

RESEARCH ARTICLE (ORIGINAL) 

Experiences of violence in the daily life of female drug users

Vivências de violência no quotidiano de mulheres consumidoras de drogas
Experiencias de violencia en la vida cotidiana de las mujeres consumidoras de drogas

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Abstract**Background:** Women who use drugs experience several situations of violence that impact their daily life through their exclusion and marginalization.**Objective:** To understand how violence is present in the daily life of women who use drugs.**Methodology:** A qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory study was conducted with 20 women who use drugs receiving care at a Psychosocial Care Center for Alcohol and Drugs. Data were collected through an open interview and analyzed using the Thematic Content Analysis method.**Results:** The daily life of these women is associated with partner violence and exposure to the risk of violence, vulnerability, and criminality due to their presence in spaces of drug use and trafficking.**Conclusion:** Efficient educational interventions and public policies should be designed to promote women's safety, reduce their exposure to these risks, and meet their needs.**Keywords:** violence; exposure to violence; substance-related disorders; women**Resumo****Enquadramento:** O uso de drogas por mulheres é permeado por diversas situações de violência que se repercutem no quotidiano por meio da exclusão e da marginalização das consumidoras.**Objetivo:** Identificar como a violência está presente no quotidiano de mulheres consumidoras de drogas.**Metodologia:** Estudo do tipo qualitativo, descritivo e exploratório, desenvolvido com 20 mulheres consumidoras de drogas assistidas num centro de atenção psicossocial álcool e drogas. A colheita de dados foi efetuada por meio de entrevista aberta, e os dados analisados conforme a análise de conteúdo temática.**Resultados:** O quotidiano de mulheres consumidoras de drogas está associado à violência pelos parceiros, bem como exposição ao risco de violência, à vulnerabilidade e à criminalidade decorrente da presença em cenas de consumo e de tráfico.**Conclusão:** Existe uma necessidade de desenvolvimento de ações educativas e políticas públicas eficientes que promovam a segurança, reduzam riscos de exposição e atendam às necessidades destas mulheres.**Palavras-chave:** violência; exposição à violência; transtornos relacionados ao uso de substâncias; mulheres**Resumen****Marco contextual:** El consumo de drogas por parte de las mujeres está impregnado de diversas situaciones de violencia que repercuten en la vida cotidiana a través de la exclusión y la marginación de las consumidoras.**Objetivo:** Identificar cómo la violencia está presente en la vida cotidiana de las mujeres consumidoras de drogas.**Metodología:** Estudio cualitativo, descriptivo y exploratorio, desarrollado con 20 mujeres consumidoras de drogas atendidas en un centro de atención psicossocial de alcohol y drogas. La recogida de datos se llevó a cabo mediante una entrevista abierta, y los datos se analizaron según el análisis de contenido temático.**Resultados:** La vida cotidiana de las mujeres consumidoras de drogas está asociada a la violencia de pareja, así como a la exposición al riesgo de violencia, vulnerabilidad y criminalidad derivada de su presencia en los escenarios de consumo y tráfico de drogas.**Conclusión:** Es necesario desarrollar acciones educativas y políticas públicas eficientes que promuevan la seguridad, reduzcan los riesgos de exposición y satisfagan las necesidades de estas mujeres.**Palabras clave:** violencia; exposición a la violencia; trastornos relacionados con sustancias; mujeres**How to cite this article:** Soccol, K. L., Terra, M. G., Silveira, A., Tisott, Z. L., Ferreira, C. L., Dutra, P. C., & Siqueira, D. F. (2022). Experiences of violence in the daily life of female drug users. *Revista de Enfermagem Referência*, 6(1), e22016. <https://doi.org/10.12707/RV122016>

Introduction

Violence against women is part of a historical and social context with social repercussions that create a public health issue. Female victims of violence can face severe discrimination and difficulty in reporting episodes of violence (Santos et al., 2018).

