

# We were raped

A NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF WOMEN WHO USE DRUGS IN FOUR CITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

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In 2018, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) funded a consultation in four cities in South Africa; Pretoria, Cape Town and Johannesburg, to get a better understanding of the lived experiences of Women Who Use Drugs. These conversations allowed the women in the room to share their experiences. What follows is their story in their own words: uncensored, visceral, disturbing, complex and highly uncomfortable, an unapologetic emotional reflection of the reality of their lives.

From this point in, until the recommendations section, all the text in the main body is made up of only the words spoken during the consultations. In the odd instance where we added a word for clarity, the words are in [square brackets]. Careful attention has been paid to express the meaning and context of the original words.

WHETHER YOU ARE DOING DRUGS OR NOT, EQUALITY IS AN ISSUE. Let's put what is really going on out there. My challenge is not

giving in to cowardice and doing the traditional, socially acceptable thing which is: 'hou djy net jou mond!' (You just shut up!). Not only am I ethically bound to rebuke the oppression and physical violation of those who are weaker and unable to defend themselves but I am also beholden to myself to stand up. I've been abused in more than one relationship. I would not want to let my kids or anyone else experience such trauma. If it will be of any help I would willing and openly share my experience just so that people can be aware that things/steps can be taken to prevent such humiliation, sadness and unhappiness. Let's put what is really going on out there on the [lamp] posts. [They] have dehumanised us and people know it, that's why they feel they can look at us like we animals. Even when we're right, we're wrong.



# PEOPLE THINK THAT WHEN YOU ARE A DRUG USER THAT YOU ARE A NO

**GOOD PERSON.** *My parents failed me because* they don't care about me. My father left me as a child and I resorted to using drugs in order not to feel the pain and forget. I was humiliated by my own father in front of people I don't even know, at my uncle's funeral calling me tikkop. Family need to give support, and it begins from there by eliminating calling you nyaope or other names, because you need them. I am angry because I really need my mother, but I can't have her just because she was raped by her stepfather and she got pregnant with me. And she hates my dad and I look just like him. I don't know what to do to get her attention and love. I started smoking when my mum passed away, for me to deal with the pain 18 years ago when I was 25 years old. In my marriage I was abused emotionally and physically. She was fired and decided to take care of her grandma and at least get something from there. However, her Grandma would overwork her and not pay her enough she would clean and cook and scrub and get paid R50. Her father went on to warn her grandma to watch her things because she is doing drugs and things can go missing. She swears to never steal from her family or take without their awareness, also they have no proof that she does drugs, but they accuse her and mistreat her. I have been raped more than 10 times by someone I know and trust. Now am HIV positive, I don't even know where I got it from I don't even drink treatment. I'm weak hurting and still grieving my grandmother - she left me when I needed her the most

"Everyone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law. Everyone has inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected. Everyone has the right to freedom and security of the person. Everyone has the right to bodily and psychological integrity. Everyone has the right to have access to health care services, including reproductive health care; sufficient food and water; and social security, including, if they are unable to support themselves and their dependants, appropriate social assistance".

The Constitution of South Africa

# THE COMMUNITY THAT I LIVE IN IS VERY JUDGEMENTAL. All I need is a

community that loves me enough to help me fight my drug addiction. People call you names like nyaope when you coming. They say Miss Nyaope is coming to steal from us. That means we are not safe in this community because of nyaope. People can swear at you because of what we are smoking. And our family turn their back on us. That means we don't get the respect we deserve anymore. They call me names and they think they know what is happening in my life when they actually don't have a clue what I'm going through. Even our own child - he/she - don't respect you anymore. [They] don't see you as mother anymore. If [they] see you [they] calls you nyaope. But I don't blame them. It's because of what I'm smoking. I ended up in the street because nobody trusted me or wanted me, even my relatives, that's why [I] ended up giving up. I had three abortions; one [when] I was 18 just from high school, others came after. I was too young and not sure. The last one was [the]



most painful physical pain and drugs help with the pain. I don't like those who beat me because I am smoking drugs. So they must beat me as if I'm nothing to them. Many people don't take us like human beings, taking us women like prostitutes. They don't respect [us], they call us names like nyaope girl or a piece of dirty tissue. But I know one day I will change, then I will be good mother to my children again.

