

A CATALOG OF STORIES
OF WOMEN WHO JOINED THE PROJECT

WOMEN LEAD IN EMERGENCIES



Foreword to the catalogue

This collection contains stories of success of women who became stronger thanks to the Women's Lead in Emergencies (WLIE) project. These are 11 stories of women whose lives changed in ways they could not have imagined before the project. Some gained self-confidence and self-respect, some have their relationships with their husbands to become more respectful and equal, and others dared to take on jobs they had long wanted. And all of them found sisterhood support and understanding in the women's circle formed by the WLIE groups that emerged in the result of the project.

In fact, there are many more stories of strength – about displaced who women found new meaning and new support groups thanks to the project, about newly registered organisations, about new status and respect in the community, and even about the end of long relationships, which brought freedom.

About the project:

During 2022 – 2025, CARE Ukraine and its partner women-rights organizations in Kharkiv, Odesa, Dnipro, Lviv and Vinnytsia oblasts implemented Women Lead in Emergencies (WLIE) project funded by CARE International Pooled Fund

Women-rights organizations who participated in the project and accompanied women and WLIE groups in their growth:



Zhyva-Ya (Izmail, Odesa oblast)



Green-Landiya (Kharkiv)



Posmishka (Dnipro)



Winds of Change (Odesa)



Center Women's Perspectives (Lviv)



VIS (Vinnytsia)

The project team faced the difficult task of selecting only 11 stories for the collection, as practically every participant in the project experienced some kind of change in their lives as a result of their participation in WLIE project. At the very least, they found a circle of friends with whom they could not only change the world, but also simply be together, because together is better.

Women have also learned not to be afraid of local authorities, but to talk to them as equals, aware of their rights. And as it turns out, this is much easier to do this together. They also learned how to design projects for their communities – identifying needs, planning, debating endlessly, making difficult decisions, and ultimately rejoicing in the results and receiving well-deserved praise from their communities.

The team responsible for the project at CARE Ukraine is immensely proud of every woman who found the strength and courage to participate in the project and make a difference in her community. We are also impressed by the skills and dedication of the teams from our partner organisations, who were able to work with women in such a way that the women's personal changes and changes in the community became truly transformative.





Nadiya

Age: 61

City/Village: Pervomaisk, Mykolaiv Oblast

Action Plan/Community Initiative: Creating an inclusive beach in the city

Personal change within the project: She realized that she can learn and grow despite her age and life challenges, becoming more confident in herself and in those around her

Nadiya is 61. She lives in Pervomaisk, a picturesque town on the banks of the Southern Bug River. She has worked hard her entire life to provide for her family — in the fields, in the orchards, in the kitchen. Seven years ago, she lost her husband and has since been raising her granddaughter on her own. “Angelina’s mother [Nadiya’s niece] has three more children, one of whom was born with a severe heart condition. That’s why I took Angelina in when she was still very little.”

Life has never been easy for Nadiya, yet she always did everything she could to make sure the children had what they needed.

“I worked very hard in the fields. You come home from work with no strength left. But I hurried anyway, because the child had to be fed. I tried my best for my granddaughter. She grew up used to working — at ten she earned her first money trimming young orchards.”

Although Nadiya doesn’t have children of her own, she loves all her nieces, nephews, and their children as if they were hers. She calls them her grandchildren. From an early age, she teaches them to read, write, and count.

“I never went to school myself. I learned the alphabet, the sounds, the syllables — all on my own. Then I taught my nieces and nephews.

At school, they once told one of the boys, ‘We might have to keep you in first grade.’ And he replied, ‘I already know addition, subtraction, and multiplication.’ The teacher asked, ‘Who taught you?’ — ‘My aunt.’ That’s how I taught all of them.”

When the full-scale invasion began, Nadiya said she would not leave her home under any circumstances.

Thanks to the Women Lead in Emergencies program implemented by the **WRO Winds of Change** with support from **CARE**, Nadiya opened a new chapter in her life.

“I am very grateful to Winds of Change. Had I received such support earlier, I would probably already be a businesswoman or even the mayor of the city. Now my grandchildren are studying as well, and my standing in the community has changed significantly.

People listen to me. They respect me. And I am glad that we can bring positive change to our community.”



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Together with her granddaughter and niece, Nadiya is working on creating an inclusive beach in Pervomaisk — a place where people with disabilities and families with children can relax on equal terms and feel dignified.

If I had received this kind of support earlier, I would already be a businesswoman — or even the mayor of the city.

For Nadiya, real success is not about positions or money.

It is the education that children receive and the changes she brings to her community, together with them.



