

Presentation by Annie Madden, AIVL Executive Officer to the Women's Congress a Satellite Event of the International Conference on the Reduction of Drug Related Harm, Slovenia 3-7 March 2002

Today I am going to talk to you not **about** women drug users but **as** a woman drug user. I am not going to focus on a particular project or a research study mostly because there are presenters to follow me who can do that much better than I can. I don't have a power point presentation but what I do have is an opinion to offer, one person's perspective on what it is like to be a woman and an injecting drug user in the current climate. I don't claim to be objective, I don't pretend that my experiences match the experiences of all women drug users but I am passionate about the rights and needs of women drug users and I do care, a lot, about what I see happening. So, I want to highlight a number of different issues and events, some of them local events and issues in Australia, some more global, in an attempt to paint a picture, connect the dots if you like and expose what I see as a major upheaval in the landscape of society. To do this I will begin with some reflections on...

- the times that we are living in
- thoughts on Feminism and change
- Drug Policy and where it is going
- But perhaps most importantly I want to reflect on how sick and tired I am, and I know other women drug users are too, about the lack of progress on the really important issues for women drug users and about how desperately we want and need things to change
- finally I want to identify some places where I think there may be some opportunity or possibility of change.

"I'm a not feminist but..."

I decided to call this paper "I'm not a feminist but..." after an article that I read a number of years ago about the trend then, towards young women not wanting to call themselves a "feminist" but still wanting all the things that feminism brings and believing in what feminism stands for so, "I'm not a feminist but I do believe in the right to choose..."

I am a feminist and I'm not afraid to say so – I am a feminist practically and theoretically, in my heart and in my head. I felt the need to say that because quite frankly, it has been a long time since I have heard someone say that they are a feminist publicly without any "ifs, buts and maybes" tacked on the end. And for me, that is a really big indicator of where I think we are right now. I said to Anke yesterday... "you know sometimes lately it's like the 80s and early 90s never happened" – like all of those street marches for basic women's rights, getting bashed by the police and thrown in jail because you dared to demand respect, human rights and control over your own body - never happened. I know it did – because I was there. But when I look around me and see how women are being portrayed in advertising and music videos, how "feminism" seems to be at best irrelevant and at worst almost a dirty word but at the same time rape, sexual assault, domestic violence, continue unabated and I really wonder, how have we managed to get to here?

It's a Small World Afterall:

At least part of the answer I believe lies in the current race to Globalisation. In a globalised world

- the needs of individual and particularly the marginalised are being subsumed in the face of supra-national institutions, trans-national corporations and multi-country trading blocks.
- the gap between the rich and the poor is growing ever wider
- and the marginalised and disenfranchised have less and less of "value" to trade or bargain with...
- when seen in this context is it really any wonder that feminism has lost its lustre for young marginalised women such as female injecting drug users?
- These women are barely surviving. They can't afford the luxury of personal politics... sad but true.

The Drugs Policy Debate is developing in this same global context

- supra-national institutions and regulatory bodies are breaking down traditional social, economic and political borders
- countries increasingly have less and less say in how they wish to approach Drug Policy issues
- all sorts of economic, social and political sanctions are used to 'convince' contrary countries of the "right" path
- to highlight this further and to assure the cynical in the audience that I am not exaggerating about the "globalisation" of social policy particularly when it comes to illicit drugs let me just briefly take you through a few of the things that have happened in Australia in the past 2 years which I believe are indicative of global trends in drug policy.

Australia – harm reduction Vs harm minimisation:

- Australia has long been recognised as one of the countries that acted early in terms of taking up a harm reduction approach in response to HIV/AIDS prevention (partic. NSP and peer-based user groups)
- However, this record is now very much under threat and things have changed quite radically
- Once upon a time, the terms Harm Reduction and Harm Minimisation were interchangeable. Not any longer, well not in Australia anyway.
- A few years ago, the Australian Federal Government developed a new policy framework for addressing both licit and illicit drug use in Australia. This document was called the "National Drug Strategic Framework". Up until this document, federal government policy was clearly and unambiguously based on a harm reduction approach. The National Drug

Strategic Framework, however, initiated a completely new policy approach – the Harm Minimisation approach.

- Harm Minimisation – supply reduction/demand reduction and harm reduction with HR as third and lowest priority. The main goal of this approach is the prevention and ultimately the elimination of illicit drug use and users.
- The two “main arms” of the harm minimisation approach that is, supply reduction and demand reduction are fundamentally based in the violation of the human rights of drug users – law enforcement, prison, courts, customs, preventing drug use from occurring at all, diversion, compulsory treatment, etc – all the features of prohibition.

The National Drug Strategy has managed to ‘dethrone’ harm reduction and fundamentally change the Australian Government’s whole policy approach to drugs with very little fuss really, given the significance of the change.

-To be fair, **many were very uncomfortable and suspicious** at the time with this change in the policy framework,

- But to be completely honest, we either felt completely powerless to stop it or others just didn’t realise what was really happening – what we were losing. (***too under-resourced on the ground to notice***) It has only really been very recently that some of us within AIVL have **begun to comprehend the full and frightening reality** of the path that we have been set upon through this **‘shift’ to a harm minimisation approach**.
- I can’t stress enough how important it is that people understand the urgency and seriousness of what has happened here, mostly because I know that this type of policy shift is not just happening in Australia as I am aware of attacks on harm reduction approaches and services in many other countries as well – make no mistake this is a global trend!
- So, now 2 years on and the process is almost complete in Australia. We no longer have any official use of the term harm reduction in Australian federal drug policy or government documents as very quietly and subtly the third arm of the harm minimisation approach has recently been transformed from “harm reduction” to the “prevention of drug use and harms”. I believe that it will not be long before the “harms” part will be dropped completely off the end and the policy will just become “drug prevention”.
- We are already seeing government and police drugs policy documents reflecting this language change.

