Migration and Diversity
June 2025
Volume: 4, No: 1, pp. 21 – 35
ISSN: 2753-6904 (Print) ISSN: 2753-6912 (Online)
journals.tplondon.com/md

TRANSNATIONAL PRESS® LONDON

Received: 10 February 2025 Accepted: 29 April 2025
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33182/md.v4i1.3510

Transforming Survivor Guilt into Social Activism: Ukrainian Women Refugees in Germany

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Abstract

This study explores how Ukrainian women refugees in Germany transform survivor guilt into social activism. Drawing on a meso-sociological and emotional framework, we identify three interrelated guilt dimensions—perceived injustice, feelings of betrayal for leaving Ukraine, and helplessness—that catalyze solidarity, national identity, and civic engagement. Through qualitative analysis of open-ended survey responses and case studies, we show how these emotions evolve into purposeful action within a supportive host environment shaped by Germany's historical memory. While this inherited guilt does not directly cause activism, it creates conditions that enable emotional processing and empowerment. We conceptualize this transformation through the Spiral Model of Survivor Guilt Transformation into Social Activism (SGTSA), which integrates Mezirow's transformative learning theory. The model traces an iterative process beginning with disorientation and moving through reflection, identity reconstruction, and collective action. Our findings highlight the generative potential of survivor guilt as a driver of refugee-led social change.

Keywords: Survivor guilt, Refugee social activism, Transformative Learning Theory, Ukrainian women refugees, German historical memory

Introduction

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine triggered one of the largest refugee crises in contemporary Europe. Germany has received over 1.1 million Ukrainian refugees—26.9% of the EU total—of whom the majority are women (45.3%) and children (32.4%) (*Ukraine emergency*, 2024). While Germany has implemented comprehensive integration policies, as documented by (Dzhalilova & Weber, 2022) in their analysis of temporary protection

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mechanisms, female refugees face immense psychological burdens, struggling to adapt to a foreign culture while remaining connected to a homeland at war.

Among the most prominent emotional challenges is survivor guilt — manifesting as guilt for escaping war, not contributing to Ukraine's defence, or living in safety abroad - are common (Buchcik et al., 2023; Stepanenko, 2023). This guilt often intensifies through feelings of betrayal, helplessness, and the urge to "compensate" for perceived privilege (Walster et al., 1973). Despite these hardships, many women have responded through social and artistic activism, partnering with German NGOs or launching cultural projects (Chargaziia & Panchenko, 2025).

Additionally, through exhibitions, performances, and creative projects, artistic activism has become a means of raising awareness, expressing emotions, and maintaining cultural identity. This activism takes place against the backdrop of Germany's historical guilt over World War II, which persists among some segments of society (Dachs, 2023; von Kellenbach & Buschmeier, 2021b). This inherited guilt translates into a moral responsibility to assist contemporary refugees, including Ukrainians. Many Germans see this as a form of moral reparation and an effort to address historical wrongs, reinforcing Germany's commitment to human rights and humanitarian efforts. The intersection of Ukrainian survivor guilt and German inherited guilt creates a unique socio-emotional dynamic that fosters activism and mutual transformation, ultimately strengthening support for Ukraine and European democracy.

To explore how survivor guilt functions within such contexts, the following literature review examines its psychological foundations, social dimensions, and adaptive potential. This framework provides a basis for understanding how guilt may be transformed from personal trauma into prosocial engagement among forcibly displaced women.

1. Literature Review: Survivor Guilt through Psychological and Social Lenses

1.1 Psychological Approaches

Early psychoanalytical models, particularly from Holocaust studies, explain survivor guilt as an unconscious conflict. Those affected often feel they have betrayed those who perished, triggering a struggle between relief at survival and guilt over others' loss (Lifton, 1982; Niederland, 1968). It has since been identified in war, disaster, and displacement contexts (Lifton, 1982). Over time, the concept has broadened to encompass guilt over any perceived advantage—whether success, safety, health, or well-being—relative to others (Fukuma, 2013).

