



United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

Topic B. Efforts to counter the expansion of drug markets through gender perspective

Introduction:

The global expansion of drug markets has devastating social, economic, and health impacts. Women in particular face distinct challenges and vulnerabilities within this context. They are increasingly targeted as consumers, coerced into trafficking, or subjected to violence within drug-related operations. Despite these realities, drug policies and interventions often overlook gender-specific dynamics, applying a one-size-fits-all approach that fails to address the unique needs and circumstances of women.

This issue warrants critical debate because understanding and integrating gender perspective into counter-drug strategies can enhance their effectiveness and equity. For instance, addressing the socio-economic pressures that drive women into drug economies or ensuring access to gender-sensitive rehabilitation can reduce recidivism and promote recovery. Moreover, acknowledging how patriarchal structures intersect with drug-related crimes can guide systemic reforms that not only combat the drug trade but also empower vulnerable populations. Therefore, innovative and inclusive solutions that disrupt the cycles of exploitation perpetuated by drug markets while fostering social justice and long-term social stability must be explored.

Concepts and definitions:

- **Drug trafficking:** global illicit trade involving the cultivation, manufacture, distribution and sale of substances, which are subject to drug prohibition laws.¹
- **Gender perspective:** the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programs, in all areas and at all levels.²

¹ UNODC. *Drug Trafficking*. UNODC, Vienna. "No update date". In: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/es/drug->





- **Gender-sensitive treatment:** programs or interventions designed to meet the specific physical, psychological, and social needs of individuals based on their gender, recognizing the unique challenges and circumstances that influence their experiences with substance abuse.³
- **Intersectionality:** the interaction and cumulative effects of multiple forms of discrimination affecting the daily lives of individuals and specific groups, like women of color.
- **Social determinants of drug use:** conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age that influence their risk of substance abuse, such as poverty, education, and gender inequality.⁴
- **Stigmatization of women in drug use:** the societal disapproval and discrimination faced by women who use drugs, often leading to barriers in seeking help and reintegration.⁵

Current issue:

The expansion of illegal drug markets is a global phenomenon that impacts diverse communities, exacerbating violence, crime, and insecurity. However, the way these markets affect men and women differs due to social, cultural, and economic factors. Consequently, incorporating gender perspective is crucial for effectively addressing this issue, as women and girls often face specific and different challenges compared to men in the context of drug trafficking and consumption.

² UN DESA. *Coordination of the policies and activities of the specialized agencies and other bodies of the United Nations System*. United Nations, New York, 08/07/1997. In: <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/followup/main.htm> (26/12/2024).

³ UNODC. *UNODC launches publication Cocaine Insights 3 at CND side event Drug Trafficking through Gender Lenses: Women's involvement and impact on their lives*. UNODC, Vienna, 14/03/2022. In: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/drug-trafficking-through-gender-lenses.html> (26/12/2024).

⁴ UNODC. *Strategy for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment 2022-2026*. UNODC, Vienna. "No update date." In: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/gender/unov-unodc-gender-strategy-2022-2026.html> (26/12/2024).

⁵ NIH. *Managing Stigma: Women Drug Users and Recovery Services*. NIH, United States. "No update date." In: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6103317/#:~:text=Women%20as%20a%20gendered%20group,more%20family%20oriented%20than%20fathers.> (26/12/2024).





In this regard, the UNODC has recognized that drug policies should not be gender-neutral. Addressing the expansion of drug markets with gender perspective allows for a deeper understanding of and response to the inherent inequalities that disproportionately affect women, especially in contexts of violence, exploitation, and marginalization.⁶

Moreover, women face specific risks in drug markets due to their more vulnerable social position and the gender norms that restrict their access to resources, justice, and support. They are often exposed to hostile conditions, such as...