There are several types of violence against women, but the most common are physical, psychological, and sexual violence. Physical violence offends a woman's bodily integrity or health. Psychological violence causes emotional damage, reduces self-esteem, interferes with a woman's full development, or aims at controlling women's behaviors, beliefs, and/or decisions. Sexual violence occurs through an unwanted sexual intercourse by means of intimidation, threat, coercion, or use of force (Instituto Maria da Penha, 2022).

Women who use drugs are more exposed to different situations of violence than those who do not use drugs. Drug use increases the risk of exposure to violence (Wechsberg et al., 2022) and using violence against others.

The profile of women who use drugs shows that most have conflicting family relationships, have no paid work, and are homeless (Leão et al., 2020). People who commit violence against women take advantage of their vulnerability to drug use (Kluk et al., 2022). In this context, the literature shows that women who use drugs may be exposed to various situations of violence in their daily lives. Thus, this study aims to understand how violence is present in the daily life of women who use drugs.

Background

Drug use among women is associated with multiple factors resulting from exclusionary behaviors and marginalization of female users. This process can be even more complex in situations involving women who use drugs and gender relations and social vulnerability. When women use drugs, the situations of violence against them are considered acceptable (Santos et al., 2018). It is as if violence against women who use drugs is somehow normal, which further reinforces the prejudice and social misconduct against them.

Women who use drugs are discriminated against by society because drug use among this population is morally less acceptable than among men. For society, drug use is meant for men and not for women (Medeiros et al., 2017). However, drug use by women and men is already becoming similar, with both using almost the same amount of some drugs (Silva, Souza, et al., 2021). Discussions about the problem of drug use should not be only about gender issues, but also involve public and social policies that facilitate the access of this population to health services, reducing the impact of drug use (Medeiros et al., 2017). It should be noted that the multi-professional team, namely nursing professionals, should be able to recognize the health needs of women who use drugs and live in a situation of vulnerability. Health care must be based on the principles of integrality, equity, and universality,

and, above all, in dignity and the respect for life (Souza et al., 2016).

Little is discussed about the issue of gender and violence in health services (Piuchi et al., 2020), even more so in the cases of women who use drugs. However, violence against women is a public health issue with a significant impact on these victims' physical and mental health (Teixeira & Paiva, 2021).

Research question

How is violence present in the daily life of women who use drugs?

Methodology

A qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory study was conducted with women who use drugs undergoing treatment in a Psychosocial Care Center for Alcohol and Drugs (*Centro de Atenção Psicossocial Álcool e Drogas, CAPS AD*) in a city in southern Brazil.

The following inclusion criteria were applied: women aged 12 years and older undergoing treatment in the CAPS AD. The exclusion criteria were women under the effect of drugs and had difficulty speaking to the researcher at the time of the interview. The sample consisted of 20 women aged 20 to 60 years. No participants were excluded. The interview script was pretested, but that information was not used in the results.

Data were collected between February and May 2017. An individual open interview was conducted with the women to collect data. The interviews were conducted by a single researcher with experience in qualitative research data collection. The following question was used to collect the information: Is there violence in your daily life? Data were collected depending on the participants' availability whenever the women had consultations and group activities scheduled at the CAPS AD. Some interviews were conducted at home according to each participant's desire and availability. The interviews were previously scheduled and lasted 40 to 75 minutes.

Sampling was not pre-determined, so the number of interviews was decided based on other eligible participants when enough meanings were obtained, that is, when theoretical saturation was reached and no new information was added to the database to support the theorization (Minayo, 2014). Thus, the *corpus* of the study consisted of 20 interviews.

The interviews were conducted individually after each woman gave their written consent. They were recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed twice to avoid possible errors that could interfere with data analysis.

Data were analyzed using the thematic analysis method (Minayo, 2014), which involves pre-analysis, exploration of the material, and analysis and interpretation of the results. Thus, the transcripts were read several times and then the most relevant excerpts to answer the research

objective were extracted. The excerpts were grouped based on the similarity of themes, leading to the creation of the thematic categories. Four researchers participated in data analysis: two had a Ph.D. and two a Master's in Nursing. The four researchers read all the interviews to confirm the themes selected according to the objectives. This study followed the ethical principles for research involving human beings in Resolution No. 466/12 of the National Health Council. The participants signed two copies of the Informed Consent Form with information on the study. The study was accepted by the CAPS AD and registered and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Santa Maria under opinion no. 1.867.646 and CAEE 61019616.8.0000.5346. Women's confidentiality and anonymity were respected, and the participants were identified by the letter M for *mulher* (woman), followed by a numeral indicating the order of the interviews.

