonment for a term of 3 to 15 years.**

(Article 149 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine)

# They intimidated us saying that no one needed us, but our loved ones found us

the story of two girls who were taken to a “camp” in Crimea

13-year-old Natalka and 15-year-old Iryna were taken from occupied Kherson to a “camp” in Crimea and told that their mother didn’t want them anymore.

They took away the girls’ phones. It was forbidden to call home. They intimidated the girls saying that no one needed them. However, the girls did not believe it and counted the days until their release, supporting each other. At the same time, their mother and volunteers were looking for them, despite all the difficulties.

Today, the family is together again; they are safe. They study, dream and know for sure: they are needed.

**Natalka:**

I was thirteen. Sirens were blaring in Kherson, armed strangers were walking the streets, but the school was still working. Everything was as usual, except the sky had become heavy, and the teacher looked at me weirdly. One day, she said we were going to a camp in Crimea for two weeks.

We were exhausted from the shelling and the constant fear for our lives, so I thought it would be good to unwind.

At first, the camp seemed quite normal: clean rooms, delicious food, creative activities, discos. But in a few days, everything changed

*They took away our phones, forbade us from leaving the territory, or calling home. Then, they said that our parents abandoned us and didn’t need us anymore.*



Iryna:

I was fifteen when I got into the camp. I didn't want to go there; I was scared. My mother assured me that it was safe, although I didn't believe her: the military were already walking around the school with weapons. Then, I found out that our teacher had long been a collaborator.

In the camp, I realized almost immediately that we had been brought there not as guests, but as hostages. Foreign children in a foreign country. We were told that we would stay in the camp because "nobody wanted us."

Every night I cried into my pillow because I didn't know where my mother was, whether she was alive, or whether she remembered us.

Natalka:

I started counting the days: I scratched lines on the locker next to the bed with my fingernail. Just like prisoners do in movies. By my calculations, we spent a hundred days without mom, without news and afraid that she wouldn't come for us.

*Then, the children started disappearing. They were taking them away without saying where. Some said the children were taken to foster families, while others said they were taken to russia. Iryna and I weren't taken away, but we constantly expected it with fear.*

Iryna:

Meanwhile, mom was looking for us. When Kherson was liberated, she and volunteers went to Crimea through third countries. She came without even knowing exactly where we were. But she still found me and took me home. That moment is hard to describe — I cried with joy. I just wanted to hug my mom and never let her go again. We couldn't pick Natalka at the moment, but we believed that we would come back for her

Natalka:

When they took away Iryna, we were all silent — happy and envious at the same time. Then, the volunteers came for me.

Now we live in a small town in the Khmelnytsky region. Sometimes, I still wake up at night — it seems to me that I am in the camp again. But I see mom next to me and go back to sleep.

Iryna:

Now I go by myself only to school because I'm afraid to be far away from mom for a long time; I even go to the store with her. I dream of working in the IT sector. Before I got to the camp, I had a phone and I watched lectures on YouTube, but since the phone was taken away in the camp, I couldn't go on with my studies.

But then, I met people from the Caritas Charitable Foundation. They just came and asked, "What do you need to dream again?"

Now I have my own laptop. I'm studying again and I believe that I'll succeed.

Natalka:

The foundation also helped me — not only with gadgets. They listened to me there, not as volunteers, but as friends. The Caritas Foundation in Khmelnytsky became a place where we felt like children again, not victims. They didn't ask us irrelevant questions, but simply helped us warmly, in a human way.

There, in Crimea, they scared us saying that no one wanted us, but that's not true — our loved ones found us and didn't forget us.

More than half of the  
identified victims are  
internally displaced persons.

Caritas Ukraine data

# From hell to Freedom

how an 18-year-old ukrainian girl escaped sexual slavery

Her path began in occupied Kherson and went through basements, fear, and slavery in Europe and Asia. However, today she is back in Ukraine — alive, free, and strong.

This 18-year-old girl experienced sexual slavery, escape, and deportation. She rebuilt herself thanks to support. And now she dreams not of escape but of being on stage, having children, and her own dance school.

In August 2022, my life split into ‘before’ and ‘after’

Because of the war and the occupation of my hometown, I had to leave Kherson and go to the west of Ukraine, to my aunt, whom I saw only once, when I was a child. My father went to the front, my mom stayed in the occupied territory with my grandma who was very ill. I felt abandoned, confused and scared, but I realized that I had to hold on.

I dreamed of entering college and becoming an accountant. But in order to calm down and distract myself at least a little, I took up choreography classes.

Dancing has always been my way to fight stress, I have had excellent plasticity since childhood, and the stage fascinated me. Over time, a new dream emerged: to make dancing not just a hobby, but a job to provide me a decent life.

At 18, I flew to Amsterdam, to dance in a club

After I turned 18, my choreography teacher offered me a job for the summer holidays. She said that I could dance in a night club in Europe and earn 1,500 euros a month. I trusted her completely.

*The seven-page contract seemed in order, and the fine print did not look suspicious. She took care of all the expenses, from the passport to the trip. I saw no reason to hesitate.*

Dancing has always been my escape



In November 2023, I flew to Amsterdam. There, a stranger picked me up, took me to a night club, and settled me in a basement with several other girls.

*It was forbidden to leave the building. They taught us the “rules”, very strict ones, almost like in prison. They took away all my documents and phone “to store them.” I worked without days off, ate poorly and insufficiently, and at the end of the month, I received only 30% of my salary — they said they kept a part of it for housing and food.*

### **I was given ‘a choice’: provide sexual services to foreigners or never come back home**

Later, I was told that I could receive 80% of my earnings if I agreed to work in “consumption.” I accepted it.

With two other girls, they took me to a large house outside the city.

*There was no salary there, only forced labor, violence, fear, and constant beatings. I began to lose my identity. Finally, when the bruises on my body disappeared, I was given “a choice”: to provide sexual services or never come back home.*

We were forced to work with foreigners and were constantly taken to other countries and cities. The clients were new every time. I lost track of time; I couldn't tell if it was day or night. I didn't know what day of the week it was.

Once I was brought to China. At one of the gas stations, I gathered all my strength and escaped. The Chinese police detained me because I didn't have any documents, and deported me to Ukraine.

At the railway station in Kyiv, I saw a poster about fighting against human trafficking and called the phone number. That's how I ended up with the professionals of the Caritas Kyiv foundation. They welcomed me like family. They helped me with housing, education, and renewing documents.

I received psychological and legal assistance, as well as training on how to start my own business. Now I dream of opening a choreography school for kids.

I can see my mom again, and hug my grandma: they evacuated. I live, feel, breathe. I also volunteer and participate in the foundation's events, where I tell my story so that other people don't fall into the same trap.

It was a road from hell to freedom. I am grateful for the chance to get myself back.

Human trafficking is the use of a person as a commodity in Ukraine and abroad.

# I was a slave in russia for six years

the story of a woman who escaped from labor slavery and is building a new life in Ukraine

**A** 55-year-old woman from Donetsk spent six years in forced labor in russia. After her hometown was occupied, she left for Tula, where she got into forced labor. They made her work without days off, documents, and choice, but she managed to escape.

