

# MIGRATION AND GROWING UP

How young men  
start new life  
in a new country?



*Emotionally abandoned by their parents and society as a whole, many boys are angry, but no one really cares about this anger unless it leads to violent behavior. If boys take their rage and sit in front of a computer all day, never speaking, never relating, no one cares.*

- bell hooks, *The will to change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*

Nowadays, more than ever before, our world is on the move. Poland is changing because of migration – both emigration and immigration. In the following article, we grasp one of the many elements constituting this complex and fluid picture. We invite you to ponder about it together.

On September 27, Ashoka organized a meeting and invited a diverse group of people to share their collective wisdom and diverse experiences in order to discuss the situation of young men trying to get along in a new country. The conversations that rolled at five thematic tables were preceded by short inspirational talks delivered by practitioners from various fields. Ashoka Fellows, representatives of NGOs, universities, media and business shared their experiences and perspectives. The Shipyard Foundation and the Migration Consortium were partners in this event.

This publication is an attempt to capture these conversations and to embed them in the literature and reports in order to be a support for those who may undertake work with adolescent boys and young men with migrant experience.

The meeting was organized within the Here Fund – fund created by Ashoka with a grant from Google.org. The fund supports NGOs that foster the resilience of people with migration and refugee experience. Within the Fund, there is the Experiments Track, which prioritizes solutions for teenage boys and young men with migration and refugee experiences. On October 23rd, the call for applications in the Experiments Track of the Here Fund closed. Soon we will begin working with organizations to pilot solutions in this area.

[Learn more about  
the Here Fund](#)



# A group no one cares about?

While preparing to launching the Here Fund, Ashoka conducted a qualitative research. The interviewees repeatedly pointed to teenage boys and young men with migration and refugee experience to be a very critical group – important and difficult to reach at the same time. Currently, work with this group is not prioritized. Mainly because most of the newcomers are women, often with their dependent ones - young children and elderly people. These are these demographic groups that get the most attention. Stereotypically, they are also perceived as easier to get in touch with, are more likely to be involved in social activities and are more likely to be invited into one's home. The same cannot be said with a similar certainty about young men and teenage boys, especially when they're not accompanied by their parents.

However, the number of teenage boys and young men is not small at all. More than 122,000 Ukrainian children attend elementary schools in Poland. At the same time, there are only 28,000 Ukrainian teenagers in secondary schools. This means that a considerable group of the 15-18 year olds who arrived to Poland after February 24 2022 don't go to a Polish school. Assumably at least half of them are boys. There are also young men, many of them 24-30 years old, who are trying to get to Europe through the Belarus-Poland border. Some of them get to the closed centers for foreigners in Poland. It is difficult to estimate how many boys from the age of 12 and young men up to 25 with migration and refugee experience are in Poland, but the offer addressed to them by social organizations, local governments or the state is very limited.

The indicated age group does not find much in the way of social support in Poland either. Boys and young men engage in social activities much less frequently than girls and women. There are fewer organizations and institutions that offer this group support in entering adulthood.





# Looking under the stone

*The situation of young men is difficult, multidimensional and lacking quick solutions. (...) I am glad that we are looking under this stone.*

- Kuba Wygnański, Ashoka Fellow, founder of the Shipyard Foundation

Supporting young men and boys with migrant experience requires deep understanding of their situation and the causes of the problems they face. The diversity of experiences, of the roles they have been imposed with, of the barriers and of levels of exclusion they encounter along the way makes the currently available solutions fail.

To better understand how the different systems affect young men and boys, we invited NGOs to discussions in five thematic areas:

- **social media** (social norms and values, public discourse),
- **mental health** (health care),
- **new start** (economics, law, education),
- **leisure** (culture, social network),
- **parenting** (family, local communities).

