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OLDER ADULTS IN WAR-AFFECTED CONTEXTS: LAYERED VULNERABILITY AND SOCIAL WORK RESPONSES

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Abstract. This article reconceptualises the experiences of older adults in war-affected contexts through the lens of layered vulnerability. It adopts a conceptual and analytical approach, aiming to synthesise and critically engage with existing literature on ageing, vulnerability, displacement, and social work in conflict-affected settings.

Drawing on the person-in-environment perspective and critical gerontology, it examines how structural inequalities, spatial disruptions, relational dynamics, and individual life-course experiences intersect and reinforce one another during armed conflict. Using Ukraine as a contemporary case, the paper illustrates how war intensifies pre-existing vulnerabilities while simultaneously generating new forms of risk associated with displacement, infrastructural breakdown, and social fragmentation. At the same time, it highlights the agency and resilience of older adults, emphasising their capacity for meaning-making, adaptation, and social contribution under conditions of prolonged crisis.

The article argues against reductionist, age-based framings of vulnerability and instead advances a relational and context-sensitive understanding that recognises both constraints and resources across multiple levels. Based on a thematic synthesis of recent literature, the study identifies four interrelated layers of vulnerability—structural, spatial, relational, and individual. With regard to this layers, it explores the implications for social work practice.

The findings underscore the need for integrated, multi-level, and trauma-informed social work responses that address systemic inequalities while strengthening the agency and participation of older adults. The article contributes to scholarship on ageing in crisis settings and provides a conceptual framework for developing more equitable and responsive social protection and social work interventions in war-affected societies.

Keywords: older adults, armed conflict, vulnerability, displacement, social work, resilience, Ukraine.

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INTRODUCTION

Population ageing is a global trend that increasingly shapes the priorities of social policy and social work practice. Globally, the number of people aged 60 and over is projected to double by 2050, reaching approximately 22% of the world's population (WHO, 2025). According to the United Nations classification, a society is considered "aged" when the share of people aged 65 and over exceeds 7%. In Ukraine, this threshold has been significantly surpassed, reaching 15.9%, and 19.8% in rural areas (National Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024). However, the ongoing war complicates the accurate assessment of demographic structure. Among forced migrants abroad, women and children predominate, while reliable statistics from occupied territories remain unavailable.

In war-affected contexts, the experience of ageing acquires new and often insufficiently explored dimensions. Older adults are frequently framed as a particularly vulnerable group due to declining health, limited income, and dependence on social support systems (Heenan, 2023). While such framing captures important aspects of their situation, it risks oversimplifying the complex and context-dependent realities older adults face during armed conflict.

In contexts of war, pre-existing structural vulnerabilities – most notably chronic poverty, reliance on state-provided pensions, health conditions, and intergenerational tensions – are significantly exacerbated (Global Action on Aging, 2004; Lushchak et al., 2025). At the same time, older adults often demonstrate remarkable resilience, drawing on life-course experiences, community ties, and biographical knowledge as adaptive resources (Chan et al., 2022).

This article aims to reconceptualise the position of older adults in war-affected contexts through the lens of layered vulnerability, integrating structural, spatial, relational, and individual dimensions. Its central argument is that in war-affected contexts, the structural layer of vulnerability acts as a multiplier that amplifies spatial, relational, and individual disadvantage, rendering age-neutral policy responses systematically inadequate for older adults. It further explores the implications of this perspective for social work, arguing for integrated, multi-level approaches that are trauma-informed, context-sensitive, and oriented toward both the agency of older adults and structural reform.

The paper adopts a conceptual and analytical approach, aiming to synthesise and critically engage with existing literature on ageing, vulnerability, displacement, and social work in conflict-affected settings. Particular attention is given to recent scholarship addressing the impact of armed conflict on civilian populations, as well as studies focusing on internally displaced persons (IDPs) and older adults.

A thematic analytical strategy is employed to identify and integrate key dimensions of vulnerability and resilience across multiple levels of analysis. AI-assisted tools (Claude and ChatGPT) were used for language polishing and editing purposes. The intellectual content of the article is entirely the authors' own.

The analysis is based on the Ukrainian context as a contemporary illustrative reference point for a war-affected society. The paper draws on secondary sources, grey literature, and empirical research from Ukraine to ground its conceptual framework in a specific and urgent national context. Since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, millions of civilians have been forcibly displaced, including a disproportionately large number of older adults who remained in conflict-affected areas or were displaced internally and abroad (United Nations in Ukraine, 2023). While context-specific, the conceptual insights developed in this article are intended to contribute to wider debates on ageing in crisis settings.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding the experiences of older adults in war-affected contexts requires moving beyond static or singular notions of vulnerability. This article adopts the ***person-in-environment perspective*** as a foundational framework, emphasising the reciprocal and dynamic relationship between individuals and the multiple contexts in which they are embedded (Kondrat, 2013). From this standpoint, the experiences of older adults are not determined solely by age-related factors but are shaped through ongoing interactions with social, political, economic, and environmental conditions. This aligns with ecological and systems-oriented traditions in social work, which situate individual well-being within broader structural and relational contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

This perspective is further informed by *critical gerontology*, which challenges dominant narratives that equate ageing with decline, dependency, and inevitable vulnerability (Buffel & Phillipson, 2024; Estes et al., 2003). Critical gerontology interrogates how age-related inequalities are socially constructed and reproduced through structural forces such as conflict, displacement, and unequal access to resources (Katz, 2019). It calls attention to the ways in which older adults are positioned within systems of power, often experiencing marginalisation not only because of their age but also due to intersecting factors such as gender, disability, socioeconomic and displacement status (Higgs & Gilleard, 2022). In war-affected contexts, these structural dynamics are intensified, shaping both the risks older adults face and the resources available to them (Gebeyaw et al., 2026; Young et al., 2022).