Results

The data in this article were extracted from a doctoral thesis. The sample consisted of 20 women who use drugs aged 20 to 60. Regarding their education, 12 women had completed elementary education, seven had completed secondary education, and one was illiterate. As for marital status, five were divorced, six were married, eight were single, and one was a widow. Only a woman had no children. As for their occupational status, five women were working, two were retired, two were homemakers, and 11 were not working. Regarding the types of drugs, 12 women used multiple drugs, namely cannabis, cocaine, crack, and alcohol. Eight women only used alcohol. Two thematic categories emerged from data analysis: Types of violence against women by partners who use drugs and Exposure to the risk of violence, vulnerability, and criminality. Table 1 illustrates the coding of the categories and themes.

Table 1

Coding of categories and themes

Thematic categories	Violence in the daily life of women who use drugs
Category 1: Types of violence against women by partners who use drugs	- Physical violence: pushing, punching, beating, and attempted suicide by partners. - Psychological violence: stalking, inability to express feelings and emotions, threats, exclusion from social life, and separation from their children.
Category 2: Exposure to the risk of violence, vulnerability and criminality	- Drug use in different spaces: women suffer aggression, risk of homicide, and sexual abuse. - Involvement in drug trafficking and sale of firearms that occasionally leads to arrest. - Drug use makes women more aggressive.

Types of violence against women by partners who use drugs

This category highlighted that women who use drugs suffer different types of partner violence. Physical violence is common in these women's lives. Their daily life is permeated by quarrels that culminate in pushing, punching, beating, and even attempted murder. The situation of violence deteriorates even more when drug-using partners are involved, as can be seen in the following statements: "He (husband) almost killed me once. He squeezed my neck and he almost killed me but then he never hit me again, that was the only time he was aggressive with me but I was afraid of him." (M1). "I was married for 15 years, a lot of cheating, a lot of things, he even assaulted me in my own house." (M4). "He (husband) also drank, so I drank with him and we ended up fighting. He hit me and once he even tried to kill me. It's a problem that stayed with me, that I can't forget." (M10). "We fought a lot inside the house. We used to break everything and even shoot each other." (M5).

A similar situation can be seen in this excerpt:

I argued a lot with my husband, and he argued a lot with me when he was drinking, because he also drinks! And there has been a lot of pushing and shoving. A lot of arguing! ... My husband got angry with me once because he had to go get me on the street. He punched me, and my son had

to get in the way. He injured my kidneys and I couldn't even walk after that. I was afraid of him because he used to threaten me: "Don't you come home drunk because I won't let you stay. I'm going to kick your ass." (M8).

My husband, who was also a drunk man, started hitting me. I didn't work. I stayed a while with him in another city and then I left. He only drank, he didn't work. And he came home and did the same thing as my father, he beat me. And I had to stay there because I was a minor and had no money. I couldn't leave. (M9).

Despite the partner violence, women could not get away from them, often due to their financial dependence or even the feelings and affection they still had for their partners.

He (ex-husband) said that if I wasn't his, I wouldn't belong to anyone else. He cut me in front of my son, in the corner of my mother's house. I had three plastic surgeries on my face. Later, I sold things that I never used, that he gave me, and I sold them. I sold my entire closet! Sheets that I never used. I sold dishcloths. He beat me. He hit me. Then I reported it to the police. The police went there, took him out of the house, and left me.

But I don't know how to live without him. (M17).

In addition to physical violence, psychological violence is present in these women's daily lives. They are persecuted

by their partners, unable to express their feelings and emotions, and threatened.