Nataliia

Age: 45

City/Village: Staryi Merchyk, Kharkiv Oblast

Action Plan/Community Initiative: Together with an initiative group of local women, she helped make the community more energy-independent by purchasing a wood chipper. It allows them to improve the town's landscaping and use the processed branches both as alternative fuel and as decorative mulch for flowerbeds

Personal change within the project: She overcame the anxiety that followed her displacement, gained confidence, learned how to support other women, and now dreams of implementing her own project idea

Nataliya is from Kharkiv. Before the war, she was never involved in community work — she raised her daughter, managed the household, and cared for her mother. But everything changed after February 2022.

“My son’s birthday was on February 23,” she recalls.

“And at dawn on the 24th, we heard explosions. At first, we couldn’t believe it. It felt like watching a movie.”

The explosions near their home in Saltivka — one of Kharkiv’s most heavily affected districts — forced Nataliya and her family to flee.

Their windows were blown out by a shockwave, and only luck saved them when a shell hit their courtyard.

“We were incredibly lucky to be standing near the elevator shaft, going up to the apartment, and not by the window,” she says.

The journey to Staryi Merchyk, a village 39 kilometers from Kharkiv and chosen as a “safer place,” took several hours instead of the usual one.

“Along the road we saw so many people — with children, suitcases, pets. Those eyes are impossible to forget,” Nataliya recalls.

“At least we knew where we were going. Many people had no idea where to flee.

It was heartbreaking and terrifying.”

In the new place, surrounded by forest, she couldn’t believe they would stay long.

For a year and a half, she didn’t buy anything new or allow herself to settle in.

“It felt like we would return any moment. But with time, I understood: life must go on.”

When her husband, a serviceman, was wounded near Bakhmut, Nataliya was left alone with her daughter.

She found support among other internally displaced women attending group meetings, therapy sessions, and art workshops.

“The psychologists taught us something essential: what’s gone will not return. We need to live here and now. We supported each other, learned to face our fears, and learned to trust the world again,” she says.

Gradually, Nataliya went from simply attending the sessions to encouraging other women to join.

“I’d tell acquaintances where they could get help,” she laughs. “My husband even joked, ‘You have your own little sect there.’

But later he admitted — it changed me for the better.”

Together with the women’s initiative group, Nataliya helped implement a community improvement action plan.

They purchased a wood chipper to clear overgrown areas — many residents had fled, and the roadsides were becoming choked with brush.

The processed wood will be used both as decorative mulch for flowerbeds and as an alternative fuel source, because during wartime, no one knows what the next winter might bring.

Taking part in the **Women Lead in Emergencies** program helped Nataliya feel confident and valued.

She especially enjoys the public speaking workshops, where she learns to express her thoughts clearly and stay composed even in difficult conversations.

“In the past, I wouldn’t have said a word in front of people. Now I understand that they listen to me. And that matters,” Nataliya says.

After everything she has been through, she dreams of peace — and of seeing the world without fear.



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We must learn to live here and now. What’s gone will not return, but we can choose to look ahead.

“Many people left because of the war, not by choice. Someday I want to travel simply because I want to. And I dream that no one will ever have to run from missiles again.”



Olena

Age: 36

City/Village: Velyka Rohan, Kharkiv Oblast

Action Plan/Community Initiative: Setting up a children's playground for the community

Personal transformation within the project: Overcame the consequences of war-related stress, regained inner calm, gained confidence, became the head of the kindergarten, and found support among other women.

Olena is the head of a kindergarten in one of the communities in the Kharkiv Oblast. A year ago, she couldn't even imagine taking on such responsibility.

But participating in the action plan, together with the support of the community and her team, helped her believe in her own abilities.

"I used to be a methodologist and never thought about a managerial position. It seemed too difficult, too demanding.

But thanks to the project, I realized that we can do more than we think. And that change begins with us."

Before the full-scale invasion, Olena's life was calm and predictable: work at the kindergarten, her little son Nazar, and family life. Everything changed on February 24, 2022.

"Our child had a fever of 38°C, and we were about to go to the doctor. And suddenly — an explosion. We went down to the cellar and stayed there for almost a week. I was worried that his illness would get worse. It was cold and damp, but what kept us going was that we were together and alive."

When it became clear that it was too dangerous to stay, the family evacuated to the Poltava Oblast. They spent almost a year there.

"What I missed most was home. Even when things became calmer, my soul wasn't at peace. I wanted to return, to feel that life continues."

In 2023, the family finally came back home. It was frightening — shelling continued, and the child reacted harshly to loud sounds. But little by little, Olena began restoring her usual life.

She returned to work at the kindergarten and soon learned about a project by the **WRO Green-Landiya** and **CARE**, which helps active women implement ideas in their communities.

