



**Believing in a Better Future**

# Believing in a Better Future: Personal Stories of Gender Based Violence Survivors

Copyright © UNFPA 2017

Journalist/Author  
Olha Omelianchuk

Photo credits  
Maks Levin

Note  
Names changed to protect privacy.  
Photos depict the work of UNFPA  
mobile teams and do not necessarily  
illustrate the heroes of stories.

## Acknowledgements

Sincere gratitude goes to UNFPA colleagues in the Country Office for their inputs provided and information shared, with particular appreciation for UNFPA mobile team workers and UNFPA partners in Ukraine for assisting, advising and facilitating interviews with the survivors of gender-based violence portrayed in this publication.

## Disclaimer

This publication was supported by United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Department for International Development (DFID UK) and Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration - U.S. Department of State. The material in the publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNFPA.



# Contents

01. Making a fresh start	4
02. Making their way through life together	8
03. Grateful to be saved	10
04. A man's tears	12
05. We see an increasing number of applications by women who are only able totell us about violence against them	14
06. Fleeng families	18
07. Happy to be together	20
08. Finding peace in a monastery	24
09. One pain shared by two	26
10. Beliving in a better future	30
11. Between AIDS and life	32

# 01.

This is the story of a 17-year-old victim of violence, who together with her father escaped from shelling, gave birth to her child in a strange city and was able to start her life again from scratch.

## MAKING A FRESH START



**'We first saw each other in the maternity hospital. Olga was sitting next to the window and staring into space. The 17-year-old was cuddling her big belly. She was in the last month of her pregnancy and did not know whether to go back home to her aggressive husband or not,' – the psychologist Olga Shapoval says.**

For the last year and a half, she has been helping girls like her namesake Olga (her name has been changed to retain her anonymity). Shapoval works with victims of violence in the UNFPA mobile team providing psychological support. Some of her clients are internally displaced persons fleeing from the war in the territories under the control of the so-called 'DPR' and 'LPR'.

## "RESCUER"

**'Olga arrived in Izium with her father. The man decided to take his daughter away from the Donetsk region when the situation at the front line began to escalate. First, they camped on the doorsteps of social centers, until they were offered shelter by local volunteers' – Shapoval continues.**

After a while, living without explosions and bullets whistling around them, both father and daughter began to return to a normal life. She entered one of the colleges in Izium, and found friends. Her father, meanwhile, started to work, but, unfortunately, the little family's happiness was short-lived.

'The girl's father was diagnosed with an open form of tuberculosis. Doctors could not determine whether he had contracted the disease on the territory outside the control of the Government of Ukraine, or in Izium. And this, in fact, no longer mattered – he was sent to a TB clinic. Olga went along with her father', – Shapoval says.

Living in the TB clinic under the constant threat of catching the deadly disease was extremely difficult for Olga. Her father was her only relative in the Kharkiv region, and her friends, despite all their efforts, could not fully support her.

The only one who was always there for her, was Olga's boyfriend. He was a local, and older than her. They met through mutual friends. The pair dated for a while, then began living together.

# AT THE AGE OF 17, EXPERIENCED SEVERAL KINDS OF VIOLENCE ALL AT ONCE

'Olga saw her partner as her champion – a brave, strong man who was able to resolve any problem. When she moved in with him, she was only 16 years old. One year later, she became pregnant and, at the age of 17, fell victim to several kinds of violence at once', the psychologist continues.

According to the girl, his care and tenderness turned into beatings, rape and constant psychological abuse. Moreover, Olga was completely financially dependent on her abuser: everything from a piece of bread to her personal hygiene, was provided to her by him.



## THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

Victims of sexual violence and abuse, according to experienced psychologists, are easy to tell apart from other victims. Women who have once been raped, have a particular posture and mannerisms. The effects of sexual abuse are not overtly visible, but once the victim is faced with a psychologist, they become so.

‘For a long time Olga did not realize that she, among other things, had been a victim of sexual abuse. She said that her partner was beating her, had threatened to throw her out in the street if she disobeyed him but she was silent about the rape. Eventually she was able to describe in detail all the horror she had been put through. It transpired that her partner occasionally took her by force, and did not consider his actions to be sexual abuse because he believed that in a marriage the husband’s needs must be met.’, Shapoval stated.

The thin, pale, and sheepish girl was discovered by a team of psychologists at the maternity hospital in Iziium. As Olga was minor at the time of giving birth, and the status of her father as her guardian needed to be substantiated, she was already in the focus of various social services. The mobile team joined them in order to provide Olga with more thorough psychological help.

‘Gently, slowly and without any pressure we learned almost everything about what the girl had experienced. Due to her young age and the impending birth of her child, Olga was able to fairly quickly overcome her pain. In her case, our legal advice and support played an important role, we helped her obtain the status of an internally displaced person (IDP) and to receive full documentation for her child.

---

**Now Olga plans to resume her studies, take care of her child, and promises to never become dependent on a man again. Her path towards full recovery will include many hours of psychological counselling, but considering all she has endured, it will be a piece of cake for her’, Shapoval concludes.**

---

\* Name changed to protect privacy  
The work of UNFPA mobile teams is being implemented by Health Right Foundation in Ukraine within the UNFPA humanitarian project "Response to acute humanitarian needs of the most vulnerable women and adolescent girls affected by armed conflict in eastern Ukraine. Phase II: Bridging

humanitarian interventions with response to lingering consequences of the crisis". The project is being implemented thanks to generosity of UNFPA donors: US Government (via BPRM), UK Government (via DFID), Die Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ),UNAIDS (via UBRAF).

## 02.

This is a story of a family of displaced persons who fled the non-government controlled area. Despite the problems they faced while trying to return to a peaceful life, they were still able to overcome all their difficulties for the sake of the future of their three children.




