

# ***Socioeconomic Factors Affecting Substance Abusing Women Seeking Treatment Services or Completing Treatment Programs***

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## **ABSTRACT**

This discussion is a review of the literature focused on current socioeconomic factors affecting substance abusing women seeking treatment services or completing treatment programs. Substance abuse treatment specifically designed for women has been proposed as one way to meet women's distinctive needs and reduce barriers to their receiving and remaining in treatment. It is clear that women have unique social and economic circumstances that tend to inhibit accessing treatment services and completing treatment programs. Implications for social work practice include knowledge of resources that provide women's only treatment programs. The practitioner should be familiar with the socioeconomic context around which a client's addiction takes place. The social worker must be skilled at screening clients for substance use disorder during the assessment process. Collaboration and referral may be necessary if the social worker has not specialized.

## **HISTORY**

The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988 ignited interest in women's treatment services. A growing body of research shows that substance abuse among women and the issues surrounding their abuse differ from that among men, requiring a specialized set of therapeutic interventions. A recent Institute of Medicine report has highlighted sex as an important variable that should be considered when designing and analyzing biomedical and health studies. These findings are just beginning to influence the way substance abuse treatment is provided for women, and few studies have examined the effectiveness of substance abuse treatment services for women. Entering, engaging and remaining in substance abuse treatment may require not only the availability of specialized treatment services but also an array of resources to help with specific issues, such as child care and physical and mental health.

## **KEY POLICY**

The recent passage of addiction and mental health parity legislation, now known as the Paul Wellstone and Pet Domenici Mental Health Parity and Addiction Act of 2008, is a step in the right direction and will be an asset in the treatment of alcoholism. However, additional emphasis on eliminating the problem of stigmatization and punishment, by removing the barriers that keep women from seeking and completing treatment, are necessary to alleviate the alienation that women experience regarding treatment options. Strategies that support woman seeking treatment, those that consider the unique responsibilities of women will foster an atmosphere of care and concern.

## **HUMAN RIGHTS**

Women have a right to health and healthcare. Historically, women have not enjoyed equal access to basic human rights, protections, resources, and services. It is evident from this review of current social and environmental factors that there still exist inequalities that keep women from seeking treatment or from completing treatment for substance abuse. Contributing to this burden are discriminatory stereotypical assumption by the health systems that alcoholism is essentially a male illness. It has already been asserted that current programs and methods fail to attract women especially when treatment services are structured to meet the needs of male clients while neglecting the special concerns of women.

## **Recommendations**

This review suggests that to improve the future health and well-being of women and their children, there is a continued need for well-designed studies of substance abuse treatment programming for women. Treatment programs should include strategies supporting women that consider their unique responsibilities and eliminate barriers that keep them from seeking and completing treatment. Advocating for such services will foster an atmosphere of care and concern for this population with potential positive implications for both women and society as a whole.

## **WHAT IS KNOWN**

Because of the characteristics of women with substance abuse problems and the obstacles to treatment they face, many researchers have suggested that women would be less likely to seek, begin, or complete treatment and would therefore have poorer long-term outcomes. Providing comprehensive services, such as housing, transportation, education, and income support, reduces post-treatment substance use among both men and women, but greater numbers of women need such services. Women now appear at least as likely as men to engage in and complete treatment. The 1998 Uniform Facility Data Set (UFDS), a survey of facilities providing substance abuse treatment, found that 19% of facilities offered special programs for pregnant or postpartum women, whereas 28% offered specific programs for other groups of women in treatment. Almost 9% of all facilities offered child care, 7% offered prenatal care.

## **KEY THEORIES**

If we are to develop effective treatment for women, we must include the experience and impact of living as a women in a male-based society. Because women have been oppressed, it is important that current studies reflect the specific needs of women, those that have been previously overlooked. Recent studies on women have indicated there is evidence that economic disparities, lower educational attainment, and fewer social supports among women compared to men influence access to substance abuse treatment and treatments entry. Addressing heightened need among women for vital ancillary services such as childcare, perinatal treatment, and family services could enhance access to substance abuse treatment for many women. The feminist perspective has helped to identify barriers keeping women from accessing recovery services. From this perspective it becomes evident how social and environmental factors that affect women require unique accommodations especially for women seeking treatment and for successful completion of treatment programs.

## **KEY SOCIAL WORK PRACTICES**

There are numerous modalities for the treatment of substance abuse disorders. Because addiction is a biopsychosocial disorder clients who enter treatment often have significant impairments in all of these areas. Clients who experience life functioning problems due to substance use disorders depend on social workers having general knowledge of systems and family systems theories, interpersonal dynamics, and other relevant theories and practice. The practitioner should be familiar with the socioeconomic context around which a client's addiction takes place. Motivation for treatment should be recognized in relation to other survival issues such as food and shelter.

## **LOCAL/GLOBAL ISSUES**

Women have experienced the pressure to stay home and look after children which is one barrier that neither affected nor concerned male alcoholics seeking treatment or remaining in a treatment facility. Because our society remains condemning of substance abusing women problems arise that affect the significant others in a woman's life as well as her own self-esteem and self image. It is quite common to find husbands or partners and other family members discouraging women from seeking treatment. Both locally and globally society can no longer afford to hide its substance abusing women. It is about time that we all realize that investment in women is the single most important path to higher productivity for society as a whole - in industrial as well as in developing countries.