Within this framework, *vulnerability* is conceptualised as contextual, relational, and socially produced rather than inherent to older age (Adekpedjou et al., 2023; Semigina et al., 2025; Tiilikainen et al., 2025). It emerges through the interaction between structural conditions (such as armed conflict and displacement), disruptions to social and spatial environments, and individual life-course experiences. This approach resists essentialising older adults as inherently fragile and instead situates vulnerability within broader systems of inequality and disruption.

At the same time, this framework recognises older adults as active agents within constrained circumstances. *Resilience* is understood as a dynamic process that emerges through the interaction of individual capacities, social relationships, and available resources (Ungar, 2011). Older adults may demonstrate resilience by maintaining daily routines, sustaining social ties, supporting others, and adapting to changing environments. Resilience may also be on the community level (Eshel et al., 2016). However, from a critical gerontological perspective, as pointed by Donnelly and Torres (2022), such resilience must be interpreted cautiously, as it may reflect not only agency but also the necessity of coping with structural neglect or systemic gaps in support.

Importantly, resilience is neither universal nor evenly distributed. Its expression depends on access to social, material, and institutional resources, as well as the broader political and social context (Zielinski et al., 2025). In war-affected settings, where formal systems of support may be weakened or disrupted, older adults may rely heavily on informal networks, while simultaneously facing heightened exposure to risk and deprivation (Kornadt et al., 2025).

By integrating the person-in-environment perspective with insights from critical gerontology, this framework provides a nuanced lens for analysing older adults' experiences in war-affected contexts. It highlights the interplay between structure and agency, while foregrounding the importance of power, inequality, and social context in shaping both vulnerability and resilience.

For the purpose of our study the concept of «layered vulnerability» (Cwiak, 2023; Luna, 2009; Meijering et al., 2024) is employed as an organising framework, allowing for the examination of how structural conditions (e.g., poverty and social policy gaps), spatial factors (e.g., displacement and place attachment), relational dynamics (e.g., intergenerational tensions and value dissonance), and individual experiences intersect and reinforce one another in war-affected contexts. Existing applications of this concept have been developed primarily within bioethics (Luna, 2009), emergency management (Cwiak, 2023), and pandemic research (Meijering et al., 2024). The present article extends the framework in three directions: it applies it specifically to older adults in armed conflict; it introduces spatial disruption and place attachment as a distinct analytical layer; and it explicitly connects layered vulnerability to social work practice and policy.

A MULTI-LEVEL ANALYSIS OF VULNERABILITY IN WAR-AFFECTED CONTEXTS

The analysis identifies four interrelated dimensions of layered vulnerability—structural, spatial, relational, and individual—through which the experiences of older adults in war-affected contexts are shaped and reproduced. These dimensions do not operate in isolation but interact dynamically, producing cumulative and often mutually reinforcing forms of disadvantage. Importantly, the four layers are not analytically equivalent. The structural layer functions as the primary conditioning environment within which spatial, relational, and individual vulnerability emerges and is sustained. Economic insecurity constrains spatial choices; pension inadequacy shapes the quality of relational support networks; and the absence of institutional provision sets the limits within which individual coping and meaning-making unfold. Recognising this asymmetry is essential for understanding why age-neutral policy responses systematically fail older adults in conflict settings, and why the structural layer must be the primary target of macro-level social work advocacy. The findings also demonstrate that vulnerability and resilience coexist within the same contexts and are co-constructed through the interplay of constraints and resources.

Structural Layer: Institutional Constraints and Systemic Inequalities

At the structural level, older adults in war-affected contexts are particularly exposed to the effects of weakened or disrupted social protection systems. As the outermost and most foundational layer of the framework, structural conditions set the parameters within which spatial choices, relational dynamics, and individual coping unfold. The deterioration of public services, combined with pre-existing socio-economic inequalities (Poliakova & Kohatko, 2023; Tesliuk & Bidak, 2023), significantly limits access to pensions, healthcare, and essential social support. These conditions can be understood through the lens of *structural violence* (Ho, 2007), whereby social, economic, and political systems systematically constrain individuals' ability to meet basic needs and achieve well-being.

In Ukraine, older adults are highly dependent on state pension provision, which constitutes their primary source of income. According to the Pension Fund of Ukraine (2026), approximately 10.2 million individuals receive pensions, with 72.8% receiving pensions based on age and 14.7% due to disability. A significant proportion of pensioners (31%) receive monthly payments ranging between 3,000 and 4,000 UAH, which falls below both the subsistence minimum and the minimum wage. Only about 15% of pensioners receive pensions exceeding 10,000 UAH (approximately 200 USD), highlighting the overall insufficiency of pension levels to ensure economic security in the current context.

These economic constraints are further exacerbated by rising living costs, disruptions to economic activity, and increased demand for basic services. Consequently, reliance on inadequate pension provision significantly limits older adults' capacity to cope with additional stressors and increases their dependence on external support systems.

According to a UN report (United Nations in Ukraine, 2021), internally displaced persons (IDPs), including older adults, face multiple barriers, including limited or no access to justice, restrictions to mobility, limited coverage of social assistance, and insufficient access to essential medicines and personal protective equipment (PPE).

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has further intensified structural vulnerabilities by redirecting state resources toward security and defense priorities, often at the expense of social welfare provisions. Social services in Ukraine are primarily financed through local budgets, which remain often insufficient to meet the growing demand. Even prior to the war, the social work system in Ukraine was characterised by restricted scope of services. In the current context, these limitations have been exacerbated (Kohatko & Poliakova, 2023, resulting in reduced availability and quality of support in a nationwide war-affected environment.

In addition, institutional fragmentation and reduced administrative capacity hinder the delivery of social services, particularly in conflict-affected or occupied areas. As a result, older adults frequently encounter bureaucratic barriers, delays, or limited access to essential support (Kurylo, 2023). These barriers can also be interpreted through the concept of *administrative burden* (Herd & Moynihan, 2018), whereby complex procedures, documentation requirements, and digital interfaces disproportionately disadvantage individuals with fewer resources and lower institutional literacy.

