

Building Black Feminist Visions



to
End
the
Drug
War

A framework for building a transnational Black feminist agenda to end the drug war.

IC INTERRUPTING
CRIMINALIZATION

DRUG
POLICY
ALLIANCE.



Since it was declared 50 years ago, the “war on drugs” has played a significant role in fueling skyrocketing rates of incarceration for women in the United States, particularly for Black, Indigenous, and other women of color. It has also been a primary driver of fatal, physical, and sexual violence by police, prison, probation, and parole officers, including the 2020 killing of Breonna Taylor by the Louisville Metropolitan Police Department and dozens more Black women and girls across the U.S. over the past five decades, including Frankie Perkins, Tarika Wilson, Alberta Spruill, Kathryn Johnston, and Danette Daniels — the roll call of Black women who are casualties of the war on drugs is both hidden and long. The global ramifications of the U.S.-driven drug war around the world are equally, if not more devastating, fueling enforcement violence targeting Black, Indigenous and other women and trans people of color in the Caribbean, Central and South America, and at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Drug policy and enforcement have also fueled family policing and separation, immigration detention and deportation, and denial of benefits, education, housing, employment, and protection from violence for Black, Indigenous, and migrant women and trans people of color, who already experience the highest rates of poverty and structural economic, social and political exclusion in the U.S. and around the world. And, it has contributed to the criminalization of pregnant, parenting, trans, and gender nonconforming people, which is now intensifying in the U.S. and beyond in the context of mounting attacks on sexual, gender and reproductive self-determination and prohibitions focused on the medications and health care that enable women, girls, and trans people to exercise bodily autonomy.

By Andrea J. Ritchie with gratitude to Sheila Vakharia and Jules Netherland of the Drug Policy Alliance for editorial feedback. Graphic Design by [Felt Design LLC](#)



Mainstream conversations, advocacy, and organizing aimed at addressing the harms of both drug use and the drug war through law, policy, and service provision have largely failed to take into account or respond to the experiences of women, girls, and trans people. They have also failed to address drug war logic — which prioritizes and justifies enforcement of abstinence, drug prohibition, criminalization, and punishment to address the real and perceived health and societal harms of drug use. Despite drug policy reform efforts, drug war logic continues to permeate systems and institutions proffered as “solutions” such as treatment, health care, and public benefits.¹

In the U.S., drug war logic creates barriers to accessing support and criminalizes women and trans people seeking care. Public benefits systems (including cash and food assistance for low-income people) are shaped by controlling narratives² about Black women, girls, and trans people rooted in racism, ableism, misogyny, classism, and xenophobia. They often perpetuate existing relations of power by distinguishing between people who are deemed “deserving” compared to those who are considered “undeserving” of support — often along lines of race, gender, poverty, and disability — and squarely frame drug users in the latter category. This is most clearly illustrated by constructed panics about “crack mothers” and “welfare queens,” which have led to surveillance and criminalization for suspected “fraud,” subjecting recipients to discriminatory nonconsensual drug testing as a condition of receiving public benefits, work requirements, and a federal ban on benefits for people convicted of a drug-related felony. Drug war logic also fundamentally shapes the family policing system and mandated reporting laws which require health and social service workers to report pregnant people and parents to authorities for alleged neglect or abuse. Black women are subjected to discriminatory prenatal and parental drug testing, and policed according to ideals of normative parenthood by non-drug using, straight, white, abled, middle-class nuclear families. Meanwhile, the healthcare system criminalizes the same groups when seeking medical treatment, through discriminatory drug testing, denial of care or undertreatment of pain, and prosecutions of pregnant and parenting people rather than providing support.

Drug war logic prioritizes punishment while ignoring the reasons people use drugs — including in an effort to manage individual and collective trauma and structural deprivation created by interlocking systems of oppression operating in the lives of Black, Indigenous, and other women and trans people of color. It also denies the bodily autonomy of people who may use drugs for pleasure, productivity, spiritual, or cultural purposes.

Drug war logic also pervades the U.S. education system through surveillance and policing to create so-called “drug-free school zones,” contributing to the criminalization of students, especially Black, Indigenous and migrant girls, trans and gender nonconforming youth while underfunding programs to help young people who may need support around safe drug use.

