

Gender Dynamics in Drug Markets, Addiction Pathways, and Criminal Liability

Union of Saints

Understanding Demand, Relationship Influence, and the “Woman of Circumstance”

Drug markets and addiction pathways are shaped by complex social, economic, and relational dynamics. Research across public health, criminology, and legal scholarship consistently shows that men represent the majority of illicit drug users, buyers, traffickers, and dealers, while women often encounter drugs through interpersonal relationships and social networks. These gendered patterns influence not only how drug use begins but also how addiction develops and how individuals become involved in drug-related criminal activity.

Understanding these dynamics provides insight into both public health outcomes and the legal consequences that have emerged from drug control policies over the past several decades.

Gender Distribution in Drug Use and Purchasing

Global and national statistics consistently demonstrate that men constitute the majority of illicit drug consumers and purchasers. Research indicates that men represent approximately:

- 71 percent of amphetamine users
- 75 percent of cocaine users
- 68 percent of ecstasy users
- 86 percent of opiate users
- 76 percent of cannabis users worldwide

Similarly, substance use disorder rates show a notable gender gap. In the United States, approximately **11.5 percent of men over the age of twelve experience substance use disorders compared with 6.4 percent of women.**

These statistics reflect broader patterns in which men are more likely to engage in recreational drug use, direct drug purchasing, and participation in drug distribution networks. Criminal justice data reinforce this trend. In the United States, more than **eighty percent of individuals sentenced for drug trafficking offenses are men**, demonstrating that men dominate higher-level roles within illicit drug markets.

Gender Differences in Drug Acquisition

While men are more likely to purchase drugs directly from dealers, research suggests that women more frequently obtain drugs through social relationships. Studies examining drug acquisition patterns show that men are more likely to engage in direct cash transactions with suppliers, whereas women often gain access to substances through partners, friends, or shared networks.

At higher levels of use, both men and women may rely on dealers at similar rates. However, during early stages of drug use, women are more likely to obtain substances through interpersonal connections rather than through direct market participation. These patterns demonstrate that social relationships play a significant role in shaping women's exposure to drugs.

Intimate Relationships and the Introduction of Drug Use

Addiction research consistently identifies romantic partners as a common pathway through which women are introduced to drugs. Studies examining women who use heroin, methamphetamine, and injectable drugs have found that many women report initial exposure within the context of a relationship with a male partner who already used drugs.

These introductions may occur through:

- Partners sharing drugs during social interactions
- Encouragement or normalization of drug use within a relationship
- Partners supplying or financing drugs
- Partners providing access to drug networks

In some cases, women report initiating drug use in order to maintain intimacy or alignment with a partner's lifestyle. Relationship dynamics can therefore shape not only access to drugs but also patterns of continued use.

Trauma, Vulnerability, and Substance Use

Women's pathways into substance use are also strongly linked to trauma and social vulnerability. Research consistently shows that women with histories of childhood sexual abuse, domestic violence, or interpersonal trauma face significantly higher risks of developing substance use disorders.

Substances may initially be used as coping mechanisms for:

- Emotional distress
- Depression or anxiety
- Relationship conflict
- Chronic or physical pain
- Trauma-related psychological symptoms

These motivations often differ from the more recreational motivations frequently reported among male users. As a result, women's substance use patterns frequently emerge within complex emotional and relational contexts.

The Telescoping Effect in Women's Addiction

Addiction researchers describe a phenomenon known as the **telescoping effect**, in which women often progress from initial substance use to addiction more rapidly than men. Although women tend to begin using drugs later in life on average, once use begins the progression to dependence can occur in a significantly shorter period.

This accelerated trajectory increases the likelihood of severe health consequences, including overdose, infectious diseases, and mental health complications.

Gendered Patterns in Prescription Drug Use

Gender differences in drug exposure are also reflected in medical prescribing patterns. Historically, women have been prescribed psychotropic medications—such as sedatives, antidepressants, and anti-anxiety drugs—at significantly higher rates than men. Some historical analyses estimate that women receive **roughly twice as many prescriptions for psychotropic drugs** as men.

Several factors contribute to this disparity:

- Women are more likely to seek medical help for emotional distress.
- Medical systems have historically framed certain psychological conditions as “female” disorders.
- Cultural expectations surrounding emotional expression may influence diagnosis and treatment patterns.