- **Gender-based violence:** women involved in drug trafficking are usually victims of physical, sexual, and psychological violence at the hands of their partners, cartel bosses, or law enforcement. They are more vulnerable due to the societal gender roles imposed on them.⁷
- **Trafficking of women and girls:** many women and girls are victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation within drug markets. Criminal organizations use drug trafficking routes to transport women for sexual exploitation, especially in conflict zones or high-risk contexts.⁸
- **Stigmatization:** women involved in drug trafficking often face greater stigmatization than men, both within their communities and in the justice system. This can limit their access to rehabilitation programs and support services.
- **Inequality in access to resources:** anti-drug policies often do not consider the specific needs and roles of women, such as their limited access to education, healthcare, and employment, which places them in a more vulnerable position to fall into drug trafficking networks.⁹

However, it is important to take into account that, while women in drug markets are primarily victims, they also play active roles in these situations, often in more peripheral

⁶ UNODC. *World Drug Report 2021*. UNODC, Vienna. "No update date". In: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/wdr2021.html> (26/12/2024).

⁷ UNODC. *Mainstreaming gender in the world drug problem. Projects/programmes*. UNODC, Vienna, 2024. (26/12/2024).

⁸ UNODC. *Global report on trafficking in persons 2022*. UNODC, Vienna, 2020. (26/12/2024).

⁹ UNODC. *World Drug Report 2021*. (26/12/2024).



positions. On the one hand, they may be transporters, mules, or intermediaries in transactions, and their involvement is often linked to the need to provide for themselves and their families, especially in contexts of poverty or violence.¹⁰ On the other hand, some women are involved in drug trafficking as leaders or intermediaries in certain regions, particularly in countries where drug trafficking is highly organized and there exists a gendered hierarchical structure.¹¹

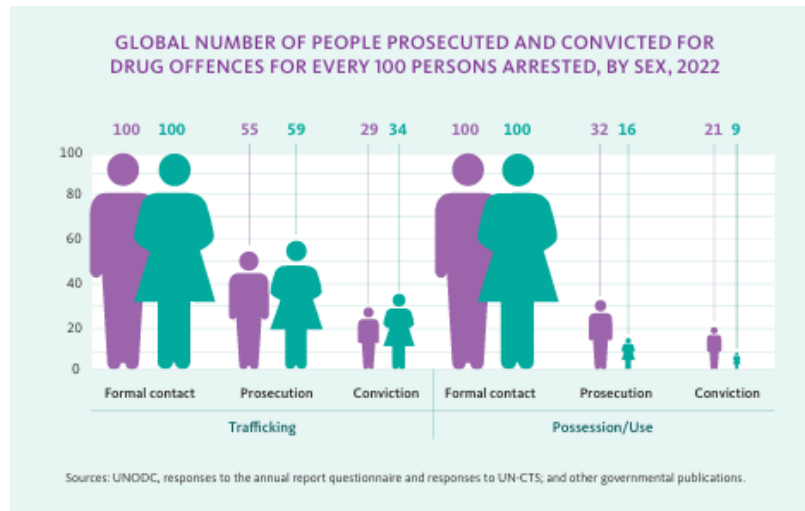


Figure 1. Global number of people prosecuted and convicted for drug offences, 2022¹²

Thus, the UNODC has emphasized the importance of integrating a gender perspective into global drug control policies. In its World Drug Report of 2021, it highlighted that incorporating gender into the formulation of anti-drug policies can enhance the effectiveness of prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation programs. This means that policies should consider the specific needs of women in treatment and rehabilitation programs; the creation of safe spaces for women who have been victims of violence linked to drug trafficking; and the promotion of gender equality in access to justice and reparation for crimes committed within drug markets. Additionally, drug-related treatment coverage is lower among women than men in all five global regions: in

¹⁰ UNODC. *Mainstreaming gender in the world drug problem. Projects/programmes.* (26/12/2024).

