

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Doing Gender in a Toxic World. Women and Freebase Cocaine in the City of Buenos Aires (Argentina)

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**Consumption of freebase cocaine in Argentina has been investigated among males but not females. This qualitative study focuses on the complexity of relationships between gender identity and the use of drugs, investigating freebase cocaine as an example in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires, Argentina. In-depth interviews were conducted with female consumers in 2010. The results reveal the different ways in which female identity is constructed in the context of social vulnerability. We identify ways of doing gender and feeling like a woman in a man's world that are associated with a higher risk of violence and exclusion for being female.**

**Keywords** freebase cocaine (freebase or paco), gender, gender identity, Argentina, violence, qualitative study

### BACKGROUND

#### Consumption of Freebase Cocaine Among Women: Vulnerability and Social Exclusion

Cocaine is smoked in the American continent in different forms according to the locality, and is known as “Basuco,” “Crack,” and “Freebase,” among other names. Freebase cocaine is cheap and widely available in countries of the Andes, being obtained with very simple laboratory processes and being easy to use while possessing a potent and rapid action that makes it highly addictive (Castaño, 2000; Trans National Institute, 2006).

The use of freebase cocaine started in the 1970s in coca-producing countries such as Columbia, Peru, and Bolivia. This was more than two decades before it ap-

peared in Argentina and Uruguay, linked to a general transformation in the preparation and trafficking of cocaine hydrochloride. In this study, “freebase cocaine” refers to the substance known by users as *paco* or “pasta base.” Smokable cocaine is derived from the processing of the coca leaf and has a very low fusion point, allowing it to be volatilized more readily and giving it a higher addictive potency, producing a rapid dependence and severe biopsychological deterioration in users.

There are no consistent data on the contents of this substance, known as *paco* by users in Argentina. The Argentinean Drug Observatory has described a variety of mixed substances that are often indistinctly called “freebase” or “*paco*” by consumers, although they sometimes differentiate between inhaled and smoked forms (Rangugni, Rossi, & Corda, 2006). Both forms contain cocaine sulfate as a base with other alkaloids and impurities, including kerosene, methyl alcohol, and sulfuric acid. Further elements are added to augment the volume, such as wheat flour, brick dust, or sugar, some of which can increase toxicity (Arnedo, 2010). Freebase cocaine is considered as highly addictive, although some authors have reported its occasional “controlled” use by non-marginalized individuals (Rangugni et al., 2006).

In Argentina, the greatest impact of freebase cocaine use has been on the most disadvantaged strata of society, and it has been described as a social consequence of the economic, political, and social measures that led large numbers of Argentines to live under conditions of extreme poverty and social exclusion (Morales, 2009). Authors have reported that these conditions stimulated drug trafficking and the use of drugs, especially *paco*,

The authors are grateful to the women who took part in the interviews and to the individuals and associations who put us in contact with the interviewees and/or provided us with space and information. The authors also thank Richard Davies and Layla Davies-Jimenez for assistance with the translation. This study is set within the research project on Damage Reduction in Female Consumers of Freebase Cocaine (*Paco*) in risk areas of the city of Buenos Aires (Argentina).

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in Argentina (Arnedo, 2010; Arizaga, 2007). Another researcher observed that the political and economic crises in the country at the beginning of this century were associated with the expansion of free base cocaine or *paco* and that its consumption and the associated health and social problems helped to shape the nature of these crises (Epele, 2011b). This link between freebase cocaine use and conditions of social exclusion and poverty, especially after 2001, has been documented in other South American countries (Domanico & Malta, 2012). Drug hazards are shaped by risk environments, considered as social or physical spaces in which a variety of factors interact to increase the likelihood of harm (Rhodes, 2009, p. 193). The freebase consumers in the present study live in a setting that increases the risks associated with its consumption due to their socio-structural conditions of poverty. *Pasta base* is used in Argentina in high-risk settings. As in the case of *krokodil* in Russia, drug use and risk behaviors do not exist in vacuum but are subject to dynamically interlocking factors (Grund et al., 2013).

