

Harm Reduction International welcomes the Committee's decision to focus on women's access to justice, and would like to take this opportunity to raise important issues relating to women in contact with the criminal justice system, and the disproportionate amount imprisoned for non-violent drug offences.

Women who come into contact with criminal justice system are usually those that are most disadvantaged. Often these women are from marginalised communities and their contact with the criminal justice system must be understood in a context of social deprivation, lack of education and economic marginalisation.

However, governments around the world are relying on criminal laws to address these social and economic problems. The results are clear.

In Europe and Central Asia There are more than 120,000 women in prisons on any given day – one in four for drug offences. In Russia alone 20,000 women are imprisoned for non-violent drug offences, more than twice all EU countries combined. In Argentina, 87% of women in prison are there for drug offences. In Peru – 67%, Costa Rica - 64%.

Drug offences are not committed in a social or economic vacuum. Incarcerating of women for minor drug offences serves neither their needs nor those of society.

Given a range of social pressures, women – and particularly women who use drugs - are reluctant to access the formal justice chain and even more, try to avoid contacts with the state functions. These women face widespread stigma, discrimination and abuse either in society in the hands of police or in prisons. Access to justice must mean more than accessing the existing justice system when that system is abusive, discriminatory, or fundamentally broken.

- Harm Reduction International encourages the Committee to examine issues related to women in contact with the criminal justice system in the context of access to justice, social deprivation and marginalisation.
- We urge the Committee to consider drug offences as a priority within this discussion, given the sheer scale of arrests, prosecutions and imprisonment for such offences.
- We would also urge the Committee to analyse national drug laws and policies as they impact on women's rights under the Convention, in periodic reporting of States parties.
- We believe that the day of discussion on these broad and complex issues would be an important step forward in improving attention to women's rights in drug control.