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PRESS RELEASE

INCB REPORT CALLS FOR DRUG POLICIES THAT TAKE WOMEN INTO ACCOUNT, AS COUNTRIES REGISTER DISPROPORTIONATE RISE IN OVERDOSES AMONG FEMALES

In its 2016 Annual Report, the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB):

- Calls for gender-sensitive drug policies and programmes, better health-care access for drug-dependent women and more funding to prevent and treat drug abuse among women
- Condemns the extrajudicial targeting of people suspected of illicit drug-related activity
- Calls on States to abolish the death penalty for drug-related offences
- Encourages States to consider alternatives to imprisonment for minor drug-related offences
- Reaffirms that legalizing cannabis for non-medical use is incompatible with international legal obligations

At a time when countries are reporting a disproportionate increase in drug overdoses among women, the Vienna-based INCB in its Annual Report for 2016 is calling on Governments to do more to take women into account in their drug policies and programmes.

INCB stresses in its Report, published today, that Governments should give priority to providing health-care access for drug-dependent women and calls for more funding and coordination to prevent and treat drug abuse among women.

INCB President Werner Sipp said: “We want to change perceptions and remind people, particularly policymakers, of the importance of protecting the rights of women who use drugs or who have committed drug-related offences and the rights of their families.”

Women and girls comprise one third of global drug users, with levels of drug use higher among women in high-income countries. However, just one fifth of treatment recipients are women, as significant systemic, structural, social, cultural and personal barriers affect women’s ability to access substance abuse treatment.

Compared to men, women are more likely to be prescribed narcotics and anti-anxiety medication, and are consequently more likely to abuse such medication. For example, Germany and Serbia have reported that fatal overdoses from prescription drugs are more frequent among women. Additionally, countries such as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland have seen larger increases in overdoses, of all substances, among women than among men.



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Number of women arrested for drug-related crimes has increased significantly

Female prisoners and sex workers are at particular risk of drug use. There has been a significant increase in the number of women arrested for drug-related crimes and, once imprisoned, drug use is more prevalent among female prisoners than male prisoners. Also, there is a strong link between sex-work and drug use. Some women turn to sex-work as a means to support a drug-dependent lifestyle, while sex workers may use drugs to cope with the demands and nature of their work.

HIV infections and mental health disorders are more prevalent among women who abuse drugs. For female prisoners in particular, separation from their communities, homes and families has a considerably detrimental impact and increases the risk of depression and anxiety disorders.

The Report also highlights the importance of prevention programmes targeted specifically at prisoners, pregnant women, people living with HIV/AIDS and sex workers. INCB calls on Member States to collect and share data to reach a better understanding of the specific needs of women affected by drug abuse, to improve prevention, treatment and rehabilitation.

Alternatives to imprisonment for drug-related offences remain underutilized

Although the three international drug control treaties are founded upon a balanced approach, the principle of proportionality and respect for human rights, in many States policies to address drug-related offences, including possession for personal use, rely primarily on punitive criminal justice responses, which include prosecution and imprisonment. Alternative measures such as treatment, rehabilitation and social integration remain underutilized.

INCB emphasizes that the drug control treaties do not require for people who use drugs or those who commit minor drug-related offences to be imprisoned.

The Board encourages States that have witnessed high rates of arrest and imprisonment for minor drug-related offences to adopt non-punitive responses rather than permitting the use of cannabis for non-medical purposes, which may prove counterproductive and which is not in conformity with the drug control treaties. INCB welcomes the move by many States to recognize drug use and dependency as a public health concern requiring health-centred responses.

INCB calls on States to abolish the death penalty for drug-related offences

Although it is up to the States to determine sanctions for drug-related offences, the Board continues to encourage States that retain capital punishment to consider the abolition of the death penalty for drug-related offences.



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Extrajudicial targeting of people suspected of illicit drug-related activity

The Board reiterates, in the strongest possible terms, its categorical and unequivocal condemnation of the extrajudicial targeting of people suspected of illicit drug-related activity. Such targeting constitutes a clear breach of the three international drug control conventions which require criminal justice responses to drug-related offences and reject extrajudicial sanctions of whatever nature. It also constitutes a serious violation of human rights, including due process norms as contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and is an affront to the most basic standards of human dignity.

The Board calls upon all Governments concerned to put an immediate stop to such actions and to investigate any person who is suspected of having committed, participated in, encouraged or incited any such extrajudicial actions.

Legalizing cannabis for non-medical use is incompatible with international legal obligations

The Board maintains a dialogue with States that have allowed or are considering the non-medical use of cannabis and the creation of a market for cannabis products for non-medical use. INCB reaffirms that such measures are incompatible with the legal obligations as set out in the 1961 Single Convention.

While the conventions provide for some flexibility in their implementation, the INCB President says: “Flexibility has its limits; it does not extend to the regulation of the non-medical use of drugs.” States parties have to determine how to respond to the developments in those countries which disregard the treaties by permitting and regulating the non-medical use of drugs.

Drug consumption rooms

For “drug consumption rooms” to be consistent with the conventions, they must aim at effectively reducing the negative consequences of drug abuse and lead to treatment and rehabilitation, without condoning or encouraging drug abuse and drug trafficking.

INCB calls for sustained support to Afghanistan

Due to the dire security situation in Afghanistan and the related difficulties for the authorities to monitor and control the illicit supply of drugs originating from the country, the Board has called upon partner Governments and the international community to sustain their support for drug control efforts in the country, in the spirit of their common and shared responsibility to address the world drug problem. The Board has emphasized that action against drugs is vital if sustainable development is to be achieved.