Available epidemiologic information shows that freebase cocaine consumption is more frequent among males than females. The latest national study on the use of psychoactive drugs (Argentinean Drug Observatory, SEDRONAR, 2010) revealed that freebase cocaine had been consumed in 2009 by 0.5% of Argentines aged between 12 and 65 years (0.6% males and 0.3% females), i.e., around 85,000 individuals. The objective of the SEDRONAR study was to obtain general and reliable information on the magnitude and characteristics of the consumption of psychoactive substances in urban-dwellers aged 12 to 65 years along with associated factors. This national survey used a probabilistic and polyphase sampling method to be a representative of all urban centers in the country with more than 70,000 inhabitants. Consumption was more frequent among 12- to 24-year-old individuals than in other age groups. However, it is difficult to estimate the number and gender of freebase cocaine consumers in the depressed urban setting of the present study. It is possible that problems of access to the population would lead to an underestimation of the magnitude of its use, which may go undetected in some social sectors. Drug users, especially the urban poor, constitute a hidden and strongly stigmatized population, whose daily life is highly conditioned by the illegal character of their habit. Most of the research in Argentina has been carried out in drug users under treatment (Canay, Brases, & La Rosa, 2012), although their access to health care is limited by the discrimination and exclusion they experience even in the health system (Bourgois, 2002a, 2002b; Gamella & Meneses, 1993; Romání, 1997). Females do not usually figure in the social imaginary of *paco* consumption, which is associated with poor and delinquent young males, and there has been no published research with a gender perspective.

Cross-cultural and historical analyses have revealed marked differences in the duration and intensity patterns of drug epidemic cycles, and the pharmacological qualities of substances are considered virtually meaningless

outside their sociocultural and politico-economic contexts (Bourgois, 2003). Young people in vulnerable sectors, especially drug consumers, are known to sustain themselves through an “illegal” economy that may or may not favor individuation processes, depending on the characteristics of individuals and settings (Bourgois, 2003; Epele, 2011a). The social spaces created are known by young drug users as *ranchadas*, *esquinas*, or *bandas* (Camarotti, 2009; Dustchazky & Corea, 2002), in which women may have active roles, and may construct an identity that counters the stereotype of female passivity. Specific research is warranted on the opinions and feelings of these women, given the possibility that these spaces may enable preventive work from a gender perspective (Doyal, 2001). Various investigations have demonstrated gender differences and inequalities in the perception of health and in the experience of and vulnerability to disease (García-Calvente, 2011). This research is usually centered on specific periods of women’s lives or on certain health situations, such as maternity, HIV infection, violence, or mental illness (WHO, 2009). Data on the effects of social gender inequalities on health are essential to support the development of appropriate policies (Benoit & Shumka, 2009).

The perception, assessment, and experience of risk practices, including those associated with psychoactive drug consumption, are influenced by the social beliefs and values of individuals. Gender is part of this social organization, governing our access to material and symbolic resources, the manner of our interaction with others, and our beliefs about ourselves. It is constructed discursively through the repetition of actions. Gender, sex, and sexuality are seen as a group of manipulated codes or internalized images that change according to the setting rather than as natural identities determined by biology (Buttler, 2007). If gender is something one *becomes* but can never *be*, then gender itself is a type of transformation or activity and should be understood as a constant and repeated action. Gender identity is constructed alongside the identification of social class and ethnicity (Benoit & Shumka, 2009; Borrell, García Calvente, & Martí Boscá, 2004).

Drug use is a constitutive part of how people “do gender” and develop their male or female identity in a conventional or non-conventional manner through their experiences with different drugs (Bureau of Women’s Health and Gender Analysis, 2005; Ettore, 2004; Measham, 2002). However, reports on freebase cocaine in Argentina have been male-oriented to date. Much of the research into women and drug use assumes that “illegal” drug use is an “unfeminine preoccupation,” taking place in an arena largely dominated by male users and “macho” images (Malloch, 1999). We hypothesized that doing gender may be conditioned by the substance consumed and by the context in which its consumption takes place.

