



Women and Drugs: From Hard Realities to Hard Solutions

“..it is time to recognize the fact that, because of drug use; many girls and women have been robbed of their identity, their dignity, their quality of life, and their right to protection. It is time to review our development paradigm and strategies, as well as our approaches to the drug issue, in order to make a real change..., and that will enable women who are affected by the drug problem to reclaim their humanity and their rights.”

(Dr. Usa Duongsaa, 9th of June 1998. Paper on Women, Gender and Drugs)

As a result of social and economic development, women now play new roles in addition to their traditional roles as wives and mothers. The stresses and strains of rapid change have contributed to an increase in the levels of drug abuse in most societies, including among women. The factors responsible for the increase in drug abuse among women are related to the roles and responsibilities of women in each society. The real extent of the impact of drugs on women is only gradually gaining the attention of policy makers dealing with matters related to substance abuse and drug trafficking.

Women as drug users

There is less documentation about women as drug users than about male users, and most does not focus on women drug users as a distinct group.

Many in-patient drug-abuse treatment facilities do not admit women, particularly if the women are pregnant or HIV-positive. The reasons for restrictive admission policies range from lack of sex-segregated accommodation and lack of expertise in dealing with pregnant drug abusers to fear of transmission of HIV to other patients and to staff. Consequently, most health facility statistics underreport female drug abusers. Since such statistics are one of the main sources for the annual reports on drug abuse submitted to the United Nations, women drug users are under-numerated in official statistics.



However, women drug users differ from male users in background, their reasons for using drugs, and their psycho-social needs, particularly because women users are viewed quite differently from men users by the wider society. Women abusing drugs are more likely to be stigmatized by society than men abusing drugs

because their activities are considered to be “doubly deviant”: drug abuse itself violates social norms of behaviour, but drug abuse by women also diverges from the traditional expectations of women as wives, mothers and nurturers of families.

Women’s drug abuse may cause more disruption to family life because the legal and social consequences tend to be more severe: as noted, many countries do not have drug treatment facilities for pregnant or HIV positive women and community institutions that normally provide shelter and financial assistance to single mothers may withhold support from mothers who are drug users. Women may not seek treatment for drug use for fear of hostility from medical authorities, or because of fear of having their children taken away.

Also:

- Biologically, women drug users are at higher risk than men of HIV infection, through both infections from needle sharing and sexual transmission from their higher incidence of casual sex and prostitution as strategies for obtaining drug supplies.
- Physically, women may become more quickly addicted than men to certain drugs, such as crack cocaine, even after casual or experimental use.
- Many women drug users have abusive fathers and/ or spouses, and lack financial security. Research indicates that up to 70 per cent of drug abusing women report history of physical and sexual abuse (National Institute on Drug Abuse – NIDA). For such women, drugs sometimes become a source of escape from the harsh realities of survival.
- Only 41 percent of women who need drug treatment actually receive it (NIDA).
- Emergency room visits by women due to drug-related problems rose 35 percent between 1990 and 1996.

Women as persons affected by drug users

Women who are not themselves drug users but live in families where men abuse drugs are also affected by drug abuse. The mothers, wives, sisters and daughters of drug abusers often try to hide or reduce the abuse of the man and, in doing so, may experience social, health and economic disadvantages including domestic violence.

The reasons why women endure such abuses may be related to a number of factors. On the one hand, engendered enculturation processes socialize women to adhere to the “good wife” and “good mother” image, making women feel they have to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their husbands or children. On the other hand, many women lack educational and vocational skills and employment opportunities and thus have to depend on men both physically and financially.

Women are particularly at risk of HIV infection through sexual relations with male partners who are drug abusers and who, as a result of needle sharing, have become HIV positive. Some women who are not drug users may trade sex to support their partner's drug habit, and are thus at risk from sexually transmitted diseases and HIV infection even when their regular partners are not infected.



Women with drug-addicted husbands or partners often suffer:

- Verbal and physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Emotional stress
- Low self-esteem
- Poverty
- Social and economic insecurity
- Lack of basic facilities

Women as drug criminals

Women, who usually bear the major responsibility for ensuring family income in situations of crisis, have more limited options for earning an income. Thus, some women in these circumstances turn to drug related income sources. Women are more likely to engage in sex work or selling drugs in order to finance their addiction, while men tend to engage in other criminal activities, such as theft and robbery.

An increasing number of women are engaged in the cultivation, processing and street-dealing of drugs. Many women are involved in growing opium in Asia and the coca leaf in South America. A study at the end of the eighties on the cocaine market in New York found that women were involved in trafficking cocaine. Their participation was related to the expansion of the drug trade, as well as to changes in the structure of society and of the economy that forced women into work in order to raise the income of their families.

Women are also used as drug couriers. Over 50 percent of the couriers arrested at London Heathrow airport between September 1991 and April 1992 were women. Most of these couriers had common characteristics: they were women of childbearing age, single or married with children, unemployed, had low levels of education and were poor. Women drug couriers are often not drug users themselves, and therefore do not understand the significance of their assignment. Of all the women arrested at New York's John F. Kennedy airport between 1986 and 1990 and sentenced to life terms in prison for drug trafficking, 96 per cent had no previous criminal record.

In some countries, women are often subject to differential (harsher) sentences than men for similar drug-related offences.

Girl children as daughters of drug users

Daughters of fathers who are drug users are especially vulnerable. They:

- Are financially dependent and cannot take independent decisions.
- Are trained to obey their fathers, regardless of the consequences of the fact that the father is a drug user. Some may be used as drug couriers.
- May be pushed into child prostitution in order to provide funds to purchase drugs;



- Are often socialized for life in the vicious cycle of obedience and submission to men.
- Have less access to education and skills training.

What needs to be done?

In order to understand the consequences of drug abuse, to determine effective action aimed at reducing demand and to create treatment and rehabilitation programmes, it is vital to focus on the gender relationship between women and men, rather than looking at women and men separately.

We need to:

- Empower women through equal access to education and vocational training.
- Sensitize both men and women about gender bias and how it affects their lives.
- Revise and shift the development paradigm and strategies to one that restore respect for human dignity and equality.

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