



## OBSERVATIONS

## WAR ON DRUGS

# Women bear the brunt of illicit drug policies

Women who use drugs are at particular risk of violence, infection, and death because of punitive policies to enforce prohibition, write **Kasia Malinowska** and **Bethany Medley**

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With the new US administration, advocating for the health and human rights of women is more important than ever.

Two days after the unprecedented turnout for the women's marches around the world on 21 January, the first day of Donald Trump's presidency, the president reinstated the "global gag rule," which bans any organization from receiving US aid if it counsels women about the option of abortion.<sup>1</sup> This time he massively expanded the rule, barring the exemptions for HIV programs that President George Bush had allowed.

In addition to cutting funding for family planning services, the policy will damage global public health, including HIV and AIDS prevention and treatment. Women who use drugs are already more likely to contract HIV in many developing countries<sup>2</sup>; they will therefore face some of the most negative repercussions of this policy.

Women who use drugs have remained invisible in global responses to HIV prevention, although rates of infection in such women are increasing worldwide. In the most recent Global State of Harm Reduction report, Tanzania, Nigeria, and Senegal reported substantially higher HIV rates in women than men who use drugs.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, the 2015 UNAIDS Global AIDS update concluded that the median prevalence of HIV in women who inject drugs was 50% higher than in male drug injectors.<sup>4</sup> Stigma, intimate partner violence, and cultural gender oppression are associated with more use of contaminated injecting equipment.<sup>5</sup> These women are also more likely to be infected with hepatitis C.<sup>6</sup>

## Harm reduction

Some of this harm is preventable. Harm reduction approaches—such as needle exchange programs, opioid substitution therapy, and supervised injecting sites—have been shown to reduce rates of HIV infection, deaths from overdoses, and other drug related harms.<sup>7</sup> However, underinvestment in such programs and the fact that sex specific needs have not been

considered have the opposite effect. Programs need to offer women easy access to services, reproductive healthcare, childcare, education on how to inject safely, and appropriate referrals (for example, to domestic violence shelters).

For women, HIV and drug use are strongly associated with intimate partner violence.<sup>8</sup> In a recent report, 76% of the 730 sampled women in Indonesia who used drugs had been subject to violence from an intimate partner in the preceding year.<sup>9</sup> In the same study, 60% of women reported experiencing police brutality.<sup>9</sup> Women who use drugs often do not report violence because of stigma and the fear of being convicted of a drug offence.

## Criminal justice

A woman's incarceration will affect her entire family. Although globally women are more likely to be their child's sole care giver, this rarely influences sentencing.<sup>10</sup> Two thirds of women in US prisons have been convicted of a non-violent, drug related offence.<sup>11</sup> Separation from family, stigma, and mandatory minimum sentences affect women's wellbeing and the livelihood of their children.

In some countries, punitive drug policies deliberately disregard human life. At least 33 countries and territories impose the death penalty for drug related offences.<sup>3</sup> In the past year, President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines has allowed the extrajudicial execution of more than 7000 people.<sup>12</sup>

Women are often seen as expendable in the war on drugs. Low level drug trafficking roles often require women to insert drugs into their body cavities or swallow potentially lethal amounts of drugs in capsules. In some cases women can be unaware they are smuggling drugs.<sup>13</sup>

In November 2016 the Global Commission on Drug Policy—whose members include former heads of state such as the former Swiss president Ruth Dreifuss—recommended an

end to all civil and criminal drug penalties worldwide. It also acknowledged that women are particularly vulnerable to punitive drug policies and susceptible to bloodborne infections, especially when imprisoned.<sup>14</sup>

Global policies have continuously failed women who use drugs. Policymakers must stop ignoring the evidence of harms caused by poorly designed, repressive policies—they are costing women's lives.

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