

The gender dimension of non-medical use of prescription drugs in Europe and the Mediterranean region



Marilyn Clark

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Marilyn Clark
and the members
of the Pompidou Group
Expert Working Group on
the Gender Dimension of NMUPD

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Key researcher: Marilyn Clark

Expert Working Group members:

Emad Hamdi-Ghoz, Marie Jauffret-Roustide, Philippe Le Moigne, Minerva Melpomeni Malliori, Elisabetta Simeoni, Ernestas Jasaitis, Marilyn Clark, Mirjana Jovanović, Kyrie James, Klaudia Palczak

Expert participants: Maria Savvidou,

Viktor Mravcik, Barbora Orlikova, Pavla Chomynova, Haroun El Rasheed, Marie Jauffret-Roustide, Philippe Le Moigne, Thérèse Benoit, Daniela Piontek, Minerva Melpomeni Malliori, Ana Kokkevi, Brigid Pike, Anat Fleischman, Bruno Genetti, Elisabetta Simeoni, Michel Soufia, Ernestas Jasaitis, Manuel Gellel, Maria Sabir, Mirjana Jovanović, Dike Van de Mheen, Haifa Zalila, Gareth Hewitt

Contributors: Jamie Bonnici,
Kelsey Renaud

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Author and contributors

Marilyn Clark is an Associate Professor with the Department of Psychology at the University of Malta. She holds a Masters degree in social psychology from the University of Liverpool and a PhD from the University of Sheffield. Her main research interests are addiction, gender, criminal careers, stigma and youth studies. She has published extensively in peer reviewed journals and in a number of academic texts. In Malta she chaired the National Commission on the Abuse of Drugs, Alcohol and other Drugs, is an assistant to the magistrate on the juvenile court and a member of the Centre for Freedom from Addictions, President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society.

Members of the Pompidou Group of the Expert Working Group on the Gender Dimension of NMUPD

Cyprus

Maria Savvidou, Officer Cyprus Focal Point

Czech Republic

Victor Mravcik, Barbora Orlikova, Pavla Chomynova, Drug Policy Department, Office of the Government

Egypt

Haroun El Rasheed, Ain Shams University, Cairo

France

Marie Jauffret-Roustide, Philippe Le Moigne, Thérèse Benoit, Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale, INSERM

Germany

Daniela Piontek, Institut für Therapy Forschung

Greece

Minerva Melpomeni Malliori, Ana Kokkevi, University of Athens

Ireland

Brigid Pike, Irish Focal Point for the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction

Israel

Anat Fleichmann, Israeli Anti-Drug Authority, Israeli Society of Addiction Medicine

Italy

Bruno Genetti, Elisabetta Simeoni, Italian National Focal Point, Department for Anti-Drug Policies,

Lebanon

Michel Soufia, Psychiatry Department, USEK Faculty of Medicine

Lithuania

Ernestas Jasaitis, Monitoring and Analysing Unit of Drug, Tobacco and Alcohol Control Department

Malta

Manuel Gellel, National Coordinating Unit for Drugs and Alcohol

Morocco

Maria Sabir, Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy, National Center on Treatment, Research and Prevention on Drugs Rabat

Serbia

Mirjana Jovanovic, National Commission on Drugs, Clinical Centre "Kragujevac"

The Netherlands

Dike Van De Mheen, Addiction Research Institute, IVO

Tunisia

Haifa Zalila, Hôpital Razi, Tunis

United-Kingdom, Wales

Gareth Hewitt, Kyrie James, Welsh Advisory Panel on Substance Misuse

Contributors

Jamie Bonnici, Kelsey Renaud, Department of Psychology at the University of Malta

Invited international organisation in the project

EMCDDA European Monitoring Center on Drugs and Drug Addiction

The Pompidou Group role in integrating a gender dimension of drug policies

The Co-operation Group to Combat Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking in Drugs (the Pompidou Group) is an intergovernmental body formed in 1971. Since 1980 it has carried out its activities within the framework of the Council of Europe. Thirty-seven countries are now members of this European multidisciplinary forum which allows policy makers, professionals and experts to exchange information and ideas on a wide range of drug misuse and trafficking problems. Its mission is to contribute to the development of multidisciplinary, innovative, effective and evidence-based drug policies in its member states. It seeks to link policy, practice and science.

The Pompidou Group, perceived as a pioneer in Europe regarding the integration of the gender dimension into drug policies, has always called for a better understanding of gender specific differences.¹

The permanent correspondents – appointed by their governments to represent them within the Pompidou Group – at their meeting in Athens in November 2013, welcomed the initiative by the Italian Department for Anti-Drug Policies Presidency of the Council of Ministers to set up a gender-specific project to be funded on an Italian voluntary contribution.

The Pompidou Group decided to launch a gender-specific project analysing problems of addiction among Pompidou Group member states, former Pompidou Group member states and MedNET (PG network of co-operation in the Mediterranean Region) countries, covering Europe and the Mediterranean Region.