"When we first heard about the project, we didn't believe it was real. We thought: it's war, who would allocate funds now?"

But step by step, we started working, learning how to write official letters, present our ideas, and talk to local authorities. And we were heard."



Together with other active women in the community, Olena decided to set up a children's playground. Now she dreams of creating a shelter in her kindergarten — not just a bunker, but a safe space where children can learn and play even during air raids.

"We want children not to lose their childhood because of the war. For them to draw, sing, and study even when it's dangerous outside."

The action plan not only helped restore a space for children but also opened new opportunities for Olena herself. Thanks to her participation, she found the courage to accept the offer to become the head of the kindergarten.

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We want children not to lose their childhood because of the war.

For them to be able to draw, sing, and study even when it's dangerous outside.

“My colleagues said: ‘We believe in you.’ And I believed, too. Now we work together, discuss things, and support one another.

We realized that we can be a driving force for change in our community.”



Olga

Age: 41

City/Village: Velyka Rohan, Kharkiv Oblast

Action Plan/Community Initiative: Equipping and opening a playground for children

Personal transformation within the project: Overcame self-doubt after divorce and returning from abroad, regained a sense of self-worth, found stable work, and regained faith in love, goodness, and herself

Olga is 41. She is a primary school teacher from Dnipro who experienced war, the loss of her home, a divorce, and... found a new family, work, and herself.

"I was living my usual life—school, students, home. And then the war began, and it became unclear where the next shell would land."

"In Dnipro, it was terrifying. My husband's friends evacuated their wives, but I stayed—I couldn't leave my sister. She had just given birth to a daughter. This was the first child in our family, and we cared for her deeply. When my sister decided to go to Germany with the baby, I packed and left with her in three minutes."

The journey took three days. In Germany, Olga continued teaching online, studied German, and joined a volunteer organization.

"Almost without understanding anything, I was telling Germans what a beautiful country Ukraine is," she laughs. "We spoke broken German, like children just learning to read. But we spoke, so they could understand what was happening in our country."

Yet behind her outward activity, there was deep exhaustion. Her marriage did not survive the distance, and by the end of 2022, she was divorced.

"Everything collapsed," Olga recalls. "I was alone in a foreign country where I knew no one and understood almost nothing. I longed for home, family, warmth."

It was tough. Foreign language. Balancing online teaching and part-time jobs in Germany. The inability to fulfill myself."

One day, when complaining about life to a friend, her friend asked, "What kind of man would you like?" Olga described her ideal without hesitation: "Tall, with a beard, and with a little daughter." From that moment, the magic began.

Her friend remembered an acquaintance in Kharkiv who was raising a young daughter alone after his wife's death. Three days later, Olga began talking to him online. For New Year's holidays, she traveled to Kharkiv to meet him in person.

That meeting changed everything.

“I came from safe Germany to front-line Kharkiv, to a man I had never met. But I immediately felt—it’s him.”

After the holidays, Olga returned to Germany briefly but could no longer stay. By spring, she was with her new family.

Now, Olga raises the child she had dreamed of for so long and works with other women in her community to improve local spaces.

The **CARE** program on **Women Lead in Emergencies**, implemented by **WRO Green-Landiya**, became a breath of fresh air for her.

“The psychologists supported me and helped me remember that I am not just a mother or a wife—I am also a person. I am the queen of my own kingdom.”

During one session, participants wrote their wishes on paper. Olga wrote:

“I want to find a stable job so I can stay close to my child and earn at least 237 dollars.”

A few months later, her wish came true: she got a job at a kindergarten and feels empowered to do even more.

“Everything I wrote came true,” Olga says. “And my friend, who wished to have a baby quickly, actually had a boy. We joke that he’s our project child.”

Today, Olga works as a methodology specialist at a kindergarten. But she doesn’t plan to stop.

She dreams of conducting her own research and believes in herself.

“I need people around me who say, ‘You’re doing great.’ It’s like air.

Because the most important thing is to believe, even when it feels like everything is lost.”

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I realized that being happy is also my responsibility. That I am a person, a woman, a mother—not just an accessory to someone else’s life.



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Rusalka

Age: 40

City/Village: Nerubayske, Odesa Oblast

Action Plan/Community Initiative: Together with the WRO Winds of Change and other members of the women's initiative group, organized garbage removal in her community.

Personal transformation within the project: Increased self-esteem, confidence, communication skills, and ability to navigate society

The village of Nerubayske, near Odesa, is home to one of the largest Roma communities in the region. Nearly five hundred Roma have lived here for decades, yet local authorities have largely ignored them.

