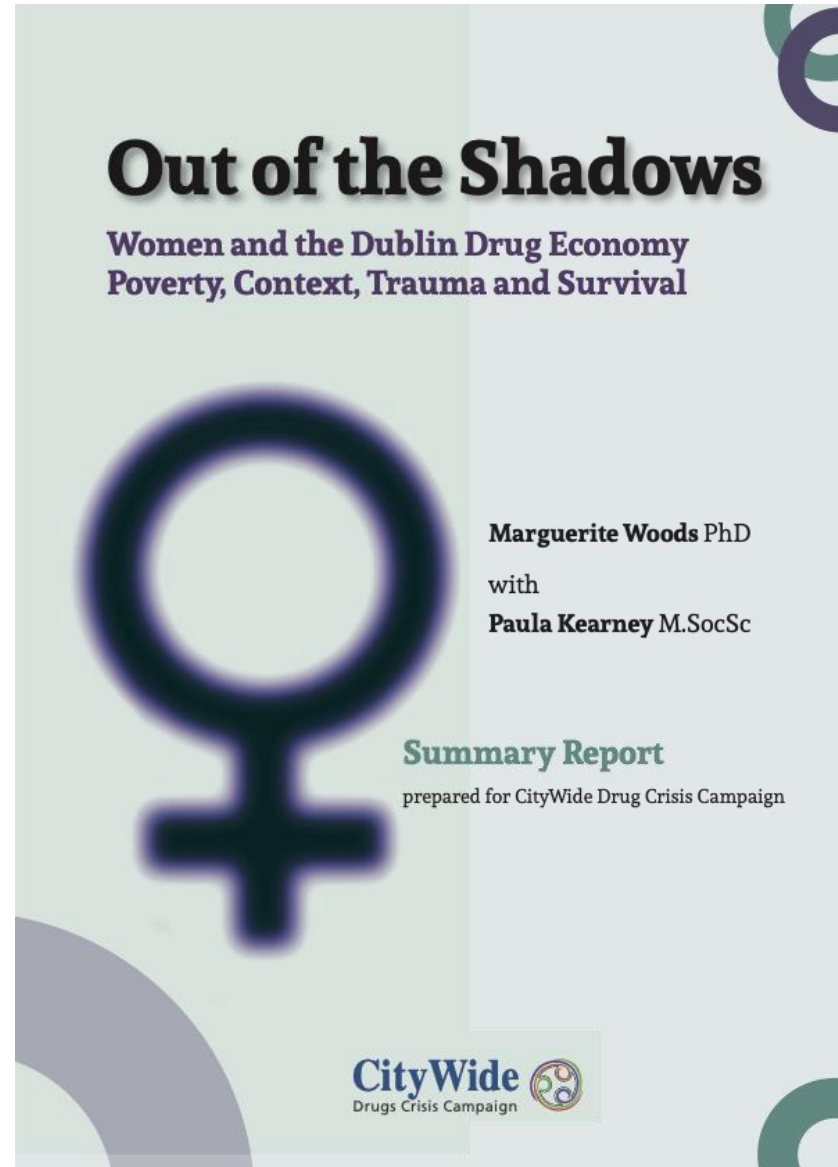

A Summary of Key Findings

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Why this study?

Beyond anecdotal reports and official statistics about women's engagement with drug treatment, involvement with crime and imprisonment in Ireland, little is known about the day-to-day realities and the impacts of the drug economy on women's lives.

Though not a new phenomenon, its rising visibility in communities often leads to sensationalized and stigmatising coverage of women's experiences.

Women's participation in various aspects of the drug economy, beyond just buying or minor selling, has existed for some time, even though it was seldom discussed and little studied.

The Study

This report presents a summary overview of the findings of a larger in-depth qualitative study of women's involvement in the Dublin drug economy

The broad aim of the study is to: explore the gender-based lived experience, power relationships and economic realities for women living in communities affected by drug use, bringing the voices of women who have lived experience of involvement to the fore in discussions of the drug economy.

The findings and recommendations are drawn from the accounts of 48 participants, purposively sampled in order to access their range of knowledge and lived experience.

