

FOR A PEOPLE-FIRST WORLD, STOP STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION

Eva Mariela Valencia Martínez



"**Stop stigma and discrimination, strengthen prevention**" was the theme of the 4th Conference in Commemoration of the **International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking**, which is organized annually by **Centros de Integración Juvenil (CIJ)**, host institution in Mexico of the **International Society of Substance Use Professionals (ISSUP)**.

The moderator of the event was **José Luis Benítez**, Head of International Relations of CIJ and coordinator of ISSUP Mexico, who introduced and welcomed the speakers. In this edition, the experts in charge of sharing their points of view, supported by a wide experience and trajectory in the field of drug demand reduction were **Carmen Fernández**, General Director of CIJ and President of ISSUP Mexico; **Roberto Canay** on behalf of ISSUP Argentina, **Augusto Pérez** on representative of ISSUP Colombia, **Patricia Ros** from ISSUP Spain and **Francisco Giménez** representing ISSUP Paraguay.

José Luis Benítez opened the conversation commenting that being a person who uses drugs is nowadays one of the most disapproved conditions in society and that it is very common for substance users to be considered as dangerous or guilty of their situation, giving rise to **multiple forms of discrimination that limit their access to adequate care services**. Afterwards, the floor was given to each speaker to express their impressions on the topic through a conversation that was divided into two segments: a first section in which comments were shared about the impact of stigma and discrimination against drug users in their contexts. The second part was oriented to the exchange of opinions on the most effective strategies to reduce all attitudes, beliefs, behaviors and, in general, any stigmatizing or discriminatory practice.

Patricia Ros, during her remarks, clarified the concept of stigma and the various forms in which it can be presented, pointing out how the process of stigmatization and discrimination against people who use drugs often begins with **health professionals**. She also indicated that it is necessary to advocate for drug policies that are centered in communities and based on the **promotion of mental health, gender equality and social justice**, in order to generate safer and healthier contexts.

In turn, **Roberto Canay** highlighted the influence of the media in the generation of stigmas, commenting that there have always been prevention campaigns that incorporate stereotypes, which, far from helping, hinder the work of professionals who treat addictions. In relation to strategies to reduce stigmatization and discrimination, he emphasized three necessary elements to take into account: to **have scientific and qualitative evidence**; to **work on education**, with different groups; and to **seek the human link** to reduce prejudices and obstacles that cause stigma.

Augusto Pérez, on the other hand, mentioned that from his perspective and in his context, the tendency to victimize substance users has caused them to lose social responsibility. In his words, it is the poor quality of public services that undermines access to treatment for people who use drugs.

Regarding the issue of public services, **Francisco Giménez** returned to the topic and commented that the phenomenon of addictions should be treated as a **public health issue**, that is a public good for which the State is responsible, and not as a crime problem. He also brought up some headlines in the press in his country, where people who use psychoactive substances are **doubly stigmatized**, being singled out for drug use, while at the same time being accused of committing criminal acts. In this way, he stressed that a **code of journalistic ethics** should be developed to focus on the **individual-citizen**.

Carmen Fernández enriched the debate with data from the National Institute of Statistics and Geography in Mexico, pointing out that almost **35% of young people** between 12 and 29 years old have stated that addiction to alcohol, tobacco and other drugs is the main reason why they face stigma and discrimination. She also emphasized that drug use is **dangerous** and that, while stigma and discrimination against drug users must be combated, the dissemination of information on the dangers and potential harm should not be neglected. On the other hand, in relation to the issue of treatment, the General Director of CIJ mentioned that **stigma particularly affects women who use drugs** and that causes them to seek care less frequently; she mentioned that, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's 2023 World Drug Report, **only one in five women who need treatment receive care**, which is partly related to stigmatizing ideas related to gender. Finally, Fernandez brought the issue of prevention to the discussion table and commented that a **narrative of self-care and caring for others** must be developed, replacing competition and criticism, without forgetting mental health, in order to generate favorable social ties.

During the meeting, **Barbara Correa**, Regional Coordinator of the Spanish and Portuguese-speaking ISSUP Chapters, was also present and addressed a message to all attendees where she pointed out that addressing the issue of stigma and discrimination of people who use drugs is of utmost importance, as it represents a first step in breaking down a barrier that can prevent people from accessing timely treatment.

In the same way, in the international conversation there was an intervention by **Natalia Zachartzi**, coordinator of ISSUP Greece, who congratulated CIJ for this initiative and invited all attendees to the next **ISSUP Global Meeting** to be held in Thessaloniki, Greece, during the summer of 2024; a meeting aimed at professionals in addiction care, which will be an excellent opportunity to exchange knowledge, experiences and best practices in this area.

The fourth edition of the virtual format talk was attended by **more than a thousand people** from all over Mexico, but also had a significant international reach, arriving to people from several countries around the world, including **Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Spain, the United States, Panama, Paraguay** and **Peru**. This reaffirms the great value of international collaboration and the role of this network in connecting, uniting and sharing knowledge among the global workforce working in prevention, research, treatment and recovery support for people who use drugs.

In this way, the meeting allowed to reflect on the responsibility of health professionals, media and the general population to stop the stigma and discrimination against people who use drugs. As well as public policy makers and decision makers, to change the vision of regulatory frameworks, to move towards a paradigm shift where **people always come first**.

PEOPLE FIRST

Stop stigma and discrimination,
strengthen prevention