Daily life is marked by neglected, unpaved roads, mountains of trash that were never collected, and small scattered homes.

Rusalka has lived here all her 40 years. She raises five children on her own and works hard to provide for her family. Her childhood, she says, was simpler:

“When I wasn’t married yet, everything was much easier...”

My mother and father always took care of me. I didn’t go to school because I was the oldest in the family and helped my parents all the time. I learned at home, so I can read a little, write a little... But I always dreamed of more.”

At 16, Rusalka married:

“It was late... [referring to Roma customs, where girls are usually married at 12–13].

My mother didn’t want to marry me off sooner. I cried, didn’t want to marry, but it happened this way...”

Her marriage did not last. Her husband left for another woman, and Rusalka was left alone with her children:

“Relatives helped us survive. My ex-husband helped a little—brought food and left us a house. But mostly, I managed on my own.”

Roma customs forbid a woman with children from remarrying. "If she remarries, who will care for her children? No, it's not allowed," so she grew accustomed to doing everything herself.

Her life began to change when she joined the **CARE Women Lead in Emergencies**, implemented by the **WRO Winds of Change**:

"They offered me sewing courses.
I agreed...

I met other women there! We learned to
sew beautiful dresses and bed linens.

But most importantly, we learned how
to communicate with people, with doc-
tors, and how to care for our children...

It was incredibly interesting!"

The project also transformed her attitude toward her children's education:

*"My daughter already reads well! And she really likes math.
My sons say, 'Mom, if you need to study, go.*

We won't stop you.' That kind of support means so much..."

Later, Rusalka received a sewing machine and now makes custom clothing. Together with other Roma women in the initiative group, she works to improve life in their community. They have organized garbage collection and removal that had accumulated for over 30 years, dream of repairing the road, and are building relationships with local authorities.

Rusalka dreams of her own sewing atelier:

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More orders for me... I want to start
my own business. I want us to have
a paved road. And little by little, we'll
make it happen.

Despite all the challenges, Rusalka demonstrates that even small steps and the support of other women can transform lives — her own, her children's, and the wider community.





Halyna

Age: 40

City/Village: Broska, Odesa Oblast

Action Plan/Community Initiative: Establishment of a children's playground for the community

Personal transformation within the project: Gained confidence in her significance, learned to appreciate herself, and to sincerely support others, especially her family

Halyna is the director of a kindergarten in the village of Broska, Odesa Oblast. She has journeyed from the despair that engulfed everyone during the early days of the full-scale invasion to active participation in **CARE's Women Lead in Emergencies program**, implemented locally in collaboration with the **WRO Zhiva-Ya**.

From childhood, Halyna dreamed of working with children, which led her to become an educator.

"I really love children. I believe pedagogy is the ideal of my life."

She recalls her determination to return to work as soon as possible after giving birth to her first child. She went back when her son was 1 year and 2 months old, bringing him along. He quickly adapted to the kindergarten schedule.

"It just so happened that while I had classes, he would sleep. And after the outdoor activities, when everyone went home, he woke up. The child perfectly adjusted to my schedule—it was wonderful."

Her example encouraged other parents to bring even younger children to class. Sometimes groups meant for 25 children were overcrowded, which delighted Halyna.

However, the war changed this trend, and this year the kindergarten enrolled only 13 children. Halyna worries about this deeply:

"This is the first year we have only 13 children. This has never happened before. I'm very concerned and dream that children will return to our village."

She remembers how life froze with the start of the full-scale invasion. People stopped communicating and left the village. Work disappeared.

Her true lifeline in these extreme circumstances was meeting the WRO Zhiva-Ya. Halyna and other women in Broska created a women's initiative group, and through their support, she realized life continues.

"I understood: life doesn't stop. It goes on. We have to act and help regardless of the circumstances."

At first, she found it hard to believe that participating in a community initiative could affect her life, let alone the whole community. Gradually, Halyna began to notice changes.

The action plan work began with trainings:

“At first, we attended sessions where we learned about various gender stereotypes, how to support ourselves, protect ourselves from different events and stresses, and restore our mental health.”

This gave her the strength to move forward — to support others and develop her community. Halyna shares that she could not believe in her own power: Ukraine has so many serious problems—could ordinary people really make a difference? Eventually, she realized they could.

“And it turned out not as we thought. Even though we are small, when we gather in groups, we have this driving force and can take real steps.”

Together with the women’s initiative group, Halyna organized the creation of a children’s playground in the village. They purchased equipment and carried out installation so that the children in the community would have a safe and joyful space to play.

The program helped Halyna see her work in a new light and recognize her own power:

“Before, everything was on autopilot. Now I can say ‘thank you’ to myself for what I do and see how even small actions inspire the people around me.”

