Gender and Addictions

Summary

The gender approach provides a guide for interpreting differences related to sexual identity, favouring a more comprehensive understanding that allows us to understand how the social construction of gender from its traditional approach negatively impacts problematic drug use, which affects men and women, each time assigning them roles that limit their potential to develop and suppressing qualities that are socially associated with the other gender. In this process of configuring social relations, the gender approach becomes especially relevant in analysis and professional intervention as a producer or transformer of gender stereotypes.

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When discussing gender, often descriptions are limited to describing differences in the forms of masculinity and femininity; however, the gender approach is much broader and offers a guide to interpreting these differences, allowing a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between gender and the problematic use of substances, and the substantial difference in risk factors and consequences that this entails for men and women.

For example, the risk of sexual violence is much higher for women than for men. In fact, the vast majority of women who seek treatment at the Romeral Dianova Treatment Centre have been victims of sexual abuse since childhood, causing early traumas that undoubtedly increase the risk of developing addictions as a means of escaping the emotions these traumas evoke. This phenomenon is presented as a vicious circle, in the sense that after developing an addiction conditioned by sexual abuse trauma in childhood, women with problematic drug use are not only more socially judged than men by the role that culture imposes upon them, but also have an ever-increasing risk of being abused in their sexual sphere, which is demonstrated by the high number of women who have been subjected to rape or sexual abuse while under the influence of drugs.

In response to the above, it is essential to focus interventions on demystifying and denaturing violent practices, including the language itself, raising awareness of the 'micromachismos' that are carried out subconsciously, which requires professionals and users to develop and promote the

capacity to generate permanent processes of self-criticism from a constructive and ethical perspective. In this sense, it is necessary to explore to what extent traditional patterns of the social construction of gender could be being replicated from a perspective that limits self-development.

For example, when parental skills work to a much greater extent in therapeutic centres for women and hardly at all in centres for men, a clear message is given:

"Parenting is a mother's responsibility, not the father's"

This strong and clear message translates into an emotional overload for women, and therefore constitutes a risk factor by increasing the likelihood that they will resort to consumption as an escape or release from this emotional overload.

In a similar sense, and in terms of male responsibilities in the home environment, it is common to hear users or professionals talk about men 'helping at home', with which the same message is repeated clearly: as though the home environment is the responsibility of mothers, who may eventually be 'helped' by the father of their children. This facilitates the understanding that this 'help' as a favour only puts a 'man in solidarity with his wife', without it being seen as part of the responsibility of the male role. Particularly considering that women also play a role in the productive economic sphere, it makes it all the more urgent to redistribute domestic roles, stimulating negotiation, agreement and cooperative systems.

In this sense, there is a lot of work to do in increasing awareness not just of male responsibilities at home and in terms of child-rearing, but also of the degree to which males are victims of patriarchy, issues that so far have been very little addressed.

Take the case of men who have had to get to together to demand their right to fatherhood, breaking the harmful paradigm that assigns them the role of 'provider' of economic resources, as they recognised that their options were limited by the mere fact that they are men, despite the fact that they may have better parental qualities than the women raising their children.

Such is the case of 'Amor de Papa' [Dad's Love], an organisation of fathers in Chile that fought to engage positively with their children, taking charge of responsibilities and needs not only in material terms but also in an emotional sense. However, there were serious cultural and institutional limitations, for example in terms of the time during which they are 'authorised' to interact with their children, which limits them to visits every 15 days or only at weekends. This is detrimental to the development of the father–son relationship. The organisation finally achieved legislation in favour of shared custody.

Of course, we are not referring to cases where a parent's behaviour negatively affects his children. In such cases, the regulation or limitation of a direct and regular relationship is necessary, both for men and for women. Rather, we are referring to all those occasions where on the one hand society offers the rhetoric of 'he ought to be a good father', but on the hand prevents him from the exercise his role as a father.

This is evidenced by the fact that it is harder to find baby changing facilities in men's public toilets while they are very common in women's.

The question is then: what do we expect a father who is widowed or separated from his partner to do when he's caring for his children and has to change his baby in a shopping centre? How can we expect this man to be a 'good father' while at the same time limiting his conditions and time that would enable this?

