

Iranian Women's Challenges with Drug Abuse

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Abstract

In light of the concerning increase in addiction rates among women, who play a vital role in family support and the upbringing of future generations, this study seeks to illuminate the distinct challenges encountered by women grappling with substance use disorders. A comprehensive understanding of these challenges is imperative for the development of effective prevention, management, and treatment strategies. This research is based on the content analysis approach and is a part of a larger study using the hermeneutic method. The participant group comprised both current and former female substance users, with data collected through interviews with eight individuals selected via purposive and snowball sampling methods from social harm centers in Tehran and Saveh County. The analysis of the interviews yielded three primary themes: life fluctuations, specific consequences, and received feedback. As women increasingly engage in societal roles and assume additional responsibilities beyond traditional expectations, their burdens and vulnerabilities have markedly intensified. This trend suggests that addiction may soon emerge as a predominantly female issue. Therefore, it is crucial to utilize the insights gained from this research to identify at-risk women and to formulate effective strategies for primary prevention, treatment, and management.

Keywords: women, drug abuse, challenges, content analysis

Extended abstract

Introduction

Substance abuse is one of the biggest health, psychological, and socio-economic problems in the world, affecting all aspects of individual, family, and even community life. Addiction is not solely a male phenomenon; women's addiction remains hidden due to societal views on women, their avoidance of addiction treatment centers, and the lack of accurate statistics. A combination of genetic, social, and sociological factors makes some women more vulnerable to addiction compared to other women or men. The family unit is the main victim of women's addiction, as families hold a special place and women play a crucial role in the stability and progress of each family. Therefore, any harm to women leads to harm to the family and can ultimately destabilize the entire society. In recent years, the rate of women's addiction has reached double digits, and barriers to addiction treatment have significantly contributed to this exponential increase. The growing tendency of women towards addiction results in consequences such as being ostracized by the family, creating a generation of addicts, reduced interaction with healthy individuals, increased interaction with unhealthy and addicted individuals, turning to unethical activities, and being exploited. Despite the existence of a few similar studies and considering the many changes in various aspects of addiction, the lack of a modern and comprehensive study related to the challenge's women face with substance abuse has been clearly evident in recent years. Therefore, it was emphasized that a better understanding of the challenge's women face with substance abuse can provide more information about the reality of their lives, which can lead to the development of interventions tailored to their needs and primary prevention.

Methods:

This research is based on the content analysis approach and is a part of a larger study using the hermeneutic method. The primary aim of this research is to explore the challenges women face due to substance abuse, and the content analysis approach qualitative research method has been chosen to fulfill this objective. The participant group comprised both current and former female substance users, with 8 individuals selected via purposive and snowball sampling methods from addiction treatment centers in Saveh (A city in the center of Iran) and Tehran (The capital of Iran), as well as in public spaces like parks.

Data collected through interviews. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants. The research questions focused on the women's experiences and feelings regarding the challenges of substance abuse, the difficulties faced during drug use, and any additional comments they had about substance abuse. Follow-up questions were based on the participants' initial responses and the interview guide. Demographic information was gathered at the start of the interview. In the context of data analysis, the interpretive analysis methodology developed by Conventional content analysis.

Results:

Demographic information showed in table 1. But main result looking for study goals show: three themes, three categories, and eight specific subcategories that illustrate the challenges encountered by women as a result of substance abuse.

3 themes included the following: Ups and Downs of Life, Specific Outcomes of Addiction, Particular feedbacks.

3 categories included the following: Facing Various Ups and Downs, Specific Outcomes of Addiction in Women, Spectrum of received feedback.

8 subcategories included the following: Family Ups and Downs, Psychological ups and downs, Economic Ups and Downs, Altering Men's Views on Addicted Women as Disposable Sexual Objects, Disturbance in the Maternal Role, Weak and Unfortunate Perception of Women in Society, Discouraging feedback, Constructive feedback.

At the theme of Ups and Downs of Life, category of Facing Various Ups and Downs and subcategories of Family Ups and Downs, Psychological ups and downs, Economic Ups and Downs, was extracted.

At the theme of Specific Outcomes of Addiction, category of Specific Outcomes of Addiction in Women and subcategories of Altering Men's Views on Addicted Women as Disposable Sexual Objects, Disturbance in the Maternal Role, Weak and Unfortunate Perception of Women in Society, was extracted.