A reflexive and ethical stance was central to the practice and conduct of this research endeavour. Voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity were essential standards and underlying all of these is the principle of doing no harm.

The Participants

- 28 semi-structured interviews, a focus group, informal conversations during fieldwork and a member checking or participant validation process following data analysis allowed for the gathering of data.
- In total, 12 women with lived experience of involvement with drug use, crime and the activities associated with the drug economy and 16 professional workers within the drug and community work field were interviewed.
- In addition, 10 professional workers participated in a focus group at the outset of the study and a further 3 professional workers and 7 women engaged in informal conversations.
- These interviews and consultations, informed by a gender-responsive and trauma-informed approach, provided a wealth of data pertaining to the study's key research questions.

*It is so
exploratory,
isn't it?*

Anything that captures anything or more about women's experiences in the drug world is really valuable. It is so exploratory, isn't it, because in my view, there is little understanding of women's experience in the drug economy.

(Margaret, PW)

Key Questions

Key questions included:

What are participants' views and experiences of the drug economy?

Where do women fit in as actors in the drug economy?

Where do women fit into this reportedly male-dominated world?

What is their lived experience?

What impact does drug economy involvement have on women's lives?

Findings

Drug Economy – Participants’ Perceptions

- There was remarkable consensus among participants about the nature of the drug economy, what it is, how it works, how it impacts generally, and how it impacts women and communities specifically.
- The reach, impact, mobility, flexibility and adaptability of the Dublin-based drug economy/economies and the absence of regulation and control were discussed in all interviews. The constancy of intimidatory and menacing nature of the drug economy was described.
- The maleness of the economy and markets, in terms of recruitment, participation, control and impact was emphasised as a key characteristic.
- The normality, everyday nature and local nature of the drug economy were also emphasised, highlighting the universality of these activities among those who use drugs, the normalisation of such activities in the community, a ‘push pull acceptance’ and their connections to a range of social networks, friendship networks, families or intimate partner relationships.

- The drug economy was said to be much more than simply visible street-level sale of illegal drugs but that it included all activities relating to the manufacture, preparation, transportation, and storage of the substances.
- It also includes all activities associated with drug use, acquisitive crime, begging and sex work.
- Two aspects were described consistently, the buying and selling of drugs by those who use drugs, and the acquisitive crime that individuals engaged with in an effort to accommodate their drug purchase and use and to support themselves. Women's involvement in sex work was also mentioned.
- The drug scene/economy, it is asserted throughout, does not 'invade' and take over the community but is run by people who have been reared in and lived in the community all of their lives. The recruitment of young people, largely boys and young men, is constant. Family members often 'recruit' other family members, brothers involve brothers and sisters and vice versa, friends share drugs and ask for favours.

- The level of control exerted by individuals at the higher end of the economy – ‘big players’ – was noted while the ‘foot work’, the dealing, distribution, moving of drugs, the intimidation is reportedly carried out by others, younger men at the middle and lower ends of the system.
- The lack of pathways for young people into the formal economy was repeatedly cited as increasing the attractiveness of the drug economy, in which immediate and far greater earnings are possible in the short term.
- All participants believed that poverty was the motivating force for people’s involvement, not just in the criminal activities themselves, but in the reliance on the proceeds and material goods accrued.
- Poverty, structural inequality, marginalisation and lack of resources are much associated with the communities in which drug selling and using is taking place and were mentioned in almost every interview as the backdrop to the drug economy under discussion.
- There was also a clear view that the context in which the drug economy thrived and flourished was one of disadvantage and poverty.