Her professional dream is to have a large kindergarten for the community’s children.

Her personal dream is for the war to end and for families to return home, with children able to play on the renovated playground.

“Maybe our help isn’t global. But even just supporting someone and not letting them fall — that’s already a big deal.”

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Even small steps have power.

Halyna describes her work with WRO Zhiva-Ya as a personal experiment and wants it to continue, as participating in the project has changed her life for the better.



Tetiana

Age: 42

City/Village: Izmail, Odesa Oblast

Action Plan/Community Initiative: Community meeting space in the village

Personal transformation within the project: Realized that a woman's role is not to serve her husband

Tetyana is 42.
She is a wife and mother to a teenage daughter.
For many years, she worked as an accountant.

"I counted other people's numbers, other people's money, other people's stories. But for the past six years, I've been a social worker in a small village in the Izmail district. And now I don't just count numbers — I count destinies. Every woman, every child, every family leaves its mark on my heart."

After finishing her workday, Tetyana often goes to her greenhouse or tends the garden, though her thoughts often remain with the people she supports.

"I hoe a garden bed, but my mind doesn't let go: I see a little girl with unwashed hair, I saw today in a neglected yard. Her gaze worries me more than any chores."

In January 2025, Tetiana heard about the **Women Lead in Emergencies** project run by the **WRO Zhiva-Ya** and **CARE**.

"I didn't really understand what it was or why. But something inside me said: I have to try," she recalls.

The meetings with the facilitators became a challenge for her.

"Twice a month, I listened to discussions about inequality and the division of household work. I argued. I got angry. I defended my position. After all, I had been taught differently my whole life."

During one session, when women were discussing unfair household labor and how some men prepare dinner, Tetyana exploded in frustration::

"How is this possible?! A man cooked dinner? A woman! That's your duty!"

She argued and clung to her lifelong beliefs: women cook the borscht, women wash the dishes, the husband is the one a woman owes.'

But one evening, after another discussion, Tetyana looked at her husband differently:

"He was sitting at the table, waiting for my daughter and me to prepare and serve dinner. We ate. Watched TV. Went to bed. And he said, 'When will you iron my shirt?' I said, 'In the morning.' But lying there, I couldn't sleep. I thought about my daughter. Will she live like this, too? Ironing shirts, running to work, doing home-work with children, cooking dinner, again and again? Will she grow up with the word 'must'?"

This was a turning point. Tetyana realized she did not want this life for her daughter..

"I don't want to pass my chains on to her."

At the next women's initiative meeting, Tetyana spoke aloud for the first time:

"I agree with you. I want to change. Not for myself — but for my daughter. She is not a servant. She was not born for this..".

She recalls that in that moment, she felt something inside her break. Like an old iron link snapping. And she told herself: "I will break these chains." Now she confidently says:

"A woman was not born for 'must.' She was born for a life of 'I want.' Her value is not in how many dishes she washes or shirts she irons, but in the fact that she is a person with dreams, needs, and the right to rest and grow."

For Tetyana, participating in the project became more than learning — it became a path to inner freedom.

Such change begins with one woman but transforms generations. Her daughter, seeing her mother free, does not repeat the same mistakes. Neighbors, colleagues, and friends are inspired by her example.



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I always believed it was my duty to serve my husband at home — never questioned it.

But through participating in the project, I realized this isn't the life I want.

I want change — not only for myself, but for my daughter, to break this chain of inequality.



Lianka

Age: 33

City/Village: Nerubayske, Odesa Oblast

Action Plan/Community Initiative: Together with the WRO Winds of Change and other members of the women's initiative group, organized garbage collection in their community.

Personal transformation within the project: Became a community leader, gained confidence and a drive for change, and completed sewing and women's leadership courses.

Lyanka is a young woman from the Roma community. From an early age, she saw her mother suffer from domestic violence, witnessed how lack of education and financial independence left women with no choice, and experienced how traditions and community rules governed women's lives.

Having spent most of her life in the Roma camp in the village of Nerubayske, Lianka never dared to dream of change. Daily routines and caring for her children and grandchildren consumed all her time.

She married at 12.

"I am 33 years old. I have eight children and seven grandchildren. Soon there will be an eighth grandchild. We all live together," she says proudly.

Fortunately, her marriage was successful, and the support of her husband and family helped her navigate life's challenges.

The full-scale invasion brought new trials. Lyanka recalls how on February 24, 2022, panic spread in the camp. Many Roma families left Nerubayske, and even Ukraine; the camp emptied. Lyanka's family had to split up: one daughter was in the hospital, and another went to Moldova with her children. The separation period was difficult and stressful.