At the theme of Particular feedbacks, category of Spectrum of received feedback and Downs and subcategories of Discouraging feedback, Constructive feedback, was extracted.

Discussion:

Based on the theme of Ups and Downs of Life, the difficult life problems such as economic problems, may lead women and girls to addiction, which despite the difference in the details of the previous studies with the current study, all of them confirm the above finding in a way.

Regarding the theme of Specific Outcomes of Addiction, the results of the present study showed that addiction in women has more social consequences than addiction in men with the same conditions. Because women are more affected and more vulnerable than a man in the same situation due to their female gender and centrality in playing different roles in the family system. In addition, due to the fact that women are dominated by men, women have less access to addiction treatment centers and hide their addiction from other people. Previous studies were also consistent with the above findings, albeit with differences in details.

In relation to theme of Particular feedbacks, the participants had experienced different feedbacks based on different personality characteristics such as age and education, financial status, etc. Some of these feedbacks were Discouraging and another were Constructive. Previous studies were also consistent with the above findings, albeit with differences in details and type of feedbacks.

Using the information obtained from the analysis of the interviews, it is possible to identify the challenges of women with drug abuse, and then by knowing them, plan the areas of solving the problems of women with drug abuse in the best possible way. For each of the above problems, you can have the necessary planning by organizing training workshops. Also, due to the access of the public to the virtual space, it is possible to continue building a suitable culture by using the media and social networks, relying on the realities of people's lives and the results of research.

Introduction

Substance abuse is characterized as the persistent and illicit consumption of various drugs or substances, including narcotics, which is evidenced by a range of cognitive, behavioral, and physiological symptoms. Individuals engaged in such practices often develop a dependency or addiction, and the cessation of substance use can result in withdrawal symptoms and deprivation syndrome (Moradinazar et al., 2020). Currently, substance abuse is recognized as one of the most critical health, psychological, and socio-economic challenges on a global scale (Crist, Reiner, & Berrettini, 2019).

Addiction-related disorders have a profound impact on numerous facets of individual, familial, and community life, leading to a significant depletion of social resources in both material and spiritual contexts (DiClemente, 2018). The consumption of drugs can diminish societal productivity, thereby positioning addiction as a form of social harm that perpetuates a detrimental cycle, intensifying various other social issues, such as familial discord, divorce, poverty, and unemployment. This scenario highlights the urgent need for enhanced attention and intervention (Aghdaghi, 2019).

The prevailing societal perception is that substance abuse predominantly affects males, with women being largely excluded from this narrative. Nevertheless, the reality is more complex; given the significant role women play within family structures, their struggles with addiction often go unrecognized. This obscurity can be attributed to various factors, including societal attitudes towards women, which may discourage them from seeking assistance from rehabilitation facilities. Consequently, this has resulted in a dearth of accurate statistical data regarding women's substance abuse (Ait-Daoud et al., 2019).

The interplay of genetic, social, and sociological factors—including family history, kinship networks, experiences of violence, and psychological disorders such as depression and anxiety—renders certain women more susceptible to addiction than their male counterparts or other women (Niazi M, 2019). A contributing factor to women's propensity for addiction is the inherent gender characteristic of being "female," which is associated with emotional responses that may lead women to utilize substances as a means of emotional escape when confronted with life's adversities (Zolfaghari, 2017). Additionally, social dynamics significantly influence women's drug addiction; for instance, when a woman cohabits with an addicted partner, she may inadvertently become ensnared in the cycle of addiction, as her partner's dependency can compel her to participate in the addiction to mitigate potential conflicts such as separation or grievances (Niazi M, 2019).

Women often disproportionately experience a range of social challenges and disparities, with addiction emerging as one of the most significant issues (Rezaei, Zarei, Firoozi, & Ahmadi, 2014). Individuals frequently endure harm and abuse from various members of their families or social networks. Conversely, a woman or mother who participates in substance use may also inflict detrimental effects on her family, friends, and acquaintances (Yazdanpanah & Samadiyan, 2015). It can be posited that the family unit is significantly impacted by women's addiction, given the high value placed on familial structures across various societies and the crucial role women play in ensuring their stability and development. As a result, any adverse effects experienced by women tend to reverberate throughout the family, potentially leading to broader disruptions within the community. The phenomenon of women's addiction initiates a cascading effect, beginning with the women themselves and subsequently influencing their children, especially daughters, who frequently identify with their mothers (Zolfaghari, 2017).

