

# Submission to OHCHR for report on the impact of drug policies on women and girls

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## Reporting organisations:



**Harm Reduction International (HRI)** envisions a world in which drug policies uphold dignity, health and rights. We use data and advocacy to promote harm reduction and drug policy reform. We show how rights-based, evidence-informed responses to drugs contribute to healthier, safer societies, and why investing in harm reduction makes sense. HRI is an NGO in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations.

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The **European Saudi Organization for Human Rights (ESOHR)** is an independent civil institution concerned with human rights in Saudi Arabia. It consists of a group of activists, human rights defenders, and researchers. It aspires to promote justice in Saudi Arabia and uphold human dignity.



**Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC)** is a premier Non-Governmental Organization in Africa with a mandate to promote human rights-centred governance at all levels.



**Women and Harm Reduction International Network (WHRIN)** is a global platform led by women and gender diverse people with a history of drug use. It focuses on accelerating the implementation of gender-responsive harm reduction services worldwide. The network mission is to improve the availability, quality, and accessibility of tailored services for women and gender expansive people who use drugs.

## Introduction

Harm Reduction International (HRI), the [European Saudi Organization for Human Rights \(ESOHR\)](#), [Kenya Human Rights Commission](#) and [Women and Harm Reduction International Network \(WHRIN\)](#) welcome the opportunity to provide input to OHCHR in preparation of its 2026 report on the impact of drug policies on the rights of women and girls, to be presented at 63rd session of the Human Rights Council. This submission focuses on use of the death penalty in the implementation of drug laws, a practice which does not meet the threshold of ‘most serious crimes’ and is thus in contravention of international law and standards.

### **Lack of disaggregated data on use of the death penalty for drug offences**

Lack of disaggregated data on use of capital punishment is a persistent issue, both generally and with specific reference to women *and* drug offences. Retentionist countries have clear obligations under international law and standards to provide comprehensive and updated information on death sentences, executions, and people on death row.<sup>1</sup> HRC resolutions on the question of the death penalty have consistently called on retentionist states to ‘make available systematically and publicly full, accurate and relevant information, disaggregated by gender, age [...] and other applicable criteria, with regard to their use of the death penalty.’<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, most retentionist countries publish only limited official information on use of capital punishment, if any, and disaggregation by crime and gender is exceedingly rare; impeding a full reconstruction of the phenomenon.

For example, of the 36 countries which prescribe the death penalty as a possible punishment for drug offences in 2026, only Thailand regularly publishes official figures on women on death row for drug offences. In China, North Korea, and Vietnam – all believed to regularly execute people for drug offences – information on use of capital punishment is covered by state secret, or regularly censored.

Information on the personal background and trial history of people sentenced to death is even more limited. Judgments are only publicly available for a handful of countries, and in some contexts – for example Iran – they are difficult to access even for defence lawyers.<sup>3</sup> This prevents a full reconstruction of gender-specific considerations regarding the pathways to crime and procedural histories of women sentenced to death.

### **Available information on the impact of the death penalty for drug offences on women and girls**

Despite the limited information available, partial official information and civil society monitoring afford a partial picture. While women are a minority among people known to be sentenced to death and executed both overall and for drug offences, such offences are the main reason for which women are sentenced to death in several countries, particularly in Southeast Asia. The

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<sup>1</sup> For more details see Economic and Social Council (24 May 1989), Resolution 1989/64. Implementation of the safeguards guaranteeing protection of the rights of those facing the death penalty; Human Rights Council, Question of the death penalty: Report of the Secretary General, UN Doc. A/HRC/48/29 (15 September 2021).

<sup>2</sup> ‘... Inter alia, the charges, number of persons sentenced to death, the number of persons on death row and the location of their detention, the number of executions carried out and the number of death sentences reversed, commuted on appeal or in which amnesty or pardon has been granted’. Human Rights Council, Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on 7 October 2025-60/17. Question of the death penalty. UN Doc. A/HRC/RES/60/17 (7 October 2025).

<sup>3</sup> Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran and Eleos Justice (2023), ‘Proven with(out) Certainty: How Judges Sentence Defendants to Death for Drug Offences in Iran’. Available from <https://www.iranrights.org/newsletter/issue/136>.

following paragraphs provide a breakdown of minimum confirmed figures for 2020-2025, as available globally.<sup>4</sup> While partially due to lack of transparency, they suggest an increase in known drug-related executions of women globally, which reflects the general trend.