Moreover, many social and health services, including those for internally displaced persons (IDPs), have undergone rapid digitalisation in recent years (Burlay, 2024). While this has expanded access for some users, it has simultaneously created new barriers for older adults who lack digital literacy or access to devices and internet connectivity (Semigina & Karkach, 2022). The shift to online platforms for pension payments, social assistance applications, and medical appointments disproportionately disadvantages older people, many of whom have limited or no prior experience with digital technologies (Kunonga et al., 2021; Sheppard, 2024).

These dynamics significantly constrain access to healthcare, social protection, and essential resources, reinforcing economic insecurity and compounding existing disadvantage. In this sense, the war has produced dynamics similar to *crisis-induced welfare retrenchment* (Perna et al., 2025), whereby social protection systems become constrained and unevenly responsive, reinforcing existing patterns of inequality. Thus, vulnerability is not determined by age alone but emerges from the interaction between ageing and structurally embedded inequalities that are intensified under conditions of war. Older adults, particularly those with low income, disabilities, or limited digital literacy, are disproportionately affected by the digitalisation of services and administrative procedures, which may exclude those unable to navigate complex systems. Consequently, structural vulnerabilities are both produced and amplified by systemic gaps in policy and service delivery.

Spatial Layer: Displacement, Loss of Place, and Environmental Disruption

The spatial dimension of vulnerability is particularly salient in war-affected contexts, where forced displacement, large-scale destruction of housing, and environmental disruption fundamentally reshape older adults' lived experiences. According to the World

Bank (2022), the full-scale war has caused extensive damage to housing and infrastructure across Ukraine, significantly contributing to mass displacement and the erosion of place-based stability.

In Ukraine, the scale of displacement remains substantial and ongoing. As of the end of 2025, approximately 4.62 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) were registered, including 837,400 children. This reflects not only the protracted nature of displacement but also the continued emergence of new displacement waves due to the ongoing war, occupation of additional territories, and deterioration of security conditions in frontline regions. A comparative increase from 3.7 million IDPs at the end of 2023 illustrates the dynamic and cumulative character of spatial vulnerability. Notably, there is a growing proportion of older adults among IDPs, alongside children, indicating the demographic ageing of displaced populations.

Spatial vulnerability is further intensified by the geographical concentration of IDPs in frontline and adjacent regions, as well as in major urban centers, where access to services and housing is often strained (UNICEF, 2025; Zmina, 2026). These spatial patterns reflect both forced mobility and constrained settlement options, which are shaped by structural inequalities and resource availability.

Beyond displacement, spatial vulnerability in Ukraine is also shaped by the systematic destruction of civilian infrastructure, including energy, heating, water, and transportation systems. Recurrent missile and drone attacks on critical infrastructure have resulted in prolonged blackouts, interruptions of centralized heating systems, and disruptions in water supply. These conditions affect populations nationwide, including those residing far from active combat zones, underscoring the fact that vulnerability is not geographically bounded but structurally pervasive across the entire country. Such dynamics can be understood through the lens of *infrastructural violence*, where the deliberate targeting and degradation of essential systems produce uneven and prolonged harm across populations, particularly affecting those with limited adaptive capacity (Otsuki, 2024).

For older adults, these infrastructural disruptions pose particular risks. The absence of electricity, heating, and functioning elevators can significantly compromise physical safety, mobility, and health. These conditions also reflect forms of *slow violence*. Nixon (2011) defines it as gradual, often invisible processes of harm that accumulate over time through environmental and infrastructural degradation. Older persons living in high-rise buildings, for instance, may be effectively confined to their homes during power outages, unable to access essential services or evacuate in emergencies.

Spatial vulnerability is intensified by the cumulative effects of displacement and infrastructural instability. The war-affected contexts fundamentally reshape older adults' lived experiences. *Place attachment*, which is often deeply rooted in later life (Lebrusán & Gómez, 2022), plays a critical role in shaping well-being, identity, and a sense of continuity. The forced separation from home and community can therefore represent not only a physical relocation but also a profound existential disruption.

For older adults, home and community are closely tied to identity, memory, and *ontological security* (Zhang, 2026). Ontological security can be understood as a person's sense of continuity, stability, and trust in the world, which provides a fundamental sense of order and predictability in everyday life. As noted by G. M. Hiscock and colleagues (2001), ontological security is closely linked to an individual's capacity to maintain a stable sense of self and to experience well-being, as it supports feelings of confidence, safety, and existential continuity.

Forced relocation thus entails a loss of familiar environments, social roles, and

everyday routines, contributing to feelings of disorientation and loss. At the same time, remaining in one's home in a damaged or unstable environment may also entail exposure to unsafe living conditions, thereby creating a dilemma between displacement and immobility.

Internally displaced older adults frequently face challenges in adapting to new environments that may lack adequate infrastructure, accessibility, or social services. Temporary accommodation, overcrowded housing, or institutional settings can further undermine autonomy and dignity. In addition, spatial dislocation often entails the loss of proximity to social networks, healthcare providers, and culturally familiar environments, thereby intensifying other dimensions of vulnerability.

These dynamics are particularly salient in war-affected Ukraine, where prolonged displacement intersects with broader structural constraints, including limited housing options, uneven access to services, and ongoing disruptions of community ties. Similar patterns have been documented in other contexts of crisis and disaster. For instance, Santiago-Santiago and others (2025) demonstrate how, following Hurricane María in Puerto Rico, older adults often assume caregiving roles for one another while simultaneously coping with displacement, loss, and disrupted infrastructures. This highlights how spatial disruption reshapes not only living conditions but also social roles and interdependence in later life.