A report from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime indicated that in 2020, there were approximately 275 million drug users globally. In Iran, the number of individuals struggling with addiction was estimated to be between 1.8 and 3.3 million in 2016 (Khazaee-Pool et al., 2021). Furthermore, recent statistics from Iran indicate

that between 2008 and 2019, the proportion of women among the total population of drug addicts in the country rose from five percent to ten percent. The obstacles to treatment for women suffering from addiction have significantly contributed to this increase in prevalence (Enayet & Ghafari, 2019). Among the most significant factors contributing to this issue are superfluous administrative procedures, the predominance of treatment programs designed for men, financial obstacles to accessing treatment, childcare obligations, and inadequate support from family members (Yazdanpanah & Samadiyan, 2015).

It is important to note that women exhibit a more rapid onset of drug use compared to men, and they also encounter the adverse effects of addiction at an accelerated pace (Niazi M, 2019). Moreover, owing to physiological variations, the threshold for safe substance use is lower for women compared to men. Additionally, the disparities in body fat and water composition between women and men influence the absorption and accumulation of various pharmacological agents within the female body (Zolfaghari, 2017).

The rising prevalence of addiction among women is likely to result in several adverse outcomes, including familial rejection, the emergence of a subsequent generation of individuals struggling with addiction, diminished relationships with healthy and socially integrated individuals, and a corresponding increase in associations with others who are also afflicted by addiction (Hashem Zehi N, 2018). The consequences of substance addiction among women can lead to engagement in unethical behaviors and exploitation, primarily as a means to finance their substance use. Furthermore, female addiction increases vulnerability to malnutrition, cancer, and severe health conditions such as AIDS and hepatitis. Women with substance use disorders are at a heightened risk for gender-specific health issues and their associated complications. Notable repercussions include complications during pregnancy, risks to fetal health, and social ramifications, including violence against women who use substances and involvement in prostitution (Gholami Abiz, Enayat, & Ahmadi, 2021a). In addition, the role of women, both as consumers and as individuals at risk, is undeniable; however, for social reasons, most addiction studies have focused on men. Additionally, prevention and treatment methods have also been predominantly male-centered (Rezaei et al., 2014).

Although there are a limited number of studies addressing the lived experiences of women with substance dependence, such as the research conducted by Garosi et al. in 2011 (Garosi & Mohamadi, 2011) and Hajiha et al. in 2016 (Hajiha, Bahrami Ehsan, & Rostami, 2021), significant shifts in various dimensions of addiction necessitate further investigation. These shifts include alterations in drug consumption patterns, a notable increase in addiction rates among women in recent years, and a decline in the stigma associated with drug use within diverse communities, particularly among women (Mohammadi, 2017), distinct differences in substance use patterns among women, as well as broader implications of addiction that warrant attention, the proliferation of advertisements and prevailing misconceptions regarding the perceived harmlessness of drugs and the absence of dependency further complicate the landscape (Gholami Abiz, Enayat, & Ahmadi, 2021b), consequently, there is a conspicuous lack of contemporary and comprehensive research focused on the challenges faced by women grappling with substance abuse. It is therefore imperative to enhance our understanding of these challenges, as such insights can inform the nursing community and policymakers about the realities of women's lives. This understanding is crucial for the development of targeted interventions and primary prevention strategies, emphasizing the significance of early intervention.

Methods:

This research is based on the content analysis approach and is a part of a larger study using the hermeneutic method, adhering to the ethical code IR.IAU.TMU.REC.1401.348. Qualitative content analysis is a method for the subjective interpretation of textual data through systematic classification processes, coding, and theming or designing recognized patterns. It also interprets the authenticity and truth of the data subjectively, but with a scientific method, delving into the transcendence of words or the objective content of texts and examining hidden patterns as explicit content (Drisko & Maschi, 2016). Among the various approaches to content analysis, the above research utilized a conventional approach aimed at obtaining direct and explicit information from the study without imposing pre-determined categories (Klein, Reininger, Briken, & Turner, 2020). The primary aim of this research is to explore the difficulties women encounter due to substance abuse, and the content analysis qualitative research method has been chosen to fulfill this objective.

Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques, with an emphasis on achieving maximum diversity to capture a range of perspectives on the central issue. Consequently, individuals with varying personal characteristics were included to ensure their views reflected these differences. Sampling continued until saturation was achieved, which occurred after conducting interviews with eight participants.

The participants, who were current and former female drug users, were located in addiction treatment centers in Saveh and Tehran, as well as in public spaces like parks. After obtaining written informed consent, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in person. The research questions focused on the women's experiences and feelings regarding the challenges of substance abuse, the difficulties faced during drug use, and any additional comments they had about substance abuse. Follow-up questions were based on the participants' initial responses and the interview guide. Demographic information was gathered at the start of the interview.

For data analysis, a conventional content analysis approach was used. Therefore, the information collected through interviews and meaning associations was analyzed. In this case, the data analysis began with repeated readings to achieve a complete understanding. In fact, based on the researchers' perceptions of the text under study, the initial analysis writing began, and this process continued until the backgrounds for the emergence of codes started. Then, they were categorized based on their similarities and differences. In the next stage, the organization and grouping of codes were carried out into meaningful clusters. Depending on the quality of the relationships between the sub-themes, by combining and organizing these sub-themes, they were transformed into a smaller number of categories (themes) (Kleinheksel, Rockich-Winston, Tawfik, & Wyatt, 2020). The analytical processes described were facilitated through the use of MAXQDA12 software (Holloway & Wheeler, 1996). To ensure the study's validity and credibility, four criteria for qualitative research reliability were applied: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Anney, 2014)

Results:

Based on demographic data, the study discovered that the average age of female participants was 42.25 years, ranging from 28 to 50 years. Half of the women surveyed were mothers. On average, they had been using substances for 11.93 years, with a variation from 1 to 25 years. Additionally, 87.5% reported having friends who also used substances. (Table 1)

Table 1: Demographic information of the participants

Indicator	Index level	Frequency (person)	Frequency percentage
job	employed	7	87.5
	housekeeper	1	12.5
education	Diploma and sub-diploma	5	62.5
	above diploma	3	37.5
marital status	single	4	50
	married	2	25
	absolute	2	25
Leave status	in use	5	62.5
	leaving	2	25
	Crack with slip	1	12.5

The analysis of interview data identified three main themes, three distinct categories, and eight specific subcategories that highlighted the difficulties women face due to substance abuse. (Table 2)

Table 2: Themes, categories, and subcategories extracted from data analysis

Themes	Category	Sub Category
Ups and Downs of Life	Facing Various Ups and Downs.	Family Ups and Downs
		Psychological ups and downs
		Economic Ups and Downs
Specific Outcomes of Addiction	Specific Outcomes of Addiction in Women	Altering Men's Views on Addicted Women as Disposable Sexual Objects
		Disturbance in the Maternal Role
		Weak and Unfortunate Perception of Women in Society
Particular feedbacks	Spectrum of received feedback	Discouraging feedback
		Constructive feedback

Them of Ups and Downs of Life

One of the experiences discussed is the challenges faced during substance abuse. All participants shared different experiences of ups and downs during their time of substance use. This category consists of three subcategories:

A) Family Ups and Downs:

This subcategory focuses on three main conceptual codes - poor living conditions, turning to substances to cope with life stressors and feelings of loneliness, experiencing homelessness, and children turning to substance abuse following parental divorce.

Similar to how positive family dynamics can foster the mental, emotional, psychological, and social development of children, negative family situations can lead children towards negative behaviors like substance abuse. Unfavorable conditions can involve financial struggles, family conflicts and breakups, and unethical actions within the family.

• *Participant 3: "I suffered a lot in this world; imagine how sensitive the age of 17 is. My parents separated when I was this age, and I turned to substances for my mental peace."*

B) Psychological ups and downs:

This group consists of three main conceptual codes: the tendency to forget worldly sorrows by turning to substance abuse, the sense of helplessness and difficulty in dealing with life's challenges using regular coping methods, and the experience of loneliness and lack of support from others. Difficulties within the family, financial struggles, joblessness, and any harmful influences that impact a person's mental well-being are factors that can contribute to an individual's vulnerability to addiction as a way to avoid unpleasant thoughts.

