

# GENDER DIFFERENCES IN PERSONAL NETWORKS AND PERCEIVED SUPPORT AMONG DRUG ADDICTS IN TREATMENT IN PUERTO RICO

Colón HM<sup>1</sup>, Robles RR<sup>1,2</sup>, Marrero CA<sup>1</sup>, Sahai H<sup>2</sup>

1. Mental Health and Anti Addiction Services Administration, 2. Medical Sciences Campus, School of Medicine, University of Puerto Rico

## INTRODUCTION

The special needs and circumstances of women addicts have just recently begun to be addressed. Most of the available literature on gender differences in substance abuse has examined differences in patterns of drug use, comorbidity with other physical and mental health conditions, and the specific reproductive and parenting needs of women. There is a scarcity of information about the social structures in which women substance abusers are embedded and the functions that these networks play as impediments and/or facilitators of recovery among women. Moreover, although substance abuse has been often found to be associated to disrupted social relationships, little is known about how these disruptions differ between men and women.

This study examines the differences between female and male drug addicts in measures of social integration and support and in reports of social disruptions. Of special concern to investigators were qualitative differences in the supportive resources available to men and women upon entering drug addiction treatment.

## METHODS

### Study Sample

This study is part of an intervention research project aimed at assessing social support strategies to help drug abusers continue their recovery process. The study population was recruited from the three public detoxification units operating in the metropolitan San Juan area during a period of 14 months, from early 1992 to mid-1993. Participants were eligible to participate if they had been in the detoxification units at least three days and were residents of the San Juan metro area. Recruitment quotas were set by detox unit and gender so as to achieve a sample from each unit roughly proportional to their static capacity and 30% female. Eligible subjects were randomly selected from daily logs and invited to participate. Of these, 89.7% consented to participate and completed the baseline interview.

### Measures

Structured interviews were conducted by trained interviewers in private offices within the detox units. The interview elicited information on sociodemographic characteristics, drug use behaviors, family composition, social integration, social support, conflictual relationships and events and other factors relevant to drug abuse recovery.

## RESULTS

Table 1 compares male and female drug abusers by sociodemographic characteristics and drug use behaviors. Women were more likely to live in their own place and to have a source of income. The group of women entering drug treatment differed from the male group in their use of drugs. Crack use was more prevalent among women; men were more likely to use 'speedball' (heroin and cocaine mixed together) and to inject drugs.

TABLE 2: SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND SUPPORT BY GENDER AMONG DRUG ABUSERS ENTERING DRUG TREATMENT IN SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO (N= 416)

	Men		Women		p
	Mean/Percent	(S.D.)	Mean/Percent	(S.D.)	
Employed during last 30 days	36.3%		16.8%		<.001
Living in same community for a year or more	90.3%		78.9%		.004
Currently in academic/training program	13.2%		16.9%		.308
At least monthly attendance to religious activities	24.5%		19.7%		.268
Attending a self-help group	1.1%		1.4%		.791
Lives with:					
Father	28.9%		11.9%		<.001
Mother	60.4%		32.9%		<.001
Spouse/Partner	29.7%		25.9%		.416
Sibling	37.4%		18.9%		<.001
Children	24.9%		59.4%		<.001
Number of friends	2.9	5.1	1.5	2.6	<.001
Size of support network	4.4	2.6	4.0	2.3	.115
Kin in support network	69.1%		62.1%		.047
Spouse in support network	33.3%		33.6%		.962
Receives support during treatment from:					
Parents	85.4%		73.2%		.005
Spouse/Partner	50.9%		52.1%		.818
Siblings	77.7%		59.9%		<.001
Children	33.3%		66.2%		<.001
Other relatives	50.2%		39.4%		.037
Friends	55.9%		57.8%		.717
Number of persons providing:					
Tangible support	3.9	2.4	3.3	1.9	.008
Emotional support	4.1	2.4	3.7	2.3	.111

Table 3 shows comparisons between men and women in reports of conflictual relationships and events. Very large differences were found in events of physical abuse during childhood as well during the last year. Close to one third of the women reported having been physically abused during childhood and 21.0% said they had also been abused during the previous year. Women were also more likely to have had serious conflicts with their mothers and partners during the previous year.

TABLE 1: SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS AND DRUG USE PATTERNS BY GENDER AMONG DRUG ABUSERS ENTERING DRUG TREATMENT IN SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO (N= 416)

	Men		Women		p
	Mean/Percent	(S.D.)	Mean/Percent	(S.D.)	
Age	31.1	7.7	30.7	6.8	.565
Completed high school	60.4%		54.5%		.248
Lives at own place	28.9%		53.2%		<.001
Has a regular source of income*	66.7%		76.2%		.044
Drug use †					
Used crack	37.0%		49.0%		.019
Used cocaine	64.8%		45.5%		<.001
Used Heroin	58.2%		60.1%		.709
Used speedball	56.0%		32.9%		<.001
Used injected drugs	57.4%		40.7%		.001

\* from job or government assistance  
† last 30 days

In the measures of social integration (Table 2) women were found less likely to be employed, and to have lived in the same community for a period of one year or more. Women were also less likely to currently live with parents and siblings but a significantly higher proportion of women lived with children. Men as well as women reported a small number of friends but men had, on average, twice as many friends as women. Measures of social support (Table 2) also reveal some gender differences. Although there was no significant gender difference in the amount of persons mentioned as sources of support, men were more likely to report family members as sources of support. This was specially true in the case of the support received for completing drug treatment. Men also reported receiving tangible support from a larger number of persons.

TABLE 3: SOCIAL AND NETWORK DISRUPTIONS BY GENDER AMONG DRUG ABUSERS ENTERING DRUG TREATMENT IN SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO (N= 416)

	Men		Women		p
	Percent		Percent		
Physically abused:					
During childhood	15.0%		30.8%		<.001
During the last 1 year	5.9%		21.0%		<.001
Recent serious conflict with:					
Mother	18.3%		28.0%		.030
Father	11.7%		10.5%		.707
Spouse/Partner	20.5%		29.4%		.043
Sibling	16.5%		17.5%		.796
Child	2.6%		5.6%		.161

\* during last 1 year

## CONCLUSION

Contrary to the social landscape described by studies of the general population where women are found to be more integrated to kin and friends, the findings of this study present drug abusing women as more isolated from family, friends and partners than drug abusing men. Women were also more likely to have undergone stressful life events like being abused in their early childhood as well as during the last year and presented more conflicts with their mothers and partners. Although there were no significant gender differences in the size of the support networks, men reported receiving instrumental support from a larger number of members of their support networks.

Previous research findings suggest that social support and social integration constitute resources that can positively influence psychiatric symptomatology and feelings of well-being. These resources have also been found to enhance and accelerate recovery processes in drug abuse, mental health, and physical illnesses. Thus, the drug abusing women in our study would seem to be lacking in the protection provided by these coping mechanisms.

However, our findings also indicate that, among women substance abusers, natural support networks might imply substantial disruptive relationships and that stresses and strains in the relationships might be pervasive. Research on the effects of social relations on psychological well-being has generally ignored the negative side of social integration. Within disruptive and conflictual social contexts, non-integration might very well be beneficial and adaptive for women.

Furthermore, these analyses suggest that the relationships between needs and resources might also differ across genders. Integration of male addicts to their familial networks might signal a larger degree of dependence on their part. Women, for example, were more likely to live on their own and to have their own sources of income. These indicators could mean that, although lacking social support from primary relationships, women addicts are more able to perform roles and utilize resources from the macro society. Intervention programs attempting to increase the social supportive resources of women addicts should carefully ponder the implications of these results. ■