At the same time, spatial adaptation may serve as a site of resilience. Some older adults actively reconstruct a sense of place by creating routines, personal spaces, and local connections in new environments (Kravchenko & Kucher, 2026; Vitman-Schorr et al., 2025). However, such adaptive strategies are highly contingent upon access to resources and the availability of supportive conditions. Where these are lacking, spatial disruption contributes to cumulative disadvantage and social marginalization.

Relational Layer: Disruption of Social Networks and Changing Social Roles

The relational dimension highlights the centrality of social relationships in shaping both vulnerability and resilience. In war-affected contexts, disruptions such as forced displacement, separation from family members, and the breakdown of community structures often lead to the fragmentation of social networks that are critical for emotional, informational, and instrumental support.

In Ukraine, these dynamics are particularly pronounced. Studies indicate that older adults experience heightened levels of social isolation, alienation, and psychological distress under conditions of war (Podorozhnyi et al., 2023). At the same time, humanitarian reports emphasise the growing need to rebuild social connections and provide relational support for isolated older individuals (Kuras & Kovalskyi, 2025). These findings underscore that vulnerability is not only material but also deeply relational, emerging through the disruption of social ties and support systems.

Older adults may experience increased isolation, particularly when traditional family structures are disrupted by migration, military service, or death. In some cases, intergenerational relationships are reconfigured, with older adults assuming caregiving roles for grandchildren or, conversely, becoming dependent on younger family members. These shifting roles may create both opportunities for meaning-making and additional sources of stress.

These processes can be interpreted through the lens of relational vulnerability, which emphasises that well-being is constituted through social ties and interdependence rather than individual autonomy alone. War disrupts these relational configurations, altering patterns of care, reciprocity, and social belonging. At the same time, inequalities in access to

social networks reflect uneven distributions of social capital, further shaping differential exposure to risk and resilience.

Relational tensions may also arise due to value dissonance between generations, differing coping strategies, and unequal access to resources. These tensions can manifest in conflicts over relocation decisions, resource allocation, and caregiving responsibilities. While younger family members may prioritise evacuation and mobility, including emigration, older adults may prefer to remain in familiar environments, reflecting differences in risk perception, attachment to place, and life-course experiences. Such divergences can generate strain within families, complicate caregiving arrangements, and produce feelings of abandonment or isolation among older adults who are left behind.

In the Ukrainian context, these relational dynamics are further shaped by historically embedded value orientations. A significant proportion of older adults, particularly those aged 75 and above, were socialised within a Soviet socio-cultural and ideological framework. This includes orientations toward language use, cultural identity, and geopolitical belonging (Hrushetskyi, 2025; Kotlyar, 2017). As a result, the current war may generate value dissonance within families and communities, as different generations interpret the causes, meanings, and implications of the war in divergent ways (Mishalova et al., 2024). Attitudes toward national identity, language, and geopolitical orientation, particularly in relation to European integration, may further deepen these divides.

Language differences may also shape relational experiences. Limited proficiency in Ukrainian among some older adults can create communication barriers, contribute to feelings of exclusion, and restrict access to information and services, particularly in displacement settings and institutional interactions.

At the same time, family and community relationships remain crucial sources of support. Interdependence between generations—through caregiving, emotional support, and shared resources—can both mitigate and exacerbate vulnerability, depending on the quality of relational dynamics (Staudinger & Kessler, 2008). Informal support systems, including neighbors, extended family, and community groups, often play a critical role in sustaining well-being where formal services are insufficient.

Importantly, the persistence of relational strain and instability in wartime conditions can also be understood in relation to broader patterns of *everyday violence*, where the cumulative pressures of insecurity, scarcity, and disruption shape daily interactions and social relations (Bowes, 2026). In this sense, war does not only produce episodic ruptures but also reconfigures the ordinary fabric of social life, embedding vulnerability within routine relational practices.

Thus, the relational layer of vulnerability reveals how war reshapes social networks, redefines roles and interdependencies, and produces both fragmentation and reconstitution of social ties. Vulnerability emerges not only from the loss of relationships but also from their transformation under conditions of prolonged crisis.

Individual Layer: Agency, Meaning-Making, and Adaptive Capacity

At the individual level, older adults engage in ongoing processes of meaning-making and adaptation in response to adversity. Life-course experiences, accumulated knowledge, and previously developed coping strategies can serve as important resources for navigating uncertainty, loss, and disruption. Empirical studies in the Ukrainian context highlight that resilience is shaped by the interaction of protective and vulnerability factors, including perceived control, social connectedness, and exposure to stressors (Kimhi et al., 2023. Similarly, research points to the central role of family and close relationships in sustaining

psychological resilience during wartime (Kostenko et al., 2024).

From a theoretical perspective, these processes can be understood through the concept of *meaning-making*, whereby individuals interpret and reframe adverse experiences in ways that sustain a sense of coherence and purpose. In war-affected contexts, meaning-making is closely linked to what Tytarenko and colleagues (2024) describe as «life-making landscapes», in which individuals reconstruct their life trajectories under conditions of uncertainty, loss, and rupture. For older adults, such processes are often grounded in biographical continuity, enabling them to integrate current experiences into broader life narratives.

Where structural conditions permit, many older adults demonstrate resilience through the maintenance of daily routines, engagement in supportive roles, and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances — though such adaptive capacity is unevenly distributed and often reflects the necessity of coping in the absence of adequate formal support (Donnelly & Torres, 2022). In the Ukrainian context, this may also include participation in community support, informal volunteering, including digital, or civic engagement, reflecting broader patterns of wartime solidarity and agency (Karkach, 2025; Stepanenko & Stewart, 2025). These forms of engagement highlight that older adults are not merely passive recipients of care but active contributors to social resilience.

However, individual adaptive capacity is closely intertwined with structural, spatial, and relational conditions. From this perspective, resilience should not be understood as an inherent trait but as a *contextually embedded and relational process*, shaped by access to resources, social support, and institutional conditions. In war-affected settings, the capacity for resilience may be significantly constrained by economic insecurity, displacement, infrastructural disruptions, and prolonged exposure to stressors.