- Supporters of harm reduction in Australia can no longer kid themselves that the current federal govt. harm minimisation approach is mostly about harm reduction as we once knew it. It is NOT! And while the process of killing harm reduction is not yet complete in Australia, in my opinion, it is certainly well under way.
- This shift away from harm reduction has not happened in isolation and as I said earlier is not just happening in Australia. During the same time Australia has endured:
 - constant international public criticism from the UN Narcotics Control Board on heroin trials and safe injecting rooms eg being accused of breaching international treaties;
 - direct interference from the Vatican in terms of preventing the first auspicing site for the safe injecting room trial (extraordinary both in terms of secular country and lack of public outcry);
 - numerous visits from US govt envoys threatening economic and other sanctions against Australia if we were to take a different drugs policy position to the US;
 - members of trans-national corporations interfering in Australian drugs policy and legislation;
 - and Australian drug users have also recently lost their representative position on the Prime Minister's Drug Policy Council.

Where the Buck Stops:

Of course, the drug users who are suffering the most under this new policy approach are women drug users:

- imprisonment rates for women IDU are at an all time high and rising and sentences for women IDU are getting longer;
- more and more women are taking up dealing to survive and both support their drug use and their families;
- the increased emphasis on drug prevention means that the funding that is being made available is not going to the types of 'harm reduction' oriented services and programs that women drug users want and need;
- there is a renewed emphasis on removal of children from women drug users
- young women who have been injecting for less than two years are getting hepatitis C at a much higher rate than their male counterparts;
- more women drug users are 'choosing' to suffer with painful and treatable conditions rather than seeking healthcare due to fears about discrimination, poor treatment, disclosure, confidentiality and having their children taken away;

- increasing numbers of women are reusing injecting equipment due to lack of NSP services and fear of accessing such services in case of police attention;
- and the list could go on and on...

How Soon is Now?

Women drug users feel disappointed and abandoned (let down?). We are sick of working our butts off and getting little or no return. We are sick of playing the game, agreeing to not raise this issue in that context with that person because it might ruin our chance of gaining support and getting change – but the change never comes anyway and we are just left feeling like we have compromised away everything that is really important to us. Being pragmatic over a long period of time seems to have got us nowhere. Quite frankly many of us feel like we have been tricked, side-lined away from our real issues and agendas by people who have their own agendas that may or may not co-inside with ours. For example when the heroin trial was stopped in Australia I was told by many harm reductions “don’t worry, it’s not a matter of if anymore – it’s just a matter of when, we’ll have a heroin trial in Australia within 10 years.” But you know what? We can’t wait another ten years. Another ten years might as well be another life time away for the majority of women injecting drug users.

We want a full and happy life NOW!

We want to use illicit drugs for fun and pleasure and boredom and pain if we choose to.

We want to be able to have a family AND use illicit drugs

We have the right to have treatment services that meet our **expressed** not **presumed** needs

We want respect and to be treated with dignity and human rights

We want to have the chance to meet our full potential rather than being left to get preventable diseases and ‘exist’ with a life of dependency

We want governments to stop punishing our children for our choices

And most of all we want the removal of the bad laws that have ruined our lives...

The sad reality is though, that I feel that change is as far away as it has ever been. I wish that I could stand here and rattle off a long list of strategies that we could employ, the fact is however, when you witness governments across the world refusing to change in the face of overwhelming scientific evidence and massive human suffering – you really do wonder what it will take – whether it’s even possible. I know that there has been some change – estab of NSPs, a heroin trial or program here, a safe injecting room there, the occasional citizen’s referendum, but I really question whether these types of strategies are sustainable without more fundamental, base level reform. How do we challenge the way that the entire community views and perceives drug users or bring on the upheaval of the current drug laws across the world which is what is needed?

I know that we can’t give up and that means continuing to chip away. And in an increasingly globalised world it is clear that one of the best ways forward is

through large and powerful international coalitions. If globalisation is how the powers that be are going to do business – then lets do business that way too. Establishment of women's congresses like this one are crucial if we are to come together in strength to demand change. Women drug users also need more support from other women particularly those working in harm reduction. We need your unconditional support and assistance so that we can speak for ourselves without fear. Too often women drug users are spoken for. We need to speak for ourselves so that we can begin to challenge the stereotypes and forge our own identity.

- we need to find ways to come together and communicate between IHRC each year – speaking about these issues once a year is not enough and will not result in the kind of change we need.

- we need resources to find alternative ways of challenging the status quo – we need to look at international human rights law as a possible way to challenge the way users are perceived and treated.

And finally, we need to all commit to doing as much as we can, whenever we can on a micro and macro level.

A fellow activist once said to me that you should start by trying to convince your parents/grandparents/family of the need for drug law reform – they should be your yardstick, if you can convince them then you've made a positive step and you should be able to convince others.

I want to leave you with a thought from the perspective of one woman injecting drug user, and that is...

“What we want?

Change.

When do we want it?

How soon is now?”