We consider it important to understand how gender identity is constructed in the setting of drug consumption, which is considered to be eminently masculinized (Arizaga, 2007). For this purpose, it is necessary to understand and analyze how females relate to the consumption

of the drug, and to identify any gender differences in the characteristics and behavior of its users. The aim of this study was to analyze the ways in which females from vulnerable sectors do gender and generate forms of identity that permit their survival in a hostile and predominantly male setting.

### Research Questions

The research questions were as follows: How does the social construction of femininity affect female freebase cocaine consumers? What repercussions does freebase cocaine consumption have on the female body? Are the females more affected than the males by violent situations? How do they combine motherhood, childcare, and pregnancy, among other characteristics of their gender identity, with their paco habit?

Our objective was to determine how elements of gender identity are constructed in a group of female freebase cocaine (paco) consumers from marginalized areas of the city of Buenos Aires.

### METHODS

The investigation was conducted during 2010 in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires, including slum neighborhoods (*villas*) of the city and shantytowns on the periphery, conducting 20 in-depth interviews with female freebase consumers. The selection of interviewees was not randomized but was rather determined by the degree of saturation of the information obtained, seeking the widest possible range of views on the phenomenon under study. For this purpose, we applied diversification criteria such as age, family and employment situation, and consumption status (current or ex-smoker of freebase, combination with other drugs). The selection was continuous and based on constant comparison (continuous codification and analysis processes) and the progressive incorporation of new cases. The study only included individuals with full capacity to communicate and who expressed their willingness to do so freely. No reward was given for participation in the study.

A qualitative study was undertaken following the basic principles of the Grounded Theory (Glasser and Strauss, 1967) and based on constant comparison and theoretical sampling, with the central problem and categories emerging from the data. The thematic axes or dimensions in the study arose from the first categorization of the data and were then widened and adjusted as the investigation advanced. Constant comparison and theoretical sampling allowed the emerging theory to be adjusted to the incoming data, combining theoretical advances with practical application. The generation and interpretation of categories were done by researchers in Argentina (ACC and CT) and Spain (NRN and AT), following the triangulation method proposed by Denzin and Lincoln (2005) for qualitative research. Regular meetings were held, in which each team independently presented its proposals, and discrepancies were discussed, reaching a compromise. Further perspectives and observations were gathered from local groups

(e.g., community meal associations, church groups, and staff at art workshops, job training centers, and paco user support units) for triangulation with the information obtained from the interviews (Denzin, & Lincoln, 2005). The search for informants was started in a church, community meals center, and two health centers in the areas under study, although response was only obtained from one of the health centers, providing contact with 25 individuals (males and females) who knew the villas well. These key informants were able to arrange interviews with women from the target population with whom they had a direct relationship. These intermediaries were crucial in allowing us to make contacts with female paco users in an atmosphere of relative trust, dispelling suspicions that may have arisen about our motives. This first round of interviews represented the initiation of a “snowball” sampling process, although various channels had to be opened to ensure its progression due to the consumers’ lack of personal links. Interviews were carried out by researchers on a one-to-one basis.

After the first contact, interviewees were invited to choose a place in which they felt safe, usually in a bar or square close to their neighborhood. The interviews were carried out by members of the research team (one interviewer per person) and lasted between 40 and 90 min. Tapes of the interviews were subsequently transcribed by a transcription specialist who was not a member of the research team, changing the names of interviewees (using randomly selected names) in order to preserve their anonymity. Once the consent of the interviewees was confirmed, the interviewer followed a series of questions to guide the interview, gathering socio-demographic data and information on the following topics: family history, history of drug use, history of paco use, setting of paco use, relationships with male paco users, motherhood and drug use, violence, and need for interventions. A thematic analysis of the interviews was performed using ATLAS.TI 7 (1991–2009, ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH.). The codification procedure highlighted the relationships between doing gender identity and freebase cocaine consumption. Our aim was to incorporate emerging categories that improved the interview and observation process by constant triangulation and comparison among the team members. A total of 20 female freebase cocaine consumers were interviewed. None of them had completed secondary education, 15 had children, and five were childless (see Table 1).