Importantly, resilience and vulnerability frequently coexist. Older adults may demonstrate agency, strength, and adaptability while simultaneously experiencing deprivation, insecurity, and marginalization (Buffel & Phillipson, 2024; Kimhi et al., 2023) (). This duality challenges overly individualistic interpretations of resilience and underscores the need to situate individual experiences within broader systems of inequality and constraint.

A key dimension of individual vulnerability in wartime contexts is the phenomenon of *cumulative trauma*. Exposure to multiple traumatic events across the life course shapes how older adults experience and respond to current adversity (Xue et al., 2023). In Ukraine, war-related stressors may reactivate earlier experiences of loss, displacement, or insecurity, including Soviet-era repression, the Chornobyl disaster, and the conflict since 2014, resulting in layered and compounded psychological responses. Such cumulative exposure may increase vulnerability to anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion, while also shaping coping strategies and thresholds of stress tolerance.

At the same time, cumulative life experience may also function as a resource. Prior exposure to hardship can contribute to the development of psychological endurance, self-efficacy, and adaptive flexibility (Drachuk, 2025). Older adults may draw on these biographical resources to navigate uncertainty, tolerate distress, and maintain a sense of continuity under conditions of disruption. In this sense, resilience can be understood not only as recovery from adversity but also as the capacity to endure and adapt over time.

This perspective aligns with insights from life-course theory, which emphasises the temporal and biographical embeddedness of individual experiences. It also resonates with critical gerontological approaches that challenge deficit-oriented representations of ageing and instead foreground agency, diversity, and contextual embeddedness (Buffel &

Phillipson, 2024; Estes et al., 2003). Recognising this complexity is essential for avoiding reductionist interpretations that equate older age with vulnerability alone.

Thus, the individual layer of vulnerability reveals a dynamic interplay between agency and constraint, resilience and fragility, continuity and disruption. Older adults' experiences in war-affected contexts are shaped not only by immediate circumstances but also by accumulated life histories, interpretive processes, and the broader socio-political environment in which adaptation unfolds. Crucially, the resilience demonstrated by older adults in these contexts must not be read as evidence that structural support is unnecessary. From a critical gerontological perspective, adaptive capacity under conditions of structural neglect reflects not only personal strength but also the absence of adequate institutional provision — a distinction that has direct implications for how social work practitioners and policymakers interpret and respond to the situation of older adults in war (Donnelly & Torres, 2022; Estes et al., 2003).

The following **Figure 1** summarizes these interconnected layers of vulnerability and illustrates how their cumulative effects shape the situation of older people in the context of war. It also highlights the dynamic interaction between individual, relational, community, and structural factors, which together determine both risks and protective capacities.

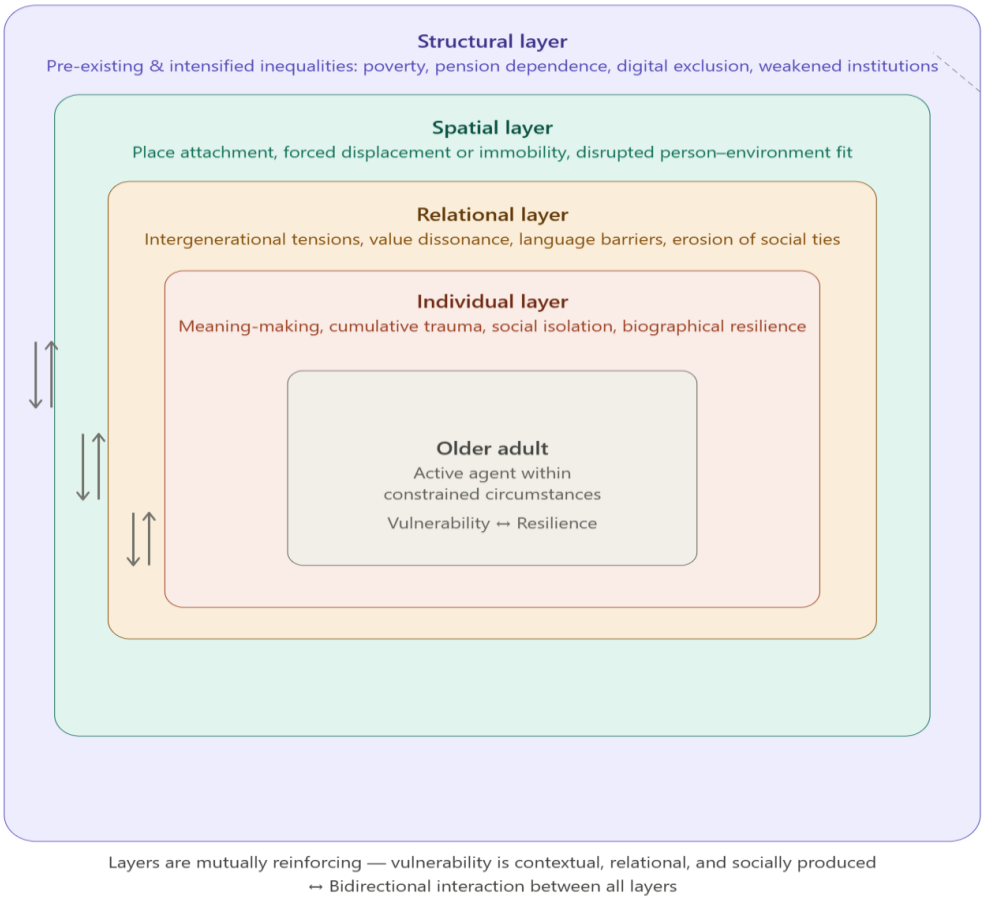


Figure 1. Dimensions of layered vulnerability among older adults in war-affected contexts

MULTI-LEVEL SOCIAL WORK RESPONSES

The findings of this study underscore the need for a multi-level approach to social work practice in war-affected contexts. Addressing the needs of older adults requires moving beyond fragmented or individualised interventions toward systemic responses that recognise the interplay between structural, spatial, relational, and individual dimensions of vulnerability. In this regard, social work must adopt a holistic, person-in-environment perspective that is both trauma-informed and context-sensitive. It should also be implemented with regard to the agency of the older person and anti-oppressive, empowering strategies (Grages & Och, 2024; Wilson & Beresford, 2000).