Another impact of male patriarchy relates to the mental health of men who are about to retire and those who have lost their job, where their labour productivity ceases. Men in these situations who see their place in society as workers and providers, with little or no involvement in other roles, suffer severe psychological damage when they lose the only one which gives them an identity: their work. Long periods of demotivation and depression then follow, negatively affecting the entire family dynamic. On the other hand, women, whose upbringing revolves around cooperation and service to others, develop the ability to take on multiple roles. This opens up more possibilities for them to reinvent themselves and team up with others in later adulthood, or at least to feel less pressure and anxiety about losing their productive economic role, since they undertake other roles that have been assigned to them by society.

The victimisation of abused women also needs to be recognised: in general terms, society positions women as victims, but does not acknowledge this or do enough to encourage women to develop their potential strengths and capabilities, empowering them to overcome their problems, rather than being victims.

Furthermore, the constantly repeated claim that gender-based or women's rights issues have been resolved in modern times, compared with just a few decades ago, rather suggests a "false sense of self-efficacy". There is a perception that women today are better off, simply because they can now participate in political elections, study and work. This reasoning overlooks the major challenges society faces with regard to the gender approach, namely that we need to see ourselves as human beings, without limiting learning and opportunities on the basis of biological sex. The feminisation of poverty and the emotional overload mentioned in previous paragraphs are ignored.

Although women's participation in productive economic activity has increased substantially overall and, of course, women can now vote and even become president, this has not meant an equal redistribution of domestic work in terms of what tasks are performed by men. It is still generally women who take on most of the childcare and domestic duties and who present higher levels of "double presence" (working while preoccupied with domestic matters).

Moreover, the importance of this work in the economic and productive sphere of the home is not recognised: if no one in the family took care of domestic matters, members of the household would have limited opportunities and conditions for successfully integrating into society. Children and adolescents need someone to ensure they are properly fed, clothed and looked after. This means that if a provider needs to work, someone else has to take on the domestic work. If there is no family member to undertake this role, there are three possibilities:

- The basic needs of the family members are not met.

- Costs must be borne for having someone to carry out cleaning, toileting, childcare and other tasks.

- Or family members (including children) are overburdened by having to carry out domestic chores as well as schoolwork or paid employment, without having suitable conditions or adequate time to do so.

In this context, the domestic role, which has historically been underrated or unrecognised and, regrettably, demands more of some than of others, is a fundamental pillar of productive and functional family life.

On the other hand, it is common to see how the assumption by women of roles, behaviours or habits associated with male stereotypes is mistakenly perceived by society as an advance, even when it involves reinforcing patriarchal values such as violence, competition and "valuing the self over the rest of the community." This scenario bears out the opinion of the author Margarita Pisano, who concludes that modern society's overvaluing of patriarchal values such as authority, individualism and competition are leading by stealth to the "triumph of masculinity" rather than to the advancement of women, thereby damaging collaborative systems and increasing degrees of vulnerability or dysfunction in social interactions.

Therefore, it is important to create a language that enables the critical analysis of the processes of social construction and emphasises the responsibility of everyone, including experts by training (professional and technical) and experts by experience (users), in the building and generation of new dynamics. In this context, the adoption of the gender approach in the **analysis** and **intervention** of a user treatment programme would not only promote a deeper understanding of the underlying problems, but would also make the therapeutic team's interventions more relevant and effective.

It is very important to become aware of the power the exercise of one's profession holds, either to perpetuate outdated cultural patterns or to change them. There is a need to develop reflective practices, as well as an understanding of the potential relevance of language and the minor cases of machismo that occur in everyday life. These mostly go unnoticed and can be as simple as asking if the man helps in the house or delegating the preparation of the charcoal and grill to the men and the preparation of salads and serving to the women.

 Although positive social and cultural change is on the horizon, the development of people needs to be approached from a human rights perspective, without limiting ourselves and devaluing or stifling human capabilities simply on the grounds of gender. This will involve encouraging all that is positive and overcoming the limitations of prejudice and patriarchal, heteronormative, anthropocentric and adult-centric mentalities in society. These measures aim to promote good living based on a culture of respect, solidarity and collaboration, opposition to all acts of macho violence, and ongoing awareness-raising and reflection on the processes of social construction of gender and their effect on the way the dynamics of social interaction are developed.

The challenge is not only to criticise and complain, thereby becoming part of the problem, but also to be part of the solution, through professional practice in the field of addiction.