This manifests in intrusive thoughts, nightmares, and a sense of unworthiness, especially the belief that they don't deserve safety (von Kellenbach & Buschmeier, 2021a, 2021b). Later research introduced a cognitive dimension. Equity theory (Baumeister et al., 1994; Walster et al., 1973) suggest guilt stems from perceived unfairness, as survivors feel they benefited more than others. The inability to compensate the deceased intensifies these feelings.

Cognitive-behavioural theories, like Kubany and Manke's (1995), define this as "irrational guilt," where survivors feel unjustified in their survival, leading to constant rumination and guilt (Pethania et al., 2018). This integrates concepts like trauma-related guilt, PTSD, and moral injury while emphasizing personal beliefs in sustaining guilt.

The cognitive model's focus on injustice, undeservingness, and inequity seems relevant for understanding survivor guilt among Ukrainian female refugees. It enables exploration of personal narratives, such as guilt over perceived abandonment of family or community, which resonates with the compounded trauma of displacement and loss.

1.2 Social and Evolutionary Approaches

Beyond the individual, guilt serves vital social functions. Wang et al. (2018) and O'Connor et al. (2012) argue that guilt encourages empathy, solidarity, and cooperation, key to group survival. This aligns with von Kellenbach and Buschmeier (2021a) thesis that guilt can drive displaced individuals toward activism, helping to "even the score" through collective contributions.

In refugee contexts, survivor guilt may catalyze purposeful engagement, especially where social networks and host society empathy provide fertile ground for action. This shift—from isolated distress to collective agency—is crucial in understanding Ukrainian women's community-oriented responses.

1.3 Coping through Social and Creative Action

Engaging in social or altruistic activities serves as a self-coping mechanism for managing survivor guilt, particularly while a crisis is ongoing. Finding meaning in survival is key to this process. Viktor Frankl's logotherapy (Frankl, 1966), developed from his experiences as a Holocaust survivor, emphasizes that individuals can mitigate survivor guilt by discovering a higher purpose that transcends their trauma. This often leads survivors to contribute through volunteering, advocacy, or fundraising for communities affected by similar hardships.

Additionally, survivors benefit from sharing their experiences in supportive environments, whether through creative expression, such as documentaries, art, poetry, or in personal and professional networks. Verbalizing their struggles helps externalize emotions, reducing the psychological burden of guilt. Support systems, including family, friends, therapists, and empathetic audiences, play a crucial role in helping survivors feel less isolated and more understood in their grief (Murray et al., 2021).

O'Connor et al. (2000) suggest that survivor guilt is an evolutionary mechanism that promotes group cohesion, reduces anti-social competition, and encourages altruistic behaviour. Wang et al. (2018) also found that among earthquake survivors, those experiencing survivor guilt demonstrated increased altruistic behaviour, using social support as a way to restore balance.

2. Research Questions, Methodology, and Participant Description

This study examines how survivor guilt among Ukrainian women refugees in Germany may influence their engagement in social activism. It situates this emotion within a broader socio-emotional environment shaped by Germany's historical memory, focusing on women's experiences due to a highly gender-skewed sample (87.7% female). Using a meso-sociological lens and grounded in the sociology of emotions, the research investigates how internal emotional drivers intersect with external contextual support to facilitate individual and collective transformation. To explore these processes and phenomena, we pursue the following research questions:

Q1. Do Ukrainian women refugees in Germany experience survivor guilt?

Q2. How does survivor guilt influence their engagement in social activism?

Q3. What role does the German socio-emotional environment play in shaping this transformation?

Since the study explores the intersection of survivor guilt, social activism, and societal transformation among Ukrainian women refugees in Germany, the methodology needs to capture both the psychological experiences of guilt and the social behaviours that result from it. Given the multidimensional nature of the research questions, we will use a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative techniques.

Data was collected in June 2022 from 423 Ukrainian refugees in Germany[3] through an online questionnaire hosted on Google Forms, distributed via Facebook and Telegram groups. The survey, conducted in Ukrainian to ensure accessibility, was anonymous and voluntary, with no personal data being collected. The participants were clearly informed about that in the survey introduction.