Today, she is recovering with the help of the Caritas Foundation. She is working and building a new life with the faith that she will return to Ukrainian Donetsk.

Occupation took away almost everything from me: the world I knew, freedom, peace of mind

I am 55 years old. I used to live in Donetsk, a city where I spent my life. Studies, work, love, family — everything was there. I had dreams, plans, daily worries about tomorrow. But the war destroyed everything.

In 2014, shots rang out in my city for the first time. It was scary. My daughter and little granddaughter left for the Czech Republic, and I stayed. I couldn't leave my home. I thought everything would pass, but it didn't. The occupation took almost everything away — the only thing left was my home, on which I had to spend crazy amounts of money in rubles.

Fear for my life and the hope to see my daughter made me leave

It was the third year of occupation, and my health was getting worse. Medical care was unavailable, and it was impossible to find the necessary medicines. There was nowhere to leave: there was no evacuation, the “green corridors” were closed. One of my acquaintances advised me to go to Tula, to russia: supposedly from there I could make my way further to Europe. I hesitated, but fear for my life and the hope to see my daughter were stronger.



*The company I contacted promised that they would provide housing, work, and documents to travel to the EU. I believed them. They told me that I would work in a store or warehouse, that I would be able to earn money, make savings, and finally escape. But it was a trap. Thus began my slavery, which lasted six years.*

We worked 12–14 hours a day, without days off. There was not enough food, and over time they also began to demand payment for housing. We were not allowed to say a word. We were forbidden to leave the city. Sometimes we were taken to Ukraine to have our passports stamped, and then returned.

Gradually, we were deprived of everything — choice, dignity, name. A year later, I was given a russian passport — I had no choice. I secretly kept my Ukrainian passport as the only thread that led to freedom

**I decided that I couldn't take it anymore**

There was no medical care at all. I was often sick: my body could not endure it. Fear was destroying me from the inside. Life was a silent scream. Then, one day, I decided that I had had enough: either I would break out or stay here forever.

When we were taken out again to get our passports stamped, I managed to transfer unnoticed to another bus at the border, the one that was going to the Czech Republic via Belarus. I kept my Ukrainian documents in my bag: with them I was able to pass all the checkpoints. I was sitting in the bus and could not believe it. My heart was beating so hard that I thought they would hear it.

I got to my daughter. In the Czech Republic, I began to get treatment, recover and just live, but I missed my country too much. In 2023, I returned to my homeland and settled in Ternopil.

*Now I am working and getting the documents for an official status of a victim of human trafficking, because what happened to me was not just hard work. It was slavery*

Despite everything, I survived. I believe that the worst things are over. In Ternopil, I met incredible people — employees of the Caritas Foundation. They helped me to get treatment and restore my vision, which had deteriorated significantly after these events.

Now I am building a new life daily — with gratitude, faith and hope that the war will end and I will return to my Ukrainian Donetsk.

“Human trafficking is an open wound on the body of the modern humanity”

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Pope Francis

# I gave life in a place where there is death all around

how a 34-year-old Ukrainian woman gave birth in captivity

“I don’t know how my heart and body endured all this – I survived where humanity doesn’t survive,” says a 34-year-old Ukrainian woman who, while being held captive by militants of the so-called DPR, gave birth to a son amidst torture, hunger, and humiliation.

This woman’s story is not just a testament to the cruelty of war, but an example of the invincibility of a mother’s heart, fighting for every breath of her child even in the most terrible circumstances.

The militants considered me a spy and a traitor

In the spring of 2021, I was four months pregnant. My husband and I lived in Mariupol and were expecting our second child. I wanted to go to Donetsk to sort out the issues with the apartment that I had sold. That’s when I was captured by militants of the so-called DPR. Instead of the joy of motherhood, I faced prison, torture, and threats to kill my baby in the womb.

The militants considered me a spy and a traitor.

*In the torture center “Izoliator” where I ended up, there was not even electricity; just concrete all around and a cut bottle instead of a toilet. There they beat me for not knowing the anthem of the DPR, and they took me out for a walk with a bag on my head. They forced me to clean, wash, work. I was afraid every day that my baby would not survive*



I prayed for him to move,  
to feel that he was alive

Then I was transferred to the Donetsk detention center, to a barrack for women with children, most of whom were serving sentences for murder. The female sniper guard deliberately told how many Ukrainian soldiers she had already killed, and in what way.

*The fear never disappeared neither day nor night. I ate spoiled porridge, because I knew: the baby needed me get stronger. I prayed for him to move, so that I could feel that he was alive.*

When the contractions started, they put me in the coronavirus ward

At 26th week of pregnancy, contractions started, so I was taken by ambulance to the coronavirus ward.

*After some time, I was also diagnosed with Covid, but only two weeks after the positive test they started treating me. And even there I was under the supervision of armed guards, who would escort me to the toilet at gunpoint.*

But he was born! My small but strong Leonid. His name means “son of a lion.” He is my lion. My reason to hold on.

I signed all “confessions,” begged for becoming a part of prisoners’ exchange for my son’s sake, just to be released.

After the so-called “trials,” I was “sentenced” to 10 years in prison, but this term was postponed until my son’s 14th birthday.

After captivity, our family moved to the West of Ukraine, where I started a small business

In December 2022 — after 19 months of hell — I was able to escape from captivity with my baby and return to my husband. Immediately after that, we moved to the West of Ukraine.

Faced with difficulties in a new place, I was advised to turn to the Caritas Charitable

Foundation — an organization that helps people who have been victims of human trafficking.

This foundation helped me feel alive, because it provided resources, support, and hope. Thanks to their grant, I purchased a sewing machine and started making hair decorations.

I already have a small business. Every stitch is a silent “thank you” for the fact that we survived.

However, I will not forget or forgive Russia for the days I spent in captivity. I believe that I will see the day when a Ukrainian mother will no longer give birth at gunpoint.

The war will pass, a life goes on!  
Take care of yourself and your loved ones.



# They forced me to live the life of someone else. Now I'm getting back mine

the 12-year-old girl broke free from enforced begging and dreams again

**K**atia is 12 years old. She spent her childhood in the market with a cardboard box in her hands and humiliation in her heart. Her mother forced her to beg, and then took all the money.

However, even then, Katia dreamed not of food, but of a normal childhood. Today, she is in a boarding school, where she has found friends and can see her grandmother. Thanks to Caritas, she received everything she needed for her studies, but most importantly, the opportunity to dream and build a new life.

**Mom would often beat me; she forced me to beg on the markets**

My name is Katia. I am 12 years old. I am from Luhansk region, but I have been living in Kyiv for over a year now, because we fled the war. Before that, I lived with my mother and a 70-year-old grandmother who can barely walk. As for my mom...

My mom didn't take much care of me: she would often beat me and drink alcohol. All I remember is how she kept saying, "Beg for more money, otherwise we won't survive." She would take me with her to the markets, where we would stand with a piece of cardboard saying that we had been robbed, and ask people for money.

