

THE MISSING LINK: WHY INDIA'S HARM REDUCTION EFFORTS MUST ADDRESS WOMEN'S UNIQUE NEEDS

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Background:

Women who use drugs (WUD) in India face a unique set of challenges shaped by deep-rooted stigma, gender-based violence, and systemic barriers to healthcare and harm reduction services. While harm reduction interventions have expanded in the country, they remain largely male-centric, failing to address the specific needs of WUD. As a result, women experience heightened risks of HIV, hepatitis C, sexual and reproductive health complications, alongside social exclusion and criminalization. This paper examines the intersectional barriers that limit access to harm reduction services for WUD in India.

Methods:

A desk review was undertaken to understand the challenges faced by WUD and provision of services for them. Further, a qualitative study was done among 36 WUD in a city of Central India to understand their perspective, needs and concerns.

Results:

The findings highlight multiple systemic and socio-cultural barriers limiting access to harm reduction services for WUD. Participants reported high levels of stigma from healthcare providers, resulting in reluctance to seek medical. Fear of police harassment and punitive drug policies further discouraged women from accessing harm reduction programs, with some facing arbitrary detention or coercion into abstinence-based rehabilitation centers.

Structural barriers such as the absence of women-friendly harm reduction services, lack of childcare support, and the dual burden of caregiving responsibilities were significant deterrents to consistent engagement with healthcare services. Many participants also cited experiences of gender-based violence within intimate relationships and public spaces, further exacerbating their social isolation and mental health distress.

Conclusion:

To ensure equitable access to harm reduction, India must move towards inclusive policies that decriminalize drug use, expand gender-sensitive health services, and foster community engagement. Centering the voices of WUD in policymaking and program design is essential to achieving better health outcomes and upholding human rights in the country's harm reduction response.