The impacts of criminalization of controlled substances extend beyond mood-altering drugs to include pain medication and medications for self-managed abortion and gender-affirming care. This brings the fight against the drug war squarely into the realm of feminist struggles for gender, sexual, and reproductive autonomy, health justice, and cultures of collective care. As international feminist drug user advocate and organizer Judy Chang has pointed out: “[Patriarchy and drug prohibition] are predicated on the same objectives and principles, the suppression and subjugation of difference, the control of bodies, limitations on personal choice and freedom and the silencing of dissenting voices.”

Building a Black feminist approach to ending the drug war offers an opportunity for organizers and advocates to come together across movements and borders to build a shared analysis and a common agenda shaped by the experiences and visions of Black women, girls, and trans people around the world. It creates the potential for a cross-sectoral, internationalist framework for resistance that exposes and challenges the racially gendered controlling narratives and carceral logics driving drug policy, and advances liberatory approaches to individual and collective healing and self-determination.

Building Black Feminist Visions to End the Drug War

In order to gain a greater understanding of existing Black feminist organizing against the drug war and bring Black feminist frameworks into the mainstream of drug policy work, Interrupting Criminalization, the Drug Policy Alliance, and the In Our Names Network hosted a two-day convening June 6-7, 2023 during the week Breonna Taylor should have been able to celebrate her 30th birthday. The gathering brought together dozens of Black feminist leaders and allies from drug policy reform, narco feminist, reproductive justice, and queer and trans liberation movements from 6 countries to explore the possibilities for a shared Black feminist vision and plan of action toward a world that centers bodily autonomy and self-determination in all forms. **This document summarizes the elements of Black Feminist Visions to End the Drug War surfaced during this gathering.**

This is certainly not the first effort to articulate Black feminist visions to end the drug war — internationally, there is a growing narco feminism movement, aspects of which are explicitly Black feminist and abolitionist — that is exploring the intersections of feminism, drug reform, and liberation — and a world beyond the drug war. In 2019 a group of women gathered by the Association for Women in Development (AWID) issued the [Barcelona Declaration](#), reproduced in the report “Feminist Movements and Women Resisting the War on Drugs.” In 2022, the Latin American Network of People who Use Drugs (LANPUD) issued a [Feminist Anti-Racist Anti-Prohibitionist Manifesto](#) (original in Spanish and Portuguese available [here](#)). In 2023, U.S.-based national Black feminist reproductive justice organization SisterSong issued the [Visioning New Futures for Reproductive Justice Declaration](#) calling for an end to the drug war.

This framework is intended as a contribution to these and ongoing efforts to articulate and advance a transnational Black feminist agenda to end the drug war rooted in the experiences, resistance, and dreams of Black women, girls, and trans and gender nonconforming people.

Our hope is that it will offer helpful guidance to:

- drug policy advocates;
- Black feminist organizers; and
- funders seeking to advance progressive drug policies and racial, gender, health, reproductive, and economic justice.

“Black women and Indigenous women are being disappeared. We have been reporting that women have been joining the drug market because of poverty because of violence as well. Once in the drug market, they are the main victims. They are the target of this war.”

— **Luana Malheiro**, RENFA (Brazil)

“We have to understand that this is a global issue and we have to address this globally.”

— **Andrea James**, Executive Director, National Council of Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls (United States)

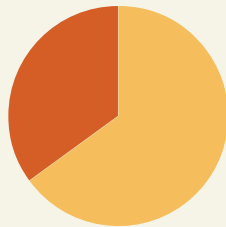
Key facts and stats:

Drug-related charges are a leading driver of criminalization and family separation for women in the United States and around the world.

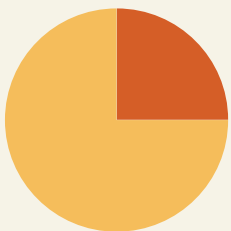


Globally, incarceration of women has increased by **33%** over the past 20 years.

35% of incarcerated women around the world — nearly 60% of incarcerated women in Peru and the Philippines, and 46% of incarcerated women in Colombia were convicted of a drug-related offense.



25% of incarcerated women in the U.S. were convicted of a drug-related offense and, since 1985, drug-related arrests among women increased by 216%.



