

# Second on the needle: Two-level strategy for claiming the rights of women who use drugs

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## Intersection of two human rights crises

- **People who use drugs face extensive human rights abuse with impunity in many cases, often condoned by law.**
- **Subordination of women doesn't stop when women use drugs.**
- **“Good woman” syndrome heavily affects women who use drugs.**



## **People who use drugs face frequent human rights abuse**

- **Police harassment, unlawful arrest to fill quotas, extortion**
- **Harsh penalties for minor crimes**
- **Violations of due process**
- **Interrogation amounting to torture**
- **Forced detox and forced HIV and drug testing**
- **Extralegal measures justified in name of “war on drugs”**

## Gaps in data on women who use drugs

- **Few countries have good data on % people who use drugs who are women**
- **Important gender differences:**
  - **Body composition, metabolism → smaller quantities of drugs, greater impact**
  - **Higher % of women addicted to anti-depressant, anti-anxiety, weight loss drugs; prescription patterns?**
  - **Higher % of women introduced to drugs by sexual partner, have partner who uses**
  - **History of sexual, other abuse?**

## **More often “second on the needle”**

- **Women in many settings more likely to share injection equipment**
- **More likely to require or seek assistance in injecting**
- **More likely to inject with a sexual partner; ability to assert need for clean injection equipment may be compromised**

## Barriers to drug treatment

- **Fear of loss of custody of children**
- **No expectation of women-oriented services**
- **Children not allowed in facility or no child-care; inconvenient hours**
- **Pregnant women fear child will be taken away from them (amenorrhea of drug use → pregnancy hard to discern; services sought late)**
- **Criminalization of sex work (overlap with drug use varies)**



## **Criminalization of women who use drugs**

- **Women often can't or won't make deals with prosecutors re their sexual partners; may receive harsh sentences for auxiliary roles in drug offenses**
- **Women often excluded from community service, other alternatives to prison because child-care not provided**
- **Women-friendly services often not offered in criminal justice systems**

## **Solutions: Program level**

- **Participation of women in design, implementation of programs**
- **Women counselors, hot-line staff; links to domestic violence and reproductive health services**
- **Women-friendly and child-friendly services; services for pregnant women not based on guilt; give pregnant women and parents priority in opiate substitution**
- **In safe injection facilities, ways to assist injection**

## **Broader solutions: Peace in the “war on drugs”**

- **Urgent need for alternatives to hyper-criminalization of drug use**
- **Urgent need for UN to stand up to US and others with repressive approaches; UN drug control mechanisms are broken**
- **“Like-minded countries” need to lead both by example and by urgent action for reform**
- **Meaningful participation by people who use drugs in programs and policies**



# **Human rights and HIV/AIDS: *Now more than ever!***

# About the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network

The Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network ([www.aidslaw.ca](http://www.aidslaw.ca)) promotes the human rights of people living with and vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, in Canada and internationally, through research, legal and policy analysis, education, and community mobilization. The Legal Network is Canada's leading advocacy organization working on the legal and human rights issues raised HIV/AIDS.



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