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**DEVELOPING DRUG POLICIES WITH GENDER AWARENESS: THE
URUGUAYAN EXPERIENCE**

Developing drug policies with gender awareness: the Uruguayan experience

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**Uruguay
Presidencia**



**Junta Nacional
de Drogas**
Salud, Libertad y Solidaridad



**Ministerio
de Desarrollo
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Mujeres**

Approach and paradigm

The National Drugs Board (JND) has outlined a strategy based on conceiving the drug problem as a complex and dynamic phenomenon, rooted in social, economic, political, and cultural factors, that affects people's fundamental rights.

The approach to public drug policies requires a comprehensive and balanced focus, centered on people and communities, with a crosscutting human rights and gender perspective that provides an ethical framework for the various rules, plans, strategies, and actions to be developed.

“Particular emphasis is placed on improving people’s accessibility to services from a perspective of gender and intersectionality (cross-referenced with other categories of analysis such as ethnic and racial origin, socioeconomic status, sexual diversity, generations, and so on.)” – END, 2021-2025.



Gender and drug policies

We start by defining **GENDER** as a relational category that encompasses women, men, and people of other identities, together with the ways in which they relate to each other.

Gender is “a set of beliefs, prescriptions, and attributions that are socially constructed on the basis of sexual difference” (Lamas, 2005).

It involves the symbolic and social representations of what it means within a culture to be male or female, together with the expectations that are built in relation to them (gender stereotypes).

How do these stereotypes come into play in drug use?

Drug use by women tends to be frowned upon while drug use by men is tolerated. In the first case it goes against expectations in terms of the caregiving role and, in the other, it contributes to expectations in terms of the construction of hegemonic masculinity. This leads to suffering, pressure, and social censure.



Gender and mental health

The main objective is **to integrate and re-signify mental health**, within the concept of integrality and denaturalization of gender stereotypes.

The mental health perspective (a theoretical-analytical construct) must therefore be explicitly and strategically incorporated into the actions undertaken in relation to the emerging and crosscutting demands made of public policies.

It implies **recognizing health problems that affect women**, identifying the possible negative impacts (emotional, physical, social, relational), considering their life trajectories, and examining the contexts in which they live their lives.

Taking account of the material, cultural, and social conditions of health allows us to **redesign our interventions** and enables the construction of full citizenship. This requires an understanding of the concept of integrality in health, where social determinants can encourage or hinder women's full development and autonomy.



Incorporating a gender perspective into drug policies allows:

- Making inequalities visible
- Denaturalizing stereotypes
- Devising specific responses to ensure that gaps are narrowed
- Avoiding stigmatization and discrimination
- Better services and attention for the emerging needs of the target population





Inter-institutional work as a tool for integral and complex approaches

Since 2020, the National Drugs Board and Inmujeres have been implementing an interconnected effort that involves:

“establishing mutual commitments to plan joint actions for the incorporation of the human rights approach, with an emphasis on the gender perspective and risk and harm reduction, into the way public policies approach treatment for problem drug use.”

- **Installing a Permanent Advisory Panel to analyze the relevant reports and recommendations.**
- **Training technical and non-technical staff of Inmujeres and the National Drugs Board in topics specific to each institution.**
- **Joint planning of an annual plan.**
- Raising public awareness of the rights of drug users.
- Promoting venues for dialogue with civil society and public and private institutions.
- Facilitating the generation of knowledge.



Stigmatization of women who use drugs and some of its manifestations

- Greater social censure for the same behavior.
- Validation of some forms of consumption and censure of others (suffering/pleasure).
- Negative impacts silenced and rendered invisible.
- Barriers to resource access.
- Help sought for other people and not for themselves.
- Criminalization of women's actions.



Approaches and lines of action: toward a new paradigm

- Generation of knowledge using differentiated methodologies that avoid expressing opinions and collect the experiences of women users.
- Review of the resources for attention from a gender perspective.
- Creation of more and new responses, based on proximity, integrality, and intersectionality.
- Training of technical teams: review of ethical positions (avoiding moralizing discourse and prejudices) and redesign of practices (intersectional approach, comprehensive approach).
- Venues for participation aimed at women and gender-diverse people, to uphold rights and create measures to combat stigmatization.
- Review of current regulations and promotion of the use of alternative measures to incarceration for substance possession offenses.
- Raising the profile of, reflecting on, and adopting measures based on state responsibility.



By way of closing...

The *effect of punishments* on women's bodies, when they deviate from what is expected and their assigned roles, can be seen in institutional practices, in technical interventions, in social mandates, in the medicalization of their bodies, and in the recognition of that or the absence thereof.

It can also be seen in the construction of devices to control deviations from what is understood as correct for women and what is expected of them.

This leads us to think about those women who have adapted and the effects of that adaptation, when it is not desired but reproduced... what happens to their bodies and their life paths because of what "is expected" of them.



Thank you very much!

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