In 2025<sup>5</sup>, a record 23 women were known to have been executed for drug offences; 20 in Iran, 2 in Saudi Arabia (both Nigerian nationals), 1 in Singapore. The person executed in Singapore was the last woman on death row in the country; she had been sentenced to the mandatory death penalty for drug trafficking, and at trial she had claimed involvement in the transaction through her then-partner.<sup>6</sup> Several of the women executed in Iran had been reportedly arrested with their partners (at least two were executed jointly with their husbands), or after drugs were found in the family's properties (such as cars and storage units) rather than in their direct possession, raising concerns about the role the women played in the offences.

At least seven women were sentenced to death for drug offences: four in Vietnam, one in Lao PDR, one in Sri Lanka, one in Iraq. Among them was a Kenyan woman sentenced to death in Vietnam after being arrested with cocaine in her luggage. She claimed she had been hired by a man in Kenya, who reportedly paid her USD 1,300 to deliver a suitcase in Lao PDR and bring other goods back. She denied any knowledge of the drugs. Unlike many foreign nationals facing capital punishment, the woman received consular assistance, and in July 2025 her sentence was commuted on appeal to life imprisonment (also a disproportionate but over-used sentence for low-level interactions in the drug market).

In 2024,<sup>7</sup> at least 18 women were executed for drug offences worldwide, of which 4 in Saudi Arabia (all were Nigerian nationals) and 14 in Iran. Among them was Marjan Hajizadeh, who was reportedly 16 years old and a victim of forced marriage when she was arrested with her husband for carrying drugs.<sup>8</sup>

At least 11 women were sentenced to death for drug offences. Six in Vietnam (including a Thai national), 3 in Iraq, 1 in Indonesia, 1 in Bangladesh (a Botswana national).

In 2023,<sup>9</sup> at least six women were executed for drug offences, of which five in Iran. Among them was Mazar Zehei, a Baloch ethnic minority. According to NGO Iran Human Rights, she was arrested at a checkpoint in December 2017 on drug-related charges including the transportation of drugs inside the bus. She repeatedly denied the charges. 'Despite her defence, the court sentenced her to death. Due to her poverty and financial inability, [she] was unable to afford an experienced lawyer for her case and to defend her innocence. In February 2022, the Iranian Judiciary issued a death sentence for her. Her family had to sell their granddaughter's gold earrings to cover travel costs to see [Mazar] before her execution.'<sup>10</sup>

Saridewi Djamani was the first woman executed in Singapore in 20 years. She was arrested in 2018 and sentenced to the mandatory death penalty, despite claiming at trial that she needed to

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<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise specified the information in the following paragraph is from HRI's 'The Death Penalty for Drug Offences: Global Overview' series, accessible from <https://hri.global/topics/drugs-and-human-rights/death-penalty-for-drugs/>; and HRI's internal database on drug-related executions, death sentences and death row populations. Specific sources are available upon request.

<sup>5</sup> <https://hri.global/flagship-research/death-penalty/the-death-penalty-for-drug-offences-global-overview-2025/>.

<sup>6</sup> Tika Pesik v Public Prosecutor, Court of Appeal of the Republic of Singapore [2023] SGCA 44. Available from [https://www.singaporelawwatch.sg/Portals/0/Docs/Judgments/2023/\[2023\]%20SGCA%2044.pdf](https://www.singaporelawwatch.sg/Portals/0/Docs/Judgments/2023/[2023]%20SGCA%2044.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> <https://hri.global/flagship-research/death-penalty/the-death-penalty-for-drug-offences-global-overview-2024/>

<sup>8</sup> Iran Human Rights (15 April 2024), 'Child Bride Marjan Hajizadeh and Esmail Hassani Executed for Drug Charges – UPDATED'. Available from <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/6640>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://hri.global/flagship-research/death-penalty/the-death-penalty-for-drug-offences-global-overview-2023/>

<sup>10</sup> Iran Human Rights Monitor (15 November 2023), 'A Baloch woman was executed in Kerman Central Prison'. Available from <https://iran-hrm.com/2023/11/15/a-baloch-woman-was-executed-in-kerman-central-prison/>.

