

Drug Abuse among Women: Emerging Global Trends

In many developed countries, drug abuse is no longer an exclusively or predominantly male activity, as reflected in Table 3. In general, male and female drug use patterns seem to be more even in industrialized countries. There is, however, hardly any information on abuse among women from developing countries, where official data suggests that drug abuse referrals are almost exclusively a male phenomenon (see, for instance, the figure for treatment from Pakistan).

In a recent research article published, Perkonig et al, (1998) reported that in a community sample in Europe, men were slightly more likely to ever use drugs and used them more frequently than women. In the same study, the authors reported that based on personal interviews, 30 percent of adolescents and young adults were using 1 or more illicit drug at least once in their lives. The criterion for abuse was met by 4.1 percent of all men and 1.8 percent of all women. In a study from Australia, Swift et al, (1996)

Women and Drug Use in the United States

- 9 million women have used illegal drugs in the last year
- 3.7 million taken prescription drugs non-medically during the past year
- 70% of the AIDS cases among women are drug related
- Emergency room visits by women increased by 35% between 1990 and 1996
- Only 41% of women who need drug treatment actually receive it
- Admission for tranquiliser abuse is greater for women than men (1:0.7)

SAMHSA, 1998, NIDA, 1998

reported that a sizable proportion of women drug users had experienced physical and psychological problems. Poly-drug use was the norm among these women. There was also increasing evidence from the UK, Switzerland and Australia towards increasing drug use among women (World Health Organisation, 1990).

Table 3. Selected Country Data on Male/Female Ratios relating to Drug Use

	Australia	Colombia	Pakistan	Sweden	UK	USA
Lifetime prevalence	1.3:1	1.2:1	-	1.6:1	1.5:1	1.2:1
Annual prevalence	1.5:1	0.7:1	-	-	2.0:1	1.5:1
Persons in treatment	2.4:1	-	99:1	3.3:1	3.0:1	2.5:1
Injecting drug users	2.1:1	-	-	-	3.3:1	2.2:1

(Adapted from the World Drug Report 1997, UNDCP)

The 1997 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse in the United States found that 34 percent of white women, 19 percent Latinas and 25 percent African-American women reported lifetime illegal drug use.

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However, it does appear that the rise in drug use among women is genuine, a conclusion supported by the global changes that favour such an increase.

Emergency room visits by women in the U.S. because of drug-related problems apparently increased by 35 percent between 1990 and 1996 (SAMHSA, 1998). More recent figures from the National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA, 1998) suggest that almost half of all American women aged 15 years to 44 years have used drugs at least once in their lifetime. In Colombia, more than two thirds of prescription drug misuse is by women. It is widely believed that female involvement in drug related problems is seriously under-reported in many countries, especially in the Third World, and that because female drug abuse tends to be more stigmatised, women are less likely to come forward for help.

A question that is often asked is whether there is indeed a true increase in drug use among women, or whether there is an apparent rise that can be attributed to more gender-specific research. However, it does appear that the rise is genuine, a conclusion supported by the global changes that (unfortunately) favour such an increase of drug use among women. One such change is the transition of women from the traditional roles of mother and homemaker to that of an economic provider for the family. Another is emancipation and greater economic independence. Though the latter can be considered a positive gain it can also impose greater levels of stress, and drug use is a possible response in the absence of other coping mechanisms.