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**Follow-up to the implementation at the national,
regional and international levels of all
commitments, as reflected in the Ministerial
Declaration of 2019, to address and counter the
world drug problem**

Statement submitted by Dianova International, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council**

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* [E/CN.7/2025/1](#).

** Issued without formal editing.



Introduction

There is a scientific consensus on the need to implement a gender perspective in addiction services. Creating a supportive and caring environment in which women feel understood, safe, confident and comfortable enough to share their experiences appears to be a key element of effective and quality services.

Gender plays a pivotal role in shaping how men, women, and other gender identities engage with substances. The social characteristics, living conditions, consumption patterns, and the consequences of substance use, as well as the trajectory toward dependence, exhibit significant variations based on gender. Failing to account for these differences through a comprehensive perspective undermines fundamental human rights, particularly the right to equitable access to healthcare. This omission has a direct impact on the exacerbation of gender-related barriers to accessing and remaining in the continuum of substance use care.

Drug policies and treatment services have historically been developed within an androcentric framework, with the result that the specific realities of women who use drugs and the socio-cultural factors that influence their experiences have been largely overlooked. This has contributed to the creation of gendered barriers related to the social determinants of health that contribute to the invisibilization and subsequent chronicity of their substance use problems. These issues, which do not conform to male-centred treatment models, are often disregarded by addiction services, which remain overwhelmingly focused on addressing the needs of men.

- **Stigma:** Women are more likely than men to be stigmatised and socially penalised for their drug use, which is often perceived as inconsistent with their roles as mothers and caregivers. Moreover, the internalization of such stigma can exacerbate feelings of guilt and shame, while gender-blind services can act as a deterrent to seeking help. Research highlights that the stigma surrounding women who use drugs is more intense than that experienced by men, significantly reducing their willingness to seek support and limiting access to available resources.
- **Financial constraints** are a **significant** barrier for women who use drugs, as they are disproportionately affected by the feminization of poverty and often have lower levels of employment and income.
- **The caregiving role and the institutional fear:** Due to their gendered caring role, women are more likely than men to be the primary caregivers for their children, often living alone with them. This responsibility can be a significant barrier to accessing treatment services, particularly in inpatient settings, as fear of institutional reprisals, including possible loss of custody, can deter women from seeking help for substance use problems. Societal expectations of women as primary caregivers compound these concerns, further complicating their ability to address their addiction. Women who use drugs are also more profoundly affected by a lack of social support than men. Social and community support play a crucial role in the recovery journey, serving as essential components for individuals seeking to overcome the challenges of substance use.
- **Gender-based violence and lifetime experiences of trauma:** Women who use drugs are more likely to report having had adverse and traumatic experiences throughout their lives, spanning childhood, adolescence and adulthood. These experiences often include sexual or physical assault, abuse and various forms of gender-based violence, including intimate partner violence and institutional violence. Such cumulative trauma profoundly shapes their relationship with substance use and their access to treatment. Failure to address the disproportionate rates of gender-based violence experienced by women who use drugs results in partial drug policies and approaches.

For these reasons, a gender-sensitive approach makes it possible to better identify and respond to the specific needs of women. This is not only a pragmatic solution from a public health standpoint, as it ensures that more people receive appropriate support, but also an ethical one, rooted in a deontological approach that guarantees access to justice and autonomy. It involves the implementation of services that are accessible, inclusive and fully capable of addressing the diverse needs and challenges faced by women and LGBTQ+ communities, including gender-based violence, discrimination, social marginalization and specific health needs.

However, there are still several barriers to the development of such services, including lack of funding, compartmentalisation of services, and insufficient or inadequate training of staff. How can these be addressed?

The need for a cross-cutting approach

It is necessary to integrate a gender perspective across the continuum of responses to drug-related issues, from drug policy, research, data collection and evaluation, to prevention, support, monitoring, treatment, and harm reduction services.

Mainstreaming gender perspective across drug policies and support services is essential to address the specific health and social needs of individuals, particularly women, who often face multiple barriers as described above. The complex and multifaceted challenges faced by many women who use drugs require coordinated and integrated services. A comprehensive approach to gender-specific needs must be embedded in all stages of care, from universal prevention to treatment and harm reduction. This approach should be reflected in every aspect of service delivery, including policy design, implementation, structure, organization, location, staff training, intervention strategies, and the content of programmes and activities.

Gender-based violence

There is incontrovertible evidence of the strong link between gender-based violence and substance use. Global statistics reveal that a significant proportion of women who have experienced violence turn to substance use as a coping mechanism. Women who use drugs face rates of violence that far exceed those of the general female population, a disturbing reality that demands urgent attention. Addressing the lifelong violence and multiple sources of trauma experienced by women in the context of addiction requires an integrated approach – one that is therapeutic, cost-effective, and ensures the right to health and reparation. It is crucial to highlight that around the world, women with substance use disorders are often excluded from gender-based violence protection services, which is a flagrant violation of their right to protection. We emphasize the need for gender-sensitive approaches to drug use that take into account the significant rates of victimization that are intrinsically linked to substance use, and ensure that these approaches are fair, competent, and responsive to the specific needs of women.

For these reasons, the issue of gender-based violence is a key aspect of gender-sensitive programmes. Due to the high levels of stigma and trauma experienced by these women, services must not only be caring and non-judgmental, but it is also important that they adopt a trauma-informed approach to provide a safe environment for women.

The implementation of integrated programmes that combine treatment for addiction and gender-based violence is essential for quality and effectiveness. This integrated, trauma-informed approach has several objectives: to identify the signs and symptoms of trauma in individuals and its impact on their lives; to prevent the repetition of trauma; and, finally, to restore a sense of safety and self-esteem. For women who are still at risk of violence, a multi-agency and multi-sectoral approach is also essential, based on a solid cooperation between health and social services and the justice system.

Recommendations

Gender-sensitive services and policies are needed at all levels of the addiction response continuum to better meet the needs of women. In terms of intervention (treatment and harm reduction), integrated and coordinated services that address addiction, gender-based violence and mental health issues are best able to meet the specific needs of women.

However, despite efforts, gender-sensitive services remain a small part of the global response to drugs.

In this context, we consider essential to:

- Support capacity building within relevant organizations and working groups to effectively support the implementation of a gender perspective in drug policies and programmes;
- Promote research and monitoring of existing gender-sensitive programmes, drawing on the experience of community organizations and civil society in this area;
- Address the broader dimensions of the impact of gender on drug use and addiction by integrating these dimensions across the whole continuum of responses to the challenges of substance use;
- Develop truly inclusive drug policies to address, from an intersectional perspective, all the factors that are likely to affect people, whoever they may be, throughout their lives. It is therefore important to mainstream the gender perspective into all aspects of the health system (prevention, treatment, harm reduction) and the justice system;
- Build all services that address gender-based violence and women's substance use on a clear understanding of the nature of systemic inequalities, intersectional oppressions and the barriers and risks associated with them;
- Prioritize the development of gender-responsive, people-centred and rights-based policies and programmes, and mechanisms that address violence across the spectrum of service provision and focus on the specific needs and circumstances of women and people of diverse gender identities and expressions;
- Rapidly implement laws on gender-based violence within the framework of drug policies in order to better protect women who use drugs, who are disproportionately exposed to violence and trauma.