Impacts of the drug war on Black women, girls, trans and gender nonconforming people include:

- Police profiling, harassment, searches, and raids
- Fatal, physical, and sexual violence by police — sexual violence is a feature of the drug war, taking the form of strip searches and cavity searches by police, in prisons, in drug “treatment” facilities, extortion of sex in exchange for leniency, and targeting drug users based on the assumption that they will not be believed if they come forward
- Criminalization, incarceration, and barriers to migration
- Forced sterilization
- Family separation
- Stigma, criminalization, abuse, and denial of treatment when seeking healthcare
- Increased vulnerability to intimate partner, community, and state-sanctioned violence and exclusion from services for survivors
- Lack of access to treatment programs, especially for pregnant, and parenting people who use drugs
- Coerced medical interventions
- Sexual, gender-based, and transphobic violence in treatment programs
- Targeting growers for chemical warfare and criminalization
- Denial of access to necessary pain, abortion and gender-affirming care medications

Key Elements of a Black Feminist Framework to End the Drug War

A commitment to dismantling all structures and systems of oppression shaping conditions of possibility for Black women, trans, and nonbinary people

Black feminist frameworks are rooted in:

- Black women, trans and nonbinary people's lived experiences at the intersections of multiple systems and structures of oppression
- An end to violence in all its forms, including the violence of surveillance, policing, and punishment
- A culture and practice of collective care
- Bodily autonomy, sovereignty, and self-determination
- An anti-colonial, anti-capitalist transnational politic and practice
- Uprooting the controlling narratives that shape perceptions and treatment of Black women, trans and nonbinary people, flowing from and bolstering intersecting systems of oppression, breaking binaries of "good" and "bad" Black women, girls, trans and gender nonconforming people



“Black youth and women need to be the protagonists in the construction of the new model of drug policy, along with our communities that have been debating and building collective alternatives to the infamous war on drugs.”

— **Ingrid Farias**, RENFA/Free School of Harm Reduction and National Network of Anti-Prohibitionist Feminists (Brazil), in *Feminist Movements and Women Resisting the War on Drugs*

A Black feminist framework to end the drug war prioritizes:

- **Leadership of Black women, girls, trans and gender nonconforming people** who use drugs or participate in drug economies
- **Radical Inclusivity** – it resists the notion that access to meeting basic needs must be mediated through narratives of relative “innocence” fueled by dichotomies between “non-violent” users and others, or through arrest and collaboration with police, prosecutors, courts, and carceral, abstinence-based treatment and community services
- **Recognition of lived experience as expertise.** Starting from the experiences of Black women, trans and non-binary people helps us understand:
 - the extent and depth of the web of criminalization of people who use drugs in all institutions of society, from the family to the state
 - that the drug war perpetrates sexual and reproductive violence and fuels intimate partner and gender-based community violence
 - we don’t make choices independent of the conditions under which we live
- **Harm Reduction**
- **A Focus on Underlying Conditions.** A Black feminist vision to end the drug war requires that we focus on the “broader contexts of violence within which drug policies are situated – organised social abandonment, interpersonal harm and state-sanctioned organised violence of policing, prisons and surveillance...” and resist punitive approaches
- **Abolition**
- **Reproductive Justice**

Radical Black feminist inclusivity includes a steadfast commitment to creating space for the most marginalized members of our community to shape our work and agitate our visions of what a just world for Black folks looks like and for everyone.

“Then I would say as a principle just lived experience as an expertise – viewing one’s position at the nexus of various identities and oppressive systems as one of possibility and power instead of a disadvantage. People who are most exposed to different forms of oppression and most impacted by the harms understand best how to dismantle them and are closest to the solutions.”

— Janaé Bonsu-Love, National Black Women’s Justice Initiative (United States)

“I come to drug policy reform as a black, queer, neurodivergent, drug-using, gender nonconforming abolitionist. I want to imagine a drug policy that can hold all of those complexities — that does not require an abandonment or shrinking of these experiences — and then to work towards a world that celebrates them.”
— Imani Mason Jordan (fka Robinson), in Towards an Abolitionist Drug Policy Reform (United Kingdom)

“Harm reduction, rather than repression and punishment, is one response that allows us to put feminist values into practice. It destigmatises drug use while curbing harmful impacts. It’s a philosophy that embraces a whole range of practices, including needle exchanges to reduce disease transmission and providing safe environments to use drugs and avoid violence or other stresses.(Continued on next page).