*Over time, mom noticed that people were more likely to give me money when I was alone. So, she ordered me to "work" on my own, even though I really didn't want to and was embarrassed. Then, my mother would come and take away all the money that I had earned this way.*

Mom often beat me  
and forced me to beg  
in the markets



I would always wait for the evening, in the hope that mom would buy food, but she would spend all the money on alcohol, and we would starve with the grandma.

When the police took me to the boarding school, I was happy

I often wore dirty clothes because my mother didn't care to give me anything clean. I often missed school and no one asked why. I didn't even know some words that other children knew. I lived by myself because no one cared about me, and mom often beat and insulted me for bringing in little money.

Once the police took me away when I was begging. I told them that the idea of "earning money" like that didn't come from me, that my mother had forced me to. They took me to a boarding school. It was scary, but I was glad because at least there I could finally rest and eat.

For the first time in a while, I feel like a normal kid

Now I'm in a boarding school; everything has changed. I met new friends, I often see my grandma. I'm really happy about not having to beg.

The kind people from the Caritas charity organization gave me wonderful clothes, various pens, pencils, notebooks, books. They brought food and even sweets and fruit for my grandma and me. I'm very grateful to them.

I don't know what will happen to my mother, I haven't seen her for a long time. I still can't forget everything that happened, but for the first time in a while, I feel like a normal kid and dream of a good job that I can get when I grow up.

Children are the most vulnerable to the risks of human trafficking during war. According to Caritas Ukraine, approximately 10% of all victims are children!

# I survived. As long as I live, I will move on

the story of a man from Avdiivka who survived labor  
exploitation and sexual violence in captivity

30-year-old Ostop was kidnapped from the street by Russian soldiers. He was taken to a torture chamber, where he was beaten, raped, and forced into slave labor. He saw a pit full of bodies and thought that it was the end.

However, Ostop survived. Despite his disability, he lives, gets treatment and is gradually coming back to life. This is the story of a man who was not broken although they did everything to make him disappear.

I lived an ordinary life until I met the military from DPR

My name is Ostop. My real name is different, but I am not yet ready to tell it publicly. The story I want to tell hurts, it sticks in my throat, makes me wake up at night in a cold sweat. But I know that silence is even worse.

I was born and raised in Avdiivka, in the Donetsk region. In 2014, my life was simple and clear: I worked in construction, together with my friend Serhiy, on a high-rise building. We had dreams, worked with our own hands, built not only walls, but also our future. We did not search for conflicts, we just lived.

One morning, as usual, we were going to work. At the entrance, three men in military uniform stopped us. One of them — without saying a word — pointed a gun at my face. They were local — from the so-called DPR. Their eyes were empty: no fear, nor hesitation, nor regret.

They took everything from me — documents, money earned through hard work. Serhiy began to argue, he could not keep quiet. They shot at him. They killed him in



front of me, without explanation, without hesitation.

They called me a 'spotter' and took to a torture chamber

They handcuffed me and took to the "pit": that's how they called the torture chamber in the Pisky village. My memories after this are blurred...

During the so-called interrogation they said that I was a "spotter."

*They knocked out my teeth with a machine gun, badly traumatized my leg, which had been injured before. Then, they said that I would be their slave. They took me to dig dugouts. To survive, I worked, despite the excruciating pain. In the evening, there was another "interrogation". The executioners did not stop even when there were no nails left on my fingers.*

Then, something happened that I still find very difficult to talk about. They tied me to a chair. I was raped by seven bulky men. They laughed, joked, did whatever they wanted. They did things that no normal person could imagine.

I stopped being myself at that moment. I felt like I had disappeared.

On the fourth day, one of them took me to a forest where there was a pit with many bodies. I thought, "This is the end." But he just said, "Get out of here."

They let me go and I somehow managed to run to Avdiivka

In 2022, my mother and I were evacuated to the Chernivtsi region. Now we live in a shelter in Chernivtsi. I have a status of a disabled person: with damaged muscles and bones, I move on crutches. For longer routes, I have an electric scooter for people with disabilities. But I couldn't use it for a long time as there were no batteries. It was my dream to get the batteries, because it meant freedom of movement.

This dream was made possible by benefactors from the Caritas Foundation in Chernivtsi. Now I can move around the city on my own.

I also received psychological support: consultations, kind words and a space where you can be yourself without fear of judgment. I was also involved in a medical

project, where I can get the necessary advice from doctors. This is very important for me, not only as a person with a disability, but also as someone who is learning to breathe again.

I don't know if I'll ever be able to start a family, or if I'll ever be able to trust people completely. I know one thing: I survived. And as long as I live, I'll keep going. Even if it's a slow process, even if it hurts. Step by step.

Human trafficking is a violation of the human rights, Freedom and dignity.



# The past did not break me

the 17-year-old girl who survived in russian captivity, started the business that warms up the others

She was a 17-year-old girl when they dragged her out of her home because they found a photo of a Ukrainian soldier on her phone. They were beating her; they locked her in a cell, and forced to carry the bodies of the dead. She survived. Today, this girl makes scented candles, builds a business and a family, and in every flame of her candles, not only fire burns, but also proof: she was not broken.

I was 17 when the full-scale invasion started

I was living in Melitopol at the time, with my mother, brother, and two sisters. We tried not to panic, although it was scary — the city had been occupied by russians; searches and “cleansing” had begun.

One of those days, people in uniform burst into our house. They turned things over, broke furniture, and rummaged through closets. They didn’t care that we were scared and cried; they were interested only in equipment, personal belongings, and any hints of a “pro-Ukrainian position.”

They found a photo of a Ukrainian soldier on my phone.

They were beating, humiliating and threatening me

This was enough to drag me out of the house, put me in a military vehicle, and take me to the commandant’s office. There I was beaten, humiliated, and threatened. The interrogation lasted forever. I cried and begged to be released, but no one listened to me.

*After the interrogation, I was locked in a cell with dozens of other detainees. The night was cold and scary. In the morning, we were given*



*some water — that was all. Then, they packed us like cattle into a truck and took us to the morgue. There was another truck there — with the bodies of soldiers. russian soldiers. We were forced to carry the corpses out with our bare hands.*

It was hell. Blood, stench, missing limbs... I could barely stand. But the machine gun aimed at me kept me conscious.

This lasted for several days. One morning I fainted. The last thing I remember is someone's voice, someone was begging, "She's a child. Have mercy on her." And, miraculously, they let me go.

I managed to recover and started my own business

Mom collected the last money — two hundred dollars — to take me out of the occupation. A private driver transported us, and I ended up on the West of Ukraine. Here, for the first time in a while, I felt like a human being again.

The employees of the Caritas Foundation saved me. They not only helped me with housing and money, but also gave me the most important thing — support and self-confidence. Thanks to them, I managed to recover, receive psychological help, and even do something that I was once afraid to dream of — start my own business.

Now I make scented candles. I like to create warmth — literally and symbolically. My home smells of lavender, cinnamon, mint. Every time I light one of my candles, I feel that the past has not broken me. I survived. I recovered. I started a new life. I also found love — I recently got married. Now, I am building our family.