The recruitment strategy via popular social media with groups relevant to the targeted participants was chosen for its accessibility and relevance to Ukrainian refugee communities in Germany. However, this method may introduce bias by disproportionately reaching younger, more digitally literate, or socially active individuals. Older refugees, those without digital access, or individuals experiencing more acute distress may be underrepresented. These limitations are taken into account in the interpretation of findings.

The questionnaire comprised nine questions—seven closed and two open-ended. Four closed questions were designed to assess various components of national identity, while three others captured respondents' demographic profiles, including gender, age, and location.

Two open-ended questions aimed to explore the living conditions, experiences, needs and challenges faced by Ukrainian refugees in Germany:

1. "What was the most difficult aspect for you after moving abroad?"
2. "What problems are relevant for you now?"

The first question prompted respondents to reflect retrospectively on their initial challenges upon arrival, whereas the second addressed their present concerns at the survey time (June 2022). The study encountered expected challenges, such as limited respondent availability and the sensitivity of the topic. Nonetheless, engagement with the open-ended questions was remarkably high: 99% of participants provided detailed responses, far surpassing the typical 10% rate for such questions. This unusually strong participation may reflect the study's perceived relevance, its novel focus, the shared refugee experience between respondents and the researcher, and participants' motivation to share their stories. These considerations align with Patel's (2022) findings on online survey methodologies in migration research, which demonstrate that Ukrainian refugees show higher engagement with digital research tools when there is cultural resonance and perceived relevance to their communities.

[3] Research for this paper was conducted by Yuliya Byelikova during a fellowship at The Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity (Gottingen, Germany)

The richness of the data collected from these open responses was substantial enough to warrant a separate analysis, presented in this paper. The qualitative data were analyzed inductively using MAXQDA with a grounded-theory approach. A key emergent theme showed the presence of survivor guilt among women and its correlation with social engagement. Due to the gender imbalance in the sample, findings center on women's experiences and do not generalize to male or non-binary refugees. Table 1 presents the participants' demographic breakdown.

Table 1. The participants' demographic structure

Age Group	Female (%)	Male (%)	Other (%)
Under 25	15.1	3.8	0.5
26 to 45	59.6	5.7	0.2
Over 46	13.0	1.9	0.2
Total	87.7	11.4	0.9

So, the sample composition appeared strongly gender-skewed, with 87.7% of respondents identifying as female. Accordingly, the analysis centres on female refugee experiences. While this gendered focus constrains the generalizability of the findings to broader refugee populations, it is consistent with the demographic distribution of Ukrainian refugees in Germany, where women constitute approximately 80% of the adult refugee population (Brücker et al., 2023, p. 3). However, the reliance on social media platforms for participant recruitment may have introduced sampling bias, particularly by underrepresenting older individuals (aged 60 and above) and potentially including a small number of respondents under 18.

This study is contextually bound by time and place, with the data reflecting the experiences of Ukrainian refugees in Germany as of June 2022—a possibly evolving situation. While the primary focus was on female refugees, responses from male and non-binary individuals were examined to provide a broader context and highlight the distinct experiences of women.

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3. The Findings: Survivor Guilt and Its Transformation into Social Action

In our data set, survival guilt occurs mostly in the answers of women. Only one young (18 y.o.) male respondent mentioned guilt, potentially shaped by societal norms of masculinity, as mentioned above. While this study focuses primarily on the experiences of female refugees due to the sample composition, this does not imply that male refugees do not experience survivor guilt. While guilt was not always explicitly verbalized in the survey, it often surfaced in personal conversations. Several factors may explain the gender difference in responses about guilt:

Men are expected to fight and defend their country, making their guilt about leaving even more profound and, therefore, more intimate and difficult to share.

Socialization discourages men from expressing emotions, which could be perceived as a sign of weakness.