The interviews were conducted in Spanish, the mother tongue of all the interviewees and researchers in the project. The manuscript, including the verbatim transcripts, was translated into English by a highly experienced English-native translator with a long (>25 years) experience of translating Spanish articles on sciences and social sciences for publication in international journals, assisted in this paper by a young translator. The translation and terminology were further checked by the research team in Argentina. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that the concept of “verbatim” is potentially compromised by the act of translation.

TABLE 1. Age, schooling, number of children, and cohabitation status of interviewees

Pseudonym*	Age (years)	Educational level	No. of children/cohabitation status
Milagros	26	Primary schooling not completed.	2 children, lives with partner.
Monica	24	Primary schooling not completed.	1 daughter, separated.
Manuela	16	Primary schooling not completed.	1 daughter, lives with partner.
Mora	26	Secondary schooling not completed.	1 son, lives with partner.
Cuca	28	Primary schooling not completed.	3 children, lives with partner (in the street).
Carmela	29	Secondary schooling not completed.	2 sons, lives with partner (in the street).
Vica	19	Primary schooling not completed.	No children, single.
Rous	32	Secondary schooling not completed.	5 children, married (husband in prison).
Paola	26	Primary schooling completed.	1 daughter, single.
Cintia	22	Primary schooling not completed.	1 son, single.
Karen	33	Secondary schooling not completed.	2 daughters, lives with partner.
Luz	45	Secondary schooling not completed.	1 son and 2 daughters, married (forced into prostitution by husband).
Flory	30	Secondary schooling not completed.	2 daughters, lives with man in highly exploitative relationship.
Poly	34	Secondary schooling not completed.	1 son, separated.
Belén	23	Secondary schooling completed.	No children, single.
Carla	20	Secondary schooling not completed.	No children, single.
Mercedes	15	Secondary schooling not completed.	2 sons, married.
Ceci	16	Primary schooling not completed.	No children, single.
Silvia	56	Secondary schooling not completed.	1 daughter, widow.
Paula	21	Secondary schooling not completed.	No children, single.

\*Selected randomly in the transcription of taped interviews.

Given the nature of this research, special efforts were made to preserve participants' anonymity and to persuade respondents that their identity would never be revealed. Only individuals who gave their informed consent were included in this study. Potential interviewees were given a form that mentioned the institutions behind the study and its main objectives as well as guaranteeing the voluntary nature of participation and the rigorous and permanent conditions of anonymity and data confidentiality. This form was first read out to the women, who were also given a verbal explanation of its contents in accessible language to ensure that it was fully understood before they signed their consent. The requirement for specific IRB approval is waived for non-interventional studies of this type at our both universities as long as national legislation on data protection and the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki are strictly followed, as in the present investigation. The study strictly complied with the Spanish (Royal Decree 15/1999) and Argentinean (Law 25.326/October 2000) data protection legislation, and the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

## RESULTS

### Embodiment and Addiction: Female Bodies, Constructing Identities

The females hardly ever spoke of gender or differences or similarities between males and females in their interviews. They described a substance that they liked when they started to consume it and reported its attractive effects. However, they recognized it as toxic once their addiction was established, portraying a destructive drug whose neg-

ative effects were rapidly perceived. Over time, its consumption led to the de-structuring of daily life in which gender is constructed. This is how Luz explained different aspects of her perception of the substance:

We call freebase paco. It's paco, freebase. It's destruction, it eats your fat, it eats you, you don't think, it makes you feel bad, bad, bad. It clouds you, it clouds everything. You stop thinking. You don't care about anything; you don't even love your own mum. (Luz)

Some of the discourses showed that the rapid slimming caused by the use of the substance was at first perceived as positive. This was previously observed in relation to ecstasy, prompting specific actions to avoid the association of this adverse effect with the female ideal of "thinness" and "beauty" (Cance, Ashley, & Penne, 2005; Curran & Robjant, 2006). Notwithstanding marked differences between the populations that use paco and ecstasy, they both share this feature.