I AM PROUD OF HER SHE PUTS HER KIDS FIRST NO MATTER WHAT, if they are not sorted she will not rest. She deals with them first - she prioritises them. She is a mother first. This façade is for unwanted attention or questions from cops or with hunters. Don't start arguments with people which will cause them to look for labels and names and accusations that will hurt and humiliate you in front of everyone present and whoever hears. Do not let people in on what you do for a living. Don't spend and give away money like water, especially around people who don't have enough. We don't have control over other people. There is no possibility of changing others. Expectations will lead to resentment and disappointment. I am grateful for the little I have. I can't deal with family in big doses. But I feel responsible to make more of an effort to be there for them and contact them and be grateful to them. The solution is personal. It's about working on self because we can't change others, so adapting to the circumstances is the most empowering way.

# A PERSON LIVING ON THE STREET WHO WANTS TO STOP TAKING DRUGS WILL FIND IT DIFFICULT AS THERE IS

**NO SUPPORT.** *I am going towards the end of* my using days, so I am past sleeping on the street, but for me, as I am unemployed, food is a very real and issue for me I only weigh 33kg. And I want to feel good about myself. I sometimes stress because although I am almost over the drugs, healthy eating is a big part of recovery, and right now I battle to find help with food. I also want to go and look for part-time work so I can get a little money to get through each day. But it is hard because I don't even have a cell phone or decent pair of shoes. I have spent 10 years on the street, begging people for money and it is degrading, but it is either that or I steal or sell my body. I don't want to beg anymore, especially now that I am sober (getting there). I've been homeless because of not having money to pay rent because of illness. I mean how do get to hustle and take care of myself and feed my habit when I'm ill. Homeless - I've got no one and nowhere to go and [I] am very sick. I need to take my medication, but I can't on the streets because I don't get food. I live on the street, now if I can get a job maybe things will be brighter. I do not have a place to put my clothes, even if someone gives me [clothes]. Its stress because where to put them - they got stolen each and every day. I end up selling them if I don't have a place.



## The Commission on Narcotic Drugs, recalling its resolution 59/5 of 22 March 2016,

Expresses deep concern that, according to the World Drug Report of 2018, genderbased violence among women who use drugs is two to five times higher than among women who do not use drugs, and also that this factor contributes to the increased risk of infection with HIV and hepatitis C among women who use drugs.

Calls upon Member States to develop and implement strategies to help identify and respond to gender-based violence by providing direct support to women who use drugs or are exposed to risk factors associated with drug use and who experience sexual violence, including appropriate measures and protections as may be required to enable women who use drugs to report abuse;

## PEOPLE THAT HAVE MONEY DO DRUGS FOR FUN, WE DO DRUGS TO COPE

WITH A LOT OF THINGS. Drugs make me feel better and makes me forget all the problems I have. When I don't get drugs I feel like it's the end of the world. And I end up sleeping with men even [if] I don't feel like [it]. I almost died because of drugs. You want to sleep, but you need food and a little bag, and you turn to God to ask "where am I going to get all these things, and a blanket and anything to help me." I am constantly thinking about the next one. It's hard for me because it's not simple getting money to [use]. Sometimes I even think of selling myself to someone, just because I'm hungry and I want to [use]. Like when it's raining usually there's no plan, so that why I think of selling [myself]. You cannot stop drugs if you are on the streets. There is no chance.

### MOST OF THE TIME I FEEL ALL ALONE, **ALTHOUGH I'M AROUND PEOPLE, I can't**

open up. I must always be there for others. I would like to have more female friends, if we are raped, physically abused, or even just someone to talk to because we sometimes feel down or depressed, or even if we are sick. I am tired of being alone, I've got no friends or even a special friend, I would like to have a normal life without the men I meet that make it hard for me to open up my heart to love. Drugs are like an old friend, the other night I had a dream about pulling and they said this is your first puff in a long time, and I woke up.