The psychological torture was so intense that I felt like a horrible person. I was becoming depressed again. He stalked me on the street and called me every day, every hour, every 5 minutes I had a message. I had a terrible time with him, but I couldn't stay away from him. He was a very good guy, but very crazy. His problem went beyond drugs. It was more than that, it was a psychological problem. He was schizophrenic, he was possessive. (M1).

I had two pregnancies in which the babies ended up dying. The day the baby died, I was crying and he told me to stop crying, that the others were watching. Can you imagine? Not being able to mourn your child! (M5).

Moreover, these women experience threats from their partners, such as the risk of aggression, death, and being unable to spend time with their children. The partners sometimes locked the women in their homes, making them submissive to them and excluding them from social life.

He always threatened that I wouldn't take my son with me if I left. He was very stupid and jealous if I had any marks on my body. When I was late, he would start thinking about things that never happened. He would only hit me when he was drunk. And I stayed in my marriage because I thought I was dumb, stupid. Because I thought that he would really do that of taking my son away from me and he was all I had. (M8).

"My husband did not allow me to receive visitors at home. He didn't want me to talk to anyone. I had to be his alone. He controlled me and controlled everything in my life" (M18).

Exposure to the risk of violence, vulnerability, and criminality

This category reveals that women who use drugs are exposed to several risks. The fact that they go to the streets searching for drugs, attend spaces where these drugs are sold, use drugs, and live in public spaces leaves them in situations of vulnerability, such as aggression, risk of homicide, and sexual abuse. "My husband started pressuring me to stop using drugs until I left home and went to live on the streets. I was raped." (M7);

I don't want to hang out at the drug dens anymore. I live near the alley, they now killed a bunch of people, a bunch of drug dealers who want to take over the drug dens. There is a drug den right next to my house, it's dangerous! They kill anyone. (M2)

Women who use drugs sometimes engage in drug trafficking and illicit activities, such as selling guns. They see these activities as an income and the only means to maintain their own dependence. The sale of drugs gets them into trouble with the law.

"My mom found out that I used cocaine. She didn't accept that. So, we left home. We went to live in a drug den. Until that moment, I didn't sell, I only used. Then I started to sell." (M6).

He (partner) was a drug dealer. And he had guns

too. I helped him sell all those guns. And the deal was that he would work and on weekends we would have a party and he could sell some of them as it was what he knew how to do. And it worked out very well because we had visitors, sold them, made a little money, and that covered what we spent on our own addiction. . . . I don't know how many times we ran the risk of almost being arrested as well. (M1).

"I sold drugs for some time. I wanted to use, so I had to sell. I was almost arrested by the police several times, but I managed to escape. It was very tense! I was afraid of being caught." (M14).

Some women were arrested for engaging in this illegal activity of selling drugs. The only way they found to obtain drugs was through trafficking, which made them lose their freedom. "I got together with a partner and had my children. And we were always smoking. Then he started trafficking. We were in prison for two and a half years." (M2).

When it comes to criminality, in addition to trafficking, women's personalities and conducts changed as a result of drug abuse, exacerbating violence and leading them to assault other people.

I used a lot of drugs. I was aggressive with people, I hit them. I don't know why I did that. I almost killed a woman. She even went to the hospital. Later she died, but it wasn't because of me. I didn't kill her; I just beat her. I was very, very aggressive, and then I stopped. (M15).

Discussion

Women who use drugs are more exposed to physical violence than those who do not use drugs. A study conducted with women who use alcohol shows a higher prevalence of psychological and physical violence in this population (Santos et al., 2020). Risk factors for violence against women include drug use, family history of violence, and violent partner behavior (Silva, Souza, et al., 2021). Involvement with men who use drugs increases the risk of psychological, physical, and sexual violence against women (Silva, Rocha-Brischiliari, et al., 2021).

Women who use drugs experience repeated violence, mostly from their partners. Partner violence has different motivations, such as jealousy and differing opinions, and occurs when women refuse to comply with the perpetrators' orders (Piuchi et al., 2020). In addition to violence, women report that partners threaten them with abandonment and even try to kill them, revealing that their daily lives also involve femicide attempts. Femicide, which is the murder of women, has been increasing. This reality highlights unequal relationships and exposes gender relations, being reflected in extreme cases of violence and death (Caicedo-Roa et al., 2022).