# MAKING THEIR WAY THROUGH LIFE TOGETHER

‘One day, Irina (her name has been changed for security reasons) called one of our psychologists. In a trembling voice and through tears, she shared that her husband had beaten her. We asked her for their home address, and immediately went there’, - says Yelizaveta Krasnoyarska, a UN Population Fund’s mobile psychological team member and psychologist.

Over the past year and a half, Olena and other members of the mobile team have been helping displaced persons, survivors of violence, and people who, due to other circumstances, are in a state of uncertainty. After the start of the active hostilities, many internally displaced persons (IDP) moved to peaceful cities in the Donbas region: yet, it is difficult to find accommodation, and thousands of people are forced to stand in line at employment centers.

‘Despite the efforts of the city authorities and residents, not all IDPs can be promptly accommodated. So when we arrived at her home, we saw that Irina, her husband, and their three children of two, eight and thirteen years of age were living in awful conditions. They were unable to pay for rental accommodation, so they moved into a house that was in such a poor state of repair that they were allowed to live there free of charge’, - Krasnoyarska continues.





Irina said that before the war, her husband worked as a miner, but was forced to give up work once the conflict erupted. As the armed hostilities began, relationships within the large family became more and more strained: the husband became aggressive, he started drinking, and began beating the wife. In addition, the husband himself was a survivor of violence on the territory not controlled by the government of Ukraine: unknown armed men had imprisoned him in a cellar and committed acts of violence against him. But the worst was yet to come for the family after their departure: their return to a peaceful life was much more difficult than they had ever imagined.

'The woman was exhausted and frightened.

## WORDS OF THANKS

Irina assures us that she was able to overcome her problems by relying on her determination and perseverance. At one point, after her initial interaction with the mobile team, the woman confronted her husband: 'If you want us to stay together, you have to stop drinking, look for a job, and stop being abusive.'

According to the woman, those words greatly affected her husband. He realized that they would not be able to return home soon, so it was necessary for him to get his act together and start over with a clean slate.

She thought she was ready for anything, but even she did not think that while living in a new, peaceful home, her husband's past would incite a war within his mind and a war at home. We explained to her that such aggressive behavior was a manifestation of severe stress. Irina then agreed to work with a psychologist", - Krasnoyarska states.

After that, according to the psychologist, the mobile team faced a whole set of new problems. In addition to the psychological support, the family needed financial and legal assistance because for some time, the large family had not received any help from the state due to document-related issues.

After the comprehensive psychotherapy sessions began, Irina's husband registered at an employment center, cut down on his drinking, and stopped abusing his wife.

'In addition, we found volunteers from international and local organizations who helped the family with basic essentials and food. Our lawyers advised Irina and her husband regarding their paperwork requesting state financial aid. With our help, the kids found recreational opportunities at a children's camp.

---

And now that all payments are settled, the large family has proceeded with renovating their home», - the psychologist summed up.

---

\* Name changed to protect privacy

The work of UNFPA mobile teams is being implemented by Health Right Foundation in Ukraine within the UNFPA humanitarian project "Response to acute humanitarian needs of the most vulnerable women and adolescent girls affected by armed conflict in eastern Ukraine. Phase II: Bridging

humanitarian interventions with response to lingering consequences of the crisis". The project is being implemented thanks to generosity of UNFPA donors: US Government (via BPRM), UK Government (via DFID), Die Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), UNAIDS (via UBRAF).

# 03.

This is the story of Karina, who ran away from her abusive husband during the terrible shelling of Avdiyivka, and who is now living in an abandoned children's camp. She is glad that fate has given her a chance to change her life.



## GRATEFUL TO BE SAVED

A few months ago, the terrible shelling of Avdiyivka, in the Donetsk Oblast, shook all of Ukraine. It only took a couple days for caring Ukrainians to collect hundreds of thousands of tons of humanitarian aid for those who had fled from bombs and bullets. Perhaps the greatest help for the frontline city came from the peaceful settlements situated in the in the conflict affected area. The people fled from Avdiyivka to Sloviansk, Kostiantynivka, Svyatohirsk, Kramatorsk, Dzerzhinsk, Soledar, and other cities. For three days nonstop, buses, arranged by volunteers, international organizations, and the Ministry of Defense, evacuated internally displaced people.

Karina sat in one of these rescue buses. She held her one-and-a-half year old son tightly, and unlike the other evacuees, she was glad to finally be able to get on with her life.

'We did not expect that the flow of evacuated people would be so large. We stood at the side of the road and welcomed the evacuees from Avdiyivka; we helped them carry their belongings, fed and warmed them up, and talked to them. Karina and her little son were accommodated in a former children's camp situated in one of the peaceful cities of the Donbass,' said Olena Borodayeva, a UN Population Fund's psychological team member and psychologist.

## GREAT SACRIFICES

Karina can talk for hours about what it is like to be a refugee and her desire to live. Olena says that unlike many other displaced persons, Karina did not just accept her situation. But, she was also sincerely grateful to have the opportunity to start her life anew. Despite her young age, Karina had been a victim of domestic violence for many years: her husband would beat her until she fainted, broke her arm, and humiliated her in front of her small child. The girl's severe emotional instability is the result of this lasting abuse.

«I remember well the moment when I helped Karina get off the bus. She was carrying her little son, so I picked up some bags with necessities. We walked towards the camp in silence: Karina was obviously stressed, but happy at the same time. "It's a good thing that we were able to escape from the war. It was hell in Avdiyivka," the girl told me. A total of more than 40 people were accommodated in the camp: some shared common rooms, some had a separate area. Karina and her eighteen-month-old son got a separate room. "They are still there," Borodayeva continues.

Olena is a child psychologist by profession, so she began to work directly in the camp with adults and children evacuated from Avdiyivka. Karina's eighteen-month-old son also became her little client: because of the parents' fights, the boy, who had previously known more than a dozen words, had stopped talking altogether. Fear and anxiety had robbed the boy of his voice: no sounds came out of his mouth, even when he was in pain.