Findings

How the drug economy impacts women

Women who use street drugs;
buying; selling; acquisitive crime
sex work;
sex for drug exchanges
Women who use drugs recreationally incurring
debt
sex-for drug exchanges

Women impacted by the drug-related debts of
family members, e.g. their partners, sons,
daughters, or grandchildren

Women impacted by the
drug economy

Women impacted by, and sometimes benefiting
from, the activities of their partners or family
members who are involved with higher level
activities within the drug trade

Women in the community, concerned about their
physical safety and impacted upon by the ambient
effects of drug dealing, buying and using in their
neighbourhoods

- Women are reportedly impacted by the drug economy in Dublin in many ways, through direct involvement with such activities and by association, through the involvement of partners, sons, daughters and other family members. Women are also impacted through living in a community and environment affected by drug economy activities, that are both visible and audible. Women are impacted upon as victims of crime. Women may also be affected by their employment and their involvement in professional work.
- The drug economy is predominantly seen as ‘a male space’ and women generally are believed to ‘be forced away’, ‘pushed away’ or ‘kept out’ from these male spaces, and only brought or welcomed into these spaces when they have a value or a ‘service to deliver’.
- As one of the participants said, women are ‘molls, mules or mummies’ and are all defined through their relationship to men, their ‘partners, their bosses or their sons’. Even where women are involved in drug trade activities, women deal but men control.

- Women in the community are normally the primary caregivers, they manage households, engage in full-time or part-time work, they care for children, teenagers, adult children and grandchildren. They manage poverty, financially resource and manage funds in the household and meet their families' needs for shelter, heat, food, clothing, often well into adulthood.
- Women are impacted by the drug economy activities of other family members, specifically their teenage and adult sons.
- Intimidation with regard to drug-related drug debts, pressure to repay and subjection to threats of violence and actual violence, 'hostile takeovers' of their homes.
- Pressure to become involved in activities such as holding drugs or allowing drug use, manufacture and other activities in their homes, moving and transporting drugs.
- Involvement in income-generating activities such as shoplifting, theft, sex work were described.
- It is also reported that women servicing the debts of family members experience significant mental health challenges, stress, anxiety and extreme fear.

Findings - Womens' lived experiences

- All accounts highlight how their experiences as women, as women who use drugs, as women who manage households and meet the needs of those around them and as women who are actors in the drug economy are very much entwined.
- The activities relating to the drug economy, described by all participants, were wide ranging
- Women are directly involved in the economy; in drug use, in drug dealing, that is, drugs purchases and sales, in assisting in the preparation, bagging, and distribution of drugs within their communities and to other locations around the city; in some cases carrying drugs or money to and from other jurisdictions - trafficking; acquisitive crime, shoplifting, robbery, burglaries, fraud; in sex work; sex-for-drug exchanges; providing facilities in their homes for use of drugs, manufacture, holding money, ammunition and weapons.
- Participants offered accounts of their own experiences and those of their contemporaries. They described lengthy involvement with a range of activities across their lifetimes from early years.
- Some women reported a broad repertoire of activities to access funds both for their drug use and others' needs, including those of their partners, families and children.

- The drug economy is perceived as having far reaching effects on and harms for women.
- Women participants and professional workers reported the considerable risks and harms that women experience as a result of involvement in street-level drug use and the drug economy.
- These include physical harms, mental health harms, risks of street-level violence, threat and intimidation, physical and sexual assault. The impact on women of involvement in dangerous worlds is far reaching. Dangers, injuries and the lack of safety were described and highlighted throughout.

- Women's physical safety and the risk of violence were also highlighted throughout.
- Many had experienced intimate partner violence and other forms of domestic and family violence and intimidation, threats, bullying and sexual violence on the street associated with selling or purchasing drugs or while engaged in sex work.
- It was suggested by many women participants and almost every professional worker that the drug world was increasingly violent.
- Almost all stated that they had never engaged in violent activities in the course of their drug economy involvement.
- Several women interviewed, and others informally contacted, acknowledged using violence towards others, men and/or women on one or more occasions.

- There is a strong sense of victimhood, particularly discussed by professional workers, while the women's resilience, strength, and perseverance was also acknowledged.
- The women interviewed discussed their frequent victimisation in the world of the street and the drug trade but the majority of those interviewed resisted the 'victim' label.
- Indeed, it is back and forth in many of the women's accounts between notions of power and powerlessness, between being very skilled in managing situations, 'living on your wits', 'cunning', 'wiles', and on the other hand, vulnerability to and at the hands of the same individuals for whom they do so much.
- They described too their struggles to exit from this life and to maintain that exit and to survive after having been involved with activities that brought not much but some financial reward and benefit.
- Women participants agreed that ultimately crime 'doesn't pay'.
- Their role as mothers was often drastically impacted to the extent that they lost their children into the care of others and even after exiting this world, family reunification was often not achieved.