"It was hard for everyone. Tears came to our eyes when we were parted from our children and grandchildren," she recalls.

Meeting the **WRO Winds of Change**, a **CARE** partner, brought relief and support.

At first, volunteers delivered humanitarian aid to the camp — clothes for children, hygiene kits — and later invited women to participate in various training programs.

Lyanka learned new skills: communicating effectively, caring for her mental and physical health, and sewing. She even received a sewing machine from the foundation as a gift.

Soon, she brought together other women in the community to form a women's initiative group.

Together, they decided that for the health of their children and a better future for the community, they needed to clean up the area and remove the garbage that had accumulated for over 20 years.

Initially, other community members were skeptical. The Roma camp had always followed its internal rules; outsiders were not allowed in, and women's voices were rarely heard. Yet, Lyanka's persistence and leadership changed that.

Thanks to the **WRO Winds of Change**, Lianka traveled outside the Odesa Oblast for the first time, visiting Kyiv for the National **Forum on the Implementation of the Roma Strategy: Valuing Diversity** — and she is proud of this achievement.

“Earlier, my husband wouldn't even let me go to the store alone — he was always nearby. But now he even let me go to Kyiv for two days.”

Lyanka also notes that her work with the foundation has changed attitudes toward the Roma in their community.

Women now feel more comfortable seeking medical care, children attend school, and the camp has become more open to others.

“When the girls from the camp started attending women's leadership courses, attitudes toward us changed.

We gather, communicate, and teach girls how to approach doctors and interact with others. And now people treat us differently.”

Today, Lyanka dreams of improving living conditions in her community — better roads, clean surroundings, and well-being for everyone.

“I want every Roma woman to have the support I have from my family. I tell them I can make a difference in my community. My daughters, sons, grandchildren — they all believe in me.”

Lyanka is now a community leader, showing that change is possible when you have support, self-belief, and the courage to take the first step.



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I do everything so that Roma life becomes a little better. This is our dream.



Anastasiia

Age: 33

City/Village: Velyka Rohan, Kharkiv Oblast

Action Plan/Community Initiative: Active participant in the Women Lead in Emergencies (WLiE) program; together with other women, initiated the creation of a children's playground in the community to provide a safe space for kids.

Personal transformation within the project: Regained inner calm after trauma, became more confident, learned to speak openly in Ukrainian, believed in her own abilities, and found support among other women.

When Anastasiya recalls the first months of the war, her voice trembles slightly, yet her eyes reveal calm and strength. She lives in Velyka Rohan, Kharkiv Oblast. When active hostilities began, her family could not evacuate.

Together with her husband, parents, and young daughter, they spent weeks hiding in a cellar, listening to explosions overhead.

“At that time, we thought only about the children. I didn’t allow myself to cry—I had to stay strong so everyone felt calm. But those experiences came out in other ways—skin problems, nerves, sleeplessness.

The doctor said my vitiligo started because of stress. I just wanted to live again.”

It was then that she learned about the **Women Lead in Emergencies program**, implemented in the community by **WRO Green-Landiya** with **CARE** support. It offered her a chance to meet other women who had gone through similar experiences, find support, and explore ways to rebuild her life.

“When psychologists Tetyana and Maryna visited, we felt seen and heard. They inspired us, helped us not isolate ourselves, and taught us to accept our emotions. When they came, it made me want to live.”

Later, women in the program were told they could implement any action plan they chose.

“I didn’t believe it. There’s a war in the country, everything is for the military first, and here they’re giving us money for what we think is important. But I decided to try.”

Anastasiya joined the program while pregnant with her second child and did not miss a single session.

“I attended until the end with my baby bump. At the final meetings, I came with my newborn son. Now everyone calls him the ‘project child.’”



She says that it was thanks to this support that she could maintain calm and faith in herself.

“I learned to breathe, to let go, not to hold pain inside. Psychologically, it was a huge help. Being heard, not being alone—that’s priceless.”

As part of the program, the women decided to implement a joint initiative: creating a children’s playground in the village.

“We wanted the children to be able to play without fear. After shelling, after destroyed homes, this seemed like a small thing, but in reality, it became a symbol of renewal. We built it with our own hands, together.”