Every year, 600-800 thousand  
people fall into slavery.

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The US Department of State

This figure is much higher  
and equals 4 million!

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The Center for Human Security

# 15 months of captivity did not ruin my dignity

65-year-old Ukrainian woman spoke about her life after captivity

“I am longing for home. I need to go not just to a spot on the map, but to myself — to my own home. But I can’t yet, because even in my dreams, I am still suffocated by the clicking of prison locks and the cold of a damp basement,” says the 65-year-old resident of Donetsk region.

She spent more than a year in the torture chamber of the so-called DPR. She was sentenced to 10 years just for not hiding her pro-Ukrainian position. She endured hard labor, hunger, humiliation, interrogations — and survived.

Today she works as a nurse in Khmelnytsky; she is setting up a new home. She values the most important thing — life with her family and freedom.

Everything changed in a moment when the so-called DPR emerged

Before the war, my husband and I were building a house in the Donetsk region, raising children. I worked in a hospital — I devoted almost 40 years to medicine. Everything changed when the so-called DPR emerged.

Residents immediately began to get robbed: everything valuable was taken out of the houses, cars were taken. People acted differently: some fled, some went to serve the “cartoon authorities,” and some, despite their fear, remained true Ukrainians.

Our sons were always sincerely pro-Ukrainian. Everyone knew about it. They were arrested the second day after the “change of power.”

A former prisoner, a local drug addict, was appointed the commandant of our city. Once we saved his wife, and then he told me, “I owe you.”

Women were not beaten,  
but instead  
they used other methods—  
humiliating,  
cruel,

such that  
it is  
difficult  
not only  
to talk  
about



but  
even  
to remember

Our family continued to help the Armed Forces of Ukraine

I ran to the commandant to ask for my sons. In the evening, the boys were released. Without hiding it, our whole family continued to help the Ukrainian army.

One day they came for me. They took me to the Izoliatsia factory, which had been converted into a prison. They put me in the basement: a damp, dark space with only bunk beds and a table on which they threw some porridge and tea in the morning and evening.

I was there all alone for a week, and then, they transferred me to a cell. There I met other women, prisoners like me.

*Every morning, we were taken out to work: we cleaned the huge territory of the former factory. Was it easy for a woman who was over 60 years old? Of course not. But we had to work along with the young ones. The supervisors made sure that we worked without rest.*

Women were not beaten, but instead other methods were used, humiliating, cruel ones. It is hard to talk about it, let alone remember.

*They were psychologically breaking us. They were oppressing us. They were torturing us with silence and humiliation.*

Later, they started taking me for interrogations: they considered me a spy. Of course, I didn't admit it. But I didn't hide that I was standing for Ukraine and the legitimate government. They called me "Ukrainian nazi."

*They sentenced me for 10 years just because I am Ukrainian and was not intimidated to say it out loud.*

My son told me that I was in the exchange list

Eventually, I was transferred to a detention center; they gave me a phone. I was able to send my son a photo of my sentence — and I got the message, "You are on the exchange list."

After 15 months of hard labor, endless interrogations, and harassment, that day came. It seemed like I had been waiting for it forever. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw the Ukrainian flag at the checkpoint.

After rehabilitation, I arrived in Khmelnytsky, where my family and a new home were already waiting. I arrived in prison uniform and old shoes. I had to start everything from scratch. But the most important thing was with me — my family. That New Year, when we sat together at the table, was the happiest in my life.

In Khmelnytsky, specialists from the Caritas Foundation supported me: they helped with rehabilitation, and as part of a project to combat human trafficking, they provided me with household items to equip a new home.

Now I work as a nurse, live with my husband, and am gradually establishing a new home — and myself. I know for sure: the greatest happiness is to be with those you love.

The cases of human trafficking are recorded in 127 countries of the world. And Ukraine is the leader in Eastern Europe in the number of the victims.

UN data

# I believe that the war will end and I'll see my mom again

the story of a teenager from Kherson, who escaped from occupation

They would come twice a week. They would put him and his mother in separate rooms and abuse them. They threatened to kill him. Artur managed to leave, but they did not let his mother go.

Now the boy is safe, he goes to school, dreams of university and waits for a call from his mother every evening. He believes that he will be able to see and hug her again. And say, "We are home. The war is over."

I wouldn't imagine that a human can learn to tolerate things that are even hard to imagine

My name is Artur, I'm 17, but sometimes it seems like I've already lived half my life. It's as if every day and night filled with fear, pain, silence, and anxiety is adding up to my adulthood.

I lived in Kherson with my mom. We had an ordinary life, like many others: apartment, school, habits, plans for tomorrow. Sometimes, I would fight with my mother over trifles, and she worried if I put on my hat. We lived a normal life. Then, the war began: the "liberators" came. Our life didn't just change, it broke.

First, loud explosions, endless columns of equipment, people in military uniform. And then, heavy footsteps in the house entrance. They didn't knock on the door, they broke it down.

*They threatened us with weapons, turned everything in the house upside down, took away our things, food, our peace. Then, they started coming regularly, twice a week. Always unexpectedly.*



I was scared for mom more than for myself

I wouldn't imagine that a human can learn to tolerate things that are even hard to imagine. However, for mom I was scared more than for myself.

*The russians told me they would kill my mother, and they told her they would kill me. Several men would come in and lock us in different rooms. They would abuse us. And then they would shift rooms.*

I heard her voice, her cries, her screams. She heard mine. We were no longer just mother and son — we were hostages in our own home and life.

I didn't break down when they were violent for the first time. And not when they took away my things, my dignity, my body. I broke down when my mother told me, "You have to go. Live. Study. I'll stay — it'll be better this way."

They let me go, but not my mom

In the evacuation convoy, I was looking out the window and afraid to think that this was the last time I saw my mom. Having reached my aunt in Chernihiv, I renewed my papers, and then went to my grandmother in Ternopil.

It's calm here: people ask, "How are you?" and this does not cause panic. In Ternopil, I received much help from Caritas. As internally displaced persons, we were first given food packages, and then, having learned my story, they offered support from the project against human trafficking.

I received psychological and legal help, but most importantly human support. Thanks to this, I went back to my studies. I dream of entering university.

Kherson has already been liberated, but they continue to shell it constantly. Mom is still there...

I don't know what's happening to her, because we rarely communicate. But every time I wait for a call, just as I once waited for silence in the corridor. When she calls, I am alive, when she is silent, my heart contracts. I dream of an apartment where no one breaks down the door. I dream of seeing my mom and hugging her. And just saying, "I am home. We are home. The war is over."

Anyone can experience sexual violence. Nothing can justify violence. Do not remain silent! You have the right to a safe life without fear and a future without violence.



# I was turned into a slave!

how a man from Kherson region survived russian captivity and started a new life in Odesa

“What I went through is impossible to forget,” says a 48-year-old man who was captured by russian soldiers. He was beaten in front of his disabled brother, stripped of his documents, forced to work hard, and deprived of the contact with the outside world.

He managed to escape thanks to his wife, who raised the money for a ransom. Everything he had was destroyed, but the man managed to start a new life thanks to rehabilitation and the help of a charitable foundation.

