Where We Stand Statement: Women and Drugs

Where Things Stand

The use of the whole spectrum of drugs has become a major source of threat to the health of women and in some cases even girls. In 2018, an estimated 269 million people worldwide, including women or girls, continued to use drugs including opioids (fentanyl or tramadol). The restrictions on movement, gatherings and social distancing which were imposed to counter the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in an increase in the use of alcohol, sedatives and pharmaceutical opioids at 63 per cent, 64 per cent and 41 per cent, respectively and the prevalence of the non-medical use of opioids and tranquillizers among women continue to remain higher than with men.

In March 2019, the Ministers and government representatives participating in the sixty-second session of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, at UN Vienna took stock of the implementation of the commitments made over the past decade to jointly address and counter the world drug problem. They created a 2019 Ministerial Declaration on strengthening their actions at the national, regional and international levels to accelerate the implementation of their joint commitments. Within this declaration they recognised the importance of appropriately mainstreaming a gender and age perspective into drug-related policies and programmes. They felt that appropriate emphasis should be placed on individuals, families, communities and society as a whole, with a particular focus on women, children and youth, with a view to promoting and protecting health, including access to treatment, safety and the well-being of all humanity.

- Polysubstance use, the consumption of more than one drug at once, is endemic among women and even girls. Studies have shown that where women used opioids for nonmedical purposes 89% also used additional substances.
- Research has shown that women are not only more vulnerable to becoming addicted to drugs with impact on differing brain areas to men but are also apt to transition more rapidly from substance abuse to addiction than men when using alcohol, cannabis, cocaine or opioids. As a result, they are often among the one out of eight people whose drug use may end up leaving them with drug use disorders ending in disabilities or death.
- When opioids, Benzodiazepines or alcohol are used together, the risk of fatal overdoses skyrockets. For example, between 1999 and 2018, there has been a 1000% increase in the number of fatal overdoses among women who used these opioids and Benzodiazepines in combination.
- In the case of alcohol, many women who use opioids have also been described as being binge drinkers of alcohol which increases the chance of fatal overdoses.

In addition, as is the case in so many other instances in childhood, girls are more vulnerable to being a victim of drug misuse because they have been exposed to various adverse childhood experiences. Research has shown that, while poverty alone does not cause anyone to initiate drug use, neighbourhoods with extreme poverty are often characterised by a lack of opportunities for personal

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attainment and economic growth, poor general health and drug use — conditions that may disproportionally affect women and girls.

Adverse circumstances such as being the victim of neglect, gender discrimination or many forms of violence including physical, sexual and emotional abuse make women and girls more vulnerable to drug abuse.

Women's drug use has also been observed to adversely affect their families, in particular children. Where poverty and therefore hunger is rife children may be given drugs to stop the hunger pains. Such adverse childhood experiences can be transgenerational and impart the risks of substance misuse to the children of women with drug use disorders.

The lack of education or illiteracy has been determined to increase a girl's chance of using drugs. For example, when seeking treatment, women and girls are seen to have generally lower levels of education than their male counterparts — a characteristic observed in studies from different global regions. Evidence shows that low school completion rates may result in a situation where a lack of social and economic resources make women and girls increasingly vulnerable to using drugs.

And Where Things Need to Go…

Fundamental Action

Soroptimist International urges governments to address the following barriers of education, poverty and violence in order to prevent all women or girls from continuing to be vulnerable to drug abuse:

Education

Education provides one of the major platforms for women and girls to escape poverty, violence and drug abuse and to move forward to fulfilling their right to development in a social, economic, political or cultural context. ***We request that Member States***:

- Ensure that education is safe, inclusive, of a high quality and accessible to all. Urgent steps must be taken to ensure that all education and training facilities are free from violence, including gender-based violence, and that journeys to and from schools and education facilities are safe.
- Renew and increase efforts to reach older women and those who have never attended school, those who come from marginalised or rural communities, women and girls with caring responsibilities and those who are leaving prisons, state care and other institutions. Those who are furthest behind must be reached as a priority.
- Urgently address the educational needs of migrating, refugee and displaced women and girls.
- Take legal and social action to prevent child and early marriage which removes girls from schools and is proved to have negative health, economic and social outcomes.
- Reduce or remove all education costs, be they direct or hidden costs, to ensure accessibility as financial barriers to education remain one of the biggest obstacles to women's and girls' education.

Poverty

One of the major drivers behind women and girls' vulnerability to drug abuse is extreme poverty which disproportionally affects women and girls. ***We request that Member States***:

- establish policy frameworks at national and regional levels which support poverty eradication based on a gender sensitive approach including the provision of adequate social protection and floors for those living below the poverty line.

Prevention of Violence Against Women and Girls

Studies show that women who use drugs experience a two to five times higher prevalence of gender-based violence than women who do not use drugs in the general population.

We request that States:

- Ratify and implement without reservation all international conventions and treaties which directly and indirectly address gender-based violence, and actively engage in accountability mechanisms contained therein;
- Without delay enact or reform legislation to criminalise all forms of gender-based violence and enforce legislation with appropriate prosecutions of perpetrators;
- Acknowledge that gender-based violence poses significant financial costs to society and that prevention of violence has real economic benefits;
- Invest in initiatives to make public spaces safe, particularly for all women and girls;
  fund effective resources and appropriate support services to all women and girls who are victims/survivors of violence, including safe shelter, access to legal services, and medical and psychological treatment at no cost to the victim/survivor;
- Ensure that front line responders have adequate resources and training to respond quickly to all incidents of gender-based violence with gender specific compassion, understanding and respect;
- Recognise that some groups are at particular risk, including migrants, refugees, indigenous women and girls, rural women and girls, women and girls living with disabilities, HIV positive women and girls, women and girls living with mental health challenges, and women and girls facing multiple discriminations;
- Take all necessary steps to ensure that gender-based violence is never used as a tool of war, and that women and girls living in conflict affected areas are fully protected;
- Address any increased risks of gender-based violence in areas affected by natural disasters;
- Ensure robust systems are in place and utilised to collect reliable data and statistics disaggregated by sex relating to violence and ensure that the collection of this data does not endanger women or girls in any way.

Where Soroptimist International Stands…

These are the principles that Soroptimist International strongly supports and will advocate for action at national, regional and local levels on behalf of women and girls by:

- Contacting our own national governments to urge action on implementation especially in relation to legislation and the ratification of international treaties and agreements;
- Working with regional entities, including local governments who provide many of the essential basic services, to ensure women are included in all decision making on what is needed;
- Collaborating with other civil society organisations and relevant stakeholders to provide supplementary services as well as lobbying for changes in policies.

Resources

UNODC Women and Drugs. Drug use, drug supply and their consequences 2018
https://www.unodc.org/wdr2018/en/women-and-drugs.html

Ministerial declaration on strengthening our actions at the national, regional and international levels to accelerate the implementation of our joint commitments to address and counter the world drug problem 2019
https://www.unodc.org/documents/commissions/CND/2019/Ministerial_Declaration.pdf

Implementation of all our international drug policy commitments, following up to the 2019 ministerial declaration "Strengthening Our Actions at the National, Regional and International Levels to Accelerate the Implementation of our Joint Commitments to Address and Counter the World Drug Problem" Multi-year workplan 2019-2023 Note by the Secretariat

UN document **E/CN.7/2021/4** World situation with regard to drug abuse Report of the Secretariat January, 2021