"Karina says that her husband repeatedly beat her in front of her son. The heavy artillery and tank salvos terrified the little boy, and he stopped talking after witnessing his parents fight. While being on the front line, Karina's husband began to drink much more. "The girl is convinced that if she had not left Avdiyivka, she might have even been killed", the psychologist emphasizes.

## STILL STRONG

A couple of weeks after the evacuation, Karina became fully accustomed to living in the camp. As of now, she is not officially divorced from her abusive husband, but she does not communicate with him. She was impressed by the stories of other evacuees, so she firmly decided: "I am young and still strong. I have to raise my child and carry on living".

Despite some inconveniences, life in the camp is fully organized: there is hot water, electricity, a space for cooking, warm beds and, above all, the support of people who are also in a state of uncertainty.

Psychologist Olena Borodayeva says that Karina and her little son are already fully prepared to go back to a normal life.

"We practiced sessions of group and individual therapy, and relieved any post-traumatic stress disorder. Of course, the fear of being humiliated again is not so easy to conquer, but Karina is eager to live a full life. The little boy has also begun to recover: he is still unable to say all the words he previously learned, but the sounds are already starting to come out of his mouth. We consider her and her son's success stories to be our shared victory. When her kid grows up, we will help Karina find a job. Today we still provide humanitarian and psychological aid to this family," Borodayeva concluded.



# 04.

In frontline cities within the conflict-affected area, there is a growing number of men asking for psychological help. Unlike women, it is socially more difficult for them to accept that they are survivors of violence, but their stories are no less dramatic.



"They come in looking disheveled, with a blank stare and trembling hands. It is true that men seldom ask for help compared to women, but that does not mean they deserve any less attention; due to the undeclared war, more and more men are becoming survivors of violence," says Maryna Kononenko.

For the past year and a half, Maryna has been working in her native Kostiantynivka as a member of the UN Population Fund's psychological assistance mobile team. Maryna has plenty of stories about how people's lives have been ruined in the conflict-affected area. She remembers her clients' stories, but she prefers not to disclose their names to retain their confidentiality.

**'There is a permanent psychological support group for women, but it is even more difficult for men because there is no separate group for them. They can only have individual sessions with a psychologist', - Kononenko continues.**

## A MAN'S TEARS

**Men are also survivors of violence: 7 percent of the mobile team's cases involve such men. The following story of a young displaced man is truly heartbreaking. Right after the beginning of military operations in the east, he left his family to defend Ukraine, while they chose to live in the "Luhansk People's Republic ("LPR").**

## HAVING THE NERVE TO ACCEPT

'Coming by yourself to a mobile team for psychological assistance is already a big step to take. It is one thing for displaced women to learn about our work via word of mouth or through social centers, but it is absolutely something else when a hefty man hesitates for five minutes or so before finally conceding in a barely audible voice that: "I need help too."

I cannot say that a lot of men turn to us these days, but there are still some. Usually, they ask for help finding something in the city, for example, a job or accommodation. Only a few of them agree to work with a psychologist, and almost none of them ever immediately accept that what they need above all else is psychological rehabilitation.

This happened to a 40-year-old man who had to leave his native Luhansk. He was not ready to communicate right away - first, he asked about the procedure for a military man to obtain a plot of land. Then, slowly, he began to tell his story.

**It turned out that the undeclared war had shattered his family: he had volunteered for the army in the conflict-affected area but his wife had taken the side of the "Luhansk People's Republic ("LPR").**

They tried to keep in touch for a while, but our client was subjected to enormous psychological pressure: he was called a traitor to his family and a mercenary.

Some military battalions are based in my native frontline city of Kostiantynivka. Sometimes, it seems that there are more people in uniforms than civilians on the streets. Trenches and bunkers are situated a little further outside the city; the undeclared war is closing in. Almost every unit of the army includes internally displaced persons, and when they ask for help, we discover that they have a variety of problems. The man in question here is not an exception to this norm.

After demobilization, as well as psychological pressure from his wife, who stayed in the territory controlled by the "LPR", the former soldier decided to stay in Kostiantynivka. Later, he found a woman he fell in love with and they began living together. At that time, he was already showing signs of post-traumatic stress disorder: irritability, frequent mood swings, aggressiveness, and depression. That being said, he showed much promise because of his readiness to accept the fact that he needed help.

We provided him with psychological and legal assistance. Because of his individual sessions with a psychologist, the man's aggression disappeared and was replaced by optimism and a thirst for life.

We never exert pressure on survivors of violence, we provide them with individual assistance tailored to the client's specific situation, their willingness to cooperate, and the presence of factors that improve or aggravate their psycho-emotional state.

In general, more than half of our clients return to us for a second and third time after their first visit. Most of them are internally displaced persons, and Kostiantynivka residents are a minority in this group.'

# 05.

The coordinator of the Kharkiv mobile team for assistance to survivors of violence, Svitlana Tavantseva, dwells on the abuse of internally displaced persons and the problems of adaptation in compact settlements.

## WE SEE AN INCREASING NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS BY WOMEN WHO ARE ONLY ABLE TO TELL US ABOUT VIOLENCE AGAINST THEM

I am running up the stairs of a large gray building at Freedom Square in Kharkiv. The decrepit elevator is out of order - regardless of their age; people here hustle up and down the stairs just as I do.

The psychologists of two UNFPA mobile teams working under the Kharkiv City Center of Social Services for Children and Youth 'Dovira (Trust)' are stationed on the sixth floor in a large gray building.

In particular, they offer assistance to survivors of gender-based violence from among the internally displaced persons.

In a spacious room with large windows, round tables, and a creaky floor, I met the coordinator of one of the mobile teams. For the past 16 years, Svitlana Tavantseva has been employed as a psychologist; she has been working with the mobile teams ever since they were formed in November 1, 2015.