### WE LOVE OUR PARTNERS WE DON'T WANT TO EMBARRASS THEM. [We're]

scared of what will happen...we might end up losing our lives. My child was going to hate me if I arrested his father. I don't [take] drugs for free especially from a man because they are always strings attached. I don't make a case on someone I love. Sometimes my boyfriend abuses me emotionally because he supports my habit of drugs. Sometimes he won't give me money to go smoke even though he knows the pain I'm going through, because he is also a drug user. [Violence] is his thing, I had to ask him if I wanted to use. My husband was the boss. My boyfriend is also using drugs and I pay for him to also buy drugs. My boyfriend assaults me when there is no money to buy drugs. Money isn't going to make him love me. [H]ow do I make money only for it to be used and abused by my boyfriend? No, *I need to value myself and my needs. [Money]* isn't gonna make anyone accept me or love me. Always maintain financial independence so that you can minimize the harm being caused. Find an enjoyable stress reliever that works for both of you don't let people especially other users dictate how your relationship should work I have to run after money then have it taken from me by force by the

man in my life. My boyfriend takes my money.

#### PERSONALLY I NEED TO BUDGET. I

survive on recycling. Money needs to work for me, not me work for money. There is a fine line between making money and becoming obsessed with money. The more I get the faster it goes. If I get it illegally then it tends to disappear as quick as sand through the hour glass. Boys take advantage of me because I was smoking they knew I always need a fix so for them to give me money *I was supposed to have sex with them for [as]* little as R20. Sometimes I sleep with people to get money for drugs which is painful and they give me small money. Men can still wash cars or be a security guard, but women cannot get those jobs and if you are a sex worker they are disrespectful.

I hate to sell my body, even if I don't want to, maybe I'm sick or tired. It's like a nightmare that won't stop because I face some challenges. You get a client that doesn't want to put a condom and hit you for that as if your life actually depends on

that R50, other client they take their money after sex that's what I hate the most take advantage that you smoke you can't even go to the police you become scared because you sell your body. Clients others are cruel they rob me my money, they don't end up paying in full amount R50 they give me

R30 telling me that they will give me R20 after sex then they run away or swear at me: "You are a prostitute you used to too many dicks, why must we pay you R50 its too much" and I've got too many needs it's not even enough, so I get terrible experience in selling my body. It's too much. I'm tired of using my body even if I don't want to, or sick, I must fuck. It's very too much for me. Please help me, please. I am tired, it's too much and painful, the money, it's not good for me. I can't even buy important things, my needs - I have to buy my wants, drugs, nyaope. One, day I'll never forget in my life, that guy fucked me three times so badly for R50 bucks, I [can] barely even walk, talk, laugh, do things for myself, being normal it was like a trauma.

BLACKJACKS ARE EX-SOLDIERS THAT ARE HIRED BY METRO POLICE TO CLEAN THE STREETS. In 2015 in Feb, I was sleeping under the trees by the harbour under the coconut. I felt something hit me, I thought a

# The United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Drugs (UNGASS) 2016, calls on member states to:

Mainstream a gender perspective into and ensure the involvement of women in all stages of the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of drug policies and programmes, develop and disseminate gender-sensitive and age-appropriate measures that take into account the specific needs and circumstances faced by women and girls.

#### It further states:

We reiterate our commitment to respecting, protecting and promoting all human rights, fundamental freedoms and the inherent dignity of all individuals and the rule of law in the development and implementation of drug policies

coconut dropped on my head, I opened my eyes and it was the blackjack security beating me. There were some men standing there shouting at them saying how can they beat a female like that. I cannot walk anymore because of that incident, and every day these security guards come back there and nobody can help me. I'm too scared to charge them because they are always there. I'm now on crutches and disabled. I was 8 months pregnant; the Blackjacks came to Greyville where I was sleeping. I was urinating under the tree because the baby was heavy on my bladder. The security took a baton and beat me with it on my head, I was bleeding. I followed him to the car and told his colleagues what he did to me. They said I was lying and they laughed and drove away. Luckily, my baby was fine.

