



## *In Her Words:*

### Understanding Push and Pull Factors to Women's Involvement with Drugs in Sweden through an Intersectional Lens

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#### Introduction

Women's deviancy tends to be a controversial subject, as crime is often understood as a primarily »masculine« enterprise (Chesney-Lind and Chagnon, 2016). This framing is particularly evident in the scholarship on drugs and drug involvement: women's roles in the illicit drugs market are sometimes identified, stereotypically, as 'subsiding male dependency, and providing housing and other sustenance needs' to their male romantic partners (Anderson, 2005, p. 371). As such, their involvement is frequently assumed to hinge exclusively on the intermediation of their male partners and other men in the field, to whom they are subordinated and at whose hands they experience victimisation (Maher, 1997). However, this is only a partial picture, and more research is needed to understand better women's experiences, even in the Nordic context.

This chapter will discuss the contributions of my research project *In Her Words: Practices and Meanings in Women's Experiences with Drugs in Sweden*, currently developed at the department of Sociology at Lund University. The project seeks to redress the relative imbalance in this research field by departing from women's narrated experiences and understandings. At the same time, it offers relevant insights on a marginalised and criminalised community in Sweden that may be relevant for Nordic criminal policy. My work shows that drug involvement has been considerably meaningful for informants, even in those cases where the overall experience may have been negative. As such, while certain participants have desisted, others will instead continue their drug involvement, despite current restrictive drug policies.

I will first provide a brief overview of the literature on the topic and identify some crucial gaps to situate my work. This will prepare the ground to discuss the original contributions of this research, as well as its relevance for Nordic criminal policy.



## 1. *Situating In Her Words*

There is relatively little research on women's involvement with drugs in the Nordic area, and this may be due to several factors. Criminology as a discipline has tended to be rather androcentric, in that 'criminologists have [long] ignored women's experiences with crime and justice', assuming that men's experiences are universal and may be directly applicable to women as well (Chesney-Lind and Chagnon, 2016, p. 311). Feminist criminologists have challenged this notion with limited success. While women's experiences have enjoyed greater attention in the literature than previously (ibid), many analyses appear to consider gender as a single variable in addition to class. Further, gender has become synonymous with women, 'as if the other, the general' were not also similarly gendered (Lander, 2018, p. 26, my translation). This, alone, can only partially help to understand people's unique experiences and it risks strengthening the idea that women can be only of marginal importance in this field, whilst ignoring the nuances characterising different experiences.

Several researchers in the Nordic area have attempted to address some of these gaps by focusing specifically on drug-using women. Richert (2014), for example, departs from a traditional public health perspective by researching how drug-injecting women in Malmö manage conditions of social exclusion and vulnerability. Lander (2018), instead, has carried out ethnographic work in Stockholm to see how the experiences of drug-using and socially marginalised women reflect societal constructions of normative femininity. Their research highlights the precarious and criminogenic living conditions of drug-involved women in Sweden, which occur despite the relatively strong safety nets in place within the country's welfare structures. Gålnander (2020) makes it clear that the road towards desistance is fraught with difficulties, particularly for drug-involved women, because criminalised women may not have enough support to lead socially integrated lives once their desistance journey begins. It can be said therefore that these works focus on the risk (push) factors that may lead women to become involved with drugs.

While these researchers lay bare the negative externalities of Sweden's criminalisation processes, their focus on socioeconomically marginalised women nonetheless may risk reinforcing the notion that drug consumption is responsible for women's downwards social trajectories. Grundetjern (2017) and Eleonorasdotter (2021) appear to be two of the few Scandinavian researchers who have instead chosen to focus on relatively well-off women active with drugs. Grundetjern (2017, p. 1) has interviewed women from the 'upper echelons of the [Norwegian] drug market', which leads her to conclude that while women are actively called upon to manage their perceived 'heterogeneity' in this environment (Grundetjern, 2015), it is nonetheless possible for them to draw feelings of empowerment and accomplishment from their involvement with drugs (Grundetjern and Miller, 2019). Similarly, Eleonorasdotter (2021, p. 361) argues that drug trajectories 'starting off in a middle-class position



[seem] to offer a measure of protection from downwards class journeys'. This enables her participants to find drug consumption extremely meaningful, even though this meaning must be negotiated within the larger Swedish anti-drug context (ibid). These works show that, under the right conditions, drug involvement may not actually be in itself a cause for a downwards socioeconomic trajectory and that it might offer meaningful rewards for those involved (pull factors).