At the **structural level**, there is a pressing need to strengthen social protection systems and ensure the adequacy and accessibility of income support for older adults. Given the high dependence on state pensions, improving pension adequacy and ensuring timely delivery of payments are critical for reducing economic insecurity. Social workers should also play an advocacy role in addressing systemic barriers, including complex administrative procedures and digital exclusion. Reducing *administrative burden* and ensuring inclusive access to services—particularly for those with limited digital literacy—should be prioritised. Furthermore, given that social services in Ukraine are largely financed through local budgets, policy efforts must focus on strengthening the fiscal capacity of local governments to ensure equitable service provision across regions.

At the **spatial level**, social work responses should address the consequences of displacement, housing instability, and infrastructural disruption. This includes supporting access to safe, adequate, and age-appropriate housing, as well as advocating for energy security and continuity of essential services such as heating, electricity, and water supply. Social workers should be involved in designing and implementing age-sensitive evacuation and relocation strategies, ensuring that older adults are not excluded from mobility options due to health, accessibility, or informational barriers. In addition, community-based outreach models are essential for reaching older individuals who remain in damaged or isolated environments.

At the **relational level**, interventions should focus on strengthening social networks and mitigating isolation. Community-based social work, including the development of peer support groups, neighbourhood initiatives, and intergenerational programmes, can play a key role in rebuilding social ties. Social workers should also be attentive to potential intergenerational tensions and value dissonance within families, facilitating dialogue and mediation where needed. Efforts to maintain and restore social connections are particularly important for older adults who have experienced displacement, loss of family members, or prolonged social isolation.

At the **individual level**, social work practice should incorporate trauma-informed and resilience-oriented approaches that recognise both vulnerability and agency. Interventions should support meaning-making processes, helping older adults to integrate experiences of loss and disruption into their life narratives. At the same time, practitioners must avoid individualising responsibility for coping and instead situate resilience within broader social and structural contexts. Psychosocial support, including counselling, group interventions, and culturally sensitive mental health services, should be accessible and tailored to the specific needs of older adults, including those with cumulative trauma histories.

Importantly, these levels should not be addressed in isolation. Effective social work practice in war-affected contexts requires coordination across sectors and scales, including collaboration with healthcare providers, local authorities, humanitarian organisations, and community actors. Integrated service delivery models that combine material assistance,

psychosocial support, and community engagement are particularly well-suited to addressing complex and layered vulnerabilities.

Finally, the findings highlight the importance of recognising older adults not only as recipients of care but also as active agents and contributors to community resilience. Social work interventions should therefore create opportunities for participation, volunteering, and civic engagement, enabling older adults to maintain a sense of purpose, dignity, and social inclusion even under conditions of prolonged crisis.

Taken together, these implications point to the need for a reconfiguration of social work practice in war-affected contexts—from fragmented service provision toward integrated, multi-level, and rights-based approaches that address both immediate needs and structural inequalities.

DISCUSSIONS

The conceptualisation of layered vulnerability has important implications for social work practice and policy in war-affected contexts (Cwiak, 2023; Luna, 2009; Meijering et al., 2024). It calls for moving beyond age-based assumptions and recognising the diversity of older adults' experiences. Social workers must avoid homogenising older adults as a uniform category and instead engage with the intersecting structural, spatial, relational, and individual dimensions that produce vulnerability in specific contexts (Adekpedjou et al., 2023; Tiilikainen et al., 2025).

The Ukrainian context provides a vivid illustration of the tension between vulnerability and resilience. Recognizing the agency and biographical depth of older adults requires both individual-level interventions and structural reforms that address the systemic conditions producing vulnerability. Importantly, this tension is not unique to Ukraine. Comparative evidence from other conflict and disaster settings supports key dimensions of the layered framework. In the Ethiopian context, Gebeyaw and colleagues (2026) document how structural exclusion and spatial displacement compound psychological distress among older IDPs in ways that closely parallel the Ukrainian findings. Young and colleagues (2022) demonstrate, in the Vietnamese case, how gendered exposure to wartime stressors produces differentiated trajectories of vulnerability and recovery in later life. Santiago-Santiago and others (2025) show how, following Hurricane María in Puerto Rico, spatial disruption and relational reconfiguration among older adults generated both additional burdens and new forms of solidarity. Taken together, these cases suggest that the structural layer operates as a cross-contextual multiplier — a pattern that the layered vulnerability framework is designed to capture and that age-neutral policy responses consistently fail to address. The framework also has limitations that future research should address. Gender is acknowledged in the Conceptual Framework as an intersecting dimension of marginalisation but remains underdeveloped in the analysis. Older women in Ukraine face compounded risks — including higher rates of poverty, greater exposure to isolation due to the predominantly male military deployment, and stronger place attachment that constrains displacement — that deserve dedicated analytical attention. Similarly, disability intersects with age and displacement in ways that the current framework treats only implicitly. Future empirical work, particularly participatory research that centres the voices of older adults themselves, should attend to these intersectional dimensions more systematically.. To synthesise the findings, the multi-level framework of vulnerability, resilience, and social work responses is summarised in **Table 1.**

Table 1: **Multi-Level Vulnerability, Resilience, and Social Work Responses in War-Affected Contexts**