Gender differences in behavioural patterns: as Hoffman (1977) suggests, while the gap in guilt levels between men and women is not large, it is still significant. Women's greater concern for others makes them feel guilty more often than men, as they focus more on maintaining relationships.

Analysis of responses to the open-ended question, "What was the most difficult thing for you personally after moving abroad?" revealed that survivor guilt was the most salient emotion reported by women. That aligns with the previous co-author's research (Byelikova, 2024). This emotion emerged in three main forms:

1. Guilt as a sense of injustice toward others

Examples: "Realizing I am safe with my children while my relatives are not," "The feeling of guilt that a terrible war is happening in Ukraine", "My husband died in the war and I was not at his funeral."

2. Guilt for leaving the country—experienced as betrayal

Examples: "Feeling like a traitor for leaving," "I can't forgive myself for going abroad," "I feel guilty for living outside of Ukraine and not sharing the suffering with our land", "There are lots of doubts about whether I did the right thing by leaving the country and letting our people face the enemy alone."

3. Guilt linked to helplessness

Realizing that there's little I can influence", "That you can hardly help the Armed Forces of Ukraine, your relatives, and friends who stayed behind", "The thought that you're not in Ukraine and can't help", "Feelings of guilt; not understanding how to build a life moving forward", "The fact that my relatives, friends, colleagues, and even acquaintances are still under shelling, and I can't help them".

Continued thematic coding revealed three main types of social responses, often linked with particular forms of guilt. One of the most prominent effects of survivor guilt is the development of solidarity and group cohesion, as highlighted by Voytiv (2024). Internal solidarity—a willingness to support one another and growing cohesion within their community — is seen in our data.

Another consequence of the transforming survival guilt visible in our data is patriotism, raising the national identity. The correlation of Nations, Identities and War is not a newly described phenomenon; one of the most fundamental works on that in the context of the First World War is described by Horne (2018). The previous research of the author supports the finding regarding strengthening identity. More than a half of respondents reported being "very proud" to be Ukrainian and considered that having a "common enemy" is a strong factor for shaping their national identity (Byelikova & Lysytsia, 2023).

Volunteering and advocacy as survival strategies and responses to crisis during wartime are well-documented by Oppenheimer (2008) and Omoto, Snyder & Hackett (2012). These themes also clearly emerge from our survey data (Table 2).

Table 2. Forms of survivor guilt and related forms of social responses

Survivor Guilt Forms	Types of Social Response	Examples
Injustice toward others	Solidarity, group cohesion	"I am constantly thinking about how to support my family and other Ukrainians." "For me, the most urgent thing now - not just a question, but a challenge that needs resolution: finding a new job, planning how to return to Ukraine, and considering how to contribute something meaningful to the country". "I constantly want to go home, especially now, with the war happening there. I have a strong desire to be at home and help in any way I can".
Betrayal for leaving	Patriotism, strengthening identity	"I feel pride for our land and people, and I really miss my homeland." "I love Ukraine very much. I want to go home". "It is so hard to be away from Ukraine and feel pain for Ukraine". "Understanding that Ukraine is the best country and we are not there". "Understanding that I am no longer in my native Ukraine".
Helplessness	Volunteering, advocacy	"I try to do something worthwhile for Ukraine." "It is difficult to comprehend that Ukrainians, including soldiers and the nation's best, are dying due to the distorted narratives of a neighbouring state. The realization that the life we once had is gone forever is overwhelming. There's anger at the abrupt loss of that life. Efforts include donations and the search for effective ways to help Ukraine from abroad, as well as raising funds to support the Armed Forces of Ukraine".

		"I am focused on the thought of how to return to Ukraine, meanwhile, I try to do something worthwhile for Ukraine". "The most important for me now is the Victory of Ukraine! My return home. Search for effective ways to help Ukraine from abroad". "Despite the large-scale humanitarian aid efforts, the feeling of guilt persists".

Some respondents describe experiencing a profound sense of "double guilt", combining its different forms. They struggle with guilt for leaving their country during wartime, feeling as though they have abandoned the fight for Ukraine's sovereignty. At the same time, they perceive their departure as a betrayal of those who remained—family, friends, and soldiers defending the nation. These emotions are further intensified by a sense of helplessness and a deep longing to support their homeland from afar.

