

STORY OF CHANGE: UKRAINE

Recognition of Women Who Use Drugs in Ukraine as a Distinct Vulnerable Group

The problem

People Who Use Drugs face a great deal of stigmatization in Ukraine. Contrary to what the Ukraine Government declares¹, drug use is not yet decriminalized. At least 83% of people convicted for drug-related crimes serve sentences for illegal drug possession without intent to sell (art. 309 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine)². Women Who Use Drugs are a particularly marginalized community; their social stigmatization as drug users is reinforced by their gender.

According to a coordinator of the Ukrainian Union of Women Who Use Drugs (VONA), only about 25% of people who use drugs participating in harm reduction programmes in Ukraine are female. There is a resulting common but false belief that women who use drugs practically do not exist in the country. In reality, this figure is a reflection of the discrimination and stigmatization faced by these women. Female drug users likewise face the discriminatory aspects of clause 164 of the Family Code of Ukraine, which states that a person can be deprived of his/her parental rights in case of alcohol or drug addiction. The discriminatory elements of the Family Code together with social stigmatization, including by medical professionals, seriously hamper the access of women who use drugs to harm reduction services, such as Opium Substitution Therapy (OST) and Anti-Retroviral Therapy (ART), and to other medical services. When accessing services, including maternal care, engaging in OST can lead to the deprivation of parental rights by the Social Service or Service on Children Affairs. The pressure and fear of being disclosed and losing their children results in the community of women who use drugs being very closed and facing strong self-stigmatization. Also, within the wider community, the stereotype exists that female partners of male drug users should be clean from drugs, leading to denial and concealment of women who use drugs in the community. Their stigmatization, isolation, and limited access to information about their human rights make women who use drugs and who also experience domestic violence additionally vulnerable.

The change process

In 2017, PITCH partner Hope and Trust conducted a first-time study on barriers to accessing HIV, SRH, and medical services in Ukraine faced by female drug users. The two-stage survey generated important evidence to counter the misconception that women who use drugs are rare. Informed by the study

¹ Statement of the Ukraine Government at the 30th meeting of UN CESCR in Geneva, Switzerland.

² <http://aph.org.ua/en/news/every-11th-convicted-person-in-ukraine-punished-for-the-drugs/>

findings, advocacy demands were formulated, with the intention of addressing changes in the Family Code and the introduction of a gender-sensitive approach to harm reduction programs and OST. In the same year, Hope and Trust started mobilizing communities of women who use drugs. A number of mobilization visits were carried out to harm reduction and OST projects in different regions of Ukraine to assess the availability of potential community leaders representing women who use drugs and engage with them. With the support of PITCH, and in partnership with the Alliance for Public Health (as part of the Global Fund project), Hope and Trust organized a series of training sessions and workshops for women who use drugs under the name "Advocacy School" which covered various subject such as reducing stigma and self-stigma; and included mobilization of the community in different regions, involvement of local activists, and community representation in local governments. In addition, thanks to PITCH and an effective partnership with the International Renaissance Foundation, paralegals were trained to support women who use drugs as part of the "Public Advisors" initiative. This training of the paralegals was funded by the International Renaissance Foundation, while PITCH contributed through the mobilisation of activists and the engagement of external experts as part of this training, including Ukraine's Deputy Minister of Social Policy, Nataliya Fedorovych and Oksana Huz (a legal specialist and lawyer from Ukrainian Women Lawyers Association "JurFem"). Moreover, activists also got the opportunity to participate in trainings and internships which gave them experiences in public speaking and argumentation when dealing with opposition.



In November 2017, during the preparations for the First National Forum of people who use drugs, a group of women who use drugs expressed the need to have a separate space in the Forum in order to discuss their particular needs. As a result, Hope and Trust, in partnership with USAID as part of the "HIV Reform in Action" project organized a pre-forum day called "Voice of a Woman". It was the first

time that such a group of women who use drugs gathered and discussed their needs and the ways to address these needs and set goals. Moreover, in order to be able to voice their own problems and advocate for their own needs, the group of women who use drugs declared the establishment of the first community-based organization of women who use drugs: the Ukrainian Network of Women Who Use Drugs (UNWUD/ VONA). Between 2017 and 2018, Hope and Trust provided technical assistance for the formal registration and institutional development of VONA. The majority of male drug users initially responded to the actions of the women with incomprehension. It took more than a year to sensitize the community of men who use drugs to the need for and purpose of the creation of a separate women's organization.

With the support of PITCH (through Hope and Trust) VONA activists began participating in various relevant events and meetings on behalf of both the women who use drugs and the broader community. They conducted activities with the media to raise the profile of women who use drugs. For instance, VONA was also invited to be a co-organizer of the Women's March on March 8, 2018. Moreover, with PITCH funding, VONA conducted awareness and training activities for medical professionals to address the stigma and discrimination of women who use drugs by health care professionals. In 2018 this involved a number of regional meetings with medical personnel as part of the technical assistance visits, while an extension of the training was also carried out in 2019. Within their districts (Sumy and Kahrkiv Oblast), VONA members got actively engaged in government decision-making spaces, including the local government Coordination Councils on HIV/TB. The participation of the women in these Coordination Councils was in particular an important step in increasing the visibility and voice of the community of women who use drugs. Hope and Trust observed that women's access to OST has improved in districts with VONA members in the local Coordination Councils, inter-alia by the introduction of a quota for women to be enrolled in treatment and by removing barriers for women with children or special conditions (for example, women with TB). With the help of PITCH and the advocacy carried out by Hope and Trust, the number of women receiving OST in five regions in Ukraine (Sumy and Kharkiv, Poltava, Donetsk, Odessa and Chernivtsi) increased significantly. For example in Donetsk region, between May 2017 and December 2020, the number of women receiving OST increased from 53 to 107. Across the five regions, the figure increased from 348 to 510 between 2017 and 2020. Such a significant increase in the number of women receiving OST in Donetsk region was made possible through collaboration between PITCH partners Our Help and Hope and Trust.