WE NEED SOMEONE TO HELP US WITH

**OUR PROBLEMS.** When we go to the police station for help they just reject us or laugh at us, not giving us help. Even when I had a case, the police made fun of me and laughed at me. I hate not being able to open a case at a police station because I smoke drugs. SAPS and Metro have dehumanized us, and people know it, that's why they feel they can look at us like we animals. Stop searching me in public it's humiliating, even if it's a female cop. Being told to go wash my  $p^{**}s$  by a female cop after telling her you have just been raped. I got caught a couple of times by cops and did sexual favours to let me go. Cops, they sleep with me in the cells so that I can get out of jail or get money for bail. The trusted men in blue took the little bit of self-esteem I had when he sexually harassed [me]. I have lost trust in the men of peace. Last night I went to buy food, and I saw my neighbour, he asked me for R2 and I gave him, the police saw me and bribed me for my R100. They found zol

on me and when we went to the station they lied

Non-discrimination and equality further imply that States must recognize and provide for the differences and specific needs of groups that generally face particular health challenges, such as higher mortality rates or vulnerability to specific diseases. The obligation to ensure non-discrimination requires specific health standards to be applied to particular population groups...

Positive measures of protection are particularly necessary when certain groups of persons have continuously been discriminated against in the practice of States parties or by private actors.

Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights & the World Health **Organization Fact Sheet 31:** The Right to Health

and said I was a drug dealer. I slept in Sun City for two weeks and now I have a criminal record for something I didn't do. We have been abused by metro police. Physical[lly] beat[ing] us, taking clothes, even my ID. I hate not been able to open a case at a police station because I smoke drugs. Protect and serve that what they should do, if not, they should get fired.

Being beaten by the police, being homeless, no shelter, family is far away, selling my body to survive, I got TB and HIV on the street. I go to hospital to take ARVs, Metro police come and take our bags, I tell them my ARVs is there, and they say fuck off. So I think that if I go take my ARVs again then the police will just take it again. We are afraid of going to the clinic because we use



drugs and then don't take medication.

### BECAUSE OF BEING A DRUG ADDICT [SHE'S] BEEN DENIED TREATMENT BY **GOVERNMENT HEALTH CARE CENTRES** DESPITE THE FACT THAT [SHE'S] LIVING

**WITH HIV.** *I once went to a clinic with an STI.* When I got there the nurse who attended to me started asking me how I got the STI and then she started calling me names and she also called other nurses to come see me because I am a bitch and I always come with and STI because I'm a prostitute. Even if you sort out your fix, you still won't go to the clinic. I think about how long I have to sit there [at the clinic] when I could be making money. Even if you sort out your fix, you still won't go to the clinic. Certain clinics or health services tend to treat drug users with no respect. For example, if you are on drugs and had an abortion, you already feel bad and hurt because of decisions that are forced on you [and] now the sisters who are supposed to help you, end up judging you. Their tone of voice or the way they look at you is very cold. There is no compassion, just because you on drugs does not mean your heart is made of stone. It's very easy to pretend you don't care, but at the end of the day we all are still human females and it's even worse if you on drugs. I've been subjected to it and I've witnessed it. It's truly sad when you need help how they just disrespect you. I've been denied by my government health care centres, despite the fact that I'm leaving with HIV. Everybody has the right to be

Preventing the transmission of HIV/ AIDS among people who inject drugs is an essential component to reducing HIV/AIDS infections and related deaths. Globally, one of the main drivers of the AIDS epidemic is has been and still is the transmission through the sharing of injecting equipment. The right to health of individuals dependant on opioids directly relates to the availability and non-discriminatory access to treatment, including opiate substitution therapy with internationally controlled substances, such as methadone and buprenorphine

### International Narcotics Control Board

The use of internationally controlled drugs for the treatment of opioid dependence

treated with respect and it's their duty, or should be, to be professional.