‘stock up on diamorphine for her own consumption’ ahead of the Islamic fasting month.<sup>11</sup> As has been the experience of other people with a history of drug use arrested in Singapore, she had also argued that ‘she was not able to give accurate statements to the police because she was suffering from drug withdrawal at the time.’ This practice raises concerns about the risk of ill-treatment and coerced confessions. However, while authorities acknowledged she was experiencing withdrawal symptoms, they denied resulting impact on her ability to give statements.<sup>12</sup>

At least 15 women were sentenced to death for drug offences, including one in Indonesia and nine in Vietnam.

In 2022,<sup>13</sup> at least eight women were sentenced to death for drug offences globally, including five in Vietnam, one in Indonesia, one in Bangladesh, and one in the United Arab Emirates (an Israeli national whose death sentence was later commuted). No executions were recorded.

In 2021,<sup>14</sup> at least six women were executed for drug offences, five in Iran and one in China; and at least three women were sentenced to death for drug offences, two in Vietnam and one in Malaysia (a 55-year-old single mother of nine from a low socioeconomic background).

In 2020,<sup>15</sup> at least 13 women were sentenced to death for drug offences – 2 in Indonesia, 3 Lao PDR, and 8 in Vietnam; including an Indonesian woman sentenced to death in Vietnam who reportedly agreed to transport methamphetamines from Cambodia to the Philippines for USD 500. No executions were recorded.

Figures on women on death row are particularly scarce. In Thailand, official figures indicate that while women are a minority on death row, most have been convicted of drug offences.

*Figures on people on death row in Thailand (2020-2025)*

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
People on death row (all offences)	252	181	195	297	348	421
People on death row (drug offences)	157	115	121	183	232	304
Women on death row (all offences)	28	22	18	25	35	43
Women on death row (drug offences)	28	19	14	23	34	42

In Sri Lanka, where official statistics exist on women sentenced to death but not on women on death row, at least seven women were believed to be on death row for drug offences as of 2024.

Reports by civil society organisations provide in-depth analysis of country-specific trends. For example, a 2021 report by Iran Human Rights documented that most confirmed executions of women in Iran between 2010 and October 2021 were linked to drug offences (86 out of 164). Many shared histories of marginalisation and poverty. An illustrative case was that of a single mother of five children whose family could not afford to bury after execution.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Derek Cai (28 July 2023), ‘Singapore executes woman for the first time in 20 years’ *BBC News*. Available from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-66333776>.

<sup>12</sup> Rebecca Ratcliffe (28 July 2023) ‘Singapore executes a woman for first time in almost two decades’ *The Guardian*. Available from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/28/singapore-woman-execute-death-penalty-saridewi-djamani-executed>.

<sup>13</sup> <https://hri.global/flagship-research/death-penalty/the-death-penalty-for-drug-offences-global-overview-2022/>.

<sup>14</sup> <https://hri.global/flagship-research/death-penalty/the-death-penalty-for-drug-offences-global-overview-2021/>.

<sup>15</sup> <https://hri.global/flagship-research/death-penalty/the-death-penalty-for-drug-offences-global-overview-2020/>.

<sup>16</sup> Iran Human Rights (2021) ‘Women and the Death Penalty in Iran’. Available from [https://iranhr.net/media/files/Women\\_and\\_the\\_Death\\_Penalty\\_2021.pdf](https://iranhr.net/media/files/Women_and_the_Death_Penalty_2021.pdf).

A 2026 report by the European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights (ESOHR) focusing on executions of women in Saudi Arabia between 2015 and 2025 found a notable increase in drug-related executions over the past decade, with eight women executed for drug offences, against four in the previous decade (2004-2014). All women executed for drug offences in the past decade were foreign nationals: seven from Nigeria, and Ijaz Fatima from Pakistan. Ijaz was reportedly arrested at the airport for smuggling heroin, while on a trip organised by an intermediary, and executed despite lack of conclusive evidence she knew about the drugs. She was separated from her husband and held in jail with her six-year-old daughter for months, after which her daughter was sent to a juvenile facility; she was denied an interpreter, and her family was not informed of her sentence. Ijaz was finally executed along with her husband; her family was not informed, and to date has not been able to retrieve her body for burial. Another woman, of Nigerian nationality, was executed despite being recognised as a victim of a drug trafficking network known for ‘planting drugs in travellers’ bags without their knowledge’.<sup>17</sup>

### **Recurring patterns concerning women facing capital punishment for drug offences**

The 2021 report ‘No One Believed Me: A Global Overview of Women Facing the Death Penalty for Drug Offenses’ by HRI and the Cornell Center on the Death Penalty Worldwide reconstructed unique patterns and trajectories characterising the experiences of many women impacted by the death penalty as a tool of drug control.<sup>18</sup> They are consistent with the unique, gendered patterns of many women impacted by the criminal legal system for drug offences.