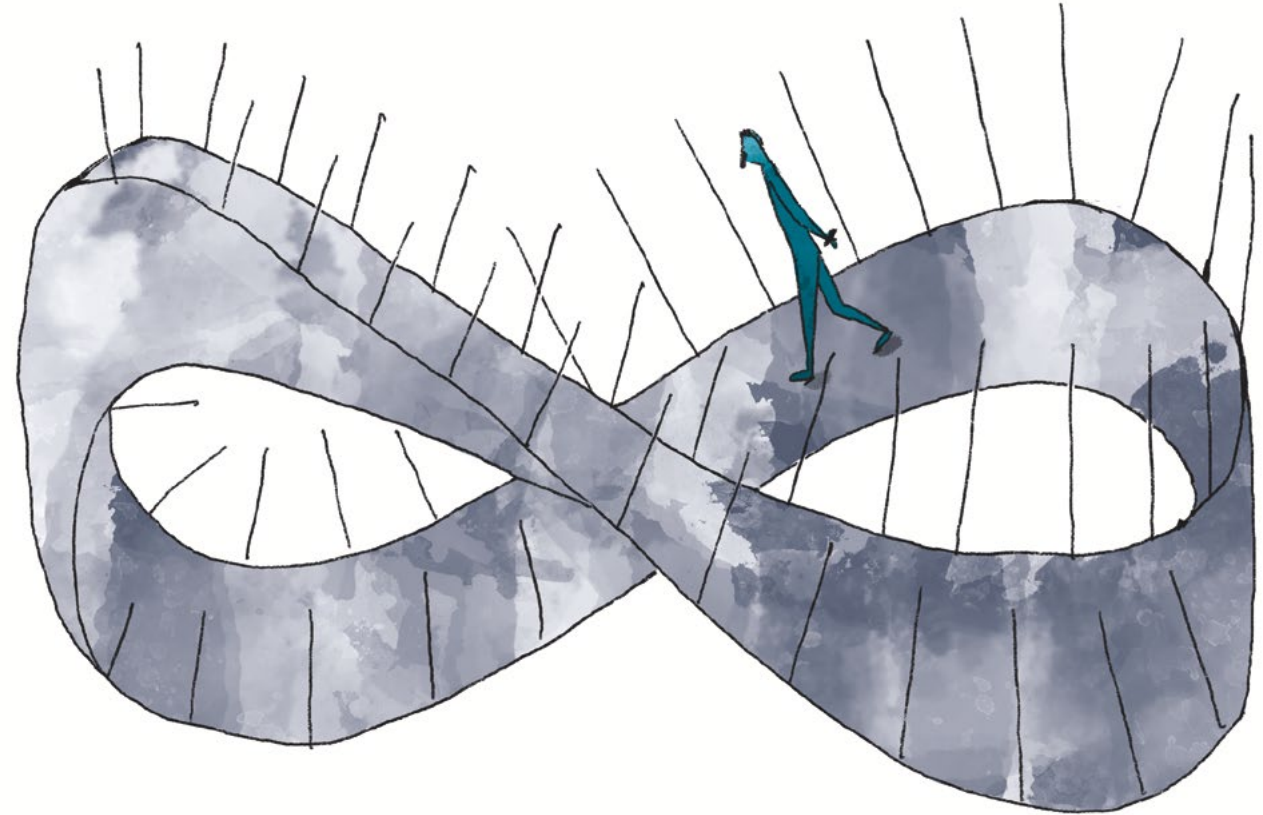
I couldn't imagine such things in the XXI century

We lived in the Kherson region. With the arrival of the russians, my wife managed to leave for Odesa, and I stayed with my brother: he has a disability, so I simply could not leave him in the occupation. At that time, I did not know that this choice would change my life forever.

I worked in local government, and then in the fire department, where, apparently, I became a target for the russian military.

That morning, October 13, 2022, I heard a knock on the door. It seemed to me that this was another search, but when they entered, I understood quickly that this was not the case.

*They immediately began to torture: they beat me with rubber batons so hard that it's impossible to describe. They beat me in front of my brother, who watched in horror, sitting in a wheelchair and unable to do anything. Then, they took my passport and put me into the "basement." This was the beginning of real hell.*



*In captivity, time dragged on like eternity*

I don't know how I endured it all: every blow to my body felt like the last one. They broke my ribs and forced me to stand in the cell. My legs couldn't hold me up, but if I fell, they beat me even harder.

*It was a nightmare. They didn't give me any water or food. The worst thing was that I had no way to contact my wife or brother. I didn't know if they were alive.*

Each day in captivity seemed eternity

I, along with other prisoners, was forced to do hard labor, digging trenches, cleaning the area, unloading trucks. All this alternated with constant interrogations. The Russian security forces said that they had lost my passport, which further complicated my situation and reduced my chances of getting out of this trap.

The prisoners said that the occupiers would call my relatives from time to time and offer them to pay a ransom. Once they made such a call to my wife, but I found out about it only later.

My wife collected the entire amount and a miracle happened: they found my passport and set me free.

When I was released, I felt fear and relief at the same time

I managed to pass the checkpoints, and then to get to Ukraine through Crimea, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. I got home, but I was no longer the person I was before captivity. Everything inside me had changed.

I came to my wife in Odesa because I couldn't return to my hometown in the Kherson region — I was afraid of being captured again. My brother stayed at home — he doesn't want to leave, but we found a social worker to take care of him.

Here, in a new city, I'm trying to start a new life. We rented an empty apartment with no dishes or appliances. Caritas in Odesa helped us with all this — the foundation purchased a microwave, a multicooker, dishes... They really became our lifeline at a time when we didn't know how to live on.

Most importantly, they helped me with treatment and rehabilitation, because my health deteriorated significantly during my captivity. Now I'm trying to adapt, do something useful, help my brother, although I can no longer be the guardian as before.

I work as a land expert in an agricultural company and am trying my best to get back to normal life. I want to believe that this is not the end of my struggle. I know from my experience that starting a new life is difficult but possible. I will fight for my place in this world.

Human trafficking is modern slavery and  
the shame of the 21st century!

# I became a servant for a man from a dating chat

the story of a woman who managed to escape labor slavery

When the war began, she had nowhere to go. She didn't want to be a burden to her family, so she accepted help from a stranger on a dating chat. Instead of being saved, she found herself trapped.

However, she managed to escape and save her son. Her story is about mother's power and courage, and a second chance to live.

I had to save my child, so I moved with him to the Carpathian region, to a man from a dating chat

Six months before the start of the full-scale war, I left my husband. Our relationship had completely collapsed — humiliation, screams, insults. My son from my first marriage heard all this. My husband told me himself that my son annoyed him with his very existence. So, I made my choice — I took my child and left without looking back.

I rented an apartment in Kyiv, worked in an office. We lived modestly, but managed. Then, the war began and everything collapsed: work, money, support. I couldn't afford to go to my mom, who was seriously ill, or to my sister, who is raising the children alone after her husband died. I didn't want to become a burden to them.

