

# Beijing 25+: Realizing Gender Equality and the Empowerment of All Women and Girls

## Joint CND & CCPCJ Virtual Event

*Statement by the International Drug Policy Consortium, Penal Reform International and Washington Office on Latin America*

Women and girls in prisons and other places of detention are amongst the most left behind in view of the Beijing Declaration and the SDGs. In the context of COVID-19, they have become silenced and pushed out of sight even more.

Women and girls are being imprisoned at a rapidly increasing rate. From about 2000 to 2017, the overall prison population around the world increased by about 20% but the numbers of women and girls in prison went up by over 50%. The proportion of women incarcerated for drug offences is significantly higher than that of men, with some of the highest to be found in Latin America and South East Asia.<sup>i</sup> In too many cases, women are sentenced under criminal justice systems that impose disproportionate penalties, do not take account of women's situation of vulnerability, and do not heed calls to remove punishment for poverty-related crimes, including those by the UNODC, WHO, UNAIDS and OHCHR to remove punishment for drug use and instead, to follow health and human rights-based approaches.

While in prison, many women face human rights violations, including gender-based sexual abuse, and their unique needs are overlooked. They face problems with managing their drug dependence and mental health problems which are often linked to histories of abuse and trauma, vulnerability to sexual abuse by correctional personnel and other prisoners, reproductive healthcare needs, being separated from their children and being unable to maintain contact with family members; a problem that has worsened during COVID-19 due to the lockdown of prisons in the majority of countries. When they come out of prison, it is more difficult for women who have been in prison to find employment, housing and financial support, due to the high level of stigma attached to crime and imprisonment.

Despite the rising numbers of women, international standards such as the Bangkok Rules, which calls for the use of non-custodial measures including for women who use drugs, are largely not implemented. While there have been initiatives to release people from prison, women do not appear to have benefited much from them. For example in Colombia, where 45% of women are in prison for drugs compared with 12% of men, people in prison for drug-related offences are not eligible for release mechanisms that were set up to relieve overcrowded prisons and prevent the spread of COVID-19.

To help ensure that women in prison, women who use drugs and women involved in drug supply are not further left behind, but included in the commitments made in the Beijing Declaration and Sustainable Development Goals, we urge Member States to include all women and girls in:

- a. Any measures to reduce the numbers of people in prisons and places of detention, and to protect people in prison from COVID-19

- b. The collection and disaggregation of data on the impact of COVID-19 on women in prison
- c. Provisions of support, including housing and financial, to ensure the safety of women released from prison and detention
- d. Ensuring access to mental healthcare and contact with the outside world for women and girls in prison, and children held with them
- e. The implementation of non-custodial measures, especially for any drug offence, and
- f. Enabling the voices of women with lived experience of prison, detention and the criminal justice system, and civil society organisations, to be heard and included in decision-making processes about drug policies and criminal justice systems.

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<sup>1</sup> Penal Reform International and Linklaters, *Sentencing of women convicted of drug related offences* (2020), at 8. [https://cdn.penalreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/LinklatersPRI\\_Sentencing-of-women-convicted-of-drug-related-offences\\_WEB.pdf](https://cdn.penalreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/LinklatersPRI_Sentencing-of-women-convicted-of-drug-related-offences_WEB.pdf)