

UNDERSTANDING GENDER-DIFFERENCES IN SUBSTANCE USE TO DEVELOP APPROPRIATE PREVENTION INTERVENTIONS

Infographic

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SUBSTANCE USE

Gender-sensitive research in recent decades have shown substantial differences among genders in not only substance use but also in the impacts of its use. Whereas men generally consume more substances, the gender gap has been closing with more [younger] women initiating substance use. Simultaneously, women are just as likely to develop a substance use disorder and are more prone to craving and relapse. Overall, women face different negative and life-threatening long-term consequences of substance use. As the gender-gap is closing, the health risks for women are increasing since they often experience more negative health risks than men. Additionally, substance use during pregnancy is not only a risk for the mother but also for the unborn child. It should be noted that the negative consequences of substance use are also influenced by co-existing substance use and mental illnesses.

THE NEED FOR GENDER-SENSITIVE PREVENTION RESEARCH & PROGRAMMES

The need to recognise these gender-differences in treatment have been reflected in published research regarding gender-sensitive treatment. However, the research and implementation of gender-sensitive prevention programmes remain scanty and prevention programmes have continued to be rather universal. Nevertheless, it is clear that generic prevention tools and mechanisms lead to different outcomes based on gender and ethnicity. Hence, prevention research and tools would also require the inclusion of subgroup analyses to determine its effectiveness not only on gender but also on other subgroups, offering an intersectionality approach.

[DIFFERENT] INCENTIVES FOR GIRLS & WOMEN:

Girls

- Factors such as body ideals among girls, depression, anxiety, and early onset of puberty
- Childhood adversity
- Family-centred and relational problems
- Stress and mental health issues

Women

- Factors such as fatigue, stress, loneliness, low self-esteem, body image issue, and/or childhood adversity
- Substance use as a coping mechanism
- Continued intake of earlier prescribed opioids
- Mental health issues
- Trauma including physical, sexual or psychological abuse, accidents, natural disasters and domestic violence

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE & SUBSTANCE USE PREVENTION

Gender-based violence and substance use are strongly correlated

- The forms of violence can lead to depression, post-traumatic stress and other anxiety disorders, sleep difficulties, etc., and trigger substance use to cope with trauma and its effects
- Substance use can be a trigger for gender-based violence. It can be used as an excuse for violent and controlling behaviour by the abuser
- Women who use drugs may be less likely to have the social and financial means to escape their abuser
- Stigma in communities stops women from speaking up and reporting the violent case
- The pattern of violent and substance abuse can become generational

WAYS FORWARD

DEVELOPING GENDER-SENSITIVE PREVENTION TOOLS

INCLUDE AND DEVELOP:

- Selective and indicated prevention models, besides universal
- Primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention
- Family-centred and relational problems
- Stress and mental health issues

TO CREATE EFFECTIVE PREVENTION TOOLS, IT IS NECESSARY TO UNDERSTAND THE INFLUENCES OF:

- Individual and environmental factors creating vulnerability and progression of substance use
 - The different incentives and triggers of substance use for the genders
- The various protective and risk factors
 - Macro and micro-level influence and personal characteristics
 - Childhood adversity

WHY PREVENTION?

- Prevention is an essential part of the continuum of care framework while promoting health and wellbeing
- Strengthening protective factors while reducing risk factors
 - Prevention is less costly than treatment
- Prevention and treatment provide opportunities for self-actualisation in women
- Prevention improves the societal value of the person
- Prevention encourages a boost in socio-economic activities
 - Prevention programmes can focus to reduce and limit adverse childhood experiences

USEFUL INTERNATIONAL PREVENTION GUIDELINES:

- International Standards on Drug Use Prevention by the UNODC and WHO
- International Guidelines on Human Rights and Drug Policy by the International Centre on Human Rights and Drug Policy