



## Argentinian women and the uses of drugs: A sociohistorical analysis of female drug use in Argentina (1860-1930)

Mujeres argentinas y usos de drogas: análisis sociohistórico del uso femenino de sustancias psicoactivas en Argentina (1860-1930)

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**ABSTRACT** This article describes cases presented by experts from the legislative and medical-legal fields regarding the use of psychoactive substances among Argentinian women from 1878 to 1930. Background information is presented regarding the relationship between women and the use of different drugs, medical interventions on the female body where psychoactive substances were used are analyzed, and experts' descriptions of cases of female drug users are detailed. Experts' discourses during this period did not attempt to comprehend the specificities of female consumption but were rather used to position the issue of drug use as a social problem. This was done using three prototypes: the victim of a sick husband; the prostitute who encourages drug use among the weak in spirit (natural-born criminals); and the virtuous young woman who succumbs to drug addiction in spite of her father's rule. Each figure reinforces the need for state intervention and increased social control.

**KEYWORDS** Substance-Related Disorders; Drug Prescriptions; Medical Legislation; Gender identity; Argentina.

**ABSTRACT** Este trabajo describe casos expuestos por expertos de los ámbitos legislativo y médico-legal periodístico, en los que se reporta el consumo de sustancias psicoactivas por parte de mujeres de Argentina, entre 1878 y 1930. Se presentan antecedentes sobre mujeres y usos de distintos fármacos, se analizan las intervenciones médicas que utilizan sustancias psicoactivas sobre el cuerpo femenino, y se detallan los casos de mujeres consumidoras desde las miradas expertas. En este periodo, los discursos expertos no buscaron comprender la especificidad femenina del consumo, sino promover el tema drogas como un problema. Esto se produce utilizando tres prototipos: la víctima de un marido enfermo, la prostituta que envicia a los débiles de espíritu (criminal nata), y la joven virtuosa que contraviene la ley del padre y sucumbe en la toxicomanía. Cada figura refuerza la necesidad de intervención estatal y control social.

**PALABRAS CLAVES** Abuso de Drogas; Prescripciones de Medicamentos; Legislación Médica; Identidad de Género; Argentina.

## INTRODUCTION

In Argentina in 1920, the case of a woman who had died of a drug overdose was chosen as a way to introduce the issue of drugs into the legislative arena. José Roydero and Juan Capurro, National Deputies for the Capital from the Radical Civic Union (UCR), used this case to argue the relevance of their bill “Regulation of alkaloid commerce” in the August 31, 1920 session.<sup>(1)</sup> The chosen case stirred up multiple issues that the legislators exploited on a number of occasions. It consisted of a lawsuit against a physician who had been charged with turning his wife into a morphine addict. This case resonated with the *porteño* bourgeoisie, as it involved a physician who had been a student of the capital city’s most renowned doctors and a woman of the elite. According to court records, the man began to utilize morphine after a fracture. The woman began using morphine during their honeymoon aboard a ship to Europe, provided and administered by her husband.<sup>(2)</sup> In 1916, after a period of recurrent morphine use, the woman died,<sup>(3)</sup> leading to a lawsuit against her physician husband.<sup>(4)</sup> According to Roydero, the document provided by the courts “is a file where we can clearly see a man driving a young and beautiful woman to the absolute relinquishment of her own will and submits to his, who transforms her into true human detritus.”<sup>(5)</sup>

Interest among physicians in Argentina regarding the uses of “alkaloids” began to appear near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nonetheless, this particular case spurred debates among experts and lawmakers regarding the role of physicians in the administration of different substances, the role of pharmacists in their provision, and especially the use of psychoactive substances without medical supervision and the criminal liability of individuals with drug addiction.<sup>(6)</sup> The debate culminated in 1926 with the penalization of the possession of a number of substances without a prescription.<sup>(7)</sup>

Despite the female protagonist in the case chosen by Roydero, in his as well as in

others’ presentation of the case, women are depicted only as passive victims without clinical details, while the process through which those same drugs are utilized on female bodies as part of the “art of healing” is omitted. This omission made it possible to evoke prototypical figures in order to highlight the danger of an epidemic whose magnitude was unclear locally. Academic and legislative publications of the time emphasized not only the danger that the citizenry was exposed to, but that the very future of the Nation was endangered. In these sources, despite the fact that the majority of cases narrated were centered on men, it is possible to observe unsystematic mentions of women who used different “alkaloids.”