The situation has diverse dimensions. It is affected by crises that have impact on society as a whole, by crises related to the full-scale escalation of the war in Ukraine and by the global politics that led to the situation on the migration route via the Belarusian-Polish border. In his speech, **Ashoka Fellow Kuba Wygnański, the founder of the Shipyard Foundation** identified three crises: existential one, loneliness and crises of masculinity. The existential crisis concerns identity. Young people who have come to Poland feel a new sense of freedom - now they can be whoever they want - which means, who? The crisis of loneliness can be painfully seen in the statistics of suicides. The suicide rate among men is three to four times higher than the one of women, and the suicide rate among children and adolescents has increased by more than 150% in 2022. Young men often close themselves off to others, convinced that they must deal with difficult emotions on their own. We also close the good inwards, increasingly talking about the well-being of the individual instead of acting for the common good. The crisis of masculinity manifests mainly in the fact that the patriarchal model of masculinity is no longer adequate to the reality around us. Each of these crises exacerbates misunderstanding, and the experience of migration and refugeeism when combined with those crises is overwhelming.



A newly published, first-in-Poland, report on the adolescence of Polish boys, prepared by the Moonka Foundation and infuture.institute, shows that it is learning that is the biggest challenge for more than half (53%) of the surveyed boys.

*Trying to meet the demands of the system, satisfying one's own ambitions and often parental expectations, a flurry of homework and extracurricular activities is also associated with a lack of time to pursue new passions, deepen interests or build relationships. The most frequently cited challenges of adolescence also include emotional life (51%), mental health (47%) and relationships - both with peers (41%) and with mom (35%) or dad (35%). (...) Nearly half of the boys said they deal with the challenges of adolescence mostly on their own (44%). (...) As many as 67% of boys admit that they look for information about puberty on the Internet. The process of acquiring knowledge about puberty occurs inversely proportional to the closeness of relationships. Parents and family - those who, by definition, should be the most supportive ones - are least often indicated as a source of knowledge. (...) Adolescent boys struggle with the image of the stereotypical male and the concept of "masculinity." The most emotions (75%) on the negative end of the spectrum (anger, discouragement and helplessness) are evoked by the stereotype of hiding emotions (which is well expressed by the term "Boys don't cry").*

- "The Maturation of Polish Boys" report, moonka, infuture.institute, September 2023

The experience of refugeeism and migration only compound the difficult experience of boys' puberty. And yet, a person is a child, a teenager, a young man only once! Other things can be made up in adulthood. Therefore, this publication is focused more on boyhood than on the refugee experience.

If you lift a stone, underneath you can see the white, sunless shoots of a lily of the valley and other plants which are trying to grow, even if the conditions are very difficult.

# An environment for growth

**Jacek Siadkowski, an Ashoka Fellow and co-founder of Tech To The Rescue,** is tall, slim, well-dressed, has a beautiful smile and many consider him handsome. He graduated from a good high school and good college, he speaks fluent English. On top of that, he works with technology companies, making them contribute to the common good. It might seem that he was meant for such a fate.

Jacek shared his story - the winding road of becoming *a changemaker*. There were many moments when this young social entrepreneur could have ended up in a reformatory. Unfortunately, as many as 58% of the alumni of reformatories and juvenile shelters return to the path of crime. If he had ended up there, the chance that he would be at the head of an NGO today would have dropped dramatically.

During his speech, Jacek said: *the easiest way to exercise the sense of agency is to hit someone. It seemed to me a form of finding my place in the world.*

Violence as a form of agency and entrepreneurship around physical force accompanied Jacek through his childhood and teenage years. It wasn't until a complete change of environment and a supportive high school that Jacek discovered that agency could also be expressed in other ways. He discovered that it was possible to do things his way, that it was possible to be accepted by his environment, and he could exercise the need of being good at something.



Jacek Siadkowski gives three pieces of advice necessary for the development of a young person:

- Allow them to do things his way.
- Give feedback on what they are doing.
- Create opportunities for them to discover constructive passions.

Do teenage boys and young men, but also people from minority groups, such as LGBT+ people, who have the experience of being on the move, find in Poland an environment that allows them to develop? How can they express their agency?

**Rowan Barnett, who runs Google.org** in Europe, the Middle East and Africa, is the grandson of a refugee who managed to flee Austria for London just before the outbreak of World War II. Rowan's grandfather was taken in by a host family, and found himself in an empowering environment that enabled him to continue to study, process his refugee experience and help him assimilate. He was then able to channel his energy to work for the common good, focussing on strengthening democracy and building peace in the immediate aftermath of the war.