"Previously, I thought I had seen almost everything already. However, working with internally displaced persons has changed my mind. People who flee from war who are often survivors of violence, are a very unique and different category of clients. If you don't believe me, just look into their eyes," Svitlana said, as I started asking her questions.

#### How do mobile teams function?

– At the moment, we have two teams in Kharkiv. Each one consists of two psychologists and a social worker. There is also a specially trained driver. Overall, all our specialists are highly qualified and have been specially trained for this work.

The work consists of scheduled and emergency visits. Scheduled visits, for example, are when we go to places that are either a compact settlement of IDPs, or a modular camp where a lot of people live whom we have been helping for a long time. There are also planned trips to a region or city - essentially any place where people live, those of whom for various reasons are in difficult situations.

Emergency calls are carried out, for example, when we are approached by social workers from hospitals, or victims of violence who report instances of abuse and request immediate intervention. Sometimes in cases of emergency, we have to also call the National Police; as such, aggressors are not always pleased about psychologists who intervene.

I HAVE SEEN AND HEARD A LOT OF STORIES, AND ALMOST ALL OF THEM, UNFORTUNATELY, ARE VERY FRUSTRATING.

Most of our requests come from calls to our hotline. Now and then, we see a woman in public needing help, but she will not let anyone come near her, and instead just watches the psychologists working with others. Then, as time passes, she may call the hotline and says, "I want to share with you how I was beaten and raped. Please help me."

**How do people who need help learn about mobile teams?**

– People receive information from volunteers, social workers, and from partner non-governmental and municipal organizations. We also leave special cards with contact information for many clients. We are well-known at hospitals and social centers. The most efficient methods of advertising when people exchange information directly through social media, public transportation, and word-of-mouth.

**Can you please remember your first emergency callout? What was situation like?**

– During our first emergency callout, assistance was provided to the husband rather than the wife.

In general, among immigrants, there are multiple cases where men are the survivors of violence. Yes, their stories are less frequent than that of women, but they still exist.

And the situation during the first callout was as follows: we were called by a woman who reported that her husband was abusing her. When we arrived at their home, we discovered that, in fact, it was the husband who was the victim of violence, not the wife. The woman had a penchant for alcohol, neglected household chores, and did not properly take care of her children. This was the source of constant disagreement within the family.







**How much violence is there against IDPs? How many people seek help each month?**

– Kharkiv has the number of applications reached over a hundred per month. The highest number was recorded in the summer of 2016, when our hotlines were literally red hot with calls. And the scale of the problem is, in fact, adversely detrimental. People who were forced to leave their homes because of war often fall victim to nearly all types of violence. It is especially painful when you communicate with a young girl, 18-20 years old, who has been all at once a victim of sexual, psychological and physical violence.

**What stories do you remember the most from your work with the mobile team?**

– At first, I worked in the team as a psychologist, and then became the coordinator. I have seen and heard a lot of stories, and almost all of them, unfortunately, are very frustrating.

I was personally devastated by the story of a female architect from the Luhansk region who had lost seven relatives all at once during a Grad rocket shelling. The eight of them were going to the local market to buy some food, but only she survived. The woman was miraculously saved by the National Guard.

She was struck by multiple pieces of shrapnel from her neck down to her lower extremities. Immediately after the attack, the woman's left leg was literally stitched together at the hospital in Artemivsk, and here, in Kharkiv, she received a free endoprosthesis. In spite of the inhumane pain and more than a dozen operations, this miracle woman was able to recover from this traumatic situation: now she is working again and is gradually returning to a normal life.

I also remember another woman whom we met in one of the compact settlements. Before our arrival, she had already been working with psychologists for more than a year, but she had somehow been unable to fully open up to them. I almost immediately realized that this IDP woman could have been a survivor of sexual violence. During our conversation, I gently asked her if this was true. The woman burst into tears and said that 25 years ago, several men had raped her. With terrible injuries, she was taken to hospital. Then, her mother said that the woman herself was to blame for what had happened, and that she should not tell anyone. For all those years she kept silent about this terrible incident and bottled it up inside. And only now, because she received free professional help, was she able to face her tragedy by telling us about it.

# 06.

This is a story about families fleeing non-government controlled territories, finding shelter in peaceful cities, and yet, ultimately separating because of despair and a lack of understanding.



## FLEEING FAMILIES

The undeclared war in eastern Ukraine has divided many families. Some of them fled to peaceful territories, while others stayed in front-line cities. A separate category includes families who fled from the shelling together, were able to find shelter, but failed to find mutual understanding in the end. The story of one of these families was recorded by Borodayeva Olena, a UN Population Fund psychological team member. For security reasons, the names of the people involved, their sex and age of their children have been changed, and the city where the family is living now is not mentioned at all.

### FAILURE TO COPE WITH UNFORTUNATE CIRCUMSTANCES

The family of Andriy and Lyudmila is a sad example of how the undeclared war breaks up families. This story shows everything: from the excitement associated with the opportunity to lead a peaceful life, to the despair caused by the inability to return home. When people lose everything, it is extremely important that they are provided with psychological support. That is why mobile teams do the work that they do: we believe that everything can be overcome, but the most important thing is that the displaced person has the resources and services available when they decide to solve their problems.



In their native Donetsk, Lyudmila and Andriy had a small business, raised two children, and were quite prosperous. They owned their own home and could afford to go on holiday.. As early as 2014, when hostilities started in the Donbass, the family decided to flee. It was Lyudmila who had the idea of moving to a peaceful city. She decided that the family's safety was more valuable than the value of their possessions.

Once in a peaceful area, the family settled down almost immediately: they rented a small house and re-organized their everyday life. Lyudmila found a job in her field and the family started to earn money again. If we told this family's story to other internally displaced persons, they would probably say: "How lucky they are! What else could they wish for?" Well, it turns out that they could wish for much more.

