



NEWS RELEASE from the EU drugs agency in Lisbon

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Male and female drug use: Is the gap narrowing?

(8.3.2005) Gender differences in patterns of drug use are addressed today by the **EU drugs agency (EMCDDA)** in a technical paper marking International Women's Day. According to the paper, men in the EU are still more likely than women to use illicit drugs. But there are concerns around possible signs of a 'narrowing of the gap' between male and female drug use, and greater similarities in lifetime drug-taking experience, particularly among school students. The paper analyses data from three sources: ESPAD school surveys (1995, 1999, 2003); general population surveys; and drug treatment centres.

The paper says: 'If young females are increasingly likely to experiment with drugs in the same manner as their male counterparts, this is indicative of a move towards more similar drug-taking patterns between the sexes in the future'. In time this could also mean a 'considerable increase in overall prevalence levels'.

The **EMCDDA** will be addressing the topic of gender in its 2006 *Annual report*. Today's paper forms part of the preparatory process, aiming to stimulate debate among researchers on the influence of gender on drug use trends across Europe.

'Young women in Europe may be increasingly vulnerable to using drugs and to consuming harmful levels of alcohol', says Professor Salme Ahlström, Chairwoman of the EMCDDA Scientific Committee. 'We need to throw more light on why this is so, in order to develop gender-sensitive prevention and treatment approaches that will engage young women and alter their behaviour. Such measures are essential if we are to avoid increased public health problems in the future'.

Factors likely to influence gender differences in drug use and treatment attendance are described in the paper and include: drug type; age group; and patterns of drug use. On the latter, the paper reveals that among all adults (15–64 years) 'predominance of males over females increases as the observation time frame is shortened from lifetime use, through recent use (last 12 months), to current use (last 30 days)'. Males are also more likely to report intensive drug use than females – in some countries, male school students are twice, three times and, in one country, even four times as prevalent as females in the 'frequent cannabis use' group (40 or more times in a lifetime).

Other contributing factors, says the **EMCDDA**, may include dynamic forces determining trends across Europe, such as drug availability, disposable income and lifestyle fashions.

Key findings

Key findings outlined in today's report include:

Drug type

- Women outnumber males in the use of hypnotic and sedative drugs. In surveys of school students (15–16 years) in the EU, more females reported using tranquillisers and sedatives without a doctor's prescription than males, except in **Cyprus, Ireland, Norway** and the **UK**.

- Among school students, males have greater current experience of drinking 'five or more alcoholic drinks in one session' (last 30 days) than females, except in **Ireland**, the **UK** and **Norway**. In general, male predominance is lower in those countries where prevalence of this drinking behaviour is highest.
- More male school students report lifetime experience of cannabis than their female counterparts, except in **Ireland**, **Finland** and **Norway**.
- Among school students in the EU, male to female ratios for lifetime cannabis use are quite similar to those for drinking 'five or more alcoholic drinks in one session'. This may suggest a common association of these behaviours with an outgoing lifestyle.
- The number of females in relation to males tends to rise as prevalence of lifetime cannabis use increases.
- The predominance of males over females for recent, current and frequent cannabis use is higher than for lifetime cannabis use.
- Country variations in the gender ratio are more marked for lifetime experience of ecstasy than for cannabis. This applies to students (15–16 years) and adults (15–64 years) alike.

Age group and patterns of use

- Increases in drug use among 15- to 16-year-old males are usually accompanied by increases among females. However increases among males tend to occur earlier or more rapidly.
- Lifetime prevalence of cannabis and ecstasy use among female school students (15–16 years) is closer to that of their male counterparts than is the case between male and female adults aged 15–64.

Treatment data

- Data provided by drug treatment services in the EU show that male clients far outnumber female clients. Only around 20% of clients in treatment are women.
- Around 90% of clients referred to treatment centres by the criminal justice system are male.
- In recent years, the proportion of females attending drug treatment services has increased in most EU countries. The highest increases were in **Germany**, **Greece** and the **Netherlands**.
- Male to female ratios among those in drug treatment in the EU vary considerably by country. In **Cyprus**, for example, men attending drug treatment services outnumber women by 9:1. Meanwhile, in **Hungary**, at the lowest end of the range, the male to female ratio is 1.6: 1.
- Most of the care provided by drug treatment services is for opiate, cocaine and cannabis problems, for which male clients far outnumber females.
- The proportion of females among clients in drug treatment is highest among young clients (under 20 years) with problems relating to amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) and among older clients (over 39 years) with problems resulting from the use of hypnotic and sedative (pharmaceutical) drugs.

Notes:

'Differences in patterns of drug use between women and men' is available at <http://www.emcdda.eu.int>

Data on general population surveys and treatment can be consulted in the 2004 Statistical Bulletin at <http://statistics.emcdda.eu.int>

The results of the 2003 ESPAD survey, covering 35 countries (22 EU), were released in December 2004, see <http://www.espad.org/index.html>

For more on International Women's Day, see <http://www.un.org/events/women/iwd/2005/index.html>