My work seeks to bridge the two currents outlined above to show both the risks and pleasures associated with drug involvement through an intersectional lens. This entails looking at both push and pull factors experienced by women whilst considering 'the intersection of multiple dimensions of social stratification' (Creek and Dunn, 2014, p. 41; Crenshaw, 1989). I am therefore interested in not only looking at how sexist and classist structures characterise the experiences of drug-involved women, but also in considering how these interact with other categories of being, such as racialisation, age, nativity, and so forth (Crenshaw, 1989). An explicitly intersectional perspective is not often deployed in drug research (Miller and Carbone-Lopez, 2015) but it can allow us to see how women contribute much to the illicit drugs market (Anderson, 2005), regardless of whether their involvement with drugs is episodic or long-standing. Furthermore, this perspective allows for recognition that drug involvement may result in both vulnerability and empowerment, depending on women's social location (Miller and Carbone-Lopez, 2015; Macaulay, 2021). Being vulnerable in certain respects does not necessarily exclude the possibility of being empowered in others. I therefore apply this insight in my research on the Swedish context to move away from the dominant 'pathology and powerlessness' framework favoured in drug studies (Anderson, 2005, p. 372).

## 2. The Research and its Contributions

My research aims to redress the relative imbalance in the field described above both empirically and theoretically through a feminist poststructuralist perspective. This entails that I am particularly interested in doing research that focuses on the experiences of marginalised individuals, as well as challenging and deconstructing taken for granted assumptions in the fields of criminology and sociology.

The project centres women's recollections of their involvement with drugs and this allows us to see how the intersection of different categories of being, *together*, may affect participants' experiences and the meanings they have attributed to them. In this way, we can see how gendered class, to name one intersection, may affect the nature of risks and rewards that drug involvement entails. Many of the middle-class women among my informants, for example, find that their class privilege tends to shield them from experiencing the excesses of sexism that characterises the drugs market. Drugs can



also support them in achieving specific situational accomplishments in more conventional settings, such as being perceived as appropriately feminine in certain respects. At the same time, some of them may also experience relatively more severe sanctions for their behaviour, because they are understood to act in violation of dominant behavioural norms for people of their social position. As such, this perspective challenges the notion that all women in this field are only marginal actors and nuances our understanding of the challenges and opportunities experienced by drug-involved women in Sweden.

I have collected the narratives of 26 women who have, at some point in their lives, have used, shared, and/or sold drugs in Sweden. Most of my participants can be described as reasonably well-off women who have not experienced downwards trajectories of socio-economic mobility in conjunction with their drug use. Only part of them have been in contact with the Swedish criminal justice system, contra participants in Lander (2018) and Richert et al. (2011), but in line with those in Eleonorasdotter (2021). This may be partly due to the project's three different recruitment strategies: through Sweden's correctional system, through a gatekeeper, and through several social media platforms. As such, it has been possible to recruit women who, at the time of the interviews, had been undergoing several stages of offending and desistance, which provided for a rich tapestry of different experiences.

This work departs from the intersectional analysis of participants' accounts of their experiences with drugs, their practices, and the meanings they have attributed to them to illuminate the push and pull factors of drug involvement. This is what Choo and Marx Ferree (2010, p. 129) define as 'group-centring', the practice of placing marginalised people's voices at the centre of research. Further, I highlight the relationality of power as necessarily mediated through one's position on multiple axes of inequality (e.g., sexism, classism, and racism), an insight that allows for a more nuanced understanding of vulnerability and empowerment in the illicit drugs market (Anderson, 2005; Choo and Marx Ferree, 2010). Finally, this work considers participants' accounts as located within the specific context of Sweden's anti-drug policies. This allows to capture how social institutions and norms are reflected in informants' stories, an angle that Choo and Marx Ferree (2010, p. 129) call 'system-centring'. Doing so, offers a window on how 'drug-using women still live »risky« lives and [may be] portrayed as egregious failures at the tasks of social reproduction, including womanhood and motherhood' (Campbell, 2015, p. 806)

Narrative analysis has great potential to reveal these dimensions: firstly, it centres informants' experiences, recollections, and reflections, 'situating them as subjects rather than objects of knowledge', in line with feminist research orientations (Fleetwood, 2015, p. 42). Secondly, it provides insight into how participants see themselves and their experiences, and consequently, the meanings they have attributed to them. This allows us to understand women's push and pull factors towards drugs, as well as the risk and challenges that drug involvement entails, and how these relate to women's social location.



Finally, narrative analysis offers insight on the contexts in which drug involvement occurs as their reflection emerges from participants' accounts.

Ultimately, this research contributes to the discipline by going beyond the so-called victimisation vs volition dichotomy (Maher, 1997) by exploring the different ways in which power and powerlessness can be understood and nuanced through an intersectional lens. For example, some of my more economically comfortable participants can rely on their romantic partners to provide drugs, thus avoiding risky procurement situations. This, however, also opens up the possibility for them to become dependent on their partners for continued access to drugs, which may ultimately become problematic. This type of analysis is only possible by paying careful attention to participants' individual social location.