As the Migration Consortium's research indicates, men are much more likely than women to be relocated to points of collective accommodation in smaller towns. This results in isolation from employment, access to education, NGOs. After one or two years in such a center it is difficult for them to return to social life, similarly as in the case of the reformatories. These centers function like waiting rooms, with sense of temporariness. Moreover the everlasting procedures and threat of eviction don't favor development, thinking about future or planning.

Western Europe's experience of hosting broad groups of migrants and refugees points to radicalization. But not, as everyone expected, the radicalization of people with refugee experience, but the radicalization of the hosting communities. An inimical hosting community is not an environment in which it is easy to thrive.

- **The role of local communities is extremely important.** Existing groups, clubs, associations can integrate young men with migrants, helping them develop their skills and interests. However, there is a need for training, sensitizing staff in offices, institutions and schools about the culture and needs of migrants to create a more welcoming environment.
- **A buddy system has good results.** Creating a peer support system where young men can help each other to settle in and participate in the hosting society.



- **It is important to pass on positive role models.** Promoting positive role models and inspiring success stories that can motivate young men to act and grow is still not very common, although very achievable.



## Life online

It's often easier to reach young man and boys in the online world than in the real one. Social media are - like any social phenomenon - multidimensional. They provide an opportunity to reach them with valuable educational content or to better form civic attitudes. At the same time, social media are also the places where they are confronted with radical opinions about their community, first-hand accounts from the war or other difficult situation in their country of origin. And, in the comfort of their smartphone, they experience different emotions. After all, the online world is also an important tool for keeping in touch with relatives and friends who now live far away.



Among many challenges existing in the topic of migration in social media, it seems that misinformation and the targeting of false information to people who may be particularly susceptible to it is a huge problem. Verifying information and removing false content and hate speech are extremely important, but working with people who had already believed the false information is difficult and time-consuming.

That's why it's much more important to use prevention in building resilience to false information and to make hate speech less severe. Most people in the Ashoka community emphasize the role of prevention, especially the primary prevention, because operating in this area is more likely to touch the causes of problems, is more effective and less expensive.

First of all, it is worth perceiving the online environment as an opportunity to reach out to young people with a migration experience. Online communities, such as those centered around computer games, can be a place to meet and engage, also in social actions. While creating places and offerings for young people in the real world, let's not forget to build some safe spaces online.

- **Countering hate speech and taking care of cyber security must go hand in hand.** Young people are a particularly vulnerable group to both hate speech and threats to their digital security, so education that builds their resilience is vital.
- **Educational programs should adapt to the needs of young boys, including recognizing emotions and the consequences of their actions on social media.** It is important to understand that young boys may need mental health and self-esteem support. At the same time, parents and teachers should be involved in monitoring and supporting children online.
- **Cooperation between social organizations and large platforms is very important.** Collaboration should take place at multiple levels and involve different organizations and institutions, because educating boys benefits entire communities and can help solve systemic problems.

## Mental health

Even in the happiest country in the world, which Finland has once again been recognized as, young people have mental problems. OECD findings show that depression, anxiety and other mental health problems affect more Finns than any other national group in the European Union. Nearly 60,000 young Finns (aged 15-29) are excluded from work and education. **Ashoka Fellow Markus Raivio, the founder**

**of Kukunori**, and his team asked young people the question: What is the most important to you at the moment? They have realized that young people want to do something that matters and don't want to feel alone. This prompted them to focus not on this what isn't working, but on the strengths of the people they were supporting. They began connecting young people, empowering them so that, with the support of mental health professionals, they would become coaches, trainers for others in the areas they are strong in - from teaching how to play guitar, to sports. The Guided Functional Peer Support model they developed is used by 43 organizations in Finland, but also in Kenya and Sweden. The GFPS model doesn't include talking about mental health - its creators know well that if they wanted to deal only with health, let alone mental health disorders, they wouldn't be able to invite anyone to work together. And being in a group, a team, and doing something that makes sense is the most important thing.

- **Boys often avoid therapy and psychological support because of the gender stereotypes.** They feel ashamed that it's "not masculine". It's also sometimes considered "leftist." Prevention is vital in countering these beliefs. Introducing the concept of "mental health" in education lessons, or in the narratives of war veterans and building awareness of the topic, can help break down barriers.
- **It is important to understand that mental health is an important part of life and people should take care of it.** It doesn't have to mean working on deficit, it doesn't have to be therapeutic. Activities related to building good mental health can focus on peer acceptance.
- **We should involve young men and teenagers in activities created for other young men.** This can be volunteering, but also paid work that will allow them to earn money creating some added value at the same time.