Dimension	Primary Vulnerabilities (Layers)	Resilience and Agency Factors	Implications for Social Work and Policy
Structural	Chronic poverty; subsistence-level pensions; digital exclusion from services	Adaptation to long-term economic scarcity; resourceful management of limited assets	Bridging the digital divide; advocating for pension adequacy; ensuring access to non-digital services
Spatial	Disruption of ontological security; forced displacement or immobility in high-risk areas; infrastructural breakdown	Strong place attachment; maintenance of routines; adaptive use of space	Supporting constrained mobility choices; developing age-friendly shelters; ensuring energy and housing security
Relational	Intergenerational tensions; social isolation; value dissonance; fragmented social networks	Family-based support; informal care networks; community solidarity	Family mediation; intergenerational dialogue; community-based interventions to reduce isolation
Individual	Social isolation; cumulative and reactivated trauma; psychological distress	Biographical depth; crisis-tested self-efficacy; meaning-making capacities	Trauma-informed care; life-review approaches; accessible mental health and psychosocial support

Building on the person-in-environment perspective and ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the implications outlined above can be further conceptualised across micro-, mezzo-, and macro-levels of social work practice. This perspective highlights the need to align interventions not only with different dimensions of vulnerability but also with different levels of social action.

At the **micro level**, social work practice should focus on direct engagement with older individuals, addressing their psychosocial needs, coping strategies, and everyday functioning. This includes trauma-informed care, counselling, and interventions that support meaning-making, emotional regulation, and adaptation to loss and disruption. Particular attention should be given to older adults experiencing cumulative trauma, social isolation, or reduced mobility. Micro-level interventions should also aim to strengthen individual agency while recognising structural constraints.

At the **mezzo level**, the emphasis shifts to families, communities, and local support systems. Social workers play a key role in facilitating social connections, mediating intergenerational tensions, and supporting informal care networks. Community-based interventions—such as peer support groups, outreach programmes, and neighbourhood initiatives—are essential for reducing isolation and rebuilding social cohesion. In the Ukrainian context, mezzo-level practice is particularly important given the strain on formal services and the increasing reliance on community-based and volunteer support.

At the **macro level**, social work involves advocacy, policy development, and systemic interventions aimed at addressing structural inequalities. This includes advocating for adequate pension provision, reducing administrative barriers to accessing services, and ensuring inclusive and accessible social protection systems. Macro-level practice also encompasses efforts to strengthen local governance capacity, promote equitable distribution of resources, and integrate the needs of older adults into national recovery and

reconstruction strategies.

Figure 2 illustrates the integrated conceptual model linking layered vulnerability with micro-, mezzo-, and macro-level social work responses, grounded in a person-in-environment perspective. The model highlights the interaction between structural, spatial, relational, and individual dimensions of vulnerability and the corresponding levels of social work intervention.

Importantly, these levels are interdependent. Effective social work responses require coordination across micro, mezzo, and macro domains, ensuring that individual support is reinforced by community resources and supported by enabling policy frameworks. In war-affected contexts, where vulnerabilities are layered and interconnected, such an integrated approach is essential for addressing both immediate needs and long-term inequalities.

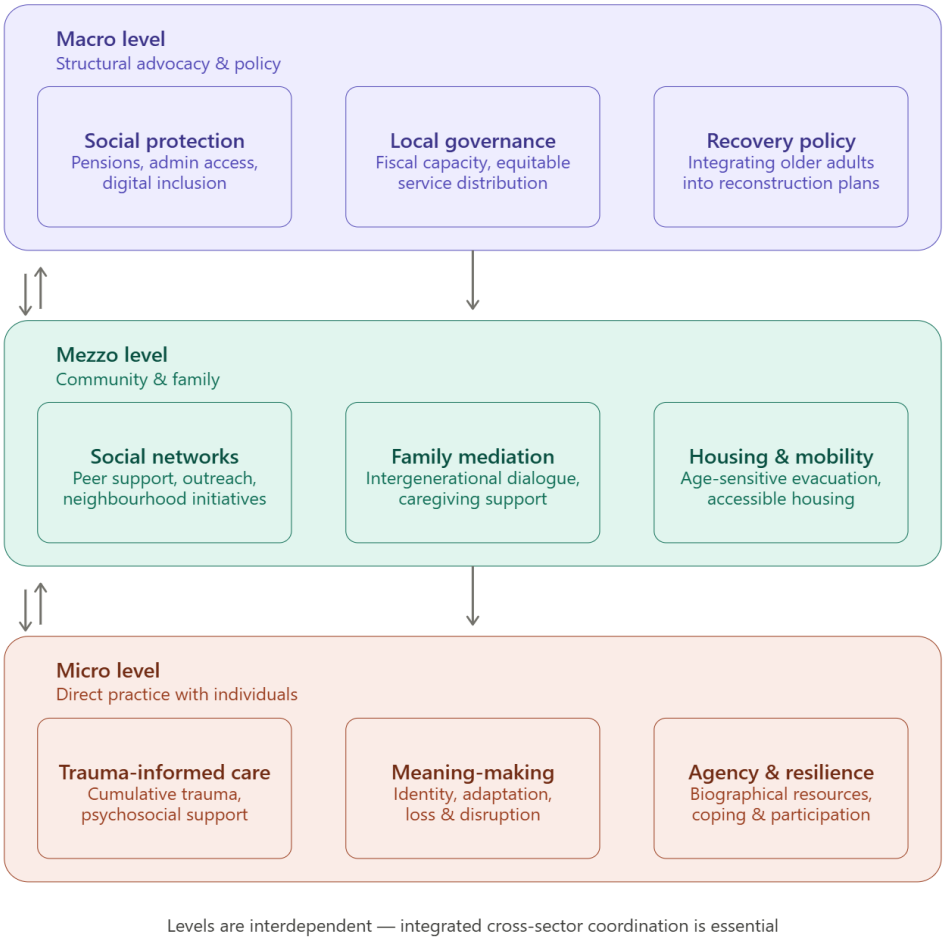


Figure 2. Integrated model of layered vulnerability and multi-level social work responses in war-affected context