...Uncountable, I used to go on two-week binges. Days and nights without sleeping. Two weeks consuming. I've been up to 17 days without sleeping or eating. That's why my weight got very low. I lost up to 20 kilos in five months. I lost 20 kilos. I got to look like a broom-stick. Besides, it's a complex, because I was always afraid of gaining weight and when I did a treatment once, I got. . .I came out really fat. That was one of the many relapses I had. Now I'm really thin compared to when I left there. (Paola)

However, these effects rapidly become undesirable, including an extreme thinning that is no longer positive for this group of females. The settings in which they smoke paco are also damaging, as are the home-made instruments that they use. Thus, the aluminum foils in pipes

further add toxic effects to the toxicity of the substance itself.

...Smoking it with a pipe is another effect. The pipes prepared in the slums are made with cider cork, pen top, a yoghurt metal is put on top, it's wrapped with tape, you wrap it, burn it, make some little holes and then that's another effect. When you put foil in it's more direct. What's the problem with foil? You swallow the bits of foil and they start to stick to your lungs. (Monica)

In our interviews, the females associated continued consumption with extreme thinning, pain, and dissatisfaction. This is what Carmela told us about the effects of the substance and its impact on her body:

(...) but freebase is like... it's much more... let's say it affects you a lot. It's like the body is more sensitive. There are days that, for example, you can't even light the lighter. Your fingers hurt, it's like your organism and your body, your skin, everything, it's as if everything becomes more sensitive. You hurt all over. (...) some girls go out and about more, are tidier and buy clothes, but their body is thinner and all that. Your body can't take any more... and sometimes you realize that at the same time your body gets used to it. (Carmela)

As observed in Carmela's statement, the effects derived from consuming the substance produce changes in body perception. We believe that these images and representations have a strong impact on the self-esteem of freebase consumers who rapidly break with the ideal feminine model associated with beauty and care after beginning to use the substance. For these women, the effects derived from the consumption of the substance generate the first identity change from the normalized construction of gender identity.

Their bodies are where their femininity resists, producing a form of struggle against addiction and deterioration in which gender precepts become strong and visible. Slimming, waxing, and having a good appearance emerge in the discourse of interviewees as important elements to be taken care of, adhering to stereotyped images of what is socially considered appropriate for women:

I get high, smoke a pipe and start. When I don't have tweezers and I see that I have a lot like, a lot of eyebrow, like very thick, I take my boyfriend's razor, always with the razor present. If I have crazy hair here under my arm it drives me mad. You don't know what it's like, but anyway I've always liked to be shaved. For example, I'm embarrassed to raise my arm full of hairs in front of the guys. And the guys are horrible; they have a big mouth (...) and tell each other everything. And I listen, because around there I'm just one more. (Cuca)

### Doing Gender in a Men's World: Violence and Exclusion

These women frequently began freebase cocaine consumption with their male partner in contexts of social exclusion. Various authors have described gender differences in the form of initiation into drug consumption, with females being more frequently introduced to the habit by their partners. The exceptions are the substances such as ecstasy, tobacco, or alcohol, whose consumption by the

women is often initiated with either male or female friends (Cance et al., 2005; Curran & Robjant, 2006).

