

Editorial

Women and drugs across the globe: A call to action

Why a special issue on women and harm reduction in 2008? Hopefully the content of this issue will answer that very question. As harm reduction has matured over the past two decades, there has been a growth in our understanding of the nature of drug use, the epidemiology of infectious diseases among drug users, the nature of effective HIV prevention interventions, the inextricable link of human rights and harm reduction, and the impact of socioeconomic and political structures on the health and well-being of drug users. Sadly, in the context of so much research, knowledge, and experience, there is very little known about the unique trajectory and circumstances of female drug users throughout the world.

In most of the much of the world and particularly in the developing world, female drug users are more stigmatized, marginalized, and hidden compared to their male counterparts. This is not to underestimate the discrimination and difficulties faced by male drug users. But female drug users pay a high price for being both a drug user and being a woman. Drug use flies in the face of women's primary societal roles of being mothers, the anchors of their families, and caretakers. Through this special issue, we also hope to shed light on the effects of drug and alcohol use on women who do not necessarily use drugs themselves—women who are nondrug using sexual partners of drug users. This group is characterized not by their own behaviors but that of their sexual partners. Although they are deeply affected by drug use, they are often invisible and unheard.

The current issue largely focuses on issues unique to female drug users. Ultimately, we hope that the articles, in concert, humanize these women, show their diversity, explore the nature of drug use in their sexual relationships, demonstrate how drug use is often times the best available coping mechanism, and point to interventions that ameliorate the lives of women drug users. Women's drug use often occurs in the context of economic deprivation and is greatly structured by class and gender inequities. Of course the predominant discourse of women drug users is that of HIV and STI vulnerabilities and infection. Women drug users' sexual vulnerability is often economically moti-

vated, through obtaining money or drugs for themselves or their partners. The nexus of risk experienced by women drug users places them at a heightened vulnerability for HIV and other STIs and reinforces their already compromised position in their intimate relationships and society at large. In this issue, we not only examine the deleterious outcomes associated with drug use and HIV vulnerability, but also expand the discourse of the realities and harm associated with drug use in the lives of women drug users.

This issue addresses a number of key factors contributing to the unique challenges facing women affected by drug use. It is not exhaustive in its coverage, rather, it raises a number of questions that we hope sparks new dialogues. The first question of course is that of why—why do women use drugs? And so many questions follow . . . How are women impacted by their sexual partners' drug use? A response to trauma, a coping mechanism, self medication, political atrocities such as apartheid? How do broader social and economic factors affect women's drug use? How do we reach and respond to women drug users in a sustainable way?

So how does this journal span the globe? [Wechsberg \(2008\)](#) documents the high rates of drug use among black and coloured women in post apartheid South Africa and report hopeful findings from a harm-reduction intervention. Harm-reduction interventions specifically targeting women drug users are sparse but [Magee, Hurlaux, Leadbetter, and Howe \(2008\)](#) describe and evaluate an innovative example of a structural intervention targeting drug using homeless women in San Francisco. [German et al. \(2008\)](#) article on Thai female methamphetamine users highlights the critical importance of scaling up STI education. [Seddon \(2008\)](#) provides a historical analysis of the development of how drug control policies can be based on the demonisation of women users. She describes the "British System," born out of the 1926 Rolerstein Report, is seen by many as the birth of harm reduction. Through the use of mapping in Vancouver, [Shannon et al. \(2008\)](#) explores the intersection of women sex workers and the police—an interaction that often results in revictimization by the justice system. [Kumar, Virk, Chaudhuri, Mittal, and Lewis \(2008\)](#)

gives voice to South Asian sex partners of drug users through a rapid assessment that examines HIV knowledge and risk behaviors.

The issue is rightfully comprised of articles about research and practice, written by authors who are academics, clinicians, and providers. All of these voices are necessary in shedding light on the myriad of issues related to drug use among women.

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