

Kowalczyk | Steimle | Grabski [Eds.]

Invisible and Ignored

Women and Drugs in Central Asia



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Introduction: Women Who Use Drugs in Central Asia – Navigating a Complex Reality

Katarzyna Kinga Kowalczyk, Larissa Steimle, Anna Meryem Grabski

The idea for this book was conceived during the SOLID project. SOLID, which stands for *Social work and strengthening NGOs in development co-operation to treat addiction*, is an international research project coordinated by the Frankfurt Institute of Addiction Research and funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for the period 2020-2024. The project focused on educational and research exchange between five research institutions from Germany, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and China. Over the course of four years, we had the privilege of exploring the Central Asian region and, most importantly, connecting with its people and hearing their stories. Among them were many women from diverse backgrounds and professions, each facing unique challenges.

Due to the nature of the project, many of the women we encountered were living with HIV and/or using drugs. It was with them in mind that we decided to create this publication. Women who use drugs represent one of the most stigmatized key populations, yet they are often excluded from research and reports. Their experiences remain largely invisible and their voices unheard. This book aims to change that narrative.

In the diverse and rapidly evolving region of Central Asia, the lives of women who use drugs are shaped by a unique set of social, cultural, and legal challenges. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, countries like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan have undergone significant transitions in their political and economic structures. However, these changes have often exacerbated the vulnerability of marginalized groups, particularly women who use drugs and women living with HIV (Chapters 2-6). This book aims to shed light on the experiences of these women, exploring the intersections of gender, drug use, and social marginalization in Central Asia.

The social environment in Central Asian countries continues to be influenced by deeply rooted patriarchal norms and traditional values, which often dictate the roles and expectations of women (Chapters 2-6). Despite progress in areas such as education and employment, women in the region

are still predominantly viewed through the lens of family responsibilities and moral guardianship. For women who deviate from these societal expectations – particularly those who use drugs – the consequences are severe. They face heightened stigma, social exclusion, and even violence, which further restricts their access to essential services, including healthcare, harm reduction, and legal protection (Chapters 2-6,9).

The issue of the “Double Stigma”

The situation for women who use drugs is further complicated by what scholars refer to as a "double stigma" - being marginalized not only for their substance use but also for challenging the traditional gender norms that prevail in Central Asian societies. This compounded stigma results in discrimination, both from the public and from within their communities. Women are often perceived as failing in their roles as mothers, caregivers, and upholders of moral values, which exacerbates their social isolation and reduces their access to harm reduction services and treatment (Chapters 2-9).

In Uzbekistan, for example, women who use drugs or are living with HIV face intense social pressures and often remain hidden due to fear of retribution and ostracism. Despite the presence of organizations that strive to support women living with HIV, the services available are limited and often do not cater specifically to the needs of women. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, access to opioid agonist therapy and needle exchange programs remains limited, and the requirements for daily visits to clinics pose significant barriers, especially for women with caregiving responsibilities (Chapter 2-4,9).

Barriers to Accessing Services

The barriers that women face in accessing treatment and support services are multifaceted. Legal restrictions, cultural taboos, and the fear of losing custody of their children are significant deterrents. In many cases, women are denied access to shelters and crisis centers due to discriminatory practices that exclude individuals with a history of drug use.

Moreover, punitive drug laws in countries like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan not only criminalize drug possession but also exacerbate the vulnerability of women who are already marginalized.

Efforts to address these issues have been sporadic and underfunded. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have stepped in to fill the gaps left by the state, but these initiatives are often limited by short-term funding cycles and lack of institutional support.

The Role of Advocacy

Activists play a crucial role in supporting women who use drugs in Central Asia, often serving as the first point of contact for those seeking help. This book highlights the efforts of these professionals and the impact of grassroots advocacy in pushing for policy changes. By documenting the experiences of women, this work aims to not only raise awareness but also contribute to the ongoing dialogue about the need for gender-sensitive harm reduction programs (Chapter 4-6).

As Central Asian countries navigate their post-Soviet realities, there is a growing recognition of the need to address the social determinants of health, particularly for vulnerable populations. However, this recognition has yet to translate into comprehensive policy changes that could significantly improve the lives of women who use drugs. The stories and analyses presented in this book underscore the urgent need for holistic, gender-sensitive approaches to harm reduction, healthcare, and social support in the region.

The book consists of 9 chapters: The first chapter is the general introduction, the second: *Invisible and Ignored: Gender-Based Challenges in Drug and HIV Treatment Services in Central Asia* introduces the situation of women who use drugs and/or live with HIV in the Central Asian region, focusing on their access to support services. Next, we discuss the *Socio-Psychological Aspects of Women Living with HIV in Kazakhstan*, examining the specific psychological and social challenges these women face (Chapter 3). This is followed by *three chapters (Chapter 4,5,6)* containing interviews with women from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, who share their personal experiences and perspectives. We then focus on specific topics related to women, including the *Protection of Reproductive Health and Family Planning (Chapter 7)*, *Women and Smoking in Central Asia*

(Chapter 8), and *Social Work with Women Who Use Drugs in Central Asia* (Chapter 9).

This book reflects what also applies to the entire region. The topic of women and drug use, including their specific needs, has so far received little attention. That includes the scientific perspective, the perspective from people working at support services, and most importantly the perspective of women who use drugs themselves. Therefore, with this book, even though the goal never was to aspire to all the topics related to women and drug use in the region, it was important to us to highlight certain topics and provide a platform for this target group. Instead of only presenting information and data we wanted to give the voice to the women, and therefore we conducted interviews. At this point, we would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to our interviewees for their trust and willingness to share their stories.

The Editors

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