¹¹ UNODC. *Global report on trafficking in persons 2022.* (26/12/2024)

¹² UNODC. *Key findings, drug policy landscape and responses.* 2022. p.32



2022, 1 in 18 women with drug use disorders received treatment, while the relation was of 1 in 7 for men.¹³




			
	TREATMENT COVERAGE	PRIMARY DRUG	PATHWAY OF REFERRAL
Africa	2.8% of people with Drug Use Disorders in treatment in 2022	Cannabis is most common, followed by Opioids	Referral by friends and family and self referral are most common
Americas	10.7% of people with Drug Use Disorders in treatment in 2022 – 7.5% for women, 13.1% for men	Opioids is most common, but ATS and cannabis are also significant	Varies across subregions but referral from other health care service is more common than in other regions
Asia	5.1% of people with Drug Use Disorders in treatment in 2022 – 1.9% for women, 10.5% for men	Amphetamine-type stimulants is most common, followed by Opioids	Criminal justice system is the most common pathway of referral
Europe	25.9% of people with Drug Use Disorders in treatment in 2022 – 13.6% for women, 29.9% for men	Opioids is most common	Self referral and referral by friends and family are the most common
Oceania	14% of people with Drug Use Disorders in treatment in 2022 – 12.5% for women, 14% for men	Amphetamine-type stimulants is the most common, followed by Cannabis	Different pathways of referral observed

Figure 2. People with drug use disorders, treatment and referral¹⁴

So, according to the UNODC's "Thematic Paper on Gender and Drugs", some key recommendations include reviewing anti-drug laws and policies, incorporating a greater participation of women in decision-making, and improving access to justice. A key effort to address this issue is to ensure that laws and policies in the realm of drug control take gender aspects into account, promoting better protection for women and girls involved in drug trafficking or victims of violence associated with it. Also, it is important to include women in decisions about drug policies at both the international and national levels, as their perspectives can enrich strategies and ensure more inclusive responses. Furthermore, it is fundamental to guarantee that women have access to fair justice,

¹³ UNODC. *World Drug Report 2024*. UNODC, Vienna. "No update date". In: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/world-drug-report-2024.html> (26/12/2024).

¹⁴ UNODC. *Key findings, drug policy landscape and responses*. 2022. p.32





especially in cases of gender-based violence and human trafficking related to drug markets.¹⁵

Nonetheless, despite the efforts of the UNODC and other organizations, several challenges persist regarding the implementation of an effective gender perspective to counter drug markets. Some of the main ones are...

- **Stigmatization and lack of resources:** the stigmatization of women involved in drug trafficking can make it difficult for them to access support services. Additionally, in many countries, resources for women-specific prevention and rehabilitation programs are limited.
- **Structural violence:** in many regions of the world, women continue to live at a disadvantage due to structural violence and traditional roles that place them in more vulnerable positions when it comes to drug trafficking networks.
- **Lack of gender-disaggregated data:** in many contexts, data on women's involvement in drug markets remains limited, making it difficult to formulate more effective, gender-focused policies.

In this sense, addressing the expansion of drug markets from a gender perspective is not only necessary for equity but also crucial for the effectiveness of anti-drug policies. Women face a range of specific challenges in this arena, from violence to lack of access to resources, requiring solutions tailored to their needs. The efforts of the UNODC and other organizations must focus on integrating inclusive approaches, both in prevention and rehabilitation, ensuring a comprehensive and equitable response.

Initiatives taken by the international community:

Over the years, several resolutions and initiatives have been implemented to improve the situation of women in relation to drug-related issues. Specifically, the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) has worked to incorporate a gender perspective into efforts that aim to counter the expansion of drug markets. Its resolution 55/5, titled

¹⁵ UNODC. *Gender Tools for Thematic Areas*. UNODC, Vienna, "No update date". In: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/gender/gender-and-thematic-areas/gender-thematic-areas-1.html> (26/12/2024).





"Promoting strategies and measures addressing specific needs of women in the context of comprehensive and integrated drug demand reduction programs and strategies", adopted on March 16, 2012, is key.