These moralizing and classist discourses – which made frequent reference to the consumption of substances by women – were central to prohibitionist arguments that were the precursors to local and international drug policy.<sup>(8,9,10)</sup> Although chronicles of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century often refer to female consumption practices, few inquiries into women as consumers of psychoactive substances exist. Rather, contemporary studies tend to focus on their role in trafficking rather than consumption,<sup>(11,12,13)</sup> while gender studies highlight the importance of understanding the socio-cultural aspects of drug use.<sup>(14,15,16,17,18,19)</sup>

In the field of Argentinian historiography, no systematic analysis has been conducted of the consumption of psychoactive substances by women. Some researchers have reflected on the formation of psychopathological discourses<sup>(6)</sup> in parliamentary debates,<sup>(20,21)</sup> as well as the figure of Leopoldo Bard and his articulation with international political consensus.<sup>(7)</sup> In this sense, the research that formed the basis for this article employed sources analyzed in previous studies, but with focus placed on cases of female consumers.

## METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

The objective of the research, therefore, was to describe cases presented by experts from

the legislative and medical-legal fields regarding the use of psychoactive substances among Argentinian women from 1878 to 1930. Expert discourses from this period are analyzed, showing that they did not seek to define female specificity, but rather to position the issue of “drug use” as a social problem that required State intervention and greater social control. Revising this historical process constitutes a contribution to the comprehension of current mental health policy, criminal law, and State action regarding individuals that use drugs, particularly women. It should be first noted that the concept of psychoactive substances – or “drugs” as a synonym – is used here in reference to the range of substances that have psychoactive effects on the central nervous system of the human body, regardless of legal status. This includes alcohol, but also products such as cocaine, morphine, laudanum, cannabis, mercuric chloride, chloroform, ether, or pentyl nitrite.

Second, period defined for the analysis comprised a historical moment in which certain substances that were utilized on the female body in local medical practice and sold over the counter gradually transformed into a public health concern that would require prohibition and State intervention both through medical and police action.<sup>(20)</sup>

Third, documentary sources published between 1860 and 1930 were used, that referred to the consumption of psychoactive substances by humans and that contained references to drug use on the part of Argentinian women. It should be noted that academic publications by local authors, in addition to theoretical discussions of the topics they addressed, constructed clinical profiles based on the reproduction of cases reported by European academics – as well as authors from the United States – in order to justify models of State regulation.

The theses of Argentinian physicians analyzed here reproduce cases described by European theorists such as Benjamin Ball, Jean-Baptiste Fonssagrives, Eduard Levisstein, Jean-Martin Charcot or Henri Legrand du Saulle, among others. This reproduction allowed Argentinian physicians to present

the theoretical elements of their analyses. Of these theses, this research only took into account cases observed involving women in Argentina. Moreover, in the journalistic articles collected by Leopoldo Bard, pieces from the European press that describe police cases revolving around drug abuse are reproduced. He also cites Harry Anslinger, who describes the situation in the United States. Therefore, the cases reported by Bard – which appeared in the press both in France and the United States – were excluded from the analysis. Although these references were considered in order to give an account of expert perspectives on the issue, the analysis focused on cases of Argentinian women that consumed these substances.

Fourth, the archives consulted for this research included: the library at the Medical School of the University of Buenos Aires (UBA), where scientific journals and doctoral theses published between 1860 and 1930 could be accessed; records of congressional proceedings from 1894 to 1933, both from the Honorable Chamber of Deputies of the Nation and Honorable Senate of the Argentinian Nation, as well as medical dissemination publications from the same period, kept in the periodicals archive at the Library of the National Congress; and the issues of the magazine *Caras y Caretas* (Buenos Aires edition) published between 1898 and 1930, found in the digital collection at the National Library of Spain.

This article forms part of a larger research agenda on women and the uses of drugs, aimed at analyzing the historical process of the production of knowledge and the problematization of female drug consumption in the healthcare field and in Argentinian politics.

The article is divided into three sections. The first provides some background on the relationship between women and the uses of different pharmaceuticals. Then, different medical interventions on the female body that utilized psychoactive substances are analyzed and the consequences of that use. Finally, cases of female drug users are presented, as described by experts in order to justify medical procedures, legal reforms, and the institutionalization of specific policies.

