

Original article

Differences between men and women in substance use: the role of educational level and employment status

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To determine differences between men and women in hazardous drinking, heavy cannabis use and hypnotosedative use according to educational level and employment status in the economically active population in Spain.

Method: Cross-sectional study with data from 2013 Spanish Household Survey on Alcohol and Drugs on individuals aged 25-64 [n = 14,113 (women = 6,171; men = 7,942)]. Dependent variables were hazardous drinking, heavy cannabis use and hypnotosedative consumption; the main independent variables were educational level and employment situation. Associations between dependent and independent variables were calculated with Poisson regression models with robust variance. All analyses were stratified by sex. **Results:** Hazardous drinking and heavy cannabis use were higher in men, while women consumed more hypnotosedatives. The lower the educational level, the greater the gender differences in the prevalence of these substances owing to different consumption patterns in men and women. While men with a lower educational level were higher hazardous drinkers [RII = 2.57 (95%CI: 1.75-3.78)] and heavy cannabis users [RII = 3.03 (95%CI: 1.88-4.89)] compared to higher educational level, in women the prevalence was the same. Women with a lower education level and men with a higher education level had higher hypnotosedative consumption. Unemployment was associated with increased heavy cannabis use and hypnotosedative use in both women and men and with lower hazardous drinking only in women.

Conclusions: There are differences between men and women in the use of psychoactive substances that can be explained by the unequal distribution of substance use in them according to educational level. Unemployment was associated with substance use in both men and women.

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Diferencias entre hombres y mujeres en el consumo de sustancias: el rol del nivel educativo y la situación laboral

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Determinar las diferencias entre hombres y mujeres en cuanto a consumo de riesgo de alcohol, de cánnabis y en el consumo de hipnosedantes según el nivel educativo y la situación laboral en la población activa española.

Métodos: Estudio transversal con datos de la Encuesta Domiciliaria sobre Alcohol y Drogas en España (2013) de personas de 25-64 años de edad (n = 14.113 [mujeres = 6.171; hombres = 7.942]). Las variables dependientes fueron consumo de riesgo de alcohol, consumo de cánnabis y consumo de hipnosedantes; las principales independientes fueron el nivel de estudios y la situación laboral. Para estimar la asociación entre variables dependientes e independientes se calcularon modelos de regresión de Poisson con varianza robusta. Todos los análisis se estratificaron por sexo.

Resultados: Los hombres tenían mayor consumo de riesgo de alcohol y cánnabis, mientras que las mujeres consumían más hipnosedantes. A menor nivel de estudios, mayores diferencias de sexo en el consumo

Palabras clave:

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de estas sustancias. Esto fue debido al patrón distinto de mujeres y hombres. Mientras los hombres con un menor nivel de estudios tenían mayor consumo de riesgo de alcohol (RII = 2,57; IC95%: 1,75-3,78) y cánnabis (RII = 3,03; IC95%: 1,88-4,89), en comparación con los de un mayor nivel de estudios, la prevalencia en las mujeres era la misma. Las mujeres con menor nivel de estudios y los hombres con mayor nivel de estudios consumían más hipnosedantes. La desocupación se asociaba a un mayor consumo de riesgo de cánnabis y de hipnosedantes tanto en las mujeres como en los hombres, y a un menor consumo de riesgo de alcohol solo en las mujeres.

Conclusiones: Existen diferencias entre los hombres y las mujeres en el consumo de sustancias psicoactivas. Estas diferencias pueden explicarse por la desigual distribución del consumo de sustancias en ambos sexos según el nivel de estudios. La desocupación se asociaba al consumo de sustancias tanto en los hombres como en las mujeres.