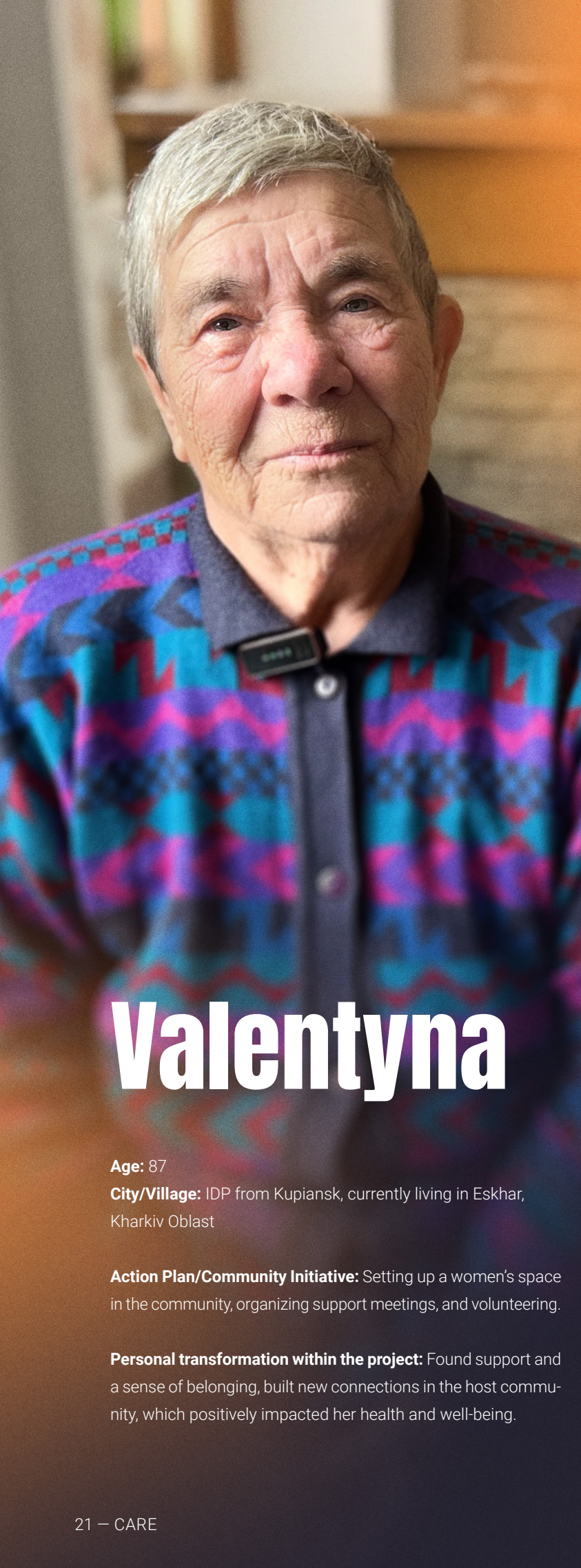
For Anastasiya, participating in the project was a true reset.

“I learned to speak Ukrainian without shame. I realized that being a mother also means being a leader. We have the right to dream, act, and inspire.”

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This project gave me the strength to keep living and believe that goodness exists.

Even in the darkest times, there are people who care. And if such people are around, everything will be okay.



Valentyna

Age: 87

City/Village: IDP from Kupiansk, currently living in Eskhar, Kharkiv Oblast

Action Plan/Community Initiative: Setting up a women's space in the community, organizing support meetings, and volunteering.

Personal transformation within the project: Found support and a sense of belonging, built new connections in the host community, which positively impacted her health and well-being.

Valentyna is a retiree whose life has been shaped by immense challenges: growing up during World War II, losing loved ones, surviving post-war hunger and poverty. Yet none of these hardships broke her spirit.

She fondly recalls her work as a caretaker in the Kupiansk community, helping make the small town welcoming and vibrant.

Even at eighty, she was full of energy — managing the household, enjoying her grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and being a pillar of support for her family.

The full-scale war changed everything.

“I remember nine people lying in my basement, trembling from constant explosions. They were neighbors whose houses were already destroyed. We couldn't go out and could only pray that the building would hold.”

Then came evacuation, her daughter's stroke, her grandson's severe injuries on the front line, and the struggle to find new housing.

“Now I cry every day. I mourn all that has been lost. I feel for my grandson, who is far away in a hospital waiting for prosthetics. A single moment erased a lifetime.”

Valentyna now lives with her disabled daughter in a small rented apartment in Eskhar, constantly managing medical needs and expenses.

“It's very hard for both of us, but looking back, I realize I've survived worse. It's just unbelievable that the war has destroyed my childhood and now threatens my old age...”

Despite her age and fragile health, Valentyna refuses to give up.

In Eskhar, she discovered a women's initiative group, supported by **CARE** and **WRO Green-Landiya**, which created a women's space — a place to gather, learn, volunteer, and support each other. This space became a source of comfort and strength for her.