Like feminism, harm reduction encourages us to do away with the false distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ women: those that deserve support and those that don’t. It rejects solutions that see people as disposable and exploitable, and helps us understand how prison-based responses do not work. These responses don’t end drug use, but they do penalise those most marginalised in society and make them more vulnerable. They disproportionately impact Black and Brown, indigenous people, trans people, sex workers, poor communities and other historically oppressed groups already at higher risk of violence and criminalisation...the US-led so-called “War on Drugs” put those already experiencing oppression because of their gender, immigration status, class, race and other factors, in the crosshairs of even more violence. Feminist responses must recognise this.” — **Fenya Fischler**, in Why Drug Policy is a Feminist Issue, AWID 2019.

“A Black feminist framework to end the drug war can’t be reformist. It is an abolitionist framework... in order for it to be a Black feminist agenda, it needs to live up to abolitionist ideals. A Black feminist framework is that of transformation. ... It is the belief that our liberation is outside of the framework that we are currently operating in...”

— **Kassandra Frederique**, Drug Policy Alliance (United States)

“A principle of a Black feminist framework is that care cannot be carceral, care cannot be punitive, care cannot be coerced, care cannot be violent. We have to radically reimagine what care means. I think abolition has to be a fundamental principle of a Black feminist framework. We have to abolish all of these institutions and policies that are founded on the abominable, lethal idea that care has to occur through punishment... This is what’s so devious about it. It becomes a smokescreen, a way of hiding that violence.”

— **Dorothy E. Roberts** (United States)

“We have to have an abolitionist approach to how to end this carceral web, which includes the war on drugs, but also family policing, hospitals, cops and prisons, and other, even so-called caring institutions and policies. ... Also, even more important I think, or just as important, is reimagining what care means, and how we’re going to care for each other...” — **Dorothy E. Roberts** (United States)

A Black feminist vision to end the drug war requires that we:

- Tell stories about drugs that are not criminalizing or stigmatizing
- Make feminist spaces accessible and welcoming to women, trans and gender nonconforming people who use drugs
- Not substitute one form of criminalization for another
- Understand that care cannot be carceral, punitive, or violent
- Build radically different care networks while fighting to abolish harmful ones
- Build local, regional, national and transnational networks of resistance led by Black women, trans and gender nonconforming people
- Engage in radical solidarity and collective action
- Understand that we all have a stake in ending the drug war



Explore Black Feminist Visions Graphic Notes

“We fight back against prohibition with solidarity, mutual support and leadership, building our networks from the grassroots to the global, from immediate action to long-term strategies to end this war on womxn who use drugs. We embrace intersectional and anti-prohibitionist feminism that integrates queer/trans-inclusive and non-ableist approaches, racial justice and the right to use drugs and experience pleasure. We work to reclaim our bodily sovereignty, including rights to the full range of sexual and reproductive health, gender-sensitive health services, and rights to use drugs. We do not ask for charity but for solidarity. We demand to live in safety and freedom.”

— The Barcelona Declaration (bit.ly/BarcelonaDeclaration)

“Liberation is ending the war on drugs and providing physical and mental health care, help, and support for everyone who needs it.”

— **Sistersong**, Visioning New Futures for Reproductive Justice Declaration 2023

¹ Cohen, Aliza, Sheila P. Vakharia, Julie Netherland, and Kassandra Frederique. 2022. "How the War on Drugs Impacts Social Determinants of Health beyond the Criminal Legal System." *Annals of Medicine* 54 (1): 2024–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07853890.2022.2100926>.

² Black feminism identifies, critiques and seeks to deconstruct controlling narratives. "Controlling narratives are images and stories about Black women and women of color that shape how we see and react to their actions and experiences. . . For example, we have been conditioned through popular culture and media to see Black women as highly sexual ("hos" and "thots"), materialistic and deceitful ("welfare queens"), and as drug users ("crack mothers")... Trans women are perceived as "freaks," deceptive, and as sexually deviant. These stories have developed, evolved, transformed and have been repeatedly reinforced over time to justify and maintain colonialism, white supremacy, and the borders of the U.S... Controlling narratives are created, internalized and perpetuated by all of us — police, the press, politicians, and every day people." *Invisible No More Book Study and Discussion Guide* (2018), available at: <https://invisiblenomorebook.com/study-guide/>

³ See, e.g., Andrea J. Ritchie, *Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017), ACLU and the Brennan Center, *Caught in the Net: The Impact of Drug Policies on Women and Families* (2005).