The use of alcohol and other drugs is an aggravating factor that increases the likelihood of violence because it may affect the aggressor's sense of judgment (Silva, Rocha-Brischiliari, et al., 2021). Therefore, women's

involvement with men who also use drugs increases the prevalence of different types of violence against women. Moreover, women under the effect of drugs may also become aggressive and violent against other people.

Women who use drugs are somehow submissive to their partners because they provide them with drugs or make them feel financially dependent. Thus, financial dependence is a risk factor for violence (Dias et al., 2021). Even when they are economically stable and financially independent, the men play psychological games, blame the women, and take them away from their families, making them emotionally dependent. Thus, it is difficult for women to leave these abusive relationships (Silva, Rocha-Brischiliari, et al., 2021).

Drug use and violence are even more problematic when women are homeless due to the intense discrimination and social prejudice associated with women who use drugs and live on the streets. Discrimination has a major impact, leading, for example, to suffering, low self-esteem, rupture of family ties, loss of rights and citizenship, social exclusion, and lack of assistance among women (Brito & Silva, 2022). The damage caused by the physical and psychological violence against these women is irreversible and sometimes even irreparable (Dias et al., 2021). Thus, the vulnerabilities and risks that women experience in their daily lives are accentuated. Women who experience violence find it more challenging to undertake treatment for drug abuse and chemical dependency, so the likelihood of relapse is higher (Ogden et al., 2022).

One study points out that women under the influence of drugs have sex without their consent, are abused when they are not in a position to answer for their actions, and sometimes do not remember how it occurred (Piuchi et al., 2020). Due to the intense need to use drugs, women cannot negotiate for safe sex, being exposed to sexually transmitted diseases (Silva, Rocha-Brischiliari, et al., 2021). Women who use drugs are more exposed to sexual violence and unwanted pregnancy because men refuse to use condoms (Leite et al., 2019; Silva, Souza, et al., 2021). Sexual abuse leads to physical and psychological trauma. The marks of sexual abuse have a negative impact on women's mental health and increase the likelihood of suicide attempts (Soccol et al., 2021). As for the exposure to settings that pose risks of violence to women's integrity, seeking drugs in drug dens also increases the likelihood of violence. Also, many women need to engage in drug trafficking as a means of subsistence and easy drug access. Women engaged in trafficking go beyond criminal boundaries and society's expectations about their socially expected behavior as women (Silva, Rocha-Brischiliari, et al., 2021).

It is generally understood that the representational structure of women who use drugs is influenced by social constructions, which influence them to enter and remain in crime. The secular stigmas, still present today, point to practices based on these women's guilt and are guided by the image of incompatibility of women in fulfilling their social roles and being able to exercise their own identity (Vargas & Falcke, 2019).

The health of women who use drugs and are more vul-

nerable and exposed to the risk of violence and crime needs to be incorporated into health policies so that the needs of this population can be met. More information is needed on this topic, associating scientific and historical knowledge with the strategies to combat sexual and gender violence. Together with other sectors, such as security and education, health professionals play a crucial role in the fight against alcohol and other drugs.

A limitation of this research was that it was carried out in a single public health service, not covering women in more favored socioeconomic situations.

Conclusion

The daily life of women who use drugs is permeated by physical and psychological violence and threats from partners who also use drugs. These women are also exposed to the risk of violence, vulnerability, and criminality. Therefore, efficient educational interventions and public policies should be designed for this population.

Health and social services must be involved in combating, punishing, and preventing violence against women, especially those in vulnerable situations who experience the pain of physical, psychological, or sexual violence and social discrimination due to drug use.

This study can inform the development of collective and organizational strategies to make these women's daily lives safer, in addition to ensuring the quality and resolution of care in health care services. Future studies should be conducted to further investigate women's socioeconomic and cultural situation, considering that drug use and violence are present in all social classes. As implications for research, further studies should be conducted on the violence experienced by women who use drugs given that there are few studies addressing this issue.

Author contributions

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