“We meet here Monday to Friday. On weekends, when I don't come, I feel sad. The girls are like my children. I love them dearly.”



Participation in the action plan has given Valentyna more than assistance — it restored a sense of human warmth, belonging, and purpose.

Together with neighbors and volunteers, she planted a small garden, canned tomatoes, and shared other resources from her cellar. These small acts brought healing beyond what she imagined.

“When I first started coming, I couldn’t even walk a step without a cane. Now sometimes I even leave it aside. My wings carry me to the girls.”

Through the initiative, symbolically called the **“Guardians of Eskhar”**, the women developed skills in communication with authorities, secured a space for their group, created ideas for a “scent garden” in the city park, helped integrate IDP women into the community, and strengthened connections with the city’s diaspora.

Valentyna’s generosity and sincerity are remarkable. Despite a modest pension, she and her daughter contribute monthly to support Ukraine, and she delights the group with homemade treats.

Her story is not about grand achievements, but about human resilience and mutual support. Thanks to humanitarian partners and local volunteers, she found shelter and became part of a community that offers a shoulder in the hardest times. Valentyna now finds meaning in daily rituals — attending church, seeing neighbors, and helping where she can. Her energy and example inspire other women in the hromada.

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We have lost a lot, but as long as we can hug, help, and pray — we are alive.

That means we have the strength to keep living



Valentyna

Age: 43

City/Village: Broska, Odesa Oblast

Action Plan/Community Initiative: Women's initiative group supported by the WRO Zhyva-Ya

Personal Change through the Project: Gained confidence in her own abilities and realized that women can influence society and community life

Valentyna is a mother of four, a school janitor, and a participant in CARE's program **Women Lead in Emergencies**. She raises two daughters and two sons.

When the full-scale war began, Valentyna and her family stayed in their village of Broska in Odesa Oblast, convinced that *"there is no need to flee from your home."*

In addition, she cares for her husband's elderly parents, whom she could not leave behind.

Amid uncertainty and daily worries, she continues to work, support her children, and care for her loved ones. Valentyna has always strived to act and keep moving forward:

"As long as you have your health, you must keep going, moving forward. Being a woman means being able to do a lot."

Valentyna lives in Broska with her children, husband, and his mother. She says:

"I am a mother of four: two daughters and two sons. Each of them is three years apart."

Valentyna grew up in the village of Komyshivka in the Izmail Oblast. At 24, she moved to Broska to live with her husband. Before the full-scale war, the family had their own business — they grew and sold oyster mushrooms. Her husband, passionate about his work, handled both cultivation and sales himself. But with the onset of war, they had to halt the business due to electricity and water issues. Despite this, Valentyna and her husband dream of restarting their business and returning to mushroom farming.

"But we had to stop the mushrooms because of the war, electricity cuts, and uncertainty about tomorrow. It's very frightening. Mushroom farming takes a lot of work and resources."

Valentyna recalls that the first day of the war, February 24, was terrifying. Her sisters in Odesa called to report shootings in the city.

They decided to leave for their parents in Komyshivka, while her husband's relatives went abroad, leaving their parents in Broska. Valentyna and her family found themselves responsible for small children and elderly parents, so they decided to stay at home..

"My husband and I looked around — small children, father-in-law, mother-in-law, parents, and I also had a lonely grandmother under my care. I said, no, we can't run anywhere. Where would we go from our home?"

So Valentyna's family stayed in Broska, where they still live. She says meeting the **WRO Zhyva-Ya** became an important discovery and a significant support.

"They told me at school that there would be some support for women. Some trainings, some gatherings for girls."

Valentyna began attending the events and eventually became part of the community. She found interactions with the psychologists particularly meaningful.

The specialists helped her cope with emotions related to the war and better understand herself, her desires, and her possibilities.

Through the **CARE program**, Valentyna discovered the power of self-reflection and supporting other women. One moment left a strong impression on her:

"They told us to draw a flower and write words of gratitude to ourselves on its petals for today. I thought, really, I do have reasons to say thank you to myself. Before that, I hadn't even realized how much I do."

Together with the women's initiative group, supported by the **WRO Zhyva-Ya** and **CARE**, Valentyna began implementing her first action plan — a children's playground for the community.

She also realized the importance of education and knowledge. Now she continues to study, develop, and find time for herself:

"I really want to learn, do something for my soul, something I've always dreamed of. Unfortunately, I never had the chance to get higher education, but now I plan to enroll somewhere to study landscape design."

Despite daily hardships and fear for the future, Valentyna demonstrates that even in the most difficult circumstances, a woman can change her life and the lives around her, inspire others, and remain strong.



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Being a woman means being able to do a lot. So you must not stop and keep moving forward.