

Ukraine joins other countries in "Women Against Violence" campaign Community

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Countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia that are part of the Eurasian Harm Reduction Network (EHRN) and their partners will be holding active measures against gender-based violence in the campaign "Women Against Violence";.

By Olena K. Davis* From November 25, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, through December 10, International Human Rights Day, activists around the globe are conducting activities that increase awareness about eradicating violence. During this period if you see a person wearing an orange-colored scarf or other garment, she/he is likely to be a part of this campaign aimed at combating violence against women.

For 16 days countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia that are part of the Eurasian Harm Reduction Network (EHRN) and their partners will be holding active measures against gender-based violence in the campaign "Women Against Violence". During this period positive actions will include measures to increase public awareness about violence by law enforcement personnel against women who use drugs. There will be discussions of possible solutions and opportunities for cooperation to combat this phenomenon. Campaigners in Georgia, Kazakhstan, Moldova and Ukraine will hold round tables with law enforcement officials and other stakeholders. During the roundtable campaign partners of "WOMEN AGAINST VIOLENCE" will present cases of police violence against women who use drugs collected in their countries through a specially designed [online platform](#).

As a country that aspires to become a member of the European Union, Ukraine bears a special responsibility to make progress on the stated goals and lead the charge for the elimination of violence against women and girls. Progress includes not only training and awareness among police personnel. In addition, there must be strong political support from the highest authorities and leaders at all levels. In spite of some progress, we know there is still violence against women who use drugs. These women are subject [\[D1\]](#) not only to violence by spouses and partners; there is evidence the problems are exacerbated by violence at the hands of law enforcement. To make matters even worse, we have evidence that violence, especially on the part of law enforcement, increases the spread of HIV.

Finally, we have a strong evidence base that police officers commit acts of violence against women drug users, but the mechanisms for punishment of these criminal acts do not work. We will only make progress by forcing these issues out into the open and strengthening the awareness of politicians, governments and society to understand the extent and seriousness of the problems. Only by acknowledgement of the realities will it be possible to help community stakeholders, including representatives of law enforcement agencies, to adopt commitments to combat this shameful phenomenon. One of our goals is, as a result of these discussions, to sign a memorandum of cooperation with law enforcement agencies and other stakeholders to address the problem. Yulia Dorokhova, a lawyer in grassroots HIV-service organization "Vertical" who advocates rights of women drug-users said: "There are widespread cases of forced cooperation, fabrication of criminal cases and extortion that should be accounted as violence. In many countries -

and Ukraine is one of them - where drug use is punishable by law, women who use drugs do not understand that they were violated, because, violence is the norm in their life. The lack of information and knowledge, self- stigmatization connected with criminalization of drug distribution and fear of being punished make them absolutely helpless and defenseless against police violence. Moreover, we are faced with a lack of training for police personnel on European best practices and effective mechanisms of punishment in case of police violence towards women who use drugs. We have to work hard to change this situation.” We ask all Ukrainians and international constituencies to join us in our efforts through this special period and throughout the year to eliminate "WOMEN AGAINST VIOLENCE" as Ukraine moves closer to a European future.

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*Olena K. Davis is chair of the Coalition of HIV-service Organizations, Ukraine’s largest grassroots HIV organization.