• *Participant 4: "When I see substances, I use them, and I feel better; I forget all my pain, the pain and sorrow of being away from my children, being rejected by my family, I forget everything."*

• *Participant 3: "No matter how much you want to avoid thinking about your problems, it doesn't work; you still unconsciously drift toward thoughts and worries. But substances make it so that all the problems fade away; they do something that nothing else can."*

Emotional divorce is when there is a lack of emotional connection between married partners, leading to a diminished importance of family and its values. This can contribute to various societal issues like alcoholism, substance abuse, and unhealthy sexual behaviors.

• *Participant 8: "There was no affection, no attention from my husband at all; he never asked me throughout the day what I was doing, whenever I really needed him, he wasn't there, he wasn't there in my happiness, he wasn't there in my sadness, it felt like I was all alone."*

C) Economic Ups and Downs:

This part contains three main conceptual categories: family financial struggles, the role of financial problems in pushing women who abuse drugs towards prostitution, exposure to harmful environments, and the cycle of substance abuse due to lack of housing.

The problem of homelessness is a major societal issue in the present day, representing a form of extreme poverty and providing the conditions for various social abnormalities. These abnormalities include connections with substance abusers, a propensity for addiction, involvement in prostitution, unplanned pregnancies on the streets, and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.

• *Participant 1: "When you're broke, you become homeless; you have to sit in the park with others and use drugs. I wasn't willing at first, but I eventually ended up going to that man's house, and he exploited me in return."*

Them of Specific Outcomes of Addiction

The category of specific outcomes of addiction in women challenges the prevailing belief that addiction is primarily a male issue. Considering women's crucial roles in families and their impact on nurturing children and upholding the family unit, women's addiction holds significant importance. This category consists of three subcategories:

A) Altering Men's Views on Addicted Women as Disposable Sexual Objects

Many women using drugs often turn to prostitution to fund their habits and cover living expenses. However, the men they engage with view them as disposable sexual objects.

• *Participant 1: "Addicted women are seen as disposable. We go to great lengths to feed our addiction, and they only view us as objects for fulfilling their desires."*

B) Disturbance in the Maternal Role

As addiction takes hold, women struggle to fulfill their roles as mothers, such as caring for their children, managing the household, and maintaining a loving environment at home. This can have detrimental effects on the family unit, particularly on the daughters.

• *Participant 1: "There are times when my daughter comes to me in tears, asking why I didn't seek help earlier, why I wasn't there for her, and why I couldn't be the mother she needed."*

C) Weak and unfortunate perception of women in society

Society often molds women to be reliant on men, leading them to be more self-sacrificing and responsible during times of crisis. Due to their inherent differences from men and their nurturing nature, women have historically been more susceptible and overlooked throughout history.

• *Participant 7: "I remember a time when I couldn't afford drugs, and the dealers would pressure me, saying I had to be with them as it was the only way for a poor woman to survive."*

Them of Particular feedbacks

The range of feedback received refers to behavioral differences with drug users in two completely different ways. In some cases, the behaviors are disappointing, while in others, they manifest as constructive behaviors, which are mentioned in the two subcategories below.

A) Disappointing feedback

Considering that a person's appearance is the first characteristic of that individual during communication, the changes in appearance resulting from addiction indicate the emergence of the individual's addiction. It is worth mentioning that many addicts are unaware of their appearance changes due to the slow and gradual nature of these changes, and they only realize the changes when they receive feedback from friends and acquaintances.

• *Participant 2: "When you lose your looks and go to see family, they behave in such a way that it made me cry for myself."*

B) Constructive feedback

The feedback from individuals with severe obesity who experienced weight loss without undergoing strict diets, or who had appearance changes such as clearer skin following drug use, was positive.

• *Participant 5: "During that time when my sister was using, she looked much better and had lost her extra fat."*

Discussion:

The main objective of this study was to explore the difficulties women face as a result of substance abuse using a content analysis. These challenges were identified through the analysis of interview data to help in better planning. Three main themes emerged from the interviews: conflicting experiences, navigating life's challenges, and the specific consequences of women's addiction, along with various feedback received.