## Joint action

We can notice the power of interaction not only when we consider mental health. Boys find it much easier to enter a new environment when they do it in a group. In the survey that preceded the creation of the Here Fund, interviewees pointed out the task-oriented nature of integration and socialization of boys and young men. It's hard for them to simply advance someone and start talking, but to get together and play football - that's a different story.

Soccer is the most popular sport in the world. It also has the largest audience, and the number of soccer schools in the world is close to the number of public

elementary schools. According to **Massimo Vallati, Ashoka Fellow and founder of Calciosociale**, this potential remains untapped. The barrier is that soccer, unfortunately, is also sometimes anti-Semitic, xenophobic, mafia-oriented, and there is enormous pressure in soccer schools - the only thing that matters is to find another Lewandowski. Massimo proposes changing the rules of soccer to reinterpret the rules of the world. To begin with, Calciosociale has introduced the new rules on and also off the field in the neighborhood of the nearly kilometer-long Il Corviale block in the suburbs of Rome - a neighborhood where crime and refugees meet in the grand staircases of a never-finished 1970s architectural concept. Calciosociale, unlike Il Corviale, is not a utopia. It already operates in 9 locations in Italy and in another 4 in Europe. In each of these places, children and teenagers with refugee and migrant experience make teams together and chant *vince solo chi custodisce* - only those who care - win. They care about justice, democracy, hospitality, freedom, about others.

- **Young men enter spaces where they feel agency** and can further develop their passions, continue what they had started at home. Maker spaces are a good example.
- **When organizing activities for boys, it is particularly important to ensure that the entry level is low**, the activity is easy and commonly known. Teamwork will be an added advantage.
- **Young men who live in collective housing centers, often far from the major cities, hardly leave these places.** They have nowhere else to go. They don't establish relationships, they don't get support. And it's them who need the support the most. It's them, who need to be reached and asked what they are facing.



Calciosociale by Leica Meet Photographer Paolo Siviero



# Who cares about them?

It's hard for us to take care of men. It is hard for men to ask for care, for help, for support. We experience how patriarchy, which has discriminated non-males for years, is a double-edged sword now hurting men as well. **Sarian Jarosz of the Migration Consortium** pointed to the double, or quadruple, standard of the humanitarian crisis. As Sarian and earlier bell hooks, noted - boys and men are a group which is overlooked by international aid organizations, but also by policies. To understand the situation of a group of men with refugee experience in Poland, we need an intersectional perspective. Their needs arise from many different identities and experiences: they have different orientations, have experienced push-backs, torture on the Belarusian side, detention in detention centers. And if they are from Ukraine they experience pressure to go back to their country, they are relocated to small towns where neither the local government nor social organizations are prepared to support them.



Without media and flashes anymore, people from Ukraine are still fleeing the war. **Igor Horków of the Union of Ukrainians in Poland** says that also at the end of September 2023, between 1,500 and 2,500 people arrive to Przemyśl every day. Among them, a 17-year-old boy with his mother who died of cancer two weeks later. He had no other family and did not want to bury her in Poland. After her body was cremated, he waited until his 18th birthday to leave Poland and bury his mother in Ukraine. Another story - a 17-year-old whose parents sent him alone to Poland. They

are both fighting on the front lines. The boy had many contacts from the drug world on his phone. Due to RODO, the court did not provide the details of his assigned legal guardian, making it impossible for social organizations to reach him. As soon as he turned 18, both the guardian and the Union of Ukrainians in Poland completely lost him from their sight. A 16-year-old boy whose dad and brothers died heroically also came to Poland. He faces the fact that in two years he may have to fight himself. There are mothers who came with the children of their friends. Three teenage brothers whose dad was killed in the Kiev bombing. They had already been in Bratislava, Krakow and Rzeszow before they got to Przemysl. No one knew how to help them, it was easier to move them from place to place.

