

## IMPACT STORY



# ROMA WOMEN CONTRIBUTE TO MAKING CITIES SAFER IN EASTERN UKRAINE

Photo: UN Women/Vitaliy Shevelev

“Roma women and girls often don’t have equal opportunities to meaningfully participate in the social, economic and public life of their community,” said Christina Bilous, a Roma civic activist and leader of Sumnakuno Petalo, a non-governmental organisation that advocates for the rights of Roma women and girls near the frontline of the conflict-affected Donetsk region of Eastern Ukraine. “We need to raise awareness on the issues faced by Roma women and girls and involve public authorities, law enforcement and health experts in designing and implementing locally owned solutions.”

The armed conflict and subsequent profound security, social, economic, and political crises have deepened gender inequalities in Eastern Ukraine, creating new protection challenges and undermining the realization of women’s rights. Gender-specific aspects of particular concern include but are not limited to entrenched gender stereotypes and discrimination as well as gender-based violence against women and girls, which represent obstacles to the meaningful participation of women in decision-making processes pertaining to community security, recovery, local development, service delivery, reconciliation, and peacebuilding. “To address the issues faced by Roma women and girls in our community you need to include more Roma women in local decision-making processes, giving them

**Photo above:** Christina Bilous is a Roma activist, leader of the UN Women self-help group from Toretsk and head of the NGO Sumnakuno Petalo.



## PARTNERS FOR CHANGE

In Ukraine, UN Women’s **Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces for Women and Girls Global Initiative** is implemented by the **Ukrainian Foundation of Public Health** under the framework of the UN Women project “**EU Support to the East of Ukraine: Recovery, Peacebuilding and Governance**,” which is part of the **United Nations Recovery and Peacebuilding Programme** (UN RPP).

The UN RPP is implemented by **UNDP, UN Women, UNFPA and FAO**, and supported by the **European Union, the European Investment Bank, the US Embassy in Ukraine**, and the governments of **Canada, Denmark, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland** and the **United Kingdom**.

UN Women, with Ukraine’s **Ministry of Internal Affairs** and the **National Police**, conducted workshops for justice sector actors to ensure the effective implementation of gender-based violence legislation and developed guidelines for police officers operating in the project’s target communities. **4,560** women from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions increased their awareness on the rights of survivors of violence.

a seat at the table where the major local development decisions are taken,” noted Bilous.

In 2019, with support from UN Women, Bilous established a self-help group to actively contribute to the social inclusion of the Roma people in her community. In 2020, she implemented a literacy programme for Roma women and men to learn the Ukrainian alphabet and basic arithmetic as part of her effort to ensure their access to services. In addition, Bilous and her group joined other women at the grassroots level in advocating for the adoption of the UN Women Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces for Women and Girls programme, which is aimed at preventing and combating sexual harassment and other forms of violence against women and girls in public spaces. As a result, Toretsk is now one of the four cities in Ukraine to have adopted the programme, which is implemented under the United Nations Recovery and Peacebuilding Programme in partnership with UN Women, UNDP, UNFPA and FAO.

Further, the adoption of the Safe Cities programme in Toretsk has catalyzed partnership-building between local authorities, police and civil society, including Roma community-based organisations, with the aim of improving public infrastructure to make it safe for women and girls. “UN Women facilitated cooperation between Roma women and the administration of the city of Toretsk to prevent and combat sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence against women and girls in public spaces,” said Erika Kvapilova, UN Women Representative in Ukraine. “Now, seven additional conflict-affected communities in Eastern Ukraine are developing similar programmes. The inclusion and meaningful participation of women in designing policies and budgets that contribute to the elimination of gender-based violence in public spaces can lead to transformative changes for the whole community.”

Recently, a Roma NGO that received a grant through the Safe Cities programme partnered with Toretsk public authorities to co-create a safe public space by installing video surveillance cameras and street lighting in the most insecure streets identified in the Safety Audit conducted by UN Women and the Ukrainian Foundation of Public Health.

“Bias and negative stereotypes about the Roma are deeply rooted in Ukrainian society,” explained Bilous. “My main goal is to dismantle these stereotypes and combat social exclusion, discrimination, and violence against the Roma; We should make the contributions of Roma women visible and ensure that they are recognized as agents of change in their communities.”






## ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN UKRAINE

In Ukraine, there is a lack of official, comprehensive, and accurate data available on the Roma population and their socio-economic situation. Despite this, it is known as a fact that the majority of Roma women across Ukraine face intersecting forms of discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, and social status, which deepens their vulnerability and increases their risk of violence.

Through the Safe Cities Global Initiative, in 2019 UN Women supported the [Multi-Site Scoping Study on Sexual Harassment and other forms of Sexual Violence against Women and Girls in Public Spaces in Eastern Ukraine](#) as part of ongoing work to fill data gaps in the country. The study found that **53%** of women respondents in Toretsk have experienced sexual harassment in public spaces. Of those women who experienced sexual violence, nearly **45%** received unwelcome sexual remarks in public spaces and about **20%** experienced stalking. The vast majority of respondents also stated that they were afraid to go out at night given military actions and shootings that take place in nearby settlements.

UN Women actively supports community mobilization and awareness-raising campaigns targeting women and girls and men and boys in Ukraine, the most effective measures for preventing and responding to sexual harassment and violence against women and girls in public spaces according to the study, alongside efficient investigations and perpetrator accountability.

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