

Unfinished business: Ending discrimination, violence and AIDS among women who use drugs 25 years on

My name is Haylna Korniienko, I am the Advocacy Manager at **Hope and Trust in Ukraine**. We provide legal support to mothers on opioid substitution therapy and conduct research on women's access to sexual and reproductive health services. We are also one of the co-founders of the Ukrainian Network of Women Who Use Drugs and a proud partner of PITCH, the Partnership to Inspire, Transform and Connect the HIV response.

Globally, women make up a third of people who use drugs and one-fifth of people who inject drugs. Yet, 25 years since the landmark Beijing Platform of Action, the health and rights of women who use drugs are still largely unaddressed in drug policies at the national and global level.

Drug use often contradicts the gender roles that society attributes to women, as mothers, as partners and as caretakers. This is especially true in Ukraine - where patriarchal values and religious institutions still hold sway. As a result, women who use drugs face intense stigma and discrimination and high levels of gender-based and other forms of violence. They are also often unable to access family planning and other essential sexual and reproductive health services. Globally, 63% of women who use drugs do not use contraceptives and many experience high levels of unsafe abortion. Women also struggle to access appropriate ante- and post-natal care as well as HIV-testing, antiretroviral treatment and services that prevent vertical HIV transmission. And when they have children, they are at high risk of losing them, because our Family Code declares that "the parental rights can be terminated in the parents are chronic alcoholic or drug addicts".

In Ukraine harm reduction and family planning services that are tailored to the needs of women who use drugs are almost non-existent. Research conducted by my organisation shows that 50% of women were unaware of harm reduction services available to them during pregnancy and 30% had undergone terminations in the belief that it would be impossible for them to give birth to a healthy child.

Gender-based violence is another significant barrier. Globally, one in three women will experience violence during her lifetime, but for women who use drugs this number is often much higher. Without access to safety, healthcare and legal support, women often remain trapped in a cycle of violence, and the impact on their health and that of their children, can be devastating. This constant threat of violence also makes it harder for women to negotiate safer sex or to refuse to share injecting equipment - further increasing their risk of acquiring HIV and other sexually transmitted infections or blood-borne viruses.

The arrival of COVID-19 magnifies the challenges even further. Recent research by UNFPA predicts an additional 15 million cases of gender-based violence and seven million more unintended pregnancies, for every three months the COVID-19 lockdown continues. In Ukraine, we are already concerned that women are facing increased levels of intimate partner violence. At the same time the sudden closure of harm reduction services and increases to police powers makes it harder for women to access to opioid substitution therapy, needle and syringe programmes and other life-saving interventions.

If we are serious about gender equality, we need to commit to equality for the most marginalised women, including women who use drugs too. This means ending AIDS among women who use drugs, stopping violence and discrimination against them, and protecting their safety and their human rights.

Whilst events like this are a start - bringing the impact of punitive drug policies on women's rights and health to the attention of decision-makers – we need to do more.

This includes increasing financial investment in community-led harm reduction and violence prevention programs that are led by women and tailored to women's needs, advocating for the decriminalisation of drug use and sex work, and ending discriminatory laws and policies that prevent women who use drugs from reporting violence, accessing services and exercising their parental rights.

Unless we address these difficult subjects, we will never realise the unfinished promise of the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action.

Achieving this vision within the context of COVID-19 will be even more challenging. That's why Hope and Trust, alongside 175 civil society organisations have signed onto the Frontline AIDS ['Call to Action'](#). This Call to Action asks governments and donors to *sustain* their investment in HIV and TB during the COVID-19 pandemic. It calls on them to provide community organisations with the resources they need to *adapt* their programmes to meet this new challenge and to *protect* and uphold the human rights of marginalised people, including women who use drugs.