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Introduction

Different social conditions and power relationship between women and men can affect and/or condition behaviours¹ such as substance use. The prevalence of hazardous drinking or heavy cannabis use at both European and country level is greater in men than in women.²⁻⁵ Conversely, the prevalence of psychotropic drug use, such as hypnotics or sedatives, is higher in women.^{4,6-8} Drug consumption is also related to living conditions, access to economic resources or employment status.⁹ It has been reported that people with worse living conditions may be exposed to more stressful situations that could lead to detrimental health behaviours.⁹ In developed countries, an association between educational level and alcohol,^{5,10,11} cannabis¹² and hypnosedative use⁶ has been found. In addition, employment status is associated with substance use, both licit and illicit, and even with substance dependence.^{10,13,14} The mechanisms that might explain the previous associations are various and sometimes contradictory.^{4,15} For example, substance use could increase in adverse social conditions as a means to cope with psychological distress, or may decrease due to the lack of financial resources. Besides, we can not rule out an inverse relationship, since it has been found that substance use during adolescence is associated with lower education and worse employment outcomes in adulthood.¹⁶

Regardless of the direction of the association, the relationship between educational level or employment status and substance use could vary between men and women. In Europe, while higher prevalence of hazardous drinking is found in men with lower education level, among women, the highest prevalence is found in those with higher education level.^{11,17} However, a recent study in Spain shows that hazardous drinking increases with the education level in both, women and men.⁵ Besides, some studies show that the association between unemployment and substance use is stronger in men than women,^{4,13} whereas others report the opposite.¹⁷ The study of the differences between men and women in substance use is especially relevant in a period of economic crisis. In Spain the crisis has led to an increase in mental health problems in men, due to their unemployment,¹⁸ and an increase in substance abuse, especially of alcohol and hypnosedatives in both women and men, regardless of their employment status, and cannabis only in unemployed men.⁴ In fact, in a period of crisis, job loss could be a predictor of becoming a hazardous drinker.¹⁴ However, although there are studies aimed at analysing the relationship between educational level and employment status and their influence on health in Spain, we are not aware of the existence of studies that specifically analyse the differences between men and women in substance use in relation to educational level and employment status.

This study aims to: 1) describe the differences in the prevalence of hazardous drinking, heavy cannabis use and hypnosedative consumption between economically active men and women aged 25 to

64 resident in Spain by educational level and employment status, and 2) analyse how educational level and employment status are related with the consumption of these psychoactive substances in economically active women and men.

Methods

This is a cross-sectional study with data from the Spanish Household Survey on Alcohol and Drugs (EDADES) from 2013 (the last edition accessible by the Government Delegation for the National Plan on Drugs: www.pnsd.msssi.gob.es). EDADES is a national survey with a representative sample of the non-institutionalised Spanish population aged 15 to 64 years. Data collection was performed through face-to-face interviews with two questionnaires: one about sociodemographic variables (conducted by an interviewer) and the other about substance use variables (self-administered). A tri-stage clustered probability without substitution was employed, oversizing the initial sample to cover the unrealizable interviews. For this study, we included people, currently working or unemployed at the time of the survey, excluding people younger than 25 years, to assure that they could have attained the highest level of education (university), and the economically inactive individuals (students, homemakers, retired, disabled).⁴ We also excluded those who had not answered some questions about alcohol, cannabis or hypnosedatives and all people without information for any of the independent variables included in the study (less than 4%). Likewise, sample weights were applied to ensure representativeness. The final sample consisted of 14,113 individuals.

Variables

1) Dependent variables:

Hazardous drinking was constructed based on the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT), a screening validated test developed by the World Health Organisation (WHO). The AUDIT consists in 10 questions scored from 0 to 4 about recent alcohol use, alcohol dependence symptoms and alcohol-related problems, and the final sum allows to identify persons with hazardous drinking and alcohol-use disorders.¹⁹ In men, hazardous drinking was considered when the total sum was 8 or more, and in women, when was 6 or more.²⁰

Heavy cannabis use was determined from the Cannabis Abuse Screening Test (CAST), a validated test that screens for different aspects of harmful cannabis use by assessing the frequency of different events within the last 12 months.²¹ The CAST consists in 6 items, scored from 0 to 4, which identify patterns or risky behaviors related to cannabis use. Heavy cannabis use was considered when the sum was 7 or more.²¹

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