Engaging in social and artistic activities helps alleviate this guilt by strengthening their sense of personal involvement in Ukraine's destiny, even from a distance. For Ukrainian refugees, participation in cultural and artistic initiatives in their host country offers a meaningful outlet for these emotions. By engaging in cultural exchanges, creative projects, and community-building efforts, they feel they contribute to Ukraine's recognition, resistance, recovery, and future. The media analysis revealed several notable creative initiatives organized by Ukrainian refugees in Germany, which institutionalize above mentioned social responses:

- Café Ukraine in Berlin (Benasuly, 2022) - a cultural hub for Ukrainians. The café serves as a space for cultural exchange, community gatherings, and support for refugees adapting to life in Germany. It hosts various events, including art exhibitions, musical performances, and workshops, promoting Ukrainian culture and fostering integration into German society.
- Intercultural Crafts Afternoons in Munich (Munich Business School, 2022) - in the summer of 2022, Nataliia Bieliaieva organized Intercultural Crafts Afternoons at Munich Business School. These sessions provided Ukrainian refugees with a creative outlet and an opportunity to connect with the local community, supporting their integration into German society.
- Ukrainian Freedom Orchestra (Holt, 2022), composed of Ukrainian refugees and musicians from European orchestras, embarked on a world tour in 2022. Their performances in German cities such as Munich, Berlin, and Hamburg showcased Ukrainian musical talent while fostering cultural exchange and solidarity.
- Ukrainian House Dresden (Dresden, 2022) was established as part of the association Plattform Dresden eV. Its activities focus on the growing social diversity of recent decades and aim to promote German-Ukrainian relations, art and culture, education, national and professional training, as well as a culture of remembrance, including a Ukrainian-Led School.

We should note that the gendered expression of guilt suggests women may be more inclined to translate emotional burdens into social action, though not universally. Not all refugees experience or act on guilt similarly. Some may engage in denial or emotional withdrawal, shaped by their psychological state or socio-cultural constraints.

This study underscores the adaptive function of survivor guilt in post-trauma contexts, highlighting the interplay between emotional suffering and collective resilience. Future research should explore these mechanisms in more diverse gender and age groups and consider the long-term sustainability of guilt-driven activism.

4. German Historical Context and Supportive Environment for Refugees

While this study does not empirically measure the perspectives of German citizens, historical memory and moral reckoning—may foster conditions conducive to refugee activism.

Germany's confrontation with its Nazi past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) has cultivated what Berger (2012) and Margalit (2010) describe as a national culture of responsibility and humanitarianism. This transformation of historical guilt into moral action is embedded in public discourse, policy frameworks, and civil society initiatives—most recently exemplified in responses to the Ukrainian refugee crisis.

Borneman in (von Kellenbach & Buschmeier, 2021a) describes German society as shaped by two types of guilt: historical guilt, concerning culpability, and survivor guilt, concerning victimization and agency. In postwar Germany, these two forms of guilt were understood to be mutually exclusive, with Germans themselves seen as bearing only historical guilt. Borneman further argues that guilt can be productive and facilitate the incorporation of refugees (as in the Syrian case), noting that "guilt is socially productive only when it carries with it supplements such as responsibility, accountability, atonement, rectification, redress, or reparation." In Germany, historical guilt is passed down through generations via both state-endorsed memories of the Nazi regime and family histories. Meanwhile, Germans' own survivor guilt remained taboo for many years, rarely acknowledging that Germans could be not only aggressors but also victims during World War II.

Although we do not claim direct causality, this emotionally and institutionally supportive environment appears to provide Ukrainian refugees with psychological space for processing guilt and engaging in purposeful action. As Krause and Schmitt (2023) argue, historical memory can mediate host community responses to refugees, especially in societies like Germany that actively engage with past atrocities.