Subsequently, on December 17, 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 70/182, titled *"International cooperation against the world drug problem."*¹⁶ This document encourages Member States to develop national drug policies that consider the specific needs of women and girls, collect gender-disaggregated data, and recognize the role of women in addressing drug-related issues. It also highlights the need for support programs for women in vulnerable situations, including those in judicial processes or requiring rehabilitation.

Building on these commitments, the UNODC aligns its work with the three main international drug control treaties: the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs; the Convention on Psychotropic Substances; and the Convention on the Control of Narcotic Drugs. Through these instruments, the agency has taken significant steps to address drug-related challenges from a gender perspective. Additionally, frameworks such as the Joint Ministerial Declaration of 2014, the Political Declaration and Plan of Action of 2009, and discussions at Session 62 of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs have reinforced the importance of addressing gender-related human rights issues.

Moreover, the UNODC has implemented initiatives in various countries to support women overcoming drug addiction, focusing on their unique circumstances, such as pregnancy and childcare. It also promotes programs that enhance women's economic autonomy and access to legal employment, aiming to reduce their vulnerability to drug trafficking networks. In Colombia and Mexico, for example, social reintegration programs provide training and psychosocial support to women involved in or affected by drug trafficking, helping them reintegrate into society and reduce recidivism.

On top of that, recognizing the interconnected nature of drug control, crime prevention, and human rights, the UNODC launched a five-year strategy (2021-2025) to strengthen institutional responses. It prioritizes human rights, gender equality, and

¹⁶ The Commission on Narcotic Drugs. *Mainstreaming a gender perspective in drug-related policies and programmes*. UNODC, Vienna, 19/04/2016. (26/11/2024)





women's empowerment while promoting evidence-based treatment, rehabilitation, and reintegration programs. Efforts also focus on ensuring coordinated action across national borders, reinforcing justice systems, and combating corruption and organized crime.¹⁷

Ultimately, addressing the world drug problem requires a comprehensive approach that includes prevention and treatment programs for women, economic empowerment initiatives, and social reintegration efforts. Strong institutions, accountability, and gender-sensitive policies are essential in ensuring an effective and balanced response to drug-related challenges.¹⁸

Guiding questions:

1. How does your delegation experience drug-related issues? How do drug-related issues affect your delegation?
2. Which actions has your delegation implemented to counter the expansion of drug markets? Which are the results of these measures?
3. Does your delegation participate in any regional and/or international effort to counter the expansion of drug markets? If so, has this initiative worked?
4. How do women in your delegation experience the expansion of drug markets differently than men? Is there enough gender-disaggregated data?
5. Does your delegation address in any way the specific challenges that women face regarding drug markets? How effective has it been?
6. Does your delegation have policies or programs specifically designed to integrate a gender perspective into its efforts to counter the expansion of drug markets?
7. How does your delegation ensure that intersectionality is considered in its policies to combat drug-related issues, addressing diverse experiences based on factors such as race, socioeconomic status, or geographic location?

¹⁷ UNODC Liaison and Partnership Office in Brazil. *UNODC Strategy 2021-2025*. UNODC, Brazil. "No update date". In: [https://www.unodc.org/lpo-brazil/en/unodc-strategy-2021---2025/index.html#:~:text=UNODC's%20mission%20is%20to%20contribute,%2C%20crime%2C%20corruption%20and%20terrorism.\(26/12/2024\).](https://www.unodc.org/lpo-brazil/en/unodc-strategy-2021---2025/index.html#:~:text=UNODC's%20mission%20is%20to%20contribute,%2C%20crime%2C%20corruption%20and%20terrorism.(26/12/2024).)

¹⁸ UNODC. *UNODC Strategy 2021-2025*. UNODC, Vienna, 2021. (26/12/2024).





8. What regional and/or international partnerships or agreements does your delegation participate in to promote gender-sensitive approaches to countering drug markets?

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