

Trávníčková Ivana:

Specific aspects of drug abuse among women¹

1999 - 2001

ISBN 80-86008-92-4

Extended summary

Background and focus of research

Epidemiological studies charting the development of the drug scene in the Czech Republic show that there has recently been a dramatic increase in the percentage of women abusing drugs. This unwelcome fact is indicated by the closing of the ratio of men and women affected. In 2000 this indicator was 1.9: 1.

Changes in the drug scene show that, although this is not a phenomenon that is governed by its own laws, the causes, disproportion and specifics of drug use by women constitute a relatively independent subject of knowledge.

From a social viewpoint it is significant that the basic feature of drug dependency is a certain social degradation and social isolation which, in the case of women, is even more apparent and has a deeper impact on their surroundings, particularly children. Drug use is always a warning sign both for further personality development (with a variety of health, socio-psychological and moral consequences) and for society. People who have become addicted to a drug often spend sums on their addiction that are disproportionate to their income and other essential or important costs. Money is usually obtained by illegal or undesirable means, in the case of women very frequently by prostitution. Drug users generally reject obedience and responsibility, try to disengage from real life, renounce their social role and tasks and neglect to support their family, if they have one.

Drug abuse always represents a health risk for the person who uses the drug. Where in the case of women this is related to pregnancy the healthy development of the foetus is also threatened. An abstinence syndrome can appear in the child following birth as a result of the mother's dependency on drugs.

Today, women are taking on new roles, new values and new tasks while retaining all the original responsibilities necessary for a harmonious marriage, relations with children and the creation of meaningful emotional ties. The adoption of a new lifestyle has resulted in an increase in the number of women who have regular contact with alcohol. The higher demands, or the threat of social failure, are often the motivation to seek out other drugs as a potential aid in broadening the range of abilities and possibilities and to reduce anxiety or stress.

In comparison with men, women's more complicated social role is also currently manifested in the substantially lower and more limited possibility for psychological relaxation and rehabilitation through social means. While, for example, male drunkenness is accepted by the social environment, a woman, in order not to feel stigmatised, cannot resolve her problems in the same way. The development of dependency among women is typically caused by the need for personal escape. Women are also more likely to develop a dependency as a result of family and partnership problems.

Women do not start to take drugs later than men but they have a rather different pattern of use. Women and men differ significantly in that more than half of female addicts received

¹ Trávníčková, I., Votavová, M., Kopřivová, L., Hermanová, M. Specific aspects of drug abuse among women. Prague : ICSP, 2001. 83 pages. Summary.

their first injection from their partner, whereas it is only rarely the case that a female drug addict would “provide” it to her partner.

Methodology:

A major part of the research charts drug use by young people, whether in specific localities or usually as part of international research over the entire Czech Republic. Although in recent times the drug problem has received a lot of attention, the relation between women and drugs remains of peripheral interest. The sources relating to drug use by women are non-systematic, non-comprehensive and need to be deliberately sought out.

The aim of this study was, on the basis of the above description, to broaden and deepen the knowledge of specific aspects of drug use among the female population in the Czech Republic. The research project was conceived so as to:

- **make it possible to summarise and analyse those factors which taken together may easily lead to the boundaries of risk being passed and the subsequent use of drugs**
- **characterise the various types of “female” roles related to drug use.**

In view of the extensiveness of the issue, we intentionally avoided questions relating to the prevention and treatment of drug dependency among women. We also did not address the very frequent abuse of medicaments, for which particularly the female part of our population is “famous”. These to a large extent are used to treat long-term psychological problems, or insomnia, or are taken in the belief of the miraculous “slimming” effects of certain medications that are taken without consulting a doctor. The extensive advertising campaigns of certain pharmaceutical companies exacerbate the situation with the obvious attempt to change our population into a “pill culture nation”.

For the purposes of our research the following methods were used:

- secondary analysis of information from expert (mainly magazine) literature
- statistical data on problem drug users from 1996 to 2000 monitored by the departments of drug epidemiology in regional hygiene stations
- statistical data on drug delinquency presented in the Ministry of Justice year-books from 1996 to 1999
- a specially compiled questionnaire, supplemented by a note sheet for client therapists and an expert employee at the Opava prison

The data obtained was processed by standard means using the special SPSS computer program. It was not appropriate to use classification II of statistical analysis in view of the small size of the sample (altogether 80 respondents from three risk groups of women).

Brief characteristics of individual groups of respondents:

The aim of the research was to ascertain the specific aspects of drug addiction among women. The research was thus aimed at women who through regular contact with drugs had found themselves in a socially negative situation and who are now trying to get rid of their drug addiction through therapeutic treatment. As at a general level prostitutes are very often linked with drug use (particularly cocaine) we also contacted this category of women, albeit with significant difficulties.

Group A – problem girls

This includes girls whose opinions, attitudes and behaviour are regarded by the social environment as unacceptable. The aim is therefore to analyse the major causes of their problems and by educational therapeutic means to bring about change.