When I started to get to know freebase, it was in the Abasto shopping mall. I first met my husband who was hanging out in Once. After I saw what he was up to he asked me, "Moni, why not give it a couple of drags?" He was really funny, as he was already really crazy. He smoked one after another. I didn't, but that's when I began to smoke joints. Later, we were walking around the Abasto mall one day and we went shopping, because he was a pickpocket. He'd got a good amount of money. We went to buy clothes and then he took me to a block of flats. I said: "What are we doing here?" He said: "Here you're going to see what we're going to do". And as I looked, he brought out a tin, flattened the tin. Like, I'd never seen him smoke it before. (Monica)

Once their addiction became established and daily life became organized around paco consumption, the women reported their experiences of exclusion and life on the streets as an inevitable downhill path of bad times. Their stories revealed violence, exclusion, and damage to their social and family bonds, which no longer held their daily life together. They suffered violence from partners and fellow users and committed violence themselves against family members, exacerbating the destructuring of their family and social lives.

My mum had noticed, but she didn't do anything. What happens is that the habit of those who consume, who drug themselves, they are very violent people. Then my old woman (mother) wanted to put me into a... because I'm not going to say that my mum saw me really thin with 20 kilos less and didn't say anything. Or that things disappeared from her house and she didn't say anything. She said things, but do you think that my mum was going to dare touch me, touch someone? Knowing that I would put one on her. My mum raised her hand against me that time and I hit her. Because you become a completely violent person with no values, no codes, no respect, no love for yourself or others, you feel nothing. (Cintia)

Gender violence stands out in the experiences of these women. It was common for interviewees to live with a partner who consumed freebase cocaine and to be frequently on the streets. The violence of the setting and the violence against women are intertwined in some of these cases, revealing situations that would require specific investigation:

He always says, "Oh, go and consume somewhere else, not here" (...) And he hits me and takes me out somewhere, pulls at me, and calls me "whore, bitch." I get really run down, because I have people who know me and know that I am not a bitch. I am no saint, but he isn't going to be talking bullshit about me (...), but thank God, nothing ever happened to me. (Luz)

Stealing and prostitution are survival strategies to which all of the interviewees had resorted at some point in their lives as users. Studies of Brazilian female users demonstrated that paco consumption was associated with prostitution and the risk of STD/AIDS transmission (Solange, Sanchez, & García De Oliveira, 2011). The women in the present study described different experiences in relation to stealing and prostitution. Some stole before starting as prostitute, while others combined both activities. Other women had been raped or abused in

childhood and then began as prostitute or got involved in criminal behavior. These are the cases of Cuca and Mora, who described different strategies around prostitution and stealing:

Me, for example, I don't prostitute myself. Maybe sometimes, some time ago, I was sent to do it every now and again, understand? Every couple of months, because in this sense I'm not ashamed to say so, I worked. An old guy comes and it's, what's going on? But if a fit guy comes in a car, I say "how much is in your wallet?" and if I don't have a nickel at the time, I start up. I go with the guy on the seafont. One of the things I learned; and here you learn things, even how to rob him. (Cuca)

On the subject of work, I left the little girls with their father for some time. And I began to get involved with other kinds of people in the Abasto mall. I came to Bajo Flores where my old man lived and I went out stealing, we nicked cars, everything. I went out to lift a car and the police caught us. There was a chase, and we went into the shopping mall. We were on TV, everywhere, a real mess. And, well, I was in jail for two years. They didn't give me more time because the man we stole from didn't recognize me. But they did give me two years of prison because I was in the car and with weapons and everything. Then there was no way to get out of that, but I did get out of the assault because the guy didn't recognize me. (Mora)

In Mora's story, maternity is a key topic in the interviews. Most of the women are mothers and fight, within their life of addiction, to remain close to their children. In this sense, they can again be seen as searching for female construction and identity centered on their ideal female model of a family life.

### Doing Gender Through Maternity and Love

The discourses pointed to partnerships as sources of protection and support in situations of exclusion and violence. In other cases they set the rhythms of consumption, abandonment, and relapse. Some of the people interviewed, such as Rous, managed to stop consuming with the support of their partners, and were protected by their personal relationships. Having relationships with male consumers, becoming strong in a male world, and claiming their role as partners and mothers are ways of being women in a man's world:

Interviewer: When he went to jail you began to consume again. . .