**Andriy was the only one who did not cope well with the move and the war. He became aggressive and began to habitually drink. He transferred and projected his anger onto his children and wife. He blamed her for the loss of their old lives: after all, it was Lyudmila who had encouraged the entire family to flee Donetsk in 2014, and now it was impossible for the family to live as they did before.**

## STRONG AND INDEPENDENT

Lyudmila turned to us for help. She could no longer tolerate her abusive husband, and decided that if he continued to oppress her and the children, she would take her belongings and leave. When we met in person, we found her to be a stunningly beautiful woman. The only thing that revealed her predicament was the exhaustion on her face. She told us that for more than a year, she had kept quiet about the physical and psychological violence she had suffered, because she was certain that she was strong enough and independent enough to cope with the issue on her own.

After a while, we offered counselling not only to Lyudmila and Andriy, but also to their children. In general, the best option for a family in this situation is extended family therapy. Unlike other displaced persons, this family had their own accommodation and could lead a normal everyday life. So, in this case the focus was put on psychological support. Now, the relationships between the family members are better, and the couple has decided not to divorce, but rather make every effort to preserve the family's harmony.

\* Name changed to protect privacy

The work of UNFPA mobile teams is being implemented by Health Right Foundation in Ukraine within the UNFPA humanitarian project "Response to acute humanitarian needs of the most vulnerable women and adolescent girls affected by armed conflict in eastern Ukraine. Phase II: Bridging

humanitarian interventions with response to lingering consequences of the crisis". The project is being implemented thanks to generosity of UNFPA donors: US Government (via BPRM), UK Government (via DFID), Die Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ),UNAIDS (via UBRAF).

# 07.

This is a story about a large family who refused to serve in the "Donetsk People's Republic" ("DPR"), fled from the war, and were able to start a new life in a rented apartment near Kharkiv.

HAPPY  
TO BE TOGETHER





Many internally displaced persons live in the suburb of Kharkiv. Ideally, local rental apartments would become their temporary place of residence for a couple of months, and sometimes even half a year or more; after that, they would move on and make their way towards a more permanent solution. However, in practice, the majority of the displaced persons population remain here for much longer. This happened to the family of Oksana (her name has been changed for security purposes), who is a mother of eight children. She and her husband fled from the territory of the Donbass controlled by illegal armed factions.

We recorded this extremely difficult story from Svetlana Tavantseva, a UN Population Fund's mobile team coordinator. For more than six months, Svetlana has been working as a psychologist with Oksana's family; she says that this case is one of the most difficult ones in the mobile team's entire period of operation. **21**

## FORCED TO FLEE

The mobile team psychologist and Oksana's family met for the first time in Kharkiv Oblast. Because they know the temporary addresses of displaced persons, social workers often come over for visits.

"Oksana's friend asked us to visit the woman's rented apartment. She decided to call us when they saw our advertisement for free psychological assistance on the internet. Oksana immediately agreed to talk face-to-face", - the psychologist says. It turned out that she and her husband fled from the territory controlled by the "DPR" in early 2015. This large family with eight children lived in a small town in the Donetsk Oblast, sincerely believing that the war would spare their home.

"When the town was occupied by representatives of the illegal armed factions, they started press-gang people into their ranks - they simply went from door-to-door and took the men. It was a military mobilization of sorts. They came for Oksana's husband too. He told them that he was raising eight children and would not join them. According to Oksana, those words later meant that her family would have to experience a living hell", - Tavantseva continues.

After refusing to cooperate with representatives from the "DPR", the large family suffered persecution. In broad daylight, as Oksana and her three children walked down the street, they were attacked by "DPR" men. Her children were allowed to go home, but Oksana was dragged into a basement and brutally beaten. Looking back on those events, Oksana still shudders. She says that only psychological abuse is worse than a physical pain.

WE HAVE 24 HOURS TO LEAVE.  
IF WE DO NOT LEAVE, THEY WILL KILL US ALL

"Oksana was cruelly beaten: they slashed her face and knocked out her teeth. It is impossible to know exactly what happened, but we believe that there were many more occurrences of torture as well. However, even after two years, Oksana cannot calmly recall everything", - the psychologist explained.

The situation of Oksana's husband was even worse: he was kidnapped, imprisoned, abused, and beaten over the course of several weeks. The family did not think they would see him again but then representatives of the "DPR" released him.

Oksana recalls when her beloved man suddenly appeared and said: "We have 24 hours to leave. If we do not leave, they will kill us all."

## PSYCHOLOGIST'S WORK

Despite the forced move, the most difficult time for the family was yet to come. Although they were already living in a rented apartment, the father of the large family began to show signs of post-traumatic stress disorder: he became aggressive and lashed out at his wife and children.

Since the family lived in a city not controlled by the Government of Ukraine and, moreover, active hostilities were plentiful, it was not an easy task for ten people to leave the city all at once. But Oksana and her husband were lucky: they successfully called the Kharkiv volunteers' hotline, who agreed to come with a minibus and take the family away", - Tavantseva says.

It is still hard for Oksana to talk about what happened: how quickly she gathered the children's clothes and other necessary belongings. When speaking about their forced move, she sighs slowly and says: "The most important thing is that we survived and left the city together."

"It is difficult to imagine how a man must feel after suffering from abuse while being held in captivity, and then under the threat of being killed, forced to flee from the shelling, along with his eight children. When Oksana told me how her beloved man hit her, she could not hold back her tears.





She said that the worst thing about it was not even his violent behavior, but rather the fact that the children saw their parents fighting. After a series of aggressive attacks, the family decided to live apart from each other: the husband went to work in another peaceful city whilst she stayed with the children”, - Tavantseva continues.

After two years without any shelling or fear of persecution, the family, which is still separated from each other, underwent many changes. With the help of the mobile team and volunteers, the smaller children went to kindergarten, while the older ones went to school and college. To help the family return to a normal life, every team member was involved: the coordinator, social worker, and psychologists.