1. Low-level, high-risk position in the drug market: many, if not most, women known to have been sentenced to death for drug offences occupied low-level positions in the drug market – such as couriers. Similarly, research published in 2021 on women sentenced to death for drug trafficking in Malaysia found that most were arrested at airports after being found carrying drugs.<sup>19</sup> This makes them highly visible to law enforcement but also readily replaceable in the drug market; and renders the death penalty inherently ineffective to counter drug trade.
2. Economic insecurity as a driver of engagement in the drug market: women facing the death penalty for drug offences often come from disadvantaged backgrounds and are moved to engage in the drug market to support themselves and their families. Research on Malaysia similarly concluded many of these women ‘were employed within feminised and precarious industries, such as short-term domestic work, and jobs within the entertainment and hospitality sectors. Moreover, many claimed to have been tricked into smuggling drugs, and stated that they had instead been paid to carry a bag across a border containing legal substances or other items [such as cosmetics or electronics]. Others alleged that they were recruited for a job abroad (as a domestic worker or in a factory) and were duped into carrying a bag to Malaysia by their recruiter.’<sup>20</sup> Recent research on Saudi Arabia corroborates this trend: ESOHR identified a recurring pattern of ‘harsh and disproportionate criminalisation of

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<sup>17</sup> European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights (2026), ‘Women’s Executions in Saudi Arabia: From Fragile Protection to Systematic Violations (2015-2025)’. Available from [https://www.esohr.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Womens\\_Executions\\_in\\_Saudi\\_Arabia\\_From\\_Fragile\\_Protection\\_to\\_Systematic.pdf](https://www.esohr.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Womens_Executions_in_Saudi_Arabia_From_Fragile_Protection_to_Systematic.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> Cornell Center on the Death Penalty Worldwide and Harm Reduction International (2021), ‘No One Believed Me: A Global Overview of Women Facing the Death Penalty for Drug Offenses’. Available from <https://dpw.lawschool.cornell.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/No-One-Believed-Me-A-Global-Overview-of-Women-Facing-the-Death-Penalty-for-Drug-Offenses.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> Lucy Harry (8 May 2021), ‘Exploring the relationship between drug trafficking and human trafficking: Women facing the death penalty in Malaysia’ *Routed*. Available from <https://www.routedmagazine.com/omc21-6trafficking-malaysia>.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* For more details: Lucy Harry, ‘Rethinking the Relationship between Women, Crime and Economic Factors: The Case-Study of Women Sentenced to Death for Drug Trafficking in Malaysia’ *Laws* 10(1) 2021. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/laws1001009>.

women—especially migrant domestic workers—within the context of “war on drugs” policies. Women are often prosecuted for smuggling, possession, or “participation” without meaningful investigation into circumstances of recruitment, coercion, deception, or exploitation that may have shaped the facts, and without serious assessment of the roles of criminal networks or principal beneficiaries.<sup>21</sup> Yet, courts often fail to take women’s economic instability and caregiving responsibilities into account. In the 15 countries where the death penalty is mandatory for certain drug offences<sup>22</sup> judges are prevented from considering such gender-specific circumstances.

3. Influence of romantic relationships: in many cases, women transported drugs under the influence of a male partner, who sometimes suffered fewer or no criminal consequences. In part, this reflects the gender-stratified and male-dominated structure of the drug economy. Women are also disproportionately likely to fall victim to online romance scams that may ultimately lead them to unwittingly traffic drugs. Yet, female defendants often struggle to convince judges that they were not aware of the drugs they were carrying. Courts also often neglect to consider the role of an abusive relationship on a woman’s decision to transport drugs.
4. Lack of gender-specific mitigation: while trauma from abusive relationships affects the trajectories of many women who traffic drugs, and women in prison for drug offenses are more likely than men to have endured adverse childhood experiences, courts routinely fail to take into account the impact of trauma and gender-based violence in determining the appropriate sentence for women.
5. Reliance on stereotypical gender narratives: available judgments show that in many cases gender bias affected the outcome of capital drug trials. As detailed in the report,