The connection between German historical guilt and the catalysis of refugee activism, while theoretically grounded and illustrated through case examples, is not empirically measured within this study. Instead, this link is inferred from contextual analysis and anecdotal evidence gathered during the research process. Several respondents described being hosted by German households motivated by historical or personal memories:

- A German family hosted a Ukrainian family in part because their grandfather was saved during WWII by a Ukrainian coworker.
- A German-Jewish household supported a Ukrainian-Jewish family, referencing their own family's past experiences of displacement.

- A family who had previously fled Syria in 2015 offered housing to Ukrainians, expressing solidarity through shared experience.
- One German spouse of Ukrainian descent hosted a refugee mother and child as a way to honour their heritage.

These examples do not serve as formal data but illustrate how inherited narratives of guilt and empathy may translate into civic hospitality. They point to Germany's historical context not as a driver of refugee activism but as a contextual facilitator—a moral and emotional landscape in which such activism becomes more viable. Future research could strengthen this connection through targeted empirical investigation into how host society emotions and narratives of guilt are perceived and internalized by refugee communities.

5. From Guilt to Action: Transformative Learning, Cultural Integration, and Social Engagement of Refugees

While not a direct catalyst, Germany's supportive environment, to some extent, enables Ukrainian women refugees to process trauma and begin reframing survivor guilt. This chapter explores the internal mechanisms by which guilt transforms into civic and cultural engagement, emphasizing the psychological journey of transformation rather than host-driven integration. Drawing on transformative learning theory, we examine how refugees reframe emotional dislocation into constructive social roles.

The theory of transformative learning, developed by Mezirow (2018), According to Mezirow, transformative learning occurs through a "disorienting dilemma" followed by critical reflection, identity reconstruction, and behavioral change. Originally rooted in adult education (Mykhailenko et al., 2019; Zogla et al., 2021), this theory has been adapted to contexts of migration and trauma, where emotional rupture often precedes social adaptation (Gilpin-Jackson, 2014).

For many Ukrainian women, war-induced flight ruptured their sense of identity and national belonging. Survivor guilt—whether experienced as injustice, betrayal, or helplessness—functions as a disorienting dilemma. Rather than disabling action, it often becomes a site for critical self-inquiry and moral re-evaluation. The guilt of leaving loved ones behind or surviving while others face violence ignites internal questioning that can prompt outward engagement.

The transformative process unfolds across multiple domains. Emotionally, refugees grapple with unearned safety. Cognitively, they begin reframing their experience through education, civic involvement, or storytelling. Relationally, they form support networks with fellow refugees or local communities. Social engagement—while seemingly external—often stems from this deeply personal emotional reckoning.

Examples from our qualitative data illustrate how this emotional work manifests practically. Initiatives like "She Can" ((SCI), 2025), Café Ukraine in Berlin, Ukrainian House Dresden serve as platforms for refugee-led leadership, solidarity, and cultural diplomacy. These activities are less about assimilation and more about constructing agency through meaningful contribution.

Despite outward engagement, many participants expressed a desire to return to Ukraine. Cultural identity remains firmly rooted in the homeland, with civic action directed outward

rather than toward permanent German integration. This ambivalence reflects the dual trajectory of trauma-based transformation: action is real, yet return often (but not always) remains the ideal.

In sum, survivor guilt does not merely paralyze; it can catalyze transformation under conducive conditions and through internal effort. This chapter has traced the unfolding of guilt into civic agency, laying the foundation for the model proposed in the next chapter.

Conclusions and Discussion

This study demonstrates that Ukrainian female refugees in Germany—the dominant group in our sample (87%)—experience survivor guilt in three distinct but interrelated forms: a sense of injustice (for being safe while others remain at risk), a feeling of betrayal (for leaving Ukraine during wartime), and helplessness (stemming from their perceived inability to support those at home). These dimensions were consistently voiced across qualitative responses and strongly linked to participants' emerging civic, cultural, and solidarity-driven actions. This provides a direct response to our first research question (Q1): Can it be demonstrated that Ukrainian women refugees experience survivor guilt? The empirical evidence presented—both in thematic patterns and individual quotations—confirms that survivor guilt is not only prevalent but also psychosocially significant in shaping refugee experience.