Unlike existing applications of layered vulnerability, this framework advances the concept in three important ways. First, it applies the notion of layered vulnerability specifically to older adults in armed conflict settings, thereby extending prior work that

has largely remained within bioethics or generalized vulnerability debates and has not systematically addressed ageing in war-affected contexts. Second, it introduces the spatial dimension, encompassing displacement, place attachment, and infrastructural disruption as a distinct analytical layer. While earlier formulations (e.g., Luna, 2009; Cwiak, 2023) emphasise the multiplicity and interaction of vulnerabilities, they do not explicitly theorise the role of space and environment, which this study demonstrates to be central in contexts of forced mobility and territorial instability. Third, the framework explicitly links layered vulnerability to social work practice and policy, moving beyond descriptive or normative accounts toward an applied, practice-oriented model. By integrating structural, spatial, relational, and individual dimensions with micro-, mezzo-, and macro-level interventions, the proposed model offers a comprehensive lens for both analysing and responding to the complex realities faced by older adults in war-affected societies.

Taken together, these contributions suggest that understanding vulnerability in later life, particularly in contexts of prolonged crisis, requires an approach that is simultaneously multi-dimensional, relational, and practice-oriented. The framework developed in this article not only captures the complexity of older adults' lived experiences but also provides a structured basis for designing integrated social work responses. In doing so, it bridges the gap between conceptual analysis and applied intervention, highlighting the need for coordinated, multi-level strategies that address both immediate needs and the structural conditions that sustain vulnerability over time.

CONCLUSIONS

Older adults in war-affected contexts navigate complex and layered forms of vulnerability shaped by structural inequalities, spatial disruptions, relational transformations, and individual life-course experiences. These dimensions interact dynamically, producing cumulative and context-specific forms of disadvantage that cannot be adequately captured through age-based conceptualisations of vulnerability. In war-affected contexts, the structural layer of vulnerability acts as a multiplier that amplifies spatial, relational, and individual disadvantage, making age-neutral policy responses systematically inadequate for older adults.

At the same time, older adults demonstrate diverse forms of resilience grounded in biographical knowledge, adaptive strategies, and social connectedness. The coexistence of vulnerability and resilience is not paradoxical but reflects the situated and relational nature of human experience in conditions of prolonged crisis. Recognising this duality is essential for avoiding deficit-oriented representations of ageing and for developing more balanced and contextually grounded approaches.

By advancing the concept of layered vulnerability, this article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of ageing in war-affected settings. It highlights the need to move beyond individualised or fragmented interventions toward integrated, multi-level responses that address both immediate needs and structural inequalities. The proposed framework underscores the importance of aligning micro-, mezzo-, and macro-level social work practices within a person-in-environment perspective.

For social work, this implies a dual mandate: to provide direct psychosocial support while simultaneously engaging in advocacy and systemic change. Ensuring accessibility, inclusivity, and responsiveness of social protection systems—particularly

in contexts of displacement, digitalisation, and infrastructural disruption—remains a critical priority.

The Ukrainian context offers an urgent and illustrative case of how war reshapes ageing, vulnerability, and resilience. However, the conceptual insights developed in this article have broader relevance for other conflict-affected and crisis settings. Future research should further explore empirical applications of the layered vulnerability framework, including longitudinal studies that track how structural conditions shape individual and relational adaptation over time, and participatory approaches that centre the voices and lived experiences of older adults. Cross-national comparative research testing the framework in other conflict-affected settings would also contribute to establishing its transferability and refining its dimensions. The field of social work, in particular, stands to benefit from practice-based research that evaluates the effectiveness of integrated, multi-level interventions — and that holds structural reform, not individual resilience, as its primary benchmark for success.

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ЛЮДИ ПОХИЛОГО ВІКУ В УМОВАХ ВІЙНИ: БАГАТОРІВНЕВА ВРАЗЛИВІСТЬ ТА ВІДПОВІДІ СОЦІАЛЬНОЇ РОБОТИ

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Анотація. *У цій статті переосмислюється досвід людей похилого віку в умовах війни крізь призму концепції багаторівневої вразливості. Вона ґрунтується на концептуально-аналітичному підході, спрямованому на узагальнення та критичне осмислення наявної літератури з питань старіння, вразливості, вимушеного переміщення та соціальної роботи в умовах конфлікту.*

Спираючись на підхід «людина в середовищі» та критичну геронтологію, у статті розглядається, як структурні нерівності, просторові порушення, реляційні (міжособистісні) динаміки та індивідуальний життєвий досвід перетинаються та взаємно підсилюють одне одного в умовах збройного конфлікту. На прикладі України як сучасного кейсу показано, як війна загострює вже наявні вразливості, водночас породжуючи нові ризики, пов'язані з переміщенням, руйнуванням інфраструктури та соціальною фрагментацією. Водночас висвітлюється суб'єктність і життєстійкість людей похилого віку, їхня здатність до осмислення досвіду, адаптації та соціального внеску в умовах тривалої кризи.

У статті аргументується відхід від редукціоністських, вікових підходів до вразливості на користь реляційного та контекстно чутливого розуміння, яке визнає як обмеження, так і ресурси на різних рівнях. На основі тематичного узагальнення сучасної літератури виокремлено чотири взаємопов'язані рівні вразливості – структурний, просторовий, реляційний та індивідуальний. У контексті цих рівнів розглянуто їх значення для практики соціальної роботи.

Отримані результати підкреслюють необхідність інтегрованих, багаторівневих та травмоінформованих підходів у соціальній роботі, що поєднують подолання системних нерівностей із підтримкою суб'єктності та участі людей похилого віку. Стаття робить внесок у дослідження старіння в кризових умовах і пропонує концептуальну основу для розвитку більш справедливих і ефективних систем соціального захисту та соціальної роботи в суспільствах, що переживають війну.

Ключові слова: *люди похилого віку, збройний конфлікт, вразливість, вимушене переміщення, соціальна робота, життєстійкість, Україна.*

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