At the same time, this research also provides insight on how informants have 'made demands, calculated costs and benefits, negotiated, reasoned, resisted, had hopes, and felt compelled' throughout their involvement with drugs (Schemenauer, 2012, p. 97). Because women in this field are certainly less visible than their male counterparts, an approach that centres their experiences makes it possible to undermine the notion that women in this field can only be understood as 'passive, victimized, acted upon subject[s]' (ibid: p. 97). It therefore highlights the need for sustained attention on this topic and, more broadly, the use of an intersectional perspective for criminological inquiry.

### 3. Relevance for Nordic Criminal Policy

This research provides insight on a group of doubly marginalised people of whom relatively little is known in Sweden and in the Nordic area. This process of marginalisation has important ramifications: it creates crucial absences in the literature on the topic (Chesney-Lind and Chagnon, 2016) and, consequently, the way policies are developed and implemented. Indeed, top-down approaches in policy development and implementation tend to either privilege ideological understandings of drug use or give more weight to fields of research that overlook individuals' experiences as well as specificities of context and social position (Macaulay, 2021). This leads to the creation and implementation of policies that may risk compounding some of the chronic insecurity and stigmatisation experienced by women involved with drugs and described by informants in this project. Campbell (2015, p. 807) indeed notes that 'risks are embedded not only in women's ways of »doing drugs«, but in regimes of social »welfare« and/or »protection« put into place supposedly to respond to drug-using women'. As such, social position is of extreme importance in understanding more specifically the pressures and risks posed by governmental policies.

While the scope of this project prevents from analysing thoroughly Swedish drug policy, it offers insight in the ways participants come to manage risk



and stigma vis-à-vis drugs, vis-à-vis others in the illicit drugs market, as well as vis-à-vis Swedish society and authorities. The aim here is to consider the multiple ways in which different identities are policed and how these different categories of being interact with one another to provide privileges and disadvantages in specific contexts. As such, we can begin to understand the effect that anti-drug policies in Sweden have had in these women's lives and this can provide a base for further research on the topic. Indeed, my work shows that the criminalisation of drug use has led many of my participants to live in conditions of precarity and risk. This is because prohibition often creates additional hurdles for drug-involved women, such as problematic drug procurement circumstances, as well as stigma and discrimination in the illicit drugs market and in conventional society.

Furthermore, there is an unspoken assumption in the Nordic area that drug use can *only* be understood in terms of addiction and compulsion (Träskman, 2004). This has led to the creation of restrictive policies aiming to completely eradicate drugs and drug use. However, my work shows that pleasure, widely defined beyond »mere« highs, is also an important driver for drug use that may coexist without contradiction alongside more traditionally established understandings. Many participants have indeed underscored how drugs engendered feelings of comfort and self-development, and this is true even for those informants who have portrayed their drug involvement in a generally negative light. Consequently, one perspective does not invalidate the other.

Moreover, careful narrative analysis of the ways in which participants discuss their involvement and the meanings they have attributed to their experiences reveal there are also other factors that may push or pull women towards and away from drugs. Recognition of the careful interplay between these factors can help us understand how and why certain women become involved with drugs, and what makes it worth it for them to continue to do so or stop. Because there is limited research on this point in Sweden, my work is a first step in this direction.

Several researchers have remarked upon the limited success of anti-drug policies in the Nordic area (e.g., Träskman, 2004; Tham, 2005), and this sentiment has been echoed by many of my informants. Historically, little space has been given in the literature for those most affected by these policies to comment and suggest alternative strategies. However, there is great potential to analyse, from the bottom-up, the ramifications of anti-drug policies: current and former drug users are in an advantageous position to highlight which policy interventions they found useful, and which instead proved to be more harmful. While this research does not focus expressly on Sweden's drug policy, participants' considerations and the project's theoretical and empirical approaches offer a fruitful base for initiating further studies on the topic.



#### 4. Concluding Remarks

This chapter has provided an overview of the research project *In Her Words*, which aims to contribute to the literature on women and drugs by showing how an intersectional perspective, in conjunction with narrative methods, can illuminate the lives, practices, and meanings of women who have been involved with drugs.

Drugs and drug-involved people currently lead stigmatised lives in Sweden and in the Nordic area, and this has important ramifications on their quality of life. First, this stigma impacts the conditions in which they are involved with drugs, as it becomes unnecessarily dangerous for many to procure, share, or sell, and then consume drugs. Secondly, this stigma carries over in people's interpersonal relationships, both in the illicit drugs market and in conventional society. It also informs their experiences with state institutions. The marginalisation of drug-involved people in the Nordic context stands in stark contrast to the area's reputation for progressive policies, and more research is needed to explore the ramifications of anti-drug policies on the lives of drug-involved individuals.

At the same time, the participants in this study discuss that some aspects of their involvement with drugs have been supremely meaningful for them. This will lead some of them to continue being involved with drugs, despite the hostile environment created by anti-drug policies. As such, it becomes of great importance to understand women's experiences with drugs and the meanings they have attributed to them, and then make them intelligible to a wider audience, in order to raise awareness and bring about some policy-changes. *In Her Words* is just the beginning.

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