"We explained to Oksana that her husband's aggression was a normal reaction to everything he had suffered from. With our help, she learned how to react to the behavior of her husband, and she agreed to have a "Safety Plan".

This is a usual practice in psychology when survivors of violence write down or discuss how they should react to specific actions. For example, we asked her to think about what she would do if a rapist attacked her at night on a public street. Would she scream? Or would it be better to throw something heavy at the nearest window? This is the way we discuss every possible situation so that our client knows what to do when he or she faces violence. Now, with the help from and engagement with our local volunteers, this large family receives humanitarian aid on a regular basis, and are in the process of waiting for a suitable house with a plot of land where they can live permanently. The man has never addressed us, but I am sure that one day he will come home from work, and we will be able to finally talk," the psychologist concluded.

## 08.

Story of a mother of two children, who tolerated her bullying husband and mother in law, fled from the war and found shelter in the Sviatohirsk Cave Monastery



# FINDING PEACE IN A MONASTERY

The Sviatohirsk Cave Monastery is one of the most amazing places in the Donbass. It stands on a hill rising above the Siverskiy Donets River and attracts thousands of pilgrims. Seventeen of the Monastery's monks have been canonized. During the conflict in eastern Ukraine, this functional Monastery became a refuge for dozens of displaced persons.

Oksana, a 34-year-old woman (her name has been changed to maintain her anonymity) hid from the war and her grief in a room at the Monastery. She is one of the hundreds of women patronized by UN Population Fund's mobile team. Her complex story is told by Yelizaveta Krasnoyarska, a psychologist and team member. For security reasons, the names of the people involved in this story and the sex and age of Oksana's two children have been altered.



## NOT ONE OF US

"We paid a scheduled visit to the Sviatohirsk Cave Monastery. We knew that internally displaced people were living there, so we collected humanitarian aid and the full team took the road. Oksana was almost immediately ready to communicate. A short and thin woman, she came apart from other displaced persons and asked for a talk. Our conversation was difficult and long. Later we had dozens of hours of therapy, but first things first.

Do you know the expression: a daughter-in-law is not one of us? These words clearly describe Oksana's situation. Before the war, her husband, two children and mother-in-law lived in a mining town near Donetsk. The family was not problem-plagued but it was not perfect either. In order to support the children, Oksana worked hard. Her husband also had a job but did not give his earnings to his wife because he believed that it was the mother, not the father, who had to provide for the children.

## ABILITY TO FORGIVE

Oksana and her children ran away from home as quickly as they could. Now she says that she should have taken the decision much sooner and regrets not leaving the Donetsk region after the first time she was attacked.

Oksana's mother-in-law found her in the Sviatohirsk Cave Monastery. It turned out that the pensioner had decided herself to leave also for peaceful territory. Almost immediately after her arrival, the mother-in-law seriously injured her thigh, so Oksana and the children had to take care of the old woman. According to Oksana, the grandma accepted the care reluctantly. Moreover, she constantly scolded

In addition to the financial problems, there was physical and psychological violence in the family. From time to time, Oksana's husband got drunk and beat her. Her mother-in-law always calmly reacted to the beating: not only did she fail to stand up for her daughter-in-law but she also believed that it was Oksana's fault. She said that Oksana should have known better than to marry a man like that.

When Oksana was told us about the abuse she had suffered, she could not hold back her tears. According to her, the last straw came when her husband said that he could not care less about her and their children.

After hostilities had started in town, the only food Oksana and her children had for a few weeks was pasta and water. Then, one night she accidentally saw her mother-in-law feeding her son with a homemade roast. Oksana asked how a man could quietly eat while his children were hungry. Her mother-in-law replied, "You feed your children and I will feed mine."

her daughter-in-law and her children and occasionally hit the children without reason.

During the entire period of our work with Oksana, we could never talk to her mother-in-law. However, we gave Oksana tips on how she could stand up for herself without using physical force and what she needed to know while facing her abuser.

Despite the abuse, Oksana found a way to forgive her mother-in-law. Now the family lives more or less peacefully. The only thing that provokes arguments is the communication with the kids' father, who has remained in the territory outside the control of the Government of Ukraine.

---

**Oksana receives the humanitarian and psychological aid on a regular basis; she is looking for a job and making plans for the future. The only thing she knows for sure is that she will never return to her tyrannical husband or to her native town".**

## 09.

The story of two Roma women who have escaped from uncontrolled Ukrainian territory, are together raising six children and believe that they will one day return home



# ONE PAIN SHARED BY TWO

She has black hair and amazingly dark eyes. Wearing a bright jacket, light jeans, and high heel boots, she is standing, smiling, and deep in thought. This is Anna, 26, and she is of Roma origin. Together with her aunt Natalia (their names have been changed to preserve their anonymity), the young woman arrived to Kostiantynivka, Donetsk region, from Horlivka which is controlled by the "DPR". Together, Anna and Natalia are raising six children. The oldest son will be 16 this year, and the youngest daughter is still a small baby.

Their story, like many others, is the story of women abandoned by their husbands; though the fate of such women differ, they all share a common trauma and despair. This is a story about overcoming challenges through thick and thin in spite of being a single mother, survivor of violence, and an unemployed IDP.



Natalia is not yet 40, but she has endured a lot of suffering and pain. The now-IDP woman has two children to take care of from her marriage with her first husband. They were living, Nata-lia says, quite happily, until the children's father decided to have fun and left the family.

"After two childbirths, I had hormonal treatment. With my short height, my weight gain was noticeable. My husband could not accept this and began to cheat on me. I did not forgive him, so he simply left me," the woman says.

She sits on an old metal bed in a small apartment on the outskirts of a peaceful town in the Donetsk region. When she first ran away from the shelling, Natalia had no money to pay the rent, so local volunteers allowed her and the children to stay with them. Afterwards, her niece, Anna, came. Now the two of them live in a two-bedroom 'khrushchevka' apartment together with six children.