Rous: I began to consume again, yes.

Interviewer: You had stopped consuming for a long time.

Rous: The time I was with him, because he talked to me. He was my friend, my partner, my boyfriend, my lover. I had no secrets about anything, he was a person who didn't hurt me even with a look, with nothing. I relapsed a long time after he was put in prison.

The experience of maternity is difficult under the effects of a substance such as freebase cocaine. A large number of the women who participated in this study had lost their children or been separated from them. This is a reason for conflict with the law and a need that should be taken into account in terms of empowering them and facilitating their social inclusion.

Luz: But I have the hope that my son says to me "Hello mum." I have the hope that my son, well, is not going to condemn the judge. It's as if the judge had to decide for some kids who go from one home to another. And where is the mother? Doing drugs. Because I have to be thankful for this part, even if (. . .) and two of my children are together but I don't know where the little one is.

Interviewer: Are they in the homes of relatives?

Luz: Supposedly in families with money so they can be kept. And now I lost contact with the social worker, everything. It's as if they disappeared, isn't it?

Interviewer: And you don't know anything?

Luz: Well, it's a small world.

Interviewer: And when you gave all the children in adoption, at what time. . .?

Luz: The judge gave them to be adopted, not me.

Maternity appears in the discourses as a protective element. In fact, many of the women interviewed voiced a desire to have children in the future. Searching for female identity, feeling themselves to be "women," and recovering "social value" are strategies for doing gender.

I would like to have another child and be the good mother I was not able to be all this time. To be a good mother and give my kid all the best. What it needs most, for example, love and a lot of affection, which I didn't have. Because I left home when I was nine, I took no notice of my old woman, and my stepfather used to hit me a lot (. . .). I would like to be a good mother because I have a lot of love to give. The love they didn't give me, I can give it to my children (. . .). I already have a daughter. But I never lived with her. The father took her; he came with a knife when the baby was nine months old. I was really out of it with freebase, I couldn't even move. (Monica)

The interviewees associated maternity with an improvement in their lives: a chance to stop consuming and to reconstruct family and emotional bonds. However, it was also associated with frustration, because the experience of most of them was that bearing children had not brought any type of change. Moreover, motherhood often worsened their situations of vulnerability (e.g., pregnancy in street situations) and generated a greater feeling of anguish and pain.

### Study Limitations

Because of the snowball sampling strategy adopted, which started with women who had been in some type of contact with social services or associations, we are unable to estimate the proportion of female paco users in the study area who refused participation or to determine their motives. Furthermore, it is not possible to extrapolate the results of this qualitative study of an intentional sample to other settings or populations. Further research is required in vulnerable populations of women who do not use paco to identify the factors that influence the initiation and development of this destructive habit.

Our study was also limited to females of a particular social stratum who had consistently succumbed to the addiction, with no evidence of resilience. A study on the consumption of freebase among the middle classes of Buenos

Aires described types of user with less compulsive habits that could even be reduced or ceased (Rangugni et al., 2006); one reason for their low visibility to researchers may be a less frequent need to seek medical assistance for problems caused by poor quality freebase and hazardous smoking apparatus.

It should also be borne in mind that we focused on some bi-directional relationships from a single perspective, e.g., the effect of drug consumption on the suffering rather than the practice of violence, although this is touched on in the interview with Cintia. Finally, the “verbatim” accounts of the women were translated from the Spanish with special care, but the fact of their translation also represents a potential limitation.

## DISCUSSION

The women interviewed in this study associated the consumption of paco with social exclusion and harm from the beginning of their habit, attributable to the rapid development of addiction and its devastating adverse effects. According to these women, the consumption of freebase cocaine increases their risk of physical or sexual violence; stealing, prostitution, and violence are associated with its consumption, and their paths are intertwined in a complex manner. They also revealed the different ways in which they negotiate and construct their female identity in this setting.