I had to save my child, but I didn't know how.

I remembered the man from a dating chat — Andriy. We chatted a little, so I knew that he lived in the Carpathian region. Andriy invited me and my son to live with him, saying that he had a private house and there would be enough space for everyone. I agreed.



### I became a servant

We got to the train station in Kyiv and found ourselves in hell. A lot of people, and everyone was pushing, and shouting. People were like waves, hitting the carriages and falling onto the rails. We were simply pushed away several times and couldn't get on the train. We stayed at the station for a day, sleeping on the floor in the waiting room. But we did wait for another train and got inside, sitting on the floor of the carriage. We were going without light and in silence, but in the direction of hope.

Andriy met us at the station. At first, I really liked his place: a big house, a spacious room, delicious food, a huge dog. My son and I just slept and tried to come to our senses. But after a few days everything changed.

*One night he called me into the kitchen. His tone changed, and his face became completely different. He said that now I “worked for him.” I had to do cleaning, cooking, washing, weeding the garden. If I didn't obey, there would be no food, no security. He took my and my son's phones and forbade us from leaving the yard. The dog was trained not to let anyone outside the territory.*

I became a servant. I survived and endured. I asked him for only one thing: not to touch my son. I don't have the force to tell all the details, but it lasted a long time.

### I put sleeping pills in Andriy's and the dog's food

One day I decided to act. I began to obey, pretending to be docile, but in reality, I had planned our escape. I told Andriy that I had insomnia, so I needed sleeping pills. He went to the pharmacy and brought some medicine. I added it to his tea, and to the dog's food. When the dog and the owner of the house fell asleep, my son and I climbed over the fence and escaped.

We walked silently, blindly, as if in a fog. We walked into the unknown. I could not feel the ground under my feet. But we walked. We were free.

People we met in the Carpathian region advised us to seek help from Caritas, an

organization that helps people who have suffered from labor exploitation.

The foundation helped us rent an apartment and provided us with basic necessities, as well as clothing and food. This is incredible support for those who have lost everything, including ourselves.

Thanks to warm communication, I have already recovered and work in a store: I am displaying goods. My son goes to school. We don't have much, but every day feels like a gift when you realize that you escaped from the cage.

90% of human trafficking recruiters work  
via the Internet.

State Labor Service of Ukraine data

# If at least one person hears my story and stops, it will be a victory

the story of 17-year-old Ivan who was implicated into criminal activity

After his father died, 17-year-old Ivan from Ternopil decided to help his mother: he took up an easy part-time job from a friend. He carried parcels and did not ask questions. Until the police rang the doorbell.

This is a story about how easily a person can be drawn into someone's crime, and how important it is to have those who will lend a helping hand.

The main thing is not to open the boxes

My name is Ivan. I am seventeen and I am from Ternopil. Everything changed in my life after my father died: my home stopped being a cozy haven and became a place of responsibility.

My mother remained alone with two children. Since I am the eldest child, I had to help. I worked every free minute, because I did not want my exhausted mother to cry because of money.

Once my old friend offered me a job: transporting parcels, picking them up from Nova Poshta office and delivering them to the addresses. They promised to pay 250 hryvnias for each day of work. It looked like a good opportunity to earn money without interrupting my studies.

"The main thing is not to open the boxes," my friend said. I did not ask anything and did not think about it. I just wanted to earn money to help my mother.



I received all the instructions on Telegram; no calls, only messages. This didn't look suspicious for me: I knew that maintaining confidentiality was a routine.

*Once I kept some packages at my house for a couple of days because the owners had to "return from abroad." I had no doubt that I was earning money through honest work. A friend I grew up with gave me this job.*

Then, police rang the doorbell. I will never forget this harsh insistent sound.

When the police officers entered the room, I didn't realize yet what happened

It turned out that I had been helping criminals for a whole year — transporting stolen equipment and helping deliver drugs. The police did not beat me, did not insult me. But I felt something else — an unbearable shame that eats you from the inside. I was afraid to look my mother in the eyes and even more afraid to look at myself in the mirror.

I didn't know how to get out of this situation. I was advised to contact Caritas in Ternopil. I did not immediately believe that someone could help just like that. But they helped — without a single condition.

The lawyer explained to me that I was not guilty — I had become a victim of scammers who used me. He told me what to do at the court.

Other employees of the foundation gave me warm clothes, because at that time I was wearing a torn jacket. They even paid for dental treatment, although I had forgotten that I had the right to smile.

These people did not judge me. They listened, believed and supported.

Now I am waiting for the court's decision; I am a witness in this case.

I have gone this way to never be silent again. If at least one person hears my story and stops in time, that will be a victory.

I don't know who I will be yet. But now I know for sure who I don't want to be.

About 12.3 million people in the world are forced to work, 2.4 million of them as a result of human trafficking.

International Labor Organization research

# I was declared dead, but I was in slavery

the story of a woman who regained her life

**46**-year-old Oksana went to work abroad to provide her parents with a better life. Instead, she spent five years in forced labor in Italy.

When she returned, she learned that she was officially considered dead, and her property had long been appropriated and sold by her partner.

However, thanks to the help of Caritas, on October 12, 2023, the woman received the most important document for her, certifying that she was alive.

*I went to Italy to work but got to slavery for five years*

I am Oksana. My real name is different, but now, it's like my whole life changed its name. I lived in an ordinary two-room apartment with my parents and my partner. I had two higher educations, but without a job, knowledge does not feed you. When you look into the eyes of your elderly parents and see anxiety in them, your heart tells you that it's time to act.

So, I decided to go to Italy to work. At first, everything was fine. I worked as a housekeeper, sending money home every month. I dreamed of saving up for my own housing, providing my parents with a comfortable life in retirement. But everything changed in an instant.

A friend offered me a "better" job: to wash the dishes in a restaurant in Sardinia. Of course, I agreed.

*First, they took my passport, supposedly to sign a contract, but I never got any documents to sign, and they never returned my passport. They*



*When I came to Ukraine,  
I understood I ceased to exist  
in this world*

*didn't give me any money. They just promised that everything would be fine after the end of the employment contract, which I hadn't even seen. Then, they took my phone and I lost contact with my family. The "employers" threatened to harm them if I didn't work. It was impossible to escape from the territory, which was guarded.*

I lived in slavery for 5 years. One day, when everyone was celebrating the anniversary of the restaurant, I managed to escape. I had no plan, no documents. Ordinary people that I met helped me return home.

Coming back to Ukraine, I discovered that I was declared dead

After my father died, my partner moved my mother to a nursing home, and transferred my property to himself, sold it, and vanished, leaving nothing behind. He also made a record of my death.

I lost everything. I lived in a monastery for a while, because I had no belongings, no documents, and no money. One day I came to the Caritas-Kyiv. It was the first moment in a long time when I felt that my situation could improve.

*At the center against human trafficking, they didn't ask me, "Why did you believe them?" They didn't accuse me, they didn't pressure me, they just listened and supported me.*

I received clothes, food, psychological consultations, and most importantly, legal assistance.

The court case lasted for months. I spent three months proving that I was alive.

