

UNDCP/ILO/IFNGO/NCDR - USM
TRAINING COURSE IN
MANPOWER DEVELOPMENT ON ADDICTION
REHABILITATION AND AFTERCARE

23 NOVEMBER - 4 DECEMBER 1992
AT
UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA

WOMEN'S ISSUES

SITI ZUBAIDAH A. HAMID
UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA

WOMEN'S ISSUES

Introduction

Chemical dependence in women cannot be ignored anymore because it is affecting marriages, children and places of work of women. At least 2 million women are addict and many more experience drug related problems. (Wilsnack, S.C. 1984). Yet, despite the scale of the problem, it is only in the last decade that there has been significant focus on the problems.

Issues and Problems of Addicted Women

In attempting to analyze the impact of female addicts - one must consider both the changes that have occurred in women's place in society, particularly within the last 20 years, and the many roles that women currently play within the society depending on their age and stage in the life cycle. Women has indeed come a long way in various productive walks of life. Still she seems to be struggling to be accepted by society.

In women, addiction is seen more as a moral issue. Addiction just does not fit, as yet into the image of a women in the eyes of **society**. While women were regarded as less vulnerable to addiction, when it did occur it was seen as much more "deviant" or "abnormal" than in men (Karpman, 1948). In a world where the disease concept of addiction played a major role in conceptualizing addiction problems, it would seem rather odd

that addiction among women was thought to be different from that among men, as though there were a special set of causative factors. The variety of causative explanations clearly reflected the vision of women in the society. Lisansky, in 1957 states "Addiction in women is more disapproved than in men, therefore the woman addict is more poorly adjusted to her social milieu."

Despite changes taking place largely in urban centres, the traditional views of society regarding the woman still prevail largely. Society does not expect the **husband** or the **family** to support with sympathy an addicted woman. But on the other hand, it expects the woman to continue with and support the addict husband. This is the reason why a large percentage of addicted women are also divorced while most addicted men continue in marriage.

The Addict woman is unwanted and considered useless. By the time the addict woman seeks rehabilitation and recovery, she has most often been abandoned, besides having been defamed. Most studies report a high rate of **divorce** and **separation** among female than male addicts, but specific contribution of addiction to these marital disruptions is unknown (Homiller, 1977).

Sexias (1977) also felt that addict mothers wrecked more damage than addict fathers, because **children's** maturation and development through the Eriksonian stages of growth were hindered by the mother's neuroticism and own lack of ego development. Sexias states, "The infant with an addict mother learns to expect

unreliability, inconsistency, ineptitude, and general disorganization". In addicted families, roles are never clearly defined and are often reversed, with the children taking on the responsibilities of the parents.

Child abuse and neglect in particular, have been associated with parental intoxication. Abuse or neglect was more likely to be by the addicted female parent. This is the case due to the fact that women addicts had fewer financial and emotional supports than men, often were single heads of a household, and had the added burden of being primary caretakers of the children despite fewer resources.

Women addicts have a **poorer self-concept** and **lower self-esteem**. Drugs could have been used in an attempt to reduce feelings of guilt, shame, anger and loss of self-esteem. And the pain and low self-esteem may drive some women into overtly self-destructive use of drugs.

Women are more likely than men to evidence primary affective disorder, in particular a serious depression that precedes addiction. **Denial** of addiction problems might also be more frequent among women due to social pressure and the stigma associated with addiction for women. If women addiction problems are characterized by severe depression, low self-esteem, feelings of powerlessness, and high denials of their problems, these characteristics may serve as **barriers** to their taking action to initiate treatment. (Wilsnack, S.G. and Beckman, L.J. 1980).

Even when in treatment and recovery, it is very hard for the woman to be accepted in the main stream of society and to restore her dignity and self respect. She is labelled for ever and treated with contempt by society.

Not only families shun the female addicts, even friends and employers are reluctant to offer her support. Success in rehabilitation is made all the more difficult in the absence of society's and family's support.

When it comes to rehabilitation for female addicts, there seems to be a dilemma of priorities. At the moment female addicts are seen as a less urgent problem than male addiction. Apparently, this is because more than 90% of all addicts are male.

However addiction is a much more complex problem for women than for men. It is a nightmare of falling into the depths of degradation because, inevitably, women addicts end up as prostitutes. It is a humiliation so complete she loses every shed of her self-respect.

Rehabilitation today do not look at the **special needs** of female addicts. How can a woman make a male counselor really understand female experiences like rape, abuse and incest? On the contrary, many males will subconsciously tend to think the girls are merely trying to pass the blame to the men.

There is normally less environmental support for women entering treatment than there would be for men. In part this could be due to the stigma attached to addiction for women.

The rationale for developing special approaches to prevention for women arises from sex differences in social and cultural roles as well as from differences in physiology.

Conclusion

The past few years have seen increasing public awareness and concern about addiction in women. Despite all types of problems in handling women addicts recovery treatment are being attempted with success and there is hope and confidence among people dealing with addiction among women

Female addicts deserve much more consideration, care and sympathy than is given them now. The main reason why many of us feel indifferent or even hostile, towards them is our lack of knowledge about the true nature of female drug addiction and how difficult rehabilitation is particularly for females.

REFERENCES

- 1) Karpman, B.; The Alcoholic Woman; Washington, D.C., 1948.
- 2) Lisansky, E.S. Alcoholism in women: Social and Psychological Concomitants; Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol, 1957.
- 3) Sexias, J. Children from Alcoholic Families, 1977.
- 4) Wilsnack, S.C. and Beckman, L.J., Alcohol Problems in women; N. York 1984.
- 5) Female Dadah Addicts - A need for Rehabilitation Centres; Her world, May 1985.
- 6) The girls who flew' high on drugs - and crashed, Female, April 1985.