Pharmaceutical marketing and cultural narratives during the twentieth century frequently portrayed women as particularly vulnerable to anxiety or emotional instability, which further reinforced prescribing patterns.

These trends highlight the broader ways in which gender norms have shaped both illicit and medical drug exposure.

Rising Drug-Related Deaths Among Women

Although men still account for the majority of drug-related deaths globally, recent public health research indicates that mortality among women who use drugs has increased at a significantly faster rate in some regions.

A national analysis conducted by the Scottish Government found that while men remain the majority of drug-related fatalities, the rate of increase among women has risen dramatically. **Between 2002–2006 and 2012–2016, drug-related deaths increased by approximately 169 percent among women compared with 60 percent among men.**

Researchers identified several factors contributing to this trend:

- Higher rates of mental health conditions among women who use drugs
- Greater prevalence of trauma and adverse childhood experiences
- Increased exposure to domestic violence and unstable relationships
- Higher rates of polysubstance use involving both illicit and prescription drugs
- Structural barriers to gender-responsive treatment programs

Many women who experience fatal overdoses also face overlapping social vulnerabilities including poverty, caregiving responsibilities, housing instability, and limited access to addiction treatment.

These findings suggest that addressing overdose mortality requires gender-specific public health strategies that account for the relational and social contexts surrounding women's drug use.

Partner Influence on Treatment Outcomes

The role of male partners does not end once addiction develops. Research examining pregnant women in addiction treatment programs found that a partner's drug use status significantly influences treatment outcomes.

Women with partners who continue using drugs are more likely to:

- Continue drug use during treatment
- Leave treatment programs prematurely
- Experience relapse following treatment

Conversely, women whose partners do not use drugs often benefit from stronger social support and greater stability during recovery.

In many cases, entering treatment may require women to confront the possibility of losing both a coping mechanism and an intimate relationship simultaneously. This dual loss can create powerful psychological barriers to seeking treatment.

The Legal Concept of the “Woman of Circumstance”

Legal scholarship examining the War on Drugs has identified another outcome of these gendered patterns: the emergence of the **“woman of circumstance.”**

The term describes women who become involved in drug crimes primarily because of their relationships with men engaged in drug trafficking or distribution. These women may not hold leadership positions in drug organizations, yet they become entangled in criminal liability through proximity or minor participation.

Examples may include:

- Answering telephones associated with drug transactions
- Driving a partner to meetings or locations
- Accepting packages or holding money
- Living in a household where drugs are stored or sold

Although these actions may appear minimal, prosecutors can interpret them as participation in a broader criminal conspiracy.

Conspiracy Law and Expanded Criminal Liability

Drug enforcement policies dramatically expanded the use of conspiracy law and mandatory minimum sentencing. Under conspiracy statutes, individuals may be held legally responsible for crimes committed by others if they are considered part of a shared criminal agreement.

Because drug distribution networks often operate through social and intimate relationships, this legal framework can draw women into criminal liability even when their involvement was indirect.

Legal scholars argue that this framework contributed to the incarceration of many women whose participation in drug operations was secondary to that of male partners.

Domestic Spaces and Criminal Exposure

Drug markets frequently operate within private domestic environments such as shared homes or apartments. Because women have historically been associated with domestic roles under patriarchal social norms, their presence in these spaces can increase exposure to criminal liability when drug activity occurs within the household.

The combination of relationship-based exposure, domestic proximity, and expansive conspiracy laws has contributed to patterns in which women become legally responsible for activities largely directed by others.

Conclusion

Research across public health, criminology, and legal scholarship demonstrates that gender plays a critical role in shaping drug markets, addiction pathways, and criminal justice outcomes.

Men remain the primary consumers, purchasers, and traffickers of illicit drugs. However, women often encounter drugs through interpersonal relationships, trauma-related vulnerabilities, and social environments shaped by male partners.

These dynamics influence not only how addiction develops but also how women become entangled in the criminal justice system. The legal concept of the **woman of circumstance** illustrates how relationship-based pathways into drug activity can intersect with expansive conspiracy laws, sometimes resulting in severe penalties for women whose involvement was secondary.

Addressing these challenges requires both public health and legal reforms that recognize the gendered contexts of substance use. Trauma-informed treatment, gender-responsive services, and more proportionate legal frameworks may help reduce both addiction harms and unnecessary incarceration.

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