



Media Release

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Inaugural study reveals that more than one in four women in European and Central Asian prisons locked up for drug offences

Up to 70 percent of female prisoners incarcerated for drug offences in some countries

Russia incarcerates over twice as many women for drug offences as all EU countries combined

Monday, 12 March 2012 (Vienna, Austria)-- Over 31,000 women across Europe and Central Asia are imprisoned for drug offences, representing 28 percent of all women in prisons in these regions, according to a new report by Harm Reduction International.(1)

The report, '*Cause for Alarm: The Incarceration of Women for Drug Offences in Europe and Central Asia, and the need for Legislative and Sentencing Reform,*' the first to calculate the total number of females in prisons on drug offences in Europe and Central Asia, was launched on the opening day of the annual meeting of the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs, which is taking place in Vienna March 12-16.

The report collected data from fifty-one European and Central Asian countries between August 2011 and February 2012 through government agencies,

including national prison services, ministries of justice and drug agencies; as well as academic researchers and civil society organisations. Drug offences include possession, preparation, production, purchase and sale of illicit substances.

In some countries (Latvia, Tajikistan) more than half of female prisoners, are imprisoned for non-violent drug offences. Moreover, in Russia, almost 20,000 women are imprisoned for drugs, more than double the number in 2005 and which exceeds double the amount of women in prison in the countries of the European Union combined.

“Women are disproportionately facing prison for non-violent drug offences, often as a result of poverty and social marginalisation,” said Eka Iakobishvili, Human Rights Analyst at Harm Reduction International, and author of the report, who is attending the CND meeting. “Many of these women have problems, including with drug and alcohol dependency, and are in need of support, not punishment. This research points to an over-reliance on criminal laws to address social and economic problems in many countries”.

The report also confirms that (2) (3):

- 1 in 4 women in prisons across Europe and Central Asia are incarcerated for drugs, some 31,400 women of a total of 112,575 presently incarcerated in that region;
- Just over a third of the 51 countries studied have a higher proportion of women prisoners convicted of drug offences than the regional rate of 28%.
- In Spain, the number of female prisoners on drug offences between 2006 and 2010 increased some 50 per cent, from 1625 to 2326.
- In Spain almost 10 times as many women (2,935) are incarcerated for drug offences compared to France (308).
- In Portugal where decriminalisation of personal possession was introduced in 2001, 47.6 per cent of female prisoners are incarcerated for drug offences.

A recent UN Women report found that “most offences for which women are imprisoned are ‘crimes of poverty’ and are nonviolent, property or drug-related. Globally, women are imprisoned for drug offences more than for any other crime.”(4)

Harm Reduction International estimates there to be over 112,000 women in prisons across Europe and Central Asia, with over 31,000 imprisoned for drug offences, based on official data from prison services, and research conducted by local civil society organisations and academic scholars. According to Harm Reduction International, incarceration for drug offences is driving the increasing female prison population in the region, especially in Russia.

“Casting women into prison for non-violent drug offences routinely ruins lives, breaks families apart and puts children at serious risk,” said HRI’s Deputy Executive Director, Damon Barrett who is attending the CDN meeting. “Numbers as high as Russia’s represent a tremendous failure in public policy. It and other

governments need to shift their focus away from arrests, prosecutions, prison and, if at all possible, the criminal justice system and into sentencing reforms.”

Globally women represent a small proportion of all prisoners - between 2 -10 per cent, depending on the country. Harm Reduction International’s research suggests that this low proportion of all prisoners hides the role of drug enforcement in driving the imprisonment of women.

In its report Harm Reduction International recommends the following:

- the decriminalization of personal possession to divert minor possession offences from the criminal justice system;
- presumptions against incarcerating mothers, with authorities acting always in the best interests of the child;
- national reviews of laws and regulations relating to thresholds and quantities;
- the establishment of clear guidelines on mitigating factors, including where exploitation is evident.