#### THERE IS A LOT OF SHARING OF

**NEEDLES**. Ever since I have shared needles I have infections and sores. If you share needles with a person who has HIV it increases the likelihood of acquiring HIV. People are fighting over needles - If you don't want to share, they become aggressive and become ugly people. It hurts when we sharing and using an old needles, it's sore and painful to get the needle in. People don't want to get HIV tested. The person does not share their HIV status and you end up getting HIV because you need to use that needle. Before, I was always in need of needles - to feed my habit it was a must to share one needle [with] as many as we were and in the process we were infecting



for people who use drugs'
recommends that all countries:

Fully implement comprehensive harm
Fully implement comprehensive harm
reduction and HIV services - including
needle-syringe programmes, opioid
substitution therapy, naloxone and safe
consumption rooms—on a scale that can

Fully implement comprehensive harm reduction and HIV services - including needle-syringe programmes, opioid substitution therapy, naloxone and safe consumption rooms—on a scale that can be easily, voluntarily and confidentially accessed by all people who use drugs, including within prisons and other closed settings.

The 2019 UNAIDS report Health,
'Rights and Drugs: harm reduction,
decriminalization & zero discrimination

Ensure that all people who are drug dependent have access to noncoercive and evidence-informed drug dependence treatment that is consistent with international human rights standards. All forms of compulsory drug and HIV testing and compulsory drug treatment should be replaced with voluntary schemes.

Find practical solutions to these challenges during the roll-out of universal health coverage schemes, states should ensure that civil society groups led by people who inject drugs participate meaningfully in health governance.

someone that cares, like a crisis centre for users; we need to talk about this, we need to do this at least once a month as females. More women in

one another with HIV. Sharing needles is not nice, people that give us needles they help us too much because we not sharing needles. [Government] must help us when we are sick, give us treatment, not to stigmatise us. When you are sick you have to call the ambulance 6 times because you have no address. Some people die One of our friends died and we called the police van, and we told them, and the cops said "you are smoking nyaope" and they left us they whole day with our dead friend. If someone passes away the ambulance takes three to four hours. I need another way of stopping.

I WAS ONCE IN REHAB, but when [I] got out, on the same day I went straight to the dealer and started using again. My solution is that rehab must have proper medication for us to drink if we would have a place or something to do after rehab. It will be better because it won't be simple to smoke again when you have to, but if you don't have them [medication] is simple for you go back and smoke. In government rehab you are not given time in rehab because you have to make space for others. [Rehabilitation centres] must provide full medication, a perfect one like methadone. Give us a safe space to chat with



The global campaign for primary health care and universal health coverage should give special attention to the needs of people who use drugs, as their extreme marginalization makes their experiences a litmus test for the success of these broader efforts.

#### **UN AIDS**

power with women empowerment. Government should build more shelters appropriate for women. We can't get shelter and facilities because they have too much rules for us [drug users]. We will like to have a safe space as woman, [where we can] sleep/stay and hang out/safe place to inject. If such programs can start by opening the DICs to women who use drugs once a week, focusing on their needs, and then evaluate attendance at regular intervals to assess the demand, they would be able to identify whether providing such services more frequently is necessary. Mobile clinic [for] visiting at our home and bring medication for those [that] are sick and can't collect for themselves.

I feel training in assertive skills is important. People empowering themselves in their human rights so one knows the law. Government should build more shelters appropriate for women. I would love to see a facility centre that caters for women only. From family problems, women doing drugs, health care, mental health etc... and women staff only, no men!

When an addict decided to come clean and change their life it's very difficult to find a job - One of the issues are the person interviewing you wants to know why there is such a large [gap] in your CV (i.e. what were you doing?) You can't exactly say, well I was.....you won't get the job.