- **Many Ukrainian teenagers want to return to Ukraine, they idealize it, they miss it, they don't want to come to terms with the idea that they will stay in Poland for a long time.** They treat refugeeism as a very short-term stay. Learning Polish may even be treated as a "betrayal". Only the refugees who had to leave Ukraine in 2014 were able to convince the young people to learn the language. At the beginning, they also thought they were going to stay only for a while, but now they know they will be here for a long time, that they are staying.
- **Teenage boys and young men experience multiple traumas, social exclusion and insecurity. It is visible in many everyday situations.** Boys, following the example of their fathers (or at their request), want to take responsibility for their family. However, in the eyes of society, they are still underaged. The dissonance between the models of masculinity and the absence of male authority on a daily basis often results in frustration and destructive behavior. Mothers, grandmothers and those who take care of boys ought to know this and be able to help them engage in constructive passions and activities.
- **The lack of male role models can be mitigated by group activities.** It is worth searching inspiration in sports, scouting or youth firefighting teams. Activities in which boys can acquire the competencies of the future while remaining in some positive structure have the potential to give them space for self-determination and regular feedback. An interesting idea is empowering Ukrainian war veterans to take up the role of youth authority and creating opportunity for them to meet and spend time together in the spirit of education for peace.

# Key findings

The conversations in the smaller thematic groups were definitely embedded in the refugee context and the current situation of Poland as a hosting country. It was impossible to escape big topics like education or the role of the state and the narratives. However, when talking about the new start, mental health, social media, parenting and leisure, at separate tables, in different lineups, with a different starting points, the interviewees came to similar conclusions on the causes of problems, as well as on the solutions, touching upon common elements.

**In almost all groups, the conversation tackled the following topics. Topics that can be considered 7 good tips, points to be mindful about when working with teenage boys and young men with refugee and migration experiences.**

## **Reaching them**

The most important and possibly the most difficult task is to reach the target group. Those who most need to be reached, rather than those who are the easiest to engage. Discussants pointed to both being online, where teenage boys and young men are present, but also being on the streets, where they hang out, often to escape their mothers and grandmothers.

## **Heterogeneous group**

The category of gender, or even gender and age, does not mean homogeneity in this group. It is extremely important to have a deepened knowledge of their needs to truly address them. This is the group we need to thoroughly understand in order to propose activities they can accept.

## **Local leaders**

Nothing about us without us, as always, remains relevant. It is extremely important, valuable, and, as known from experience, effective, to engage the target group not only as recipients, but also as creators and co-leaders of activities.

## **Engagement**

The need of young people to be involved in action was mentioned in most of the conversations. It may be volunteering or working – what is important in these experiences is to allow boys and men to develop in favorable circumstances.

## **Hate Speech**

Hate speech, both online and in real world, accompanies teenage boys and young



men. They experience hate as a "source of danger," but also because of the pressure to return. The vast majority of activities are related to removing the hate and to mitigate the effects. There are too few preventive measures in this area.

### **Understanding the role of social media and being online**

As adults in the social sector, we do not understand the role of social media in the lives of teenage boys and young men. Understanding their needs, realized in this way, can allow us to direct adequate solutions.

### **Using existing infrastructure**

There are Volunteer Fire Departments with programs for the young, open football pitches, outdoor gyms, playgrounds at schools, libraries, country housewives associations, community centers, neighborhood houses and village halls. There are very good studies and reports, such as " Polish School of Help", "Challenges and needs related to the influx of students from Ukraine," and good examples from the world. Let's take advantage of what is already there.



# Question instead of summary

As a teenage boy or a young man, how can I make the best use of my time in Poland to prepare for what the future holds? What do I need to learn to contribute in rebuilding Ukraine? What can I do right now to support my loved ones who had sent me on this journey?

One solution that can serve as an inspiration is the work of **Ashoka Fellow Sazzad Hossain** in Singapore. Starting with Bengali workers in Singapore, Sazzad is improving migrant workers' lives by transforming the experience of migrant workers from a difficult time spent away from home to earn money into a period of personal and professional development.

Teenage boys and young men, actually all of us, need to prepare for the world we will be co-creating. In the future. Even as near as when we finish this article.

## Podziękowania

We would like to thank each and every person who accepted our invitation and came from Berlin, Helsinki, Rome, Toruń, Poznań, Przemyśl, Lublin, Warsaw and many suburban towns to talk together about boyhood, growing up and refugees.

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