On October 12, 2023, I received a document that stated a simple, but a very important truth for me: it was saying that I was alive.

I was brought back to life not only officially; I got back my dignity and human rights.

Now I am starting all over again. I am learning to trust people, myself, this world, and to breathe freely.

More than 6.8 million Ukrainians live abroad - this is 14% of the population of Ukraine. Human trafficking and labor exploitation are a real threat to labor migrants and refugees from Ukraine.



# It seemed to me that my life was over, but then, I saw the light

the story of a victim of sexual violence

The 34-year-old resident of Kharkiv went to the village for just a few days to honor her deceased father. However, on February 24, 2022, her life split into “before” and “after.”

The Russian military turned her house into a torture chamber, and she became a prisoner. She endured abuse, hunger, and rape. She survived. Later, she found light where it seemed there was only darkness.

I spoke up and asked the Russian military what they were doing in my house

On February 23, 2022, I arrived in the village to my parents' house, where no one lived anymore. I didn't plan to be there for a long time, just to stay for a few days, honor my father's memory on the anniversary of his death, and clean up the house a bit. On February 24, I was supposed to return home to Kharkiv, where my husband and son were waiting for me.

In the morning, I heard explosions. I thought it was somewhere far away, so I went to the cemetery, to my father's grave. When I returned there were already Russian equipment and military personnel in the village. In my house, I found three armed “guests.”

I spoke up and asked why they came to my house. The next moment, I got a blow in my face, then, they hit me with a machine gun in the ribs. Screaming, pain, pushing...



They threw me into a damp cellar, where there were only a few old boxes that I could sit on — there was no food or water.

“Lock her up, we’ll make use of her,” one of them said. I still remember these words.

The first time they touched my body I tried to defend myself with a knife

When they opened the cellar, I thought they wanted to let me go. I was wrong.

*They told me to cook, with a machine gun pointed at me. Then came harassment, brutal jokes... The first time they touched my body, I tried to defend myself with a knife, for which they beat me and raped me. And then again, the cellar, humiliation, washing, cooking, rape... I lost track of time. I lost faith that I would ever get out of there.*

Just when I almost broke down, rescue came. Someone opened the cellar and I thought, “Not again.” But I heard, “Daughter, get out if you want to come with us.” I still don’t know who that man was. But he pulled me out of the cellar, out of hell, and brought me back to people. They took me out of the village. I got to the Ukrainian checkpoint and for the first time in many days, I felt that I was still breathing, that I was alive.

Caritas brought light back to me

When I got home, I told my husband everything, and he, understanding my situation, began to look how to leave for a safe region. However, due to the intense shelling of Kharkiv, it was not easy to leave the city. We managed to do it only at the end of March. Looking for a safe place in different corners of Ukraine, we arrived in Ivano-Frankivsk.

Here I was treated, went to psychotherapy. I started eating, sleeping, talking, dreaming again... We tried to return to Kharkiv, but I was only able to stay there for a week. Each explosion echoed in my head, like that first punch in the face. My son

and I went to Prykarpattia again.

Now I work online. I earn little, but this work helps me to survive. Thanks to Caritas, I can work even during power outages. The foundation gave me back light, both literally and figuratively: they bought EcoFlow and warmed me with their care.

During the war in Ukraine, thousands of people in the occupied territories found themselves in a particularly vulnerable position. They became the targets for the various forms of human trafficking and exploitation.



# I wanted to find love, but they forced me to work for the russian army

how an online dating turned into captivity

Roman, 30, wanted to start a family and find peace, but instead he became a victim of a fake online dating site. The Ukrainian man was lured to russia, beaten, stripped of his documents and forced to work for the russian army.

After the exchange, he returned to Ukraine to rediscover himself, restore his documents and search for his relatives.

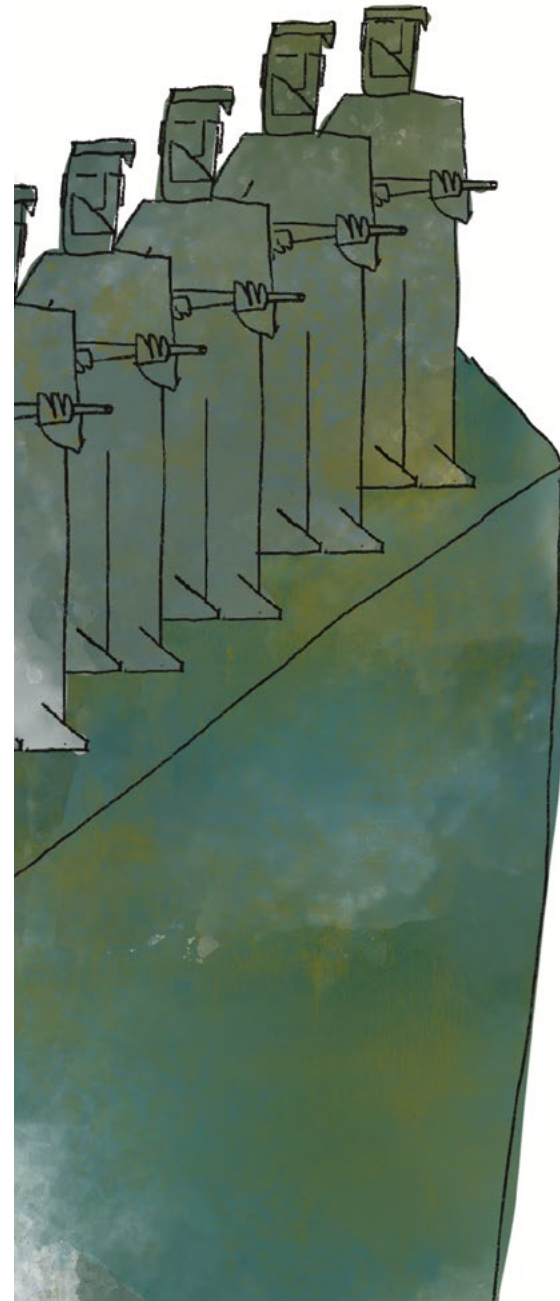
I met a girl from russia and was dreaming of a family with her

My name is Roman; I am 30 years old. I was born into a large family, where there was enough love and care, but never enough money. As a child, I got into a traffic accident and lost my arm — since then, I have had a third-group disability.

Life was not easy from the very beginning: a constant struggle for survival, lack of money, difficulties in finding a job. And, of course, I wanted very much to find my love — a person who would be there for me, who would understand and support me.

In 2021, I met a girl on a dating site. Her name was Olga. We corresponded for a long time — she seemed kind, sincere, open. She said that she lives in russia, in Orel, where she has a home, a stable job and would be happy to host me, help me to settle. She said that I would be able to work and even support my relatives.

I believed her. I wanted to start a new life and build real relationships. I dreamed that things would finally change, and that I would even be able to start my own family.



I returned to Ukraine  
with one wish



to be  
a person again

At the station, two men met me and promised to take me to the girl

After a year and a half of correspondence, I dared to go through Belarus to Russia. Olga did not meet me at the train station in Orel, although she had promised to. Instead, two men approached me; they said they were her friends and would take me to her place.