Each section corresponds to a moment of transformation of the discourses analyzed. In all cited texts the original syntax and grammar of source material are respected.

### **WOMEN AND THE ART OF HEALING UNDER THE VICEROYALTY: COMMON PEOPLES AND FOUR HERBS**

The relationship of women to drugs is not limited to their status as users. Women have had a central role in the use of herbs, tonics, and elixirs, as well as in the exercise of healing practices throughout history.<sup>(22)</sup> The institutionalization of medical and pharmaceutical roles demanded a strict regulation of domestic practices, specifically limits on the production and administration of home remedies. The modernization of the art of healing displaced and discredited female power and knowledge in the administration of different substances.<sup>(23)</sup> This process took on a complex and irregular character, marked by advances and retreats, in accordance with the greater or lesser success of legalized pharmaceuticals in treating disease.<sup>(24)</sup> In the Rio de la Plata, the relationship between women and the uses of pharmaceuticals had been characterized as a public problem dating back to the period of the Viceroyalty. As documented by Juan Ramón Beltrán,<sup>(25)</sup> indigenous women utilized a number of native herbs and preparations for the purpose of healing. He defined these practices as “indigenous folk medicine characteristic of primitive peoples” and included them in a perplexing group of activities meant to deceive, based on exorcism and witchcraft. At the beginning of the 1790s, these activities were so widespread that representatives of the Spanish Crown alerted that

...the common peoples of the Country, opposed to Doctors and Chemists' Medicines, hand themselves over with greater ease to that class of Empiricists, whose science can be reduced to four herbs...

and a few poorly composed and even less suitable recipes that they call home remedies...

This abandonment, and their scarcity in other Places motivates the amateurs in this ability, or Some women whose piety or interest compels them to apply remedies without knowledge of the symptoms of the accidents that they tolerate (Cited by Beltrán in his *Historia del Protomedicato de Buenos Aires*, 1937)<sup>(25)</sup>

The headings utilized by Beltrán synthesized the disputes between traditional or native medicine and the colonizing advances of what Di Liscia has called “European techno-cultural movements.” This would entail, on the one hand, a displacement of the role of women in medicating communities and families, and on the other a double process: the appropriation of indigenous knowledge on the use of herbs and potions, along with a relegation of their knowledge to a place of inferiority. This hierarchization made it possible to consolidate the techniques and conceptions brought from the European continent as unquestionable truths.<sup>(26)</sup>

Moreover, this modernization entailed the imposition of classificatory systems, a transformation that was reflected in the Penal Code authored by Carlos Tejedor in 1867. This introduced regulations regarding the production of beverages and food products, associated with the need to penalize the adulteration of substances making them harmful to health.<sup>(27)</sup> This did not only have to do with the classification and codification of substances as nutritious, healing, and harmful, but also with the differentiation among professions, commercial activities, and legal and illegal uses. The modernization of the art of healing implied excluding therapeutic practices and actors from the institution of prescribing and preparing pharmaceuticals. Cast as folk medicine and quackery, many of these practices were led by women, and lawmakers began to demand that they be controlled.<sup>(26,28,29,30,31)</sup> Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women were reduced to

the maternal role and recast as promoters of health in the home, as auxiliary custodians of expert indications, as executors of preventive measures, and as supervisors of the sick.<sup>(24)</sup>

### THE FEMALE BODY: TERRITORY OF ACTION AND PRESCRIPTION OF SUBSTANCES

Between 1870 and 1890, the transformations in medical technology in Europe can be largely attributed to the urgent need to address high mortality rates in childbirth and the postpartum period. The spread of these technical advancements brought with it an increased use of aseptic measures as well as the utilization of stitching and anesthetics such as morphine.<sup>(32)</sup> Argentinian experts were not unaware of these advancements, which were cited and reproduced in their publications.

Emulating their European colleagues, Argentinian experts pushed for the medicalization of pregnancy. A thesis published in 1908 placed focus on hygiene during pregnancy and included recommendations regarding nutrition habits, controlling the pregnant woman's desire to consume alcoholic beverages, indications regarding clothing, and vaginal aseptic measures with mercuric chloride.<sup>(33)</sup>

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, it became commonplace to use cocaine, opium extract, and morphine injections in order to address symptoms in the female body. In 1895, these drugs were recommended for the management of incoercible vomiting,<sup>(34)</sup> a condition that weakened the pregnant woman and had adverse effects on the fetus. They were also prescribed for labor pains and as anesthetics for vaginal cesarean sections, which according to a thesis published in 1918 had been a practice utilized in the country since 1907.