In terms of dealing with life's challenges, the analysis of interviews revealed various issues and obstacles that pushed these women towards addiction. These challenges shed light on the women's role as either facilitators or participants in the cycle of addiction. Some of these challenges include family problems like parental separation, emotional issues like isolation, and financial struggles like homelessness.

Hajiha and his colleagues discussed the presence of "severe financial difficulties" in this context, specifically related to funding the purchase of substances. These costs were often covered through different methods such as begging (Hajiha et al., 2021). The study conducted by Garosi and his team also found that psychological issues like marriage dissolution and being separated from a child contribute to emotional fluctuations, aligning with the current research findings (Garosi & Mohamadi, 2011).

Enayat and his team discussed the economic challenges faced by families in their article titled "Compulsory and Double Constraints." These financial difficulties often restrict access to education and reduce awareness among girls, ultimately leading to the issue of addiction (Enayat & Ghafari, 2019). Even though the category name used in the research conducted by Enayat and her team differs slightly from the current study, both articles discuss the financial fluctuations that play a role in the development of addiction.

The outcomes of the current study indicate that women who are addicted face more extensive social consequences compared to men in similar situations. This is because women, being predominantly responsible for various roles within the family, experience greater impact and vulnerability due to their gender. Additionally, women often avoid seeking help from addiction treatment facilities and hide their addiction due to male dominance. As a result, accurate data on women with substance abuse issues is lacking and most addiction programs are tailored towards men. Research conducted by Gilbert et al. and El-Bassel et al. also highlight that addicted women are often perceived differently by society and are at higher risk of experiencing harassment and sexual abuse than non-addicted women (El-Bassel, Terlikbaeva, & Pinkham, 2010; Gilbert et al., 2015), which is consistent with the results of the study mentioned earlier. In the research conducted by Strathearn and his team, findings showed that addiction in women not only affects the individual but also has specific implications involving their fetuses and children. This can result in complications during pregnancy and care of the fetus, which can disrupt the mother's role. Additionally, it highlights the possible negative outcomes of addiction on the children's future. As a result, the study underscores the importance of recognizing the unique aspects of addiction in women compared to men (Strathearn et al., 2019), consistent with the findings of both Sebastiani's study and the previously mentioned research (Sebastiani et al., 2018).

Participants in the study received different types of feedback based on their individual characteristics such as age, education level, and financial status. Results from Syvertsen and colleagues' research suggested that women who

use substances are often blamed for their addiction and the physical changes it causes. The study also highlighted women's addiction as a major social stigma (Syvertsen et al., 2021). The negative feedback in the current study is in accordance with this finding. While the term "blame" was not directly stated in this study, the change in behaviors towards disrespecting and mistreating women with substance use is seen as a type of negative feedback. In general, the results of these studies are in harmony with one another. Wakeman and his colleagues also mention that the language used to refer to these individuals is stigmatizing, contributing to negative perceptions of them within the community and among others (Wakeman, 2019). This study is limited in terms of its generalizability. We used the purposive and snowball method due to the difficulties associated with the topic of the study, which has its own limitations. The small sample size is another limitation. We suggest designing public health programs to promote awareness about the health risks of Substance abuse in women and modifying misconceptions about Substance abuse in women use through different communication channels like social media and school-based education. Future research should be conducted using a mixed method design in a nationwide program to raise awareness and to better our understanding of Substance abuse in women initiation in Iran. Using the information obtained from the analysis of the interviews, it is possible to identify the challenges of women with drug abuse, and then by knowing them, plan the areas of solving the problems of women with drug abuse in the best possible way. For each of the above problems, you can have the necessary planning by organizing training workshops. Also, due to the access of the public to the virtual space, it is possible to continue building a suitable culture by using the media and social networks, relying on the realities of people's lives and the results of research.

Ethics Committee Approval: Ethics committee approval was received for this study from the Ethics Committee of the Deputy for research and Technology of Tehran Islamic Azad University of Medical Sciences; IR.IAU.TMU.REC.1401.348.

Informed Consent: Informed consent was obtained from the participants in this study.

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