"When I ran away from the front line, I was pregnant. In Gorlivka there was no work, and

there still is none; and because of the constant shelling, my children were literally shaking with fear. Our small house was blown to pieces, and living with relatives became increasingly difficult. The decision to leave was not easy, but there was no other choice. I took the children and left," the woman continues.

After divorcing her first husband, Natalia officially married a man who is also the father of her newborn daughter, Natalia officially married one more time. "My second husband was in prison at the time we got married, so I waited for him for two years." When her husband came out of prison, it turns out that Natalia was not the only one waiting for him. And so, they split up.

"Legally, we have not dissolved our marriage, so now my little daughter does not bear the name of her real father. My second husband lives on his own, we no longer keep in touch, and do not even know which party he supports in the conflict. It's all a real mystery. Now some believe he is even missing, and there is no possibility for me to formally divorce him," Natalia explains.

---

**The ethnic Roma's will to survive is inspired by her children. It is for them that she endured inhuman treatment by doctors at the maternity hospital; it is for them she gathered the piles of necessary documents required to receive IDP status, and it is for them she escaped the shelling to take sanctuary in a strange new city.**

Now, to continue her return to normal life, Natalia works hard daily in order to earn her living. Once her smallest daughter is old enough to attend kindergarten, she hopes to find a stable job.

## BEING RESCUED TOGETHER

The story of Natalia's niece, Anna, is equally dramatic. Anna is from the Donetsk region, but for some time she lived in central Ukraine: she got married, and became a mother. Due to her Roma heritage and corresponding dark

physical appearance, her husband forced Anna to cadge. He used to beat her, and told her to go to the village to beg for money for their children. Eventually, she broke down and returned to the Donbass.

“And at home in Gorlivka, war had already erupted. It was terrible and merciless. Sometimes it was so bad that I would silently ask: 'God, if you exist, let my children stay alive. Just let them survive, I'm begging you.'”

THE STORY OF NATALIA'S NIECE, ANNA, IS EQUALLY DRAMATIC.





We barely managed to survive while living with our relatives, and when the shelling began to reach our house, we left to stay with Natalia in Kostian-tynivka. The first few months there were very difficult, but now we have become much stronger. We would love to return to our home in Gorlivka. The main issue is the war, but once that is over, we will return and be able to handle the rest by ourselves," Anna states.

For women like this who have endured so much, according to the coordinator of the UNFPA mobile team for psychological support, Maryna Kononenko, a comprehensive approach must be applied. In order to relieve their of fear and PTSD, these women must receive both psychological and legal support.

'This is where the happiness of mothers directly depends on the happiness of their children. We helped the women by enrolling their youngest children into kindergarten, and their older children into schools and colleges. Now, both women have the status of internally displaced persons and are receiving financial assistance from the state. It is hard for them to find full-time work, but this issue will also be resolved in due time. Anna and Natalia receive help from a psychologist through group sessions and individual sessions. The sisters have proven with their own stories that if there is a will, there is a way, and that in any situation, one can retain their family and dignity," the psychologist concludes.

**During the time that this publication was being prepared, Anna and her children moved into a small rental apartment. Volunteers and staff from the mobile team helped her in finding this accommodation. Local activists let the IDP family live in the apartment for free; Anna only pays for the utilities and is getting ready to start working soon.**

## 10.

This is a story about a victim of violence who fled with two daughters from the outskirts of Donetsk, overcame a disease, and regained her faith in humanity.



# BELIEVING IN A BETTER FUTURE

"Once Nadia's (her name has been changed for security purposes) husband hit her in the head so hard that she could not move her left hand anymore. Now we are sitting with her and talking about her new life and the nice weather outside, but when we met for the first time, this pretty woman could hardly speak and cried all the time", says Maryna Kononenko, the UN Population Fund's mobile team coordinator in Kostiantynivka.

The psychologist has become a real friend to many displaced women who were victims of violence; their friendships blossomed when the women turned to Maryna for help. She says that some stories have deeply affected her. Nadia's is one such story.

## THE COURAGE TO RESIST

According to Maryna, the 32-year-old woman arrived in Kostiantynivka from a place near Donetsk. Previously, Nadia had lived with her husband and two daughters in a small mining town. One of her daughters was born with a musculoskeletal disorder. When initial problems with her husband arose, Nadia did not dare run away; she hoped that all their fights would soon be over, and peace would be restored. Yet, in 2015, her decision to take the children and set off for the peaceful territory of the Donbass was prompted by another fight with the husband.

"As a psychologist, I have seen many survivors of physical violence. There were women who tolerated abuse and kept silent for 20 years or more. And we have also worked with girls who, after being hit once, put themselves into isolation. Nadia's case falls under the first category. Her husband beat her with extreme brutality: when she prepared a bowl of soup in a way that he did not like, he beat her; when she looked at or said something to him in a way that he did not like, he beat her; and when he came home and was in a bad mood, he beat her then too," the coordinator says.

When fleeing from Donetsk, Nadia only grabbed one backpack with basic essentials and documents, before escaping. First, the woman and her daughters were accommodated in Kramatorsk, and then the family moved to Kostiantynivka, where they are still living now. According to Nadia, she was mostly afraid that because of her injured hand and poor psycho-emotional state, she would not be able to raise her daughters (one of whom is disabled) by herself.

"When Nadia finally pulled herself together and was able to speak during one of our consultations, she said that, in addition to the regular beating, her husband had exerted psychological pressure on her, stolen her hard-earned money, and after losing his job, did not even think of looking after her and the children.," Kononenko continues.

Nadia attends group session with other displaced women who were or still are survivors of violence. One form of rehabilitation that is available to these women is art therapy; however, the best kind of help the women receive is when they are able to communicate. According to Maryna Kononenko, thanks to mutual support, many of the women who were forced to leave their homes are beginning to recover gradually and return to a normal life.

