



# news release

from the EU drugs agency in Lisbon

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## **Annual report on drugs in the EU – 2000**

### **WOMEN DRUG USERS FACE GREATER STIGMA THAN MEN**

#### **Agency calls for more tailor-made responses to their needs**

Women drug users face a greater stigma than men, according to the *Annual report on the state of the drugs problem in the European Union*, out today from the Lisbon-based EU drugs agency, the EMCDDA. The report calls for more tailor-made responses to take account of their special problems and needs.

The agency says drug use is seen as incompatible with a woman's role. A key element is motherhood. Women fear being labelled 'unfit' mothers and having their children removed if they enrol for treatment.

This, the EMCDDA adds, means that women drug users face more barriers than men in obtaining treatment relevant to their needs.

These challenging findings emerge from a special focus in the report on the specific problems of women and drugs – and the differences between the sexes.

The agency concludes that the limited information available shows that, while responses to male drug use tend to focus on its crime-related impact, those relating to women appear more motivated by concerns about the impact of their drug use on others – on children whose mothers are users...and on men where the users are sex workers.

#### **Differences between the sexes**

Today's report says female drug users commit less property crime than men, more often supporting their habit through the sex industry. Sex work can be an established source of income, in some cases for up to 60% of women.

Sex workers' potential to spread infectious diseases to clients has always caused concern, it adds. And the connection between female drug use and sex work has almost certainly contributed to growth in harm-reduction and treatment services for female drug users.

The EMCDDA says women-specific drug issues so far have not been systematically examined by EU drug-information systems. But most Member States do have specialised programmes of varying extent and focus – and a number of facilities for women have been established providing shelter, information and practical advice on safer sex and safer drug use.

Twelve Member States offer programmes addressing the needs of female sex workers who use drugs. **Ireland, Spain** and the **UK** report several such programmes, whereas none is reported from **Belgium** and **Finland**.

Overall, says the report, men use illicit drugs more than women. However, differences in drug use between the sexes are complex – such as the issues surrounding the sex industry and male pressure on young girls.

A problem for women highlighted by the agency is girls experimenting with drugs earlier than boys. This is 'generally the result of girls having older boyfriends who might encourage them to try drugs'. With this in mind, in **Austria, Germany** and **Sweden**, drug-prevention is oriented specifically towards very young women and schoolgirls. 'These initiatives often focus on female identity and how to refuse offers of drugs from boyfriends or other male peers.'

Between ages 15 and 16, boys and girls tend to experiment equally with cannabis. By 20 to 24 there is more male than female use.

Gender differences in reported drug use in the past 12 months and in use of specific drugs are even more marked. And, as girls grow older, further differences between the sexes appear and strengthen.

In contrast to illegal drugs, use of medicines such as benzodiazepine is more common among women, with the difference increasing with age. The social stigma is lower, although the health risks of regular use of such medicines are considerable.

Anecdotal (non-scientific) reports from **France, Germany, Ireland** and the **UK** suggest some concern that HIV and hepatitis B infection is rising among some female drug users. This, it has been suggested, results from riskier injecting behaviour by women or unprotected sex.

### **Protecting babies from drugs**

In all Member States, pregnant women are offered a 'fast track' to drug treatment. In **Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Ireland, Portugal** and **Sweden** specialist services have been developed specifically for them. But, for many, regular maternity care is incompatible with their lifestyle – or they fear stigmatisation if they attend.

The agency declares: 'The growing number of children born to drug users run a high risk of developing drug problems themselves, and how children are affected...is an emerging concern.'

The extent to which children remain with drug-using mothers varies widely across the **EU**. Clear policies on childcare provision are either not yet developed or not standardised in practice.

### **Fewer women than men in treatment**

The ratio of female to male drug users in treatment tends to be less than 1:3. Such women tend to be younger than men and their proportion falls with age. Rather than implying that women are treated more successfully, the figures are generally thought to under-represent women with drug problems.

The report explains that a key reason for low representation of women in drug treatment is motherhood – many female clients have at least one child and are often too occupied with childcare to follow a programme. Or they fear being stigmatised and labelled 'unfit' as a mother and having their children removed if they enrol.

### **Women and drugs in prison**

Today's report says the number of women prisoners in Europe is rising steadily. In **Spain**, it has almost tripled in the last 10 years. Although a smaller proportion of convicted drug offenders is female, data from **Ireland** and the **UK** reveal significant levels of problem drug use in women on entry to prison. This mainly involves heroin, methadone and benzodiazepine. Guidelines for

treating benzodiazepine dependence to prevent dangers of sudden withdrawal do not appear as well developed as those for opiates.

The **EMCDDA** notes that treatment facilities in women's prisons vary. It says only a few countries – such as **Germany** and **Portugal** – provide specific services in women's prisons, even though a high percentage of female prisoners use drugs. In **Portugal**, two prisons provide kindergartens enabling children to remain with their mothers.

#### Notes to editors

1. The **Annual report on the state of the drugs problem in the European Union** may be downloaded from the **EMCDDA's** website on **Wednesday 11 October at 12 noon (CET)**:  
[http://www.emcdda.org/publications/publications\\_annrep.shtml](http://www.emcdda.org/publications/publications_annrep.shtml)  
or <http://emcdda.kpnqwest.pt>
2. Other aspects of today's report are highlighted in two separate news releases which can also be downloaded on **Wednesday 11 October at 12 noon (CET)**:  
<http://www.emcdda.org/press/press.shtml>
  - **Problem drug use – changing trends (main release)**
  - **Substitution treatment expanding EU-wide – 'but still under-evaluated and patchy' (special-focus release)**

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