*Instead, I was brought to some factory. There they told me: “Olga never existed. If you want to survive, you have to give up your Ukrainian citizenship and take a Russian passport.” I didn’t want to. For this, they beat me, locked me in the basement without food — they gave me only water*

Then, the hell opened. I was taken to a detention center. They brought an absurd charge: participation in the first Chechen war, although at the time I was less than a year old!

*I was beaten, tortured, mocked, deprived of my documents and communications. They demanded a ransom, threatened my loved ones. They forced me to clean the territory, work without food, medical care. In the colony in Pyatigorsk, they forced me to sew military uniforms and produce parts for the weapons of our enemies. I received medical care only when I was hospitalized with a broken leg and anemia.*

The Russians gave me a choice with no choice: either exhaust myself with work, or take their passport and get an “easier” life — just three years in a colony. Otherwise, death.

After being released from captivity, I had one desire: to live a normal life

I survived. In February 2024, I was released as part of an exchange. I returned to Ukraine with one desire, just to be a human being again and live a normal life.

When I arrived home, I learned that my entire family had left abroad, fleeing the war. I was alone. Thanks to Caritas-Kyiv, I received shelter, support, and hope. They are helping me find my relatives. And also, to get back not just my documents, but my dignity.

Now, I only dream of peace, justice, and a normal life that I won’t have to fight for daily.

Follow the general safety rules.  
Be careful, don’t fall for human traffickers!  
Travel and work safely!

## Caritas Ukraine’s advocacy in the Fight Against Modern Slavery at the National and International Level

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Although 76 years have passed since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted, humanity is still striving to protect the fundamental rights it enshrines. Article 4 of the UDHR clearly states: “No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.” However, in recent years, the world has witnessed a rise in armed conflicts, leading to widespread violations of human rights and freedoms. Russia’s aggression against Ukraine highlights the fact that our rights are not constantly guaranteed – they must be continuously protected and fought for. Human trafficking remains one of the most hidden and highly profitable crimes. It is crucial not to stay silent: every survivor’s story and testimony is a vital contribution to the pursuit of justice.

Through its advocacy efforts, Caritas is able to support the Ukrainian state in its systematic fight against this crime through active participation in the National Referral Mechanism, organizing seminars, trainings, conferences, and lectures; cooperating with law enforcement agencies and educational institutions; conducting awareness-raising campaigns; engaging in legislative analysis; drafting recommendations for legal improvements; and monitoring the implementation of state programs at the local level.

Thanks to its international presence, Caritas also draws global attention to the current human trafficking situation in Ukraine. It

highlights emerging trends and challenges related to the war and the need to support Ukraine in addressing them. Caritas uses available international mechanisms to influence the fight against crimes, the punishment of perpetrators, assistance to victims, and the restoration of justice.

Caritas Ukraine’s anti-trafficking work focuses on raising awareness among Ukrainians and preventing people from falling victim to trafficking. As part of this effort, our specialists have developed an educational course in partnership with the Prometheus education platform: “Human Trafficking: How to Protect Yourself and Your Loved Ones.” The course covers simple rules of safe behaviour, that you need to remember, especially in times of war. We encourage everyone who reads this book to take the course and share the knowledge with family and friends.

In knowledge and unity lies our strength.

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***Iryna Maievska***  
***Head of the Safe Migration and Anti-Trafficking Program***

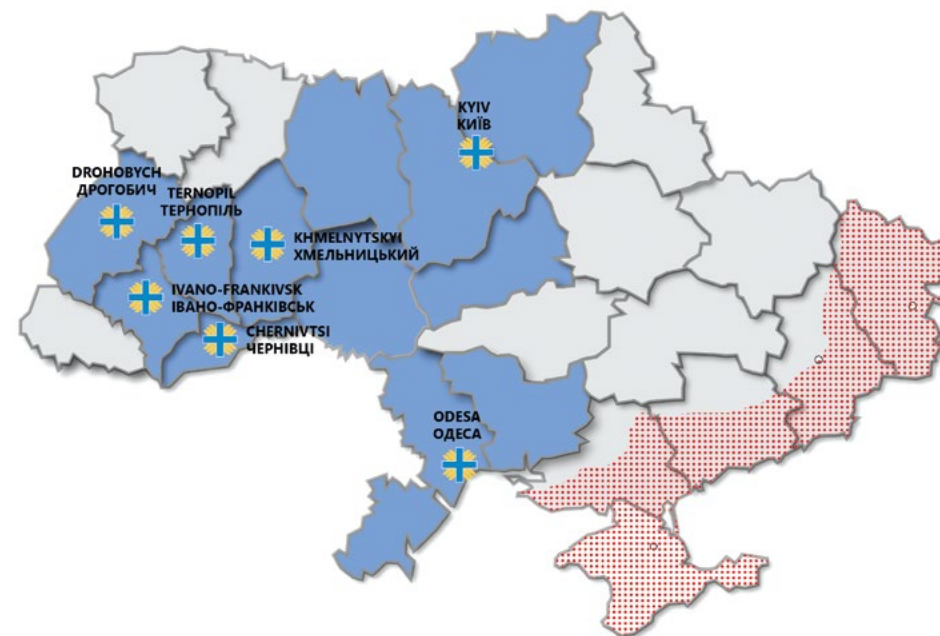
Follow the online training course  
“Human Trafficking: How to Protect  
Yourself and Your Loved Ones”:



# This publication was prepared by anti-trafficking specialists of Caritas Ukraine

Caritas Ukraine extends its sincere gratitude to our partners for their invaluable support and collaboration in the publication of this book. This project became possible thanks to your trust, our shared efforts, and faith.

Thank you for your solidarity and for joining us in this crucial mission. Together, we have amplified the voices of those who are too often unheard. What we created is more than just a collection of texts – it is a space for documentation, support, and hope for victims of human trafficking in Ukraine and beyond, during the time of war.



Currently, seven Caritas anti-trafficking centers operate across Ukraine – in Odesa, Kyiv, Drohobych, Ternopil, Chernivtsi, Ivano-Frankivsk, and Khmelnytskyi. The stories of people who sought support formed the foundation of this publication.

The names and ages of the characters featured in this book have been changed.

Each victim gave informed consent to share their story.

If you or someone you know has been affected by human trafficking or is at risk, please contact our specialists in the nearest region.

**Life Is Fragile – But Caritas Is Here!**

[#CaritasAgainstHumanTrafficking](#) [#КарітасПротиТоргівліЛюдьми](#)

[caritas.ua](http://caritas.ua)



Please see the details of the nearest  
center for combating human trafficking: >>>

Socio-political publication

Caritas Ukraine

# Fragile Life

Stories of Ukrainians who suffered from  
human trafficking during the war  
(2014-2025)

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A close-up photograph of a white ceramic plate that has shattered into several large, irregular pieces. The cracks are jagged and deep, revealing a dark, possibly black or dark brown, interior surface. The plate is set against a dark blue, textured background. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the broken ceramic and the sharp edges of the cracks.

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