Already in 2001, the Pompidou Group made a contribution on the subject with a study on the sensible use of benzodiazepines and the subsequent CND Resolution 44/13 “Contribution to the appropriate use of benzodiazepines” in 2001.²

1. The gender dimension of drug policies was first discussed at the 1984 Ministerial Conference of the Pompidou Group.

2. See www.unodc.org/unodc/en/Resolutions/resolution_2001-03-28_8.html.

In January 2014, Ms Elisabetta Simeoni, Permanent Correspondent for Italy and Gender Equality Rapporteur for the Pompidou Group within the framework of the Council of Europe's Gender Equality Strategy – which aims at moving from legal equality to real equality – agreed to focus first on the following topic: the gender dimension of non-medical use of prescription drugs.

The nomination of experts took place within a few weeks. They were then given a few months to reply to the survey. Marilyn Clark presented the draft report at a conference in Rome in September 2014 opened by Counsellor Attorney Patrizia de Rose, General Manager, Department for Anti-Drug Policies, Presidency of the Council of Ministers, and attended by the researchers from the countries participating in the study and from UNICRI and EMCDDA.

During the 16th Pompidou Group Ministerial Conference in November 2014, the media expressed a strong interest in this first study on the gender dimension of the non-medical use of prescription drugs in the Mediterranean region and in Europe.

Executive summary

Background

Understanding gender as it relates to drug use and drug-use disorders is a critical requirement for developing effective policy and practice responses. This study aims to explore the gender dimension of the non-medical use of prescription drugs (NMUPD) in Europe and the Mediterranean region, to build on the corpus of knowledge on the subject, and to help identify gaps in this knowledge.

Working definitions

This study uses the definition of NMUPD developed by the Lithuanian Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2013 : “use of a prescription drug, whether obtained by prescription or otherwise, other than in the manner or for the time period prescribed, or by a person for whom the drug was not prescribed”. This study is concerned specifically with the use of psychotropic drugs. The term “non-medical use” does not correspond to the definition of substance-related disorders in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edition (DSM-V, American Psychiatric Association, 2013). For the purpose of this study’s research tool, the “use of prescription drugs” was defined as “consumption with doctor’s prescription and/or consumption as prescribed by a medical practitioner”.

Project purpose and design

The main aims of this study are:

- ▶ to explore gender differences in NMUPD in Europe and the Mediterranean region through a documentation of secondary sources;
- ▶ to identify gaps in the data available for Europe and the Mediterranean region;
- ▶ to make recommendations for further research;
- ▶ to make recommendations for policy development and practice.

The research tool used in this study was a questionnaire sent to experts nominated by the permanent correspondents of the Pompidou Group (PG) member states and former member states, and experts nominated through the PG’s Mediterranean Network (MedNET) correspondents for the Mediterranean region countries.

Geographical scope

This study is based on a geographically representative sample of PG member states, MedNET participating countries and some former PG member states. Seventeen countries participated: Cyprus, Czech Republic, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Lebanon, Lithuania, Malta, Morocco, Serbia, the Netherlands, Tunisia and the United Kingdom (Wales only).¹

Results

The literature review identifies women as a high-risk category for NMUPD and shows how gender is not predictive in the same direction across different drug categories. It highlights how the telescoping phenomenon is evident for women in their NMUPD “career path” and that they manifest different patterns of use to men. It highlights how trauma and interpersonal violence may be causal factors for NMUPD among women.

The submitted data indicates that, in the general population, the use of prescription drugs is higher among women than men. Prescription-drug use increases with age, with the thirties constituting the highest risk period. No conclusions about gender influences on the use of a specific class of prescription drug were reached.

While rates for prescription-drug use have been shown to be clearly higher for women, the picture for NMUPD is less clear. Few countries were able to report on NMUPD: Greece and Lithuania registered higher levels for women while the opposite was true for Lebanon and Israel. The initiation into NMUPD is marginally later for women than men. The most common source of prescription drugs for both sexes is a legal one (from a doctor), followed by “from a friend or a relative” indicating the relative ease of diversion. Data from surveys of young people indicate that lifetime rates of NMUPD are higher for women in a number of countries and that the age of first NMUPD coincides with middle adolescence.

In Germany and Serbia, the number of fatal overdoses related to the use of psychotropic prescription drugs is higher for women than men. The data on treatment are too limited to make any reliable conclusions according to gender.

Disparity in the type of drug use surveyed in relation to prescription-drug use and NMUPD makes comparison of prevalence rates particularly problematic, and there is no clear documentation of the full extent of NMUPD which would allow researchers to highlight gender differences. Data-collection instruments, such as general population drug prevalence surveys, do not always distinguish between “medical use” and “non-medical use”. The national data on the use and misuse of prescription drugs among general populations should, therefore, be interpreted very cautiously. Not all the countries which participated in this study reported on the source of the prescription drugs. While the monitoring of prescribing practices among young people is an important area of research, surveys of young people in Europe mainly explored NMUPD.

1. Wales is not a sovereign state but rather a semi-autonomous region of the UK.