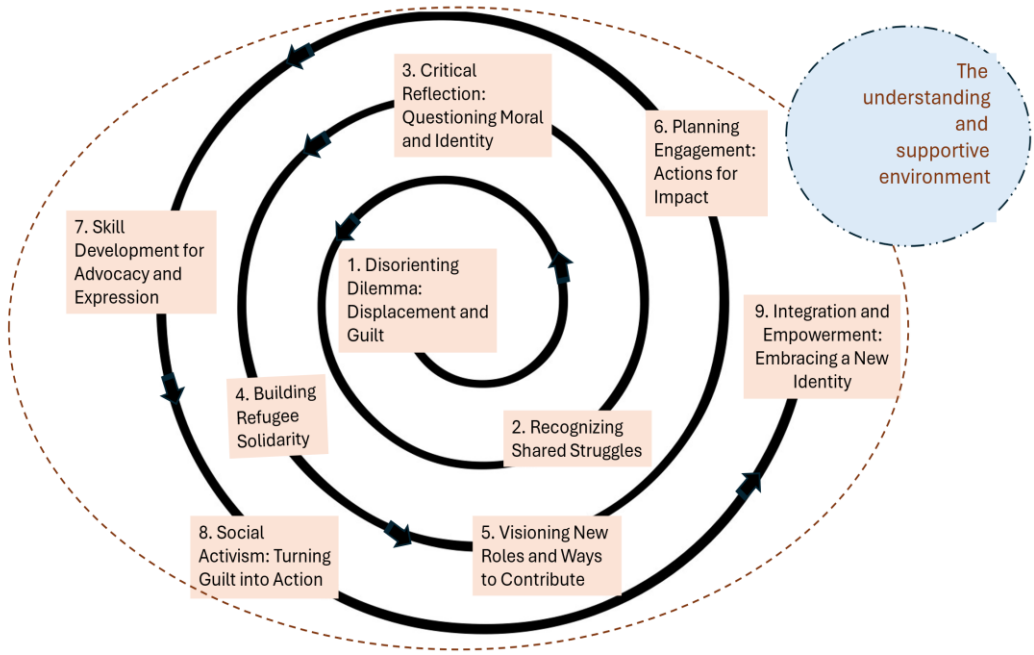

Figure 1. Spiral Model of Survivor Guilt Transformation into Social Activism (SGTSA)

The second research question (Q2) addresses the mechanism connecting guilt to activism. Based on our findings, we propose the Spiral Model of Survivor Guilt Transformation into Social Activism (SGTSA), which builds on Mezirow's theory of transformative learning and situates individual emotional processes within broader socio-cultural and historical contexts. This model traces how survivor guilt evolves through reflection, identity reconstruction, and social interaction into forms of civic engagement and activism. Through a structured and

empirically grounded model (Table 3), we demonstrate how survivor guilt, initially expressed as emotional distress, becomes a catalyst for engagement. Participants' narratives reveal a clear progression: from critical reflection and emotional tension to community bonding, visioning of new roles, capacity-building, and ultimately to active engagement. The spiral structure captures how transformation unfolds not in a linear but cumulatively and iteratively, with each stage reinforcing the next. The inclusion of representative quotes and thematic coding at each stage ensures that the model is both analytically coherent and empirically anchored.