I was at a drug centre for 6 weeks and trying to get myself together. When I went back my family did not believe me, and I had tried to stop, and they accused me of still doing drugs, so I said "what the hell" and I started again.

Everything [is hard], getting water, finding a toilet, washing, having clothes to wear, cleaning, eating, seeing with no electricity. My life is in danger. I live [on] the street so we meet with a lot of challenges. We get raped sometimes without [a] condom - some of them they are rough. So life is a challenge. **I fight back.** 

## **Getting started**

The hardest job it seems,
is just to make a start.
Even when desire is strong,
This is always the toughest part.

You put off things that should be done.
You wrestle with fear and doubt
But the only way your ship comes in,
Is once you send it out.

The time to do it is always now,
you can't have a doubting heart.
So once the first has begun,
the things you thought you couldn't do
Have already been halfway done.

~Catherine Botha

Poem written by a participant from the dialogues. She asked to have her real name used in this poem



# Findings, Recommendations and next steps

The findings revealed in this report, and the companion report, show that women who use drugs suffer human rights abuses at all levels. Key findings include the existence of extreme levels of sexual violence and sexual rights violations experienced by women who use drugs and women who inject drugs and high levels of stigma among service providers, leading to denial to access health services. Another phenomenon is the physical violence and aggression during law enforcement and security raids and forced removals, as well as sexual favours required by law enforcement agencies. Issues related to continuity of care have also been raised, where medical treatment is interrupted at the times of arrest and when belongings are confiscated, especially for streetdwelling female drug users.

For this unacceptable level of trauma and abuse experienced by women who use drugs, there has to be a response, and there has to be sustained change to ensure that we do not fail the research participants, women who use drugs in general and women collectively. The research

participants made some suggestions based on their immediate needs:

- The development of safe, functional spaces (drop in centres) where women can meet, receive counselling, training, skills development and share experiences with each other.
- Women-only shelters, spaces to securely store personal items, ablutions, basic healthcare and nutrition.
- A continuum of low threshold, nonstigmatizing health and harm reduction services, including needle and syringe services, and evidence-based interventions to help resolution of drug dependence, including medication such as methadone, and continued support services.
- Access to law enforcement they can trust and confidence that due process will take place and a cessation of police violence.
- A mutually supportive community of women who use drugs.

The facilitators and authors believe that more must be done. We call for immediate changes at the level of interaction between women who use drugs, and law enforcement, health workers, service providers, families and partners, women who use drugs will continue to suffer. We need people to hear their stories and to take action in whatever way they can, right now. People need to be aware of what is happening and take accountability for their role in actively or passively, intentionally or unintentionally letting this happen.

# OUR KEY RECOMMENDATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS ARE:

- 1. Women who use drugs are encouraged and must be assisted to form networks of like-minded women to support each other, and defend their rights collectively and individually. This should be facilitated by the Department of Social Development.
- 2. Women who use drugs must be consulted and included in local, regional and national policy making processes that impact and involve the women who use drugs community. Where excluded, civil Society organisations must represent the voices of women who use drugs in spaces they are not heard, and facilitate their inclusion

- Organisations and services that exclude, stigmatise or do not respect the rights of women who use drugs must be held accountable and be monitored.
- 4. An immediate shift in the priorities of the police and other law enforcement agencies away from 'drug related crime', specifically the possession and use of drugs, towards violent crime and crimes against women and other members of the community. This an essential first step toward sensible drug policy. The targets for increased arrests for drug crime and use must be scrapped immediately.
- 5. Simultaneously, an inter-sectoral task force convened by Government at a National level must evaluate the current drug laws that criminalise the use of drugs, and then produce recommendations on how to address the realities women who use drugs face.
- 6. Women in positons of authority and who have influence from within law enforcement, other government departments and stakeholders that stigmatise and exclude people who used drugs should ensure that the people under their authority are held accountable for their actions, particularly acts of violence.





