

SSA PhD Studentship Final Report

Dr Sarah Fox

Department of Social Care and Social Work, Manchester Metropolitan University

PhD awarded February 2019

Title:

'They said if you come you can't drink. I thought, I can't stop.'

Exploring the journeys to support among women who experience co-occurring substance use and domestic abuse.

Research abstract:

Although 30-40 percent of people in England seeking treatment for substance use are women, little research explores their experiences of support when domestic abuse is also present. There is also a gap in service provision for women with multiple and complex issues such as problematic substance use and domestic abuse. Ongoing austerity measures continue to impact health and social care services in the UK, which in turn, has an impact on the support options available to women. What women do to seek help, how they feel about the support they receive (or lack thereof), and information about the type of support available to them, is a missing conversation in both substance use and domestic abuse research and other related literature. As such, this research sought to understand women's journeys to support when they experience co-occurring substance use and domestic abuse. This research took an in-depth look at women's motivations for support seeking, it explored the barriers and enablers to accessing support, it determined the wider influences on women's decision to seek help, and, it identified the practice of substance use services and domestic abuse agencies in supporting women with dual needs. Influenced by feminist research theory and hermeneutic phenomenology, this thesis presented data from 12 interviews with women who have experienced co-occurring substance use and domestic abuse. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to analyse the interviews, a sample profile, 12 pen portraits and five superordinate themes focused on the complexity of support seeking among women with co-occurring's substance use and domestic abuse. In particular, this research shows that the women in this study experienced multiple complex histories of abuse and substance use. The relationship between motivations and barriers of support seeking, the impact of systematic barriers and, a discussion of trauma informed approaches to support are also key themes discussed in this research. Overall, this research presents the journeys to support, and the experiences of support, for women with histories of substance use and domestic abuse. This research creates a new knowledge, because it is the first-time women's voices have been heard in terms of their own support journey. By listening to the voices of women, this research presents the lived realities of accessing support in a climate where support is reducing. This research therefore highlights the need for more research, better practice and improved policy relating to women and substance use, and advocates for a trauma informed, gender-responsive approach to drug and alcohol support.

Useful links:

The following organisations conduct research on women who experience multiple disadvantage (substance use, abuse, mental ill-health, criminal justice and homelessness). They offer a range of services including resources for practitioners, commissioners and policy makers, as well as training for those working in any area of multiple disadvantage.

- <https://avaproject.org.uk/>
- <https://weareagenda.org/>

- <https://www.nice.org.uk/sharedlearning/against-violence-abuse-stella-project-mental-health-initiative>
- <http://www.gldvp.org.uk/the-stella-project/>

Publications:

In review: Chapter co-author with Jennifer Holly
Interactions between domestic abuse and other harms and vulnerabilities. In Domestic abuse across the life course: safeguarding and prevention. Radford, L & Thiara, R. (eds.). Jessica Kingsley Publishers: UK

May 2017: Understanding Co-occurring Substance Use and Domestic Abuse - SSA Website

I am currently writing a pocket guide on substance use and domestic abuse for the British Association for Social Workers. This pocket guide will be made available to all social work practitioners.

I am also writing an article exploring the complex interaction between substance use and domestic abuse among women.

Networks:

- Member of the Substance Use and Addictive Behaviours Research Group (SUAB), Manchester Metropolitan University
- Student Associate for the Society for the Study of Addiction
- Co-found of the Drugs, Alcohol, Women and Families (DAWF) Conference

Oral and Poster Presentations:

I have been lucky enough to present various aspects of my research at local, national and international conferences over the past three years as a PhD student. I have presented posters at the Lisbon Addictions Conference (Lisbon, 2017), Alcohol Research UK (ARUK) Annual Symposium (London, 2017, 2016), the Global Addiction Conference (Venice, 2016) and the SSA annual conference (York 2016, Newcastle 2017). I have been invited to speak about my research at the University of Nottingham (2018), the University of Glasgow (2014) and various local events at Manchester Metropolitan University. I have also presented my research at conferences including the SSA annual conference (Newcastle 2017, 2018), the Women Being Conference (Edinburgh 2017), the Abuse and Safeguarding Conference (Manchester 2017), IPVI conference (Finland 2017) and the ARUK (London, 2017) conference where I was awarded the best paper prize. I also co-founded the Drugs Alcohol Women and Families Conference (DAWF) which took place in May 2018.

Future Direction:

I believe women who use substances are underrepresented in drug and alcohol research, practice and policy. Thanks to the studentship from the SSA, my PhD research has created a foundation that allows me to explore women's substance use further. However, my PhD is only the starting block. I aim to have a career exploring women's substance use so as to make a change in practice and policy. I am keen to use my knowledge to impact service provision for women with problematic substance use, particularly in the area of trauma-informed practice. Planned projects seek to explore the histories of women who use drugs and alcohol problematically so as to better understand the complex interaction between childhood and adult adversities and problematic substance use. I am currently seeking funding to explore the relationship between substance use and coercive behaviour.