This approach offers new insights into how women refugees' activism emerges not merely as a response to immediate needs but as part of a deeper transformative learning process facilitated by both internal psychological mechanisms and external societal conditions. The relationship between dimensions of survivor guilt and corresponding stages of emotional and social transformation is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Survivor Guilt Transformation Mapped onto the Spiral Model (SGTSA)

Spiral Model Stage	Transformative Focus	Empirical Quote from Participants
1. Disorienting Dilemma	Moral disorientation caused by sudden displacement and guilt over safety	"The feeling of being a traitor for leaving home during difficult times." "The fact that my husband died in the war when I crossed the border, and we were not at his funeral."
2. Recognizing Shared Struggles	Connection through shared emotional hardship; emergence of collective identity	"I am constantly thinking on how to support my family and other Ukrainians." "The most difficult is to assist relatives and friends who remain in the occupied territories."
3. Critical Reflection	Self-questioning about moral identity and the decision to flee	"I just can't forgive myself for going abroad." "There are lots of doubts about whether I did the right thing by leaving the country and letting our people face the enemy alone."
4. Building Refugee Solidarity	Transformation of isolation into social engagement via support networks	Example initiatives: Café Ukraine in Berlin, Ukrainian House Dresden, Intercultural Crafts Afternoons in Munich

5. Visioning New Roles	Redefining purpose abroad through imagined contributions to Ukraine	"I try to do something worthwhile for Ukraine." "The most important for me now is the Victory of Ukraine! My return home. Search for effective ways to help Ukraine from abroad."
6. Planning Engagement	Turning moral obligation into actionable plans for support	"Efforts include donations and the search for effective ways to help Ukraine from abroad, as well as raising funds to support the Armed Forces of Ukraine."
7. Skill Development	Empowerment through learning, training, and cultural activity	Example: "She Can" project; workshops, orchestral tours, cultural diplomacy
8. Social Activism	Visible civic and humanitarian engagement informed by enduring guilt	"Despite the large-scale humanitarian aid efforts, the feeling of guilt persists." "I try to do something worthwhile for Ukraine."
9. Integration and Empowerment	Reconciling guilt with pride and dual identity; long-term commitment	"I feel pride for our land and people, and I really miss my homeland." "Understanding that Ukraine is the best country and we are not there."

Importantly, this transformation is not universal. As noted in prior literature and reinforced by our data, not all refugees process guilt this way. Some respondents showed signs of avoidance or emotional numbing. For others, guilt remained unarticulated or untransformed. This underscores the need to treat guilt as a potential source of agency, not a deterministic trigger.

Our findings also address the third research question (Q3): *What is the role of the German socio-emotional environment in transforming Ukrainian refugees' survivor guilt into social activism?* We clarify that Germany's historical guilt and its associated civic infrastructure—including remembrance culture, humanitarian values, and moral responsiveness—do not cause refugee activism. However, they serve as a socio-emotional ecosystem that, to some extent, enables and supports the transformation of guilt into constructive action. Civil society organizations, cultural institutions, and social policies create platforms for Ukrainian refugees to process emotions and engage in advocacy. When survivor guilt encounters a host context that values

moral responsibility and solidarity, it is more likely to evolve into empowerment and agency. This dynamic illustrates the indirect but powerful role of host-country emotional memory in refugee adaptation and civic mobilization.

We also emphasize the methodological and contextual boundaries of our conclusions. The sample, recruited primarily through digital platforms, likely reflects a younger, digitally connected demographic. Older refugees or those less active online may experience and express guilt differently. Moreover, gender norms likely influence how survivor guilt is internalized and acted upon. The emotional transformation process documented here may not apply to men in the same way, as our data showed minimal male expression of guilt. Thus, our conclusions are explicitly gender-specific and bound to this particular time, place, and population.

By presenting the Spiral Model of Survivor Guilt Transformation, we contribute not only a novel empirical analysis but also a conceptual framework for understanding how trauma can be rechannelled into civic resilience. Survivor guilt, often perceived as a disabling emotion, here emerges as a productive force when situated in a context of social support and reflective opportunity. The model may serve as a diagnostic and educational tool for practitioners working with refugee populations, particularly in societies where historical memory plays a role in shaping integration. We invite further testing of this model across different cultural and displacement contexts to better understand the conditions under which guilt becomes not a burden but a resource for transnational solidarity, resilience and democratic engagement.

Refugee activism is not merely survival—it is transformation. And transformation, as this study shows, begins with pain, but can evolve—through reflection, solidarity, and purpose—into power.

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