‘Courts are reluctant to accept that a female defendant was tricked or pressured into transporting drugs unless she matches the profile of a helpless female victim: poor, uneducated, and— in cases involving a male co-conspirator - inexperienced with men. Courts tend not to believe that women from less disadvantaged backgrounds or who have experienced prior romantic relationships are vulnerable to coercion or manipulation. In one case from Malaysia, the court concluded that *“it is very unlikely that the respondent, who is a diploma holder... could have placed herself in a situation where she could be exploited to commit a crime.”* In the case of another woman, who claimed her partner manipulated her into transporting drugs, the court described the defendant’s defense posture as *“a damsel in her maiden love,”* a perspective it rejected given that *“she herself gave evidence that she was in the process of divorcing her husband and, on top of that, they have a child. Thus, it would not be too remote in finding that she fully knew the effect, danger and pitfall of anyone madly and blindly in love.”*

6. Lack of access to adequate consular assistance, legal defence and interpreters, despite heightened needs: women in many migrant source countries tend to have less access to

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<sup>21</sup> European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights (2026), ‘Women’s Executions in Saudi Arabia: From Fragile Protection to Systematic Violations (2015-2025)’. Available from [https://www.esohr.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Womens\\_Executions\\_in\\_Saudi\\_Arabia\\_From\\_Fragile\\_Protection\\_to\\_Systematic.pdf](https://www.esohr.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Womens_Executions_in_Saudi_Arabia_From_Fragile_Protection_to_Systematic.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> For more details see HRI, ‘Death Eligible Drug Crimes: Legislation by Country’. Accessible from <https://hri.global/publications/deathpenaltydrugslaw/> [last accessed 20 March 2026].

education than men, which makes them less likely to speak a foreign language. Because of disparities in socioeconomic status and educational attainment, women also tend to struggle more than men to access an interpreter or retain skilled legal counsel. In one case reviewed for the report, the woman’s boyfriend and potential co-defendant told the police, in a language she did not understand, that she did not need an interpreter, before pinning the blame on her and walking away—while she was sentenced to death.

In its recent report on Saudi Arabia, ESOHR concluded that ‘common violations include denial of effective legal representation from the moment of arrest; lack of interpretation during interrogation and trial; prolonged isolation; and failure to provide early consular notification. Case trajectories are often reduced to brief “confessions” suspected to have been extracted through coercion or psychological pressure.’ In most cases, origin countries reportedly failed to take substantial steps to protect and support nationals facing capital punishment in Saudi Arabia.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusions and recommendations

The death penalty is a disproportionate, ineffective, and illegal response to drug offences. Its imposition ignores gender-specific pathways to offending, while reinforcing structural discrimination against women and girls. We invite OHCHR to provide detailed recommendations to Member States on this practice, including to:

- Impose a moratorium on all executions, and abolish the death penalty for drug offences as a first step towards total abolition;
- Pending total abolition, abolish the *mandatory* death penalty, as it prevents judges from considering all circumstances of the defendant and the offence; including gender-specific mitigation;
- Implement the United Nations Rules for the treatment of Women Prisoners and non-custodial measures for women offenders (Bangkok Rules), including alternative to incarceration;
- Ensure lawyers, judges, prosecutors, and consular officials are adequately trained to fully explore and consider all relevant mitigation evidence in capital trials, including evidence of trauma, gender-based violence, economic pressures, family caretaking responsibilities, and lack of criminal history;
- As clarified by the International Guidelines on Human Rights and Drug Policy,<sup>24</sup> make available gender-specific interventions that aim primarily at diversion from the criminal justice system, and address the underlying factors leading to women coming into contact with the criminal justice system; and
- Centre the voices of directly impacted women, trans people, and non-binary people in policy decisions, as they best understand their own problems and needs.

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<sup>23</sup> European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights (2026), ‘Women’s Executions in Saudi Arabia: From Fragile Protection to Systematic Violations (2015-2025)’. Available from [https://www.esohr.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Womens\\_Executions\\_in\\_Saudi\\_Arabia\\_From\\_Fragile\\_Protection\\_to\\_Systematic.pdf](https://www.esohr.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Womens_Executions_in_Saudi_Arabia_From_Fragile_Protection_to_Systematic.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> International Center on Human Rights and Drug Policy et al. (2019), International Guidelines on Human Rights and Drug Policy, Guideline 2.2. Available from [https://www.humanrights-drugpolicy.org/site/assets/files/1640/hrdp\\_guidelines\\_2020\\_english.pdf](https://www.humanrights-drugpolicy.org/site/assets/files/1640/hrdp_guidelines_2020_english.pdf).