Activists representing women who use drugs also lobbied for their participation in Ukraine's National Parliament's Committee on Human rights, National Minorities, and Interethnic Relations' Working Group—responsible for the development of a national policy on reduction of stigma and discrimination of women from vulnerable groups. After finding out that the working group did not consult the community of female drug users and did not consider them to be vulnerable women, Hope and Trust and VONA sent an official letter to the Working Group depicting a detailed description of the rights violations typically experienced by women who use drugs in Ukraine. As a result, they were invited to the working group's meeting in September 2018 where they discussed these rights violations. After this meeting, the Working Group agreed that these problems of stigmatization and discrimination do in fact differ from the issues faced by women living with HIV more generally and went on to recognise the existence of women who use drugs as a separate group with distinct experiences of stigma and discrimination. This also led to the invitation of Hope and Trust's president to give a speech on the rights of women who use drugs in the parliamentary hearing in the *Verkhovna Rada* (Parliament of Ukraine).

On October 10, 2018, the president of Hope and Trust spoke at the Parliament hearings on “Preventing and Countering Discrimination of Women from Vulnerable Social Groups” in front of Members of Parliament. During this parliamentary hearing, a significant outcome for the community of women who use drugs was realized. During this hearing, Deputy Minister of Social Policy Nataliya Fedorovych stated that the rights of women from vulnerable populations must be protected. For the first time during discussion of vulnerable populations, she mentioned the rights of female drug users as a separate group of vulnerable women. Previously, PITCH carried out advocacy in the Ukrainian Parliament’s Human Rights Committee, at which Deputy Minister Fedorovych was present, on the issue of women living with drug dependence, as well as in meetings of the inter-factional MPs association "For Equal Rights". The Deputy Minister's speech on 10 October 2018 was at least partly informed by the PITCH advocacy carried out at these earlier meetings. At the end of the parliamentary hearings, the Ukrainian Parliament recommended to revise article 164 of the country’s Family Code, a discriminatory provision that stigmatizes and discriminates women in vulnerable groups, particularly women who use drugs. Hope and Trust and VONA still have to continue their advocacy works as up to date, no concrete progress has been made yet towards amendments.

Significance

The statement from the Deputy Minister of Social Policy at the parliamentary hearings on Preventing and Countering Discrimination of Women from Vulnerable Social Groups is considered to be a big achievement considering the high level of stigmatization of women who use drugs in Ukraine society. In the Ukrainian Parliament, women who use drugs are usually only mentioned in a negative context. It was the first time women who use drugs were mentioned as a separate group of vulnerable women in a similar space and that a high-level political stakeholder called for the protection of their rights. The statement is seen as a benchmark in the recognition of women who use drugs, which has already contributed to other important achievements in the recognition of the community. In 2020, for instance, women who use drugs were identified as a separate group in the Ukrainian’s government’s Global Fund grant application process for the harm reduction program funding periods to follow, which indicated the recognition of the community by the government.

Moreover, as a result of the creation of the women who use drugs movement in Ukraine and the inherent empowerment of the movement’s activists, the advocacy by female drug users has gained a great deal of strength in the past few years. A powerful example of this is the shadow report that VONA, together with the Ukrainian Network of People Who Use Drugs and the European Harm Reduction Association, produced and submitted to the United Nations Committee on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights (CESCR) in April 2019. At the 30th meeting of UN CESCR in Geneva, Switzerland (March 6, 2020), an activist from VONA presented the shadow report in an emotional speech about discrimination and stigmatization of people who use drugs in Ukraine. Subsequently, the UN Committee gave clear recommendations to the Ukrainian government for the development and implementation of a policy on people who use drugs which would address decriminalization, applying a human rights-based approach and making efforts to reduce stigma and discrimination against drug users.

“My own life story is an easy story to show all the drawback and pitfalls of our Ukrainian drug policy against people who use drugs. I was imprisoned for having seven tabs of ephedrine with me, the dose which is quite small even for single consumption, let alone distribution. My speech was only my life story, but it touched the audience considerably—they were simply astonished at the reality in contrast to the situation reported in the official report.” (VONA activist on her speech at the meeting of UN CESCR)

Lessons learned

The institutionalization of this movement has been crucial to increasing the visibility and strengthening the voice of women who use drugs. Being an official body representing this community has enabled the participation of women who use drugs in high-level meetings and roundtables, including in parliamentary hearings. To do this, overcoming self-stigma has also been essential. Following the empowerment and mobilization of women who use drugs, self-stigma decreased, which allowed a group of female drug users to tell their stories—an important strategy in VONA’s advocacy work. Support from established organizations, such as Hope and Trust and other similar organizations like PITCH partners Convictus Ukraine, Meridian, and Our Help, has also been an important factor contributing to the development of the first organization advocating for women who use drugs.

“The more we unite, the more we speak, the more partnerships we have, the louder our voice is and the more chance to make changes.” (Local VONA coordinator)

The story was prepared as part of the End Term Evaluation of the PITCH Programme in 2020, conducted by ResultsinHealth team: Aryanti Radyowijati, Conny Hoitink, Zaïre van Arkel, Maurizia Mezza, Lingga Tri Utama, and Mariia Samko (national consultant).