There are two possible associations, although not necessarily circular. Historic sexual violence is associated with risk of drug dependency, and drug dependency is associated with present/future risk of sexual violence. We contribute data on the latter.

As reported by other researchers who attempted to make gender visible in the context of drug use, our analysis suggests that gender is implicit and performative but can also be seen as a situated action that implies agency or some degree of choice (Haines et al., 2009). Gender identity is constituted as a changing, dynamic process, described by Butler (2007) as a complexity whose totality is permanently postponed, never appearing complete in any given situation; thus, identities are alternately established and abandoned as a function of the objectives at the time.

Some of these women evidence a response to the social pressure to maintain the ideals of femininity in terms of physical beauty. In spite of living on the streets, they feel the need to look good for their men through depilation or wearing makeup. Their bodies are places for the construction of femininity, strengthening the elements that form the conventional female identity, and permitting articulation of the identity constructions gathered in the discourses. In fact, weight loss, an adverse effect of paco consumption, was seen as positive by these women at certain times in the history of their addiction. Couple relationships and maternity are highlighted in their stories. Being a mother, losing their children, or conceiving the possibility of having other children as a form of social inclusion appear as important elements for their social empowerment and acceptance. These aspects

should be taken into account in designing measures to enable these women to confront the consequences of consumption in a male world and to design treatment approaches from a gender perspective.

The interviewees described the “paco problem” as starting at around the beginning of the millennium, when the economic crisis in Argentina began to have a major social and institutional impact, with a weakening of public support networks, including public education, alongside the increasing pauperization of populations and a marked increase in the difference between the rich and the poor. Thus, in 2001, a census by the Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos (INDEC, 2000) found that the percentage of households unable to meet the basic necessities of life was six-fold higher in areas in the south of Buenos Aires than in areas in the north of the city, where the figure was around 3%.

Social alarm about the use of freebase cocaine may have been used to justify the control and persecution of the most impoverished populations in a context in which social conflict, although contained, is expressed in different ways (Rangugni et al., 2006; Rossi, 2009). It is likely that the rupture of female consumers with the constructed and idealized model of “female identity” generates a double social rejection; they are the “other” poor people. They lose social dignity and feel rejection in the environment around them. “They are not pretty,” “they are dirty,” and “they are “bad women.” They adopt a male world and incorporate female strategies to confront this dual rejection.

During the 20th century, distinct currents of feminist thought emphasized the plurality of specific problems faced by women related to ethnic origin, social class, sexual orientation, or gender identity, among others. The novelty of our findings lies in our focus on the construction of gender identity in relation to drug use and its consequences. This perspective has not been widely adopted in research on gender and drug use, with the notable exception of the studies by Measham (2002) and Ettore (2004, 2007). The visibilization of gender as constructed and variable allows drug use to be analyzed from new perspectives that are more appropriate to the design of policies to reduce gender-sensitive harm.

### Public Health Implications

These findings demonstrate the need for public health programs to take into account the specific requirements of this hidden collective of women. Further in-depth research is warranted on the relationship between paco consumption and violence from a gender perspective and on the incidence of STDs/AIDS among female paco consumers in Argentina. Incorporation of the gender perspective in this setting could improve the effectiveness of prevention and treatment programs for these women.

### Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of the article.

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## GLOSSARY

**Gender-based violence:** Following the European Institute for Gender Equality, this is defined as violence directed against a person on the basis of gender. It constitutes a breach of the fundamental right to life, liberty, security, dignity, equality between women and men, non-discrimination, and physical and mental integrity. It remains one of the most pervasive human rights violations of our time. It is rooted in gender inequalities, and reinforces them. Gender-based violence harms women, families, communities, and society.

**Gender/gender identity:** The state of being male or female. Used with reference to social and cultural differences. Butlers and other authors maintain that gender, sex, and sexuality are seen as a group of manipulated codes or internalized images that change according to the setting rather than as natural identities determined by biology.

**Paco/pasta base:** Local terms that refer to a diverse set of substances that are included under the expert category of freebase cocaine.

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