



Support – Don't Punish Women who use drugs

June 26th marks the [International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking](#). Although the focus of this year's theme¹ is on the creation of healthy and safe environments for children and youth, Women4GlobalFund (W4GF) and partners bring into focus the voices and lives of women who use drugs. Women who use drugs are often caregivers and are impacted by harmful drug policies that do not support women's enjoyment of their right to lead full lives together with their families.

The connection between the impact of gender inequality on women who use drugs and the impact of punitive legal frameworks must be understood as reinforcing each other. Structural gender inequality impedes the development of effective drug policies that adequately understand and address the rights of women who use drugs. Additionally, punitive legal frameworks under current drug policy regimes reinforce gender inequality and the negative impact of criminalization is visible in police violence, stigma and stereotyping faced by women who use drugs.

We need Governments to do the following to protect and uphold the rights of women who use drugs:

- Decriminalise and depenalize drug use and possession for personal use
- Ensure services and treatment are rights-based and uphold principles of voluntary, non-coercion and confidentiality, preferably delivered within communities
- Provide funding and ensure access to comprehensive health care services, including SRH, HCV, HIV prevention strategies recommended by UNODC, WHO, and UNAIDS, especially in prisons. Ensure that future interventions that transition incarcerated women to community-based HIV clinical care are gender-sensitive
- Invest in non-custodial sentencing of women involved in non-violent offences (reinforced in several sections of the [UN Bangkok Rules on Women Offenders and Prisoners](#)), while moving towards decriminalisation of drug use^{2,3}
- Develop mechanisms that guarantee personal safety and privacy that allow women to report incidents of violence without fear
- Provide access to free legal assistance for women who use drugs in case where their rights are violated to ensure violence and unlawful actions are investigated, including those committed by healthcare providers, social workers, law enforcement officials
- Conduct a full review of progress and recommendations (together with women who used drugs) made through UNGASS policy around gender in drug policies
- Improve legal framework to ensure uninterrupted substitution therapy for women who use drugs, including access and availability to integrated services, support and opioid substitution treatment (OST) during and post pregnancy.

We need researchers to:

- Highlight the reality women who use drugs face and their susceptibility to HIV and Hepatitis and the biological impact of drug use on women
- Capture the diversity of women who use drugs and that recognises the intersectionality within different populations of women who use drugs
- Focus on women who use drugs, including LGBTI⁴ communities, young women, women who are incarcerated, women living with HIV and sex workers, as key considerations in treatment, research and support.

We need the Global Fund to:

- Encourage countries to support human rights and evidence based interventions for women who use drugs
- Strengthen the capacity and engagement of women who use drugs in Global Fund supported programmes
- Support community driven research that collects and explores qualitative data to address and improve the lives of women who use drugs.

¹ This year's theme is "[Listen First- Listening to children and youth is the first step to help them grow healthy and safe.](#)" This initiative hopes to increase support for prevention of drug use based on science and thus creating well-being of children and youth, their families and their communities.

² [Global Commission on Drug Policy](#)

³ [WHO consolidated guidelines on HIV prevention, treatment, diagnosis and care of key populations](#) speak to decriminalisation as a 'critical enabler' for health (page 86)

⁴ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people



The reality for women who use drugs

Little attention has been paid to gender differences in drug use which is essential to develop treatment approaches that work for women. One third of all people who use drugs are women and girls, yet only one in five of those women receive treatment.⁵ Although men are more likely to use drugs, the combined social, institutional, health and cultural effects and risks carried with drug use, are disproportionately higher in women.⁶ Women living with HIV who experience violence are less likely to access HIV care and participate in HIV prevention and drug and treatment services.⁷ In addition to this, data suggests that women progress from use to dependence faster than men; experience more severe emotional and physical consequences of drug use compared to men and underutilize treatment.⁸ Women who use drugs are under-represented in drug related clinical trials and in research, which is also heavily centred on men.⁹

The experience of women who use drugs and those living with HIV is compounded by poor access to maternal healthcare and other human rights violations, including misleading information about the effects of drugs during pregnancy; forced and/or coerced abortion and sterilization; and the removal of children from their custody, regardless of their parenting ability. Women face greater barriers than men to accessing drug treatment and rehabilitation services, since the design of services often fails to address the priorities of women. In addition stigma leaves women who use drugs reluctant to seek medical services.