Notes to editors:

- (1) ‘*Cause for Alarm: The Incarceration of Women for Drug Offences in Europe and Central Asia, and the need for Legislative and Sentencing Reform,*’ Eka Iakobishvili, Harm Reduction International, March 2012. http://www.ihra.net/files/2012/03/10/IHRA_WomenInPrisonReport_Web.pdf

Data were collected from fifty-one European and Central Asian countries between August 2011 and February 2012, and obtained from government agencies, including national prison services, ministries of justice and drug agencies; as well as academic researchers and civil society organisations. Data providers were asked for the most recent, available numbers on national female prison populations – both the total number and the number for drug offences, defined as: Crimes committed within the functioning of illicit drug markets, as part of the business of drug supply, distribution as well as drug law offences (crimes committed in violation of drug (and other related) legislation). This encapsulates a range of offences including possession, preparation, production, purchase, keeping, shipment, transfer or sale, illegal import or export, international transit shipment, illicit growing or cultivating of illicit plants. But it excludes acquisitive crime to obtain money for drugs; and crimes other than drug law offences committed under the influence.

(2) The European and Central Asian Female Prison Population for Drug Offences

Country	№ of women in prisons	№ of women in prison for drug offences	% of female prisoners serving sentences for drugs	Female population in the country
Albania	73	9	12.3	1597981
Andorra	6	~	~	40753
Armenia	196	28	14	1645985
Austria	165	18	11	4285367
Azerbaijan	347	103	30	4515456
Belarus	3000	210	7	5154164
Belgium	471	142	30.1	5432623
Bosnia and Herzegovina	52	7	13.4	1954241
Bulgaria	300	40	14	3896823
Croatia	177	42	23.7	2288572
Cyprus	45	4	8.8	446895
Czech Republic	1493	168	13.4	5280608
Denmark	136	18	14	2758756
Estonia	136	62	46	722266
Finland	216	35	17	2715370
France	2200	308	14	32030798
Georgia	1169	386	34	2256415
Germany	3318	511	16	41880940
Greece	526	230	43.7	5628221
Hungary	1253	62	4.9	5249210
Iceland	7	4	57.1	157449
Ireland	138	32	23.1	2254301
Italy	2913	1252	42.9	30744127
Kazakhstan	4237	1080	25.4	8189953
Kyrgyzstan	300	100	33.3	2777222
Latvia	278	191	68.7	1212656
Liechtenstein	0	~	~	18254
Lithuania	421	88	20.9	1748624
Luxembourg	39	8	20.5	245017
Macedonia	52	~	~	1022501
Malta	39	~	~	205154

Monaco	4	~	~	16891
Montenegro	30	7	23.3	317411
Netherlands	627	197	31.4	8368118
Norway	206	67	32.5	2419969
Poland	2604	82	3.1	19709069
Portugal	682	325	47.6	5522407
Republic of Moldova	303	15	4.9	1891895
Romania	1370	177	12.9	10932250
Russian Federation	59000	19628	33.1	75777199
San Marino	0	~	~	15777
Serbia	300	~	~	4976678
Slovakia	477	131	27.4	2783408
Slovenia	68	16	23.5	1033426
Spain	6461	2935	45.4	22763627
Sweden	289	119	41	4659255
Switzerland	347	35	9.9	3871429
Tajikistan	600	420	70	3519960
Turkey	4728	739	15.6	37236294
Ukraine	6108	610	10	24631770
United Kingdom	4668	759	16-18	31363239
TOTAL	112 575	31 400	27.8	440 6 774

(3) The European Union Female Prison Population for Drug Offences

Country	№ of women in prisons	№ of women in prison for drug offences	% of female prisoners serving sentences for drugs	Female population in the country
Austria	165	18	11	4285367
Belgium	471	142	30.1	5432623
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Sweden	289	119	41	4659255
United Kingdom	4668	759	16-18	31363239
TOTAL	31 333	7 910	25.2	253 872 555

(4) Report on the progress of the World's Women 2011-2012: In Pursuit of Justice, UN Women, July 2011

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