---

**"Those who are more experienced tell the others, for example, where to get legal assistance. When their kids outgrow their clothes, the women exchange clothes that are still wearable. They share each other's pain; that is why, in my opinion, these group therapy sessions are so important and effective", - the mobile team coordinator emphasizes.**

## SPRING IN THE SOUL

After nearly a year of receiving help from psychologists and social services, Nadia has been able to finally take care of herself on her own. Previously, she could not even consider dating, especially because she was so ashamed of her non-functional hand. But now, after her treatment and working with physicians and psychologists, she exercises her hand and has even found the opportunity to go to the hairdresser's.

"I am very happy when I observe our clients overcoming challenges and finding happiness and harmony once more. Perhaps the greatest happiness for a psychologist is to see a once depressed woman smiling and saying that she is now better than just fine. Currently, Nadia receives humanitarian aid on a regular basis; she is rarely in a bad mood, and swears that she will never return to her tyrannical husband, no matter how bad things may get. I am sure that she has become strong enough to take care of herself and raise both of her daughters", Kononenko summarizes.

# 11.

Confessions of an HIV-positive IDP woman who fled from the war with her three children and promised to never fall in love again.

## BETWEEN AIDS AND LIFE





'I loved him more than anything in the world. It was real love, when you know everything about the person, but it seems that you will never get tired from being with them.

Before the conflict in eastern Ukraine, my husband worked for a large company, I raised children and did the household chores. When in 2014 the war reached Horlivka, we decided not to flee our home believing that it would not last for long, but, unfortunately, fate decided otherwise. I remember well the first time I heard the sound of shelling somewhere nearby. It felt as though it was the end of the world: the windows were blown out of our house, and people were in the streets screaming.

In our native Horlivka we lived in a private house, like most other families of miners. Our neighbors, just as we did, did not leave until the last moment. It was a sort of, you know, gambling with life: inside you realize that warfare will not end tomorrow, but you keep trying to live on, in an attempt to accelerate the onset of peace.

Almost immediately after the first major bombing in the city, plants began to close. Business owners shrugged, because however much they wanted to, due to the war, it was no longer possible to do business in Horlivka. Workers were laid off. My husband was also asked to leave his job.

They say that in terrible trouble, people either become closer, or turn into bitter enemies. For me, unfortunately, the second option was true. I immediately noticed that my husband became aggressive. His attitude towards me and the children changed. In order to somehow feed the family, he found a job as a construction worker's assistant – so we called the people who were dismantling the ruins after the shelling and removing reinforcements from concrete slabs. The work schedule was, to put it mildly, irregular, so I turned a blind eye to his constant absence at home.

Among the very frustrating stories of IDPs being victims of violence, there are those that cannot be expressed in words. You intend to make a detailed interview or report, but instead you are left with just a list of words: difficult, scary, war, remained alone – and then have to write about it.

So, the story of the 34-year-old HIV-positive IDP woman from Horlivka took the form of a confession. For safety reasons, we will not give her name, age and the gender of her three children.

Accidentally, a mobile hospital came to our town. There were long queues, and I happened to be in one of those. The weather was very sunny and, as I didn't think there was anything wrong with me.

**I agreed to take an HIV test without any ulterior motive: 'Are you sure this is necessary? Positive? Well, I will then.' And a few hours later, like a bolt from the blue, I received the result: 'The HIV test is positive. You are infected'.**

## AMONG THE ONES LIKE YOU

The first thing you think of when you are told that you are HIV-positive, is how to tell the children about it, and what to do in order to keep them safe? I confess, I still have not found a proper explanation for my kids. However, all of them took a blood test, and all three of them, fortunately, are not infected. In everyday life, it is impossible to get HIV, but I still worry every day and care about the safety of my children.

When my husband abandoned us, we were left alone. I had HIV, there was nothing to eat, there was no work, and the war was in full swing in Horlivka. Many times I was wanted to escape to a peaceful area, but there was always something stopping me. And then fate intervened.

Various humanitarian missions came to us, one of which was working with the HIV-positive. I took all the tests again and started receiving treatment. Subsequently, my neighbors learned about it. Some suddenly became aggressive. They were saying I had 'picked up a plague by having fun' and forbade their children to be friends with my kids. This was the last straw. We packed and moved away.

I really do not remember how I went home after that. 'Oh, God, why? Why are you doing all this to me? What have I done to you?' – these angry thoughts raged inside my head. Now, who knows what then hurt me the most – the diagnosis, or the realization that among the war and despair you have been betrayed by the person you trusted the most.

My conversation with my husband was, to put it mildly, strained. Instead of an explanation and an apology, I received insults and bruises. That same evening he left me and the children for a woman who, apparently, had infected him with HIV. Now his fate is unknown. I am still angry with him, and shall never trust men again.

Saying that the first month was difficult for us would be an understatement. We were camping on the doorsteps of social centers until miraculously we found refuge in one of the peaceful cities in the Donetsk region. Representatives of the UNFPA psychological support team helped to enroll my children in schools and kindergartens. I undertook a new course of maintenance therapy. Now we live in a small rented house. And I have found friends. It turned out that among the displaced women there are many victims of violence.

I did not immediately open up to them, but, indeed, receiving psychological support is important. You are among people like you, you are being listened to and understood. It is nice when people share your pain, and together you make plans for the future'.





**UNFPA**

because everyone counts!

The project is being implemented thanks to generosity of UNFPA donors: US Government (via BPRM), UK Government (via DFID), Die Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), UNAIDS (via UBRAF).

**United Nations Population Fund**

Country Office in Ukraine

42-44, Shovkovychna Street,

Kyiv, 01004, Ukraine

Tel +380 44 281 3231,

Fax +380 44 281 3233

[ukraine.office@unfpa.org](mailto:ukraine.office@unfpa.org)

[www.unfpa.org.ua](http://www.unfpa.org.ua)