Available harm reduction services are generally tailored towards men and, as a result, often fail to address the specific needs of women. For example, harm reduction programmes rarely support women's personal safety and confidentiality, and/or do not provide sexual and reproductive health services and/or prevention of vertical transmission services and/or child care. Staff are often not trained to provide specific services for women who use drug who are also sex workers or often survivors of gender-based violence (GBV). GBV and intimate partner violence (IPV) are intrinsically linked to the causes and effects of drug use in women. All of this has detrimental effects on their mental and physical health and creates barriers to accessing support, and treatment.

Medical protocols are widely unavailable to guide the prenatal care yet only 0.003% of women who inject drugs have access to OST in Eastern Europe¹⁰. OST is unavailable during pregnancy in maternity hospitals in Ukraine¹¹ or Kazakhstan¹² (and is totally unavailable for all people in Russia and Uzbekistan). Women who use drugs are often pressured into terminating their pregnancy¹³ given that many medications prescribed in Russia to treat addiction are not advised during pregnancy¹⁴.

National and Global Responses

National responses to people who use drugs are often retributive and linked to criminal sanctions. Women who use drugs are more criminalized compared to men who use drugs and face more serious charges leading to tougher sentences. Advocacy campaigns continue to amplify the negative effects of punitive approaches to drug users on prevention and treatment efforts. [Support. Don't Punish.](#) advocates for the decriminalisation of people who use drugs and calls for policy reform to guide treatment and prevention. Punitive measures and draconian laws in many regions, particularly in Eastern Europe and Asia, continue to punish and incarcerate women for possession and drug use. Criminalisation impedes women's human rights; silences human rights violations and blocks access to services. Women who use drugs are afraid to advocate for themselves and it is often dangerous for advocates to speak on behalf of women who use drugs.

⁵ [The International Narcotics Control Board \(INCB\)](#)

⁶ Sex and Gender Differences in Substance Use

⁷ [Gilbert et al. and Wechsberg et al.](#)

⁸ [Comparative Profiles of Men and Women with Opioid Dependence: Results from a National Multisite Effectiveness Trial](#)

⁹ [Women who use or inject drugs: an action agenda for women-specific, multilevel and combination HIV prevention and research](#)

¹⁰ INPUD, UNODC, UN Women, WHO (2014). Policy Brief: Women who inject drugs and HIV: Addressing Specific Needs,

http://www.unodc.org/documents/hiv-aids/publications/WOMEN_POLICY_BRIEF2014.pdf

¹¹ [SHADOW REPORT](#) on the situation of women who use drugs, women living with HIV, sex workers, and lesbian, bisexual women and transgender people in Ukraine, submitted to the 66th CEDAW Session Geneva, Switzerland, 2017.

¹² [Shadow Report](#) of Civil Society Organizations on Discrimination and Violence against Women who use Drugs, Women Living with HIV, Sex Workers and women in prison in Kazakhstan

¹³ Center For Reproductive Rights: [Punishing Women for Their Behavior During Pregnancy An Approach That Undermines Women's Health and Children's Interests](#)

¹⁴ ['War on Drugs'—or on Pregnant Women who Use Drugs? Situating Russia and Canada in Global Drug Policy](#)



In 2016 the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Drugs (UNGASS) called for gender mainstreaming in drug policies and emphasised the need to involve women at all stages of development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of drug policies and programming. The United Nations Rule for the Treatment of Female Prisoners and Non-Custodial rules for female offenders (Bangkok Rules) 2011, rules 13 and 14, reinforce the importance of gender sensitive policies on people who use drugs. As women living with HIV transition from jail they experience greater co-morbidity and worse HIV treatment outcomes than men.^{15,16}

Although these policies oblige member states to implement gender responses in drug policies, implementation lags behind with little reform and no consideration to scale up gender-sensitive drug policies. Despite this, in-roads have been made by a few countries with regards to law reform. Bolivia is an example of where the incarceration of women for drug related offences is rife within an already overburdened prison system. To respond to this, in 2018, policy reforms on penal codes were enforced within the Bolivian criminal justice system and led to the reduction of sentences for women. The Washington office on Latin America (WOLA) in Partnership with Andean Information Network (AIN) released a comprehensive report on promoting gender sensitive drug policies in that context.

#harmreduction

#decriminalisation

#supportdontpunish

#10by20



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¹⁵ [Women who use or inject drugs: an action agenda for women-specific, multilevel and combination HIV prevention and research](#)

¹⁶ Meyer JP, Zelenev A, Wickersham JA, Williams CT, Teixeira PA, Altice FL. Gender Disparities in HIV Treatment Outcomes Following Release From Jail: Results From a Multicenter Study. American journal of public health. 2014 Jan 16;104(3):434–441. [[PMC free article](#)] [[PubMed](#)]