The group contained girls living in the Prague Diagnostic Institute for Young People. Here, a detailed personal case history is used to define the appropriate educational therapeutic treatment for the client, or alternatively a further stay is organised in a special institution (e.g. an educational home for young people, medical treatment facility etc.). Due to the fact that at the time of the research only a small number of girls in the Diagnostic Institute had problems with drug use we decided to expand the group. The second part was made up of clients from “Cesta” (The Road), a special non-governmental medical institution whose purpose is to motivate female addicts to lead a life without drugs.

Group B – prostitutes

This includes girls selling sex for money. We contacted these girls through the civic association R – R (Rozkoš bez rizika – Pleasure without risk) whose employees distributed our questionnaire (for a symbolic reward of CZK 20 for its completion) as part of their preventive field work (blood tests to check for HIV positives) both in and outside Prague.

Group C – female addicts serving time in Opava prison¹

This includes women who are serving their sentence in a special section of Opava prison where they attempt to rid themselves of their addiction to drugs.

Summary and conclusions

The aim of the survey presented here was to ascertain and describe as fittingly as possible the specific relation between women and drugs. Although most experts emphasise that the problem of female drug abuse is on the increase and differs substantially from drug abuse in the male population, there are only isolated studies on these issues. There is general agreement that changes in the social climate are among the destabilising factors and that among women these are frequently transformed into problems in the family or in relations with the partner.

One of the constant questions in the life of every woman and whose solution affects the stability and dimension of a “woman’s role” is how to successfully combine relations with her partner, her career and children.

In addition to the changes transforming the contemporary family, or partner co-habitation, a major change is also underway in women’s social role. It would seem that it is no longer very attractive to be a mother. With some women this is clearly combined with a feeling of non-fulfilment in life and a loss of social responsibility together with a sense of life certainty that a woman in a family with children used to have. The daily care of and responsibility for children, together with the financial stability provided by the husband, can be characterised as a long-term “generational pattern” which most women tried to fulfil. This uniqueness of the “woman’s role”, defined and passed on almost unchanged through many generations, has been lost. The uncertain conception of the “woman’s role” in society and the enormous dilemma of combining successfully the majority of demands can raise the question whether drug use is not an escape from or defensive gesture on the part of the woman to excessive social pressure.

In the theoretical part of the work we conceived the problem so as to ascertain the typical variables in the women and drugs relationship.

Women play an irreplaceable role – that of mother. To this is connected the most important question relating to drug abuse in the female population. According to what social criteria do we deal with a pregnant addict? To what degree do we limit the freedom of choice and rights of the mother, or alternatively in what ways do we defend the freedom and rights of the

¹ More detailed information on the specific institutions can be found in a separate annex.

unborn child? The submitted paper obviously does not contain a clear-cut answer but it at least contains the basic information on the most common approaches.

In the empirical part of the work the epidemiological and statistical data are supplemented by behavioural factors – the relations with the partner and ties to the child. It may be that even the data presented in the empirical part of the report are not as decisive as the trends observed. On the basis of the findings gathered we can state that among the risk groups of women singled out there is a relatively marked consistency of opinion on the decisive motivation connected with drug use in the female population as well as on the changes in life style relating thereto.

Practically all groups of women polled displayed an equally vehement conviction that their child should not use drugs and only exceptionally (up to 5 %) did they agree that their parents or siblings should use drugs.

The research also confirmed a relatively significant bond to the partner offering drugs (slightly over 50 % of the women polled).

An important finding was that more than half of the women had undergone an unpleasant experience (physical violence, rape) connected with sex.

Although the data obtained cannot be generalised, their aggregation makes it possible to ascertain the difference in drug addiction between women and men. The difference could be summarised as follows:

- drug use degrades women more than men, isolation from the surroundings is greater and it is more difficult to alter the situation,
- the effects of addiction on physical and mental health are manifested more markedly and more quickly than on men,
- women are more anxious and less aggressive than men,
- women dependent on alcohol generally drink secretly and alone from the beginning and the surrounding environment thus reacts more slowly,
- the most common motivation for abuse among women is a reaction to life complications and failures (with “family” problems the major factor); a drug abusive partner has a significant influence,
- women more commonly abuse alcohol with medication than men,
- women using drugs or alcohol more frequently lose their partner or whole family,
- the greater social stigma and fear of losing their children causes women to delay asking for help.

The differences in society’s relation to men using drugs and to women have their roots in the long-term development of man and culture.

In this respect it is also important to emphasise that the beginning of drug addiction or dependency in each individual (regardless of sex) is conditional upon many factors which have no mutually constant link or form.

The submitted research, specialising on women’s abuse, shows through a summary of various data that more attention should be paid to this problem. This particularly applies to the most sensitive problems – the increased incidence of violence against women using drugs and the bond between the mother and the unborn child.

It did not always prove possible to complete the information. However, it may be said that most of the problems linked to female abuse are closely connected to life style and way of thought. Women’s problems often accumulate. Various means exist to solve them. One of the “close to hand” solutions is the use of medication affecting the person’s psychology. At the beginning the solution is quick and easy, but gradually this turns into an addiction without which it is impossible to lead a “normal” life. Each woman has her own experience but certain general signs exist that continue over the long term.

From the information obtained it is evident that even though this is not a consistent phenomenon, female abuse is also closely connected to society's economic and social structure and that the drug problem in the female population of the Czech Republic is also clearly apparent.