- The key issues that were raised included: the stress of women's coping and survival, their minding others, caring and 'keeping things going'; the level of risks for women on an ongoing basis and the levels of drug-related and sex work – related risk-taking; experiences of trauma; how women trade safety for survival and align with dangerous and violent partners for protection; and concerns about the overwhelming impact of gender-based violence and the drug economy.
- Overwhelmingly, professional workers asserted the need to listen to the voices of women affected directly by these issues.
- Women with lived experience stated '*Our voices must be heard and inform everything – nothing without us*'.

- Several women described the fallout from involvement, with regard to imprisonment and becoming homeless.
- Only one of twelve women interviewed, all of whom used or had used drugs and engaged in drug economy activity, had to date remained outside the criminal justice and drug treatment systems.
- The judgements and stigma arising from involvement with income-generating activities in the drug economy were stressed in many accounts.

- There was a consensus that women's involvement in the drug economy is 'not a new thing'.
- These accounts highlight how women have always been involved to an extent with drug economy activities, how it is qualitatively different for women and how their lived experience underlines their unequal position in the economy, their role as peripheral and the unequal benefits and fallout of such involvement.
- It was observed by all participants, however, that women's involvement in the drug economy was a topic that had not merited a great deal of attention to date and required attention, participation by women in discussions and the need for the dissemination of such findings about women's lives.

Why do we do this?

Why do we do this? Why did I do it? Because you're fucked, you're traumatised, you think it's normal, you think that's OK, it feels good. And it does feel good, I know! You're protected by all these big men, you know. But it can turn at any moment. So it does feel good, well safe, but it's not all the story ... But you know what everything falls! They say that there's a war on drugs and on women, but you know like you very rarely succeed in the informal economy because the drug trade is criminal, like it's a criminal act, you know.

(Celine, LE)

Study Recommendations - 'We need broader strokes'

- *Participation, Representation, Leadership - Involvement of women beyond tokenism.*
- The *extent of women's experiences of violence* must be the subject of ongoing investigation, study and review.
- *Independent gender-specific oversight* groups locally and citywide must be established.
- The *impact of poverty and low income* on women and the reality of the 'feminisation of poverty' must be acknowledged and central to an understanding of structural inequality, disadvantage and social exclusion.
- A range of responses to women beyond those responding to women during pregnancy and motherhood must be explored and represented in the National Drug Strategy, reflecting the social and economic realities of women's lives.
- It is crucial that concerted dialogue, debate and review of policy and legislation be regularly conducted regarding prohibition and alternative legal and policy strategies as they impact women in communities.

Out of the shadows

The layers and layers that stop these women from coming out of the shadows needs to be heard, talked about and tackled at a national level, the dialogue or narrative needs to change around the drug economy involvement. It's hidden, it's over there and "it's not us, it's them", the very same as the drug issue was. (Neasa, PW)

Keeping communities and women in view

What's necessary is to keep communities and women in view – keep the spotlight there. A social response – not just health led. Yes, the national drug strategy has moved on in terms of being health led rather than criminal justice focussed – tying women into the Criminal Justice System is ludicrous – but this way of thinking about things is limited. It is a response to communities, poverty, disadvantage, structural inequality, these are the things that have to change – otherwise it's a band aid response, that really changes nothing in the long term. ... We probably haven't even scratched the surface in terms of what is going on. We need these conversations to continue about women's experiences in their homes and hostels, the world of the street, the drug trade, the economy. (Lorraine, PW)

Thank you for listening!

Introducing Participants' Voices

- The Voices of Women with Lived Experience of Drug Economy Involvement
- The Voices of Professional Workers in the community and drug work fields
- Introducing the women participants, staff, students and allies of the SAOL Project – the BRIO programme– who will voice the words of the study participants.