⁴ Pregnant people, parents and families who are subject to surveillance and family separation through what is known in the U.S. as the "child welfare system" describe it as the "family regulation" system or the "family policing system" to highlight the ways it intersects with and reinforces the criminal punishment system. In addition to differential punishment of drug use, the family policing system blames individual parents and families for the consequences of structural conditions of poverty, and imposes white middle class ableist standards of parenting as a condition of social acceptance. For more information please read Dorothy Roberts, *Torn Apart: How the Child Welfare System Destroys Black Families--And How Abolition Can Build A Safer World* (New York: Basic Books, 2022); Lisa Sangoi, "'Whatever They Do, I'm Her Comfort, I'm Her Protector.' How the Foster System Has Become Ground Zero for the U.S. Drug War," *Movement for Family Power*, June 2020, static1.squarespace.com/static/5be5ed0fd274cb7c8a5d0cba/t/5eead939ca509d4e36a89277/1592449422870/MFP+Drug+War+Foster+System+Report.pdf.

⁵ Kajstura, Aleks, and Wendy Sawyer. *Women's Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2023*. March 1, 2023. Prison Policy Institute. Retrieved from: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2023women.html>

⁶ Kajstura, Aleks. *States of Women's Incarceration: The Global Context 2018*. June 2018. Prison Policy Institute <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/global/women/2018.html>

⁷ Youngers, Colletta A., Teresa Garcia Castro, and Maria (Kiki) Manzur. *Women Behind Bars for Drug Offenses in Latin America: What the Numbers Make Clear*. WOLA. November 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.wola.org/analysis/report-reveals-alarming-levels-women-incarceration/>

⁸ Working Group on Women, Drug Policies, and Incarceration. *Women, Drug Policies, and Incarceration: A Guide for Policy Reform in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Retrieved from: <https://www.oas.org/en/cim/docs/WomenDrugsIncarceration-EN.pdf>

⁹ Penal Reform International and Thailand Institute for Justice, *Global Prison Trends 2022*, available at: <https://cdn.penalreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/GPT2022.pdf>

¹⁰ Cots Fernandez, Adria and Marie Nougier. *Punitive drug laws: 10 years undermining the Bangkok Rules*. February 2021. International Drug Policy Consortium Fact Sheet. Retrieved from: <https://cdn.penalreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Punitive-Drug-Laws-10-years-undermining-the-Bangkok-Rules.pdf>

¹¹ Monazzam, Niki and Kristen M. Budd. *Incarcerated Women and Girls*. Sentencing Project. April 3, 2023. Retrieved from: <https://www.sentencingproject.org/fact-sheet/incarcerated-women-and-girls/>

¹² Herring, Tiana. "Since you asked: What role does drug enforcement play in the rising incarceration of women?" *Prison Policy Institute*. November 10, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2020/11/10/women-drug-enforcement/>

¹³ Harm Reduction International. 2013. Briefing paper: *Violence Against Women who use Drugs and Access to Domestic Violence Shelters*. https://www.hri.global/files/2013/03/19/Briefing_Paper_-_Access_to_Shelters_-_with_correct_fonts_07.03_.13_.pdf

¹⁴ Fischler, Fenya and Inna Micheali. *Feminist Movements and Women Resisting the War on Drugs: Documentation of an AWID Learning, Movement-Support and Engagement Process*. 2019. <https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/WUD%20report%20-%20English%20-%20Finalsmall.pdf>

¹⁵ Mason Jordan (fka Robinson), Imani. (2020), "Towards an Abolitionist Drug Policy Reform", Buxton, J., Margo, G. and Burger, L. (Eds.) *The Impact of Global Drug Policy on Women: Shifting the Needle*, Emerald Publishing Limited, Bingley, pp. 259-269. <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83982-882-920200035>.

¹⁶ Mason Jordan (fka Robinson), Imani. 2020.

¹⁷ Mason Jordan (fka Robinson), Imani. 2020.

¹⁸ Fischler, Fenya and Inna Micheali. *Feminist Movements and Women Resisting the War on Drugs: Documentation of an AWID Learning, Movement-Support and Engagement Process*. 2019. <https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/WUD%20report%20-%20English%20-%20Finalsmall.pdf>