



FACT SHEET from the EU drugs agency in Lisbon

8 MARCH: INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Women's voices — experiences and perceptions of women facing drug problems

(5.3.2009, LISBON) A collection of narratives from women facing drug-related problems in Europe is released by the **EMCDDA** today ahead of **International Women's Day (8 March)**. It is estimated that around one in four drug users entering treatment is female, and that women account for one in five drug-related deaths. Yet most drug services today are designed with male drug users in mind, as they remain the predominant client group.

Epidemiological studies routinely collect quantitative data on gender differences in drug use (e.g. prevalence, mortality), but far less is published on the qualitative aspects of female drug problems. In this optic, today's review — **Women's voices** — presents quotations gleaned from interviews with women in eight countries. Through these testimonies, the report illustrates how qualitative research can provide glimpses into the experiences and perceptions of women facing drug issues that statistics alone cannot provide.

It is widely recognised that drug policy and programme effectiveness are enhanced when gender differences are acknowledged and the needs of both sexes addressed. In November 2008, an EMCDDA expert group agreed that drug treatment guidelines should take account of 'service-user views' in order to understand treatment needs and plan appropriate responses.

The quotations, selected from grey literature (e.g. research studies, government reports) focus mainly on women in their role as mothers, sex workers or prisoners, and on their vulnerabilities related to physical and sexual abuse.

Some of the quotations highlighted today are invocations by women for better services to alleviate their drug problems and provide them with necessary social support. Others are calls to reduce the stigma imposed on them and to recognise their achievements in controlling their drug use and fulfilling their social roles.

The testimonies gathered do not claim to represent the situation of all drug-using women in Europe. They do, however, illustrate an overarching theme: the struggle that female drug users face in fulfilling their social roles and the need for holistic interventions for female drug users.

According to the **EMCDDA**, qualitative research focuses on the meanings, perceptions, process and context of drug service users (and potential users) and offers a way to understand their needs and plan responses. As one expert cited in the report affirms ⁽¹⁾: 'Gender-responsive policies and programming for women do not fall from the sky. They are anchored in "Nothing about us without us" principles, with systematic inclusion of women drug users in the design, planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluation of policies, strategies and programmes'.

Notes:

⁽¹⁾ Hankins, C (2008), 'Sex, drugs and gender? High-time for lived experience to inform action', *International Journal of Drug Policy*, Volume 19, Issue 2, editorial, pp 95–96.

For more, see *Women's voices* at <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/thematic-papers/womens-voices>

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