In his 1903 thesis, the physician Luis Villarreal called for an end to the "inviolability of pregnancy [...] imposed by religion," in favor of the control of pregnancy and childbirth by the medical profession, in order to struggle

against "the failings of nature." Although he suggested preventing marriages between individuals with "hereditary diseases or defects," when faced with a pregnancy already underway, medical intervention appeared to be "the logical, rational, and to a certain extent scientific option."<sup>(36)</sup>

In this context, the pharmaceutical boom continued, and in 1915 renowned Tucumán physician Eliseo Cantón made an incursion into the perfection of anesthetics with the creation of "birth analgesics," highly praised by the National Academy of Medicine. In an article published that same year in an issue of the weekly magazine *Caras y Caretas*, Cantón espoused that "four centigrams [of morphine chlorhydrate] are enough to alleviate labor pains, and six will resolve surgical analgesics in the majority of gynecological cases."<sup>(37)</sup>

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, hegemonic schools of medical thought seemed to place a great deal of emphasis on female physiology and morality.<sup>(38)</sup> In Latin America, eugenic ideas began to prosper at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which encouraged policies for reproductive control as well as social conducts on the part of both men and women that would affect that control. These ideas promoted the interference of the State in private matters, fostered by increased medicalization and application of legal regulations.<sup>(30,39,40,41)</sup>

During the period analyzed, profound socio-demographic, political, and economic changes took place in Argentina, particularly in the city of Buenos Aires. Growing international migration and political-economic crisis exacerbated social conflicts. In the field of expert knowledge, eugenic ideas emerged from the tensions produced by inequality. Biological determinism permeated a large part of conceptions related to health and disease, the role of the medical field as a political actor, and the role of the State in the control of various individual behaviors.<sup>(42,43)</sup> Thus, there emerged a biopolitics enclosed in scientific discourse, with no other objective than to define political actions aimed at institutionalizing hierarchies based on class, geography, and gender, justified through biological arguments.<sup>(42)</sup> With respect to gender, these

expert discourses legitimized the hierarchies of the patriarchal order.<sup>(44,45)</sup>

In Argentina, this school of thought was connected to debates regarding the role of demographic expansion in economic growth as well as elites' qualms regarding the "quality" of the population. Physicians began to distinguish a number of afflictions specific to the female body that related specifically to their sex and their sexuality. Among these "women's diseases," chlorosis and vaginismus were conditions that required special attention. Associated with manifestations of processes of transformation in the female body, these alarmed Argentinian physicians who treated them as indicators of poorly administered passions that should be considered pathological.<sup>(46)</sup>

In the case of chlorosis, in his 1847 thesis Argentinian physician Adolfo Peralta reports on European experiments that had connected this condition with iron deficiency; at the same time, among the etiological factors he mentions moral afflictions resulting from lovesickness.<sup>(47)</sup> Nonetheless, the author criticizes other doctors for characterizing chlorosis as a type of hysteria and rejected the use of narcotics commonly used in treating it.<sup>(47)</sup> Regarding vaginismus, the popular science volume titled *My Doctor: A Practical Guide to Medicine and Hygiene* defined it as

...excitability, excessive sensitivity of the genital organs... It can be observed in certain young women, nervous, excitable, and even hysterical at times... above all in the recently married. Its treatment should be oriented toward "fighting against the nervous element."  
(Fournol, Heiser and Samne, 1930)<sup>(48)</sup>

The interest in demographic quality spurred initiatives aimed at preventing "social poisons," in particular syphilis, tuberculosis, and alcoholism, all considered inheritable and therefore subject to medical intervention.<sup>(42,43)</sup> Attention to hygiene and female genital therapies for their treatment necessitated the development of techniques such as the positioning of the body for medical examinations,

as well as specific technologies such as injections of liquids or gases. For the treatment of syphilis, in 1882 Miguel Figueroa mentioned introducing mercuric chloride into the vagina of pregnant women, despite the risk of triggering an abortion or "inducing saturnism" as a product of mercury poisoning; while in 1887, another physician reported using preparations of opium, cocaine, or *belladonna* in order to combat the "nervous element" that was thought to cause vaginismus.<sup>(50)</sup>

The symptomology of "women's diseases" oscillated between the naturalization of weakness and delicateness as innately female characteristics and the pathologization of their conditions as consequences of excessive passionate energies that weakened their moral spirit.<sup>(21,52,53,54)</sup>

The organic hypothesis regarding feminine weakness and delicateness was not purveyed by physicians alone. Argentinian legal experts also utilized it to explain female inferiority in the area of criminal law. They attributed difficulties in controlling the passions to these organic aspects, which they understood as a lack of adherence to the moral order. Thus, in his 1878 thesis on *Comparative Morality of men and Women from the penal point of view*, José Calderón held:

Extreme passions are even more extreme in women than they are in men; because the latter lives more under the influence of his brain and therefore his will, and women under the influence of the ganglion nervous system, that is, they are dominated by feelings, and do not reason. (Calderón, 1878)<sup>(54)</sup>

The articulation between physical-moral weakness and the dangers of degeneracy functioned as an explanatory standard from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>(22)</sup> The concept of degeneracy is worth closer examination, given that it was widely utilized by Argentinian experts in analyses of drug addiction. According to Benedict Morel, primitive human nature (in the sense that it was not corrupted) was characterized by a "natural" adhesion to moral laws.

A variety of mental illnesses – understood as moral affectations – could be explained by an abnormal constitution, a hereditary and cumulative condition that could lead to a process of unhealthy deviation of the race. Valentín Magnan, on the other hand, reasserted biological factors as an explanatory variable by establishing that damage to areas of the brain would give way to a lack of moral will.<sup>(4)</sup> This organic damage produced psychic imbalance and was caused by the effects of diseases, emotions, physiological disorders, and physical debilitation.<sup>(5)</sup>

Along these lines, the renowned and influential Argentinian psychiatrist Domingo Cabred analyzed a disorder that he termed “reflex madness.” According to his 1881 thesis, mental alienation was a reflex to organ failure. In the case of women, this disorder was attributed to changes in the reproductive system during the menstrual cycle, and particularly in the postpartum period. Between 1876 and 1880, around 3% of cases admitted to La Convalecencia, the former women’s hospice of the City of Buenos Aires, were “madness caused by the postpartum.”<sup>(56)</sup> The proposed treatment included a combination of interventions on the organ that caused the pathology and morphine injections to alleviate symptoms such as delusions, insomnia, or hallucinations.

In his thesis, Cabred describes the case of Eufemia in order to explain his reasoning. Admitted to La Convalecencia in 1879, the patient was a 45-year old single Argentinian woman who had no family history of alienation or diseases that would explain a psychotic episode. After suffering a violent blow, she presented uterine hemorrhaging, auditory and visual hallucinations, as well as paranoid delusions. Despite no family history of degeneracy, the woman experienced periods of “violent agitation” during her menstrual cycle. Recurrent insomnia worsened her condition, for which Cabred prescribed cannabis extract and thermal shock therapy with ice baths, a very common practice at the time.<sup>(56)</sup>

Among Argentinian physicians, a detailed analysis of hereditary traits was central

to the configuration of the medical history needed for the psychopathological definition in general, and for the identification of drug addiction in particular.

### Hysteria as a field of pharmacological action

A number of symptoms including nervousness, uncontrolled passions, and moral and physical weakness began to become associated with hysteria; even though this was not thought of as an exclusively female condition, it would become institutionalized as inherent to their subjectivity.<sup>(58)</sup> Interpreted as a condition that represented a halfway point between psychopathology and simulation, its study became a sort of “spectacularization of pain” of the modern woman.<sup>(21,51,53,59)</sup>

Near the end of the 1880s, the Argentinian medical profession took a clearer interest in hysteria. Following Vallejo, two perspectives can be identified in the theses of Argentinian physicians: one, focused on emotionality, nervousness, and morality in order to distinguish the condition; and another, that attempted to identify physiological traits that could explain the origin of the disorder. Both interpretations of hysteria coincided in recommending the use of alkaloids to treat its symptomology.

Those that emphasized moral and emotional factors suggested that the proper treatment for the hysterical woman was marriage. According to Ignacio Firmat in his 1889 thesis, this would build character, disciplining nervousness under the rule of the husband, thereby countering moral weakness; at the same time, it would calm the “perverse curiosities” and “restless affectivity” common in young women. Nonetheless, he advised against “the very vivid release” of women’s passions, given that it could lead to “violent agitations and immoderate excitement.”<sup>(60)</sup>

Following French authors such as Jean Martin Charcot and Henri Legrand du Saulle, Argentinian physicians also proposed treatments such as cold showers, and according to Firmat, “lashing the patient with a wet

towel,”<sup>(60)</sup> shock therapy, and exhalation of chloroform or pentyl nitrite. This led to a need to combat the “stimulating effects of some drugs” such as pentyl nitrite, for which ether was prescribed, as well as opium and its derivatives (morphine and laudanum), despite the fact that other physicians warned against the danger that women would “become enamored with these anesthetics.”<sup>(60)</sup>

According to the physician Celestino Arce, in 1881 at the Buenos Aires Women’s Asylum there was evidence of “large-scale” use of both opium extract tablets as a sleep aid as well as morphine injections, given that they produced satisfactory results in “moderating the excitability of the nervous system.”<sup>(61)</sup>

Among those that placed greater emphasis on the organic aspects, it is worth mentioning the physicians Arturo Ferrand and Juan Yzaurre. The former contended in his 1888 thesis that the origin of this pathology resided in “a lack of harmony or an imbalance between the voluntary or cerebral nervous component and the involuntary or spinal nervous component.” The prevalence of this pathology among women was due to the fact that they possessed a “weaker constitution and a more developed nervous system, more prone to suffering from this ailment.”<sup>(62)</sup> Moreover, he held that physicians should combat bodily symptoms such as diarrhea, seizures, and hysterical fits by utilizing ether, chloroform, and morphine injections.<sup>(62)</sup>

In the same year as Ferrand, Juan Yzaurre emphasized in the theoretical background of his thesis the explanations that identified the origins of hysteria in the brain and the ovaries. Nonetheless, in his observations carried out at the Buenos Aires Women’s Asylum, the etiology confusingly pointed at both organic and emotional aspects. Among the observations carried out by Yzaurre, some cases of girls and young women stand out, as they presented violent outbursts and convulsive hysterical fits. In Josefa, 14 years old, the physician attributed these symptoms to a delay in the first menstruation and a family history of alcoholism; in María, 17 years old, the crisis was prompted by a bout of lovesickness; while in the case of L.B.,

16 years old, family history turned out to be decisive (a sister who had had a nervous breakdown). In the case of Juana, a 30-year-old Argentinian woman with a “bilio-nervous temperament,” Yzaurre was unable to identify hereditary or organic explanations, only a family quarrel that triggered the hysterical disorder. Despite the range of causes of these symptoms, he prescribed ice baths, morphine injections, and “restorative medication” to all of the women.<sup>(63)</sup>

Regardless of the etiology of hysteria, these drugs were considered true “anti-hysterics.” Nonetheless, Firmat warned that decisions regarding the quantity and frequency of their administration, as well as the instruments for their injection, should not be entrusted to the patient, “given that the relief that they produce will draw them to a multiplication of the dosage.” That being said, he held that “supervised intoxication” was the only way to prevent tolerance and drug addiction.<sup>(60)</sup>

### ***Intoxications and morphine addiction***

In medical texts, hysteria, intoxicating agents, and morphine addiction were often linked in confusing ways. In his 1900 thesis, Eduardo Doyle posited a connection between mercuric chloride poisoning and hysteria. As previously mentioned, mercuric chloride was utilized in treating syphilis, a pathology more prevalent among women subjected to prostitution. Doyle argued that mercuric chloride used alongside alcohol acted as a catalyst for a specific condition: toxic hysteria. Although the primary cause was hereditary predisposition, the physician held that intoxication could trigger latent hysteria.<sup>(64)</sup>

On the other hand, in 1891 Antonio Almeida presented his thesis on morphine addiction as a specific clinical condition. The etiology of this condition interestingly enough identified it with lifestyle choices and specific social sectors:

...the demands of modern life keep people in a state of constant nervous agitation, [...] the neuroticism so frequent and widespread among the high social

classes, imitation and contagion, and the skepticism of our generation combined with that unquenchable thirst for sensualism quickly brings on exhaustion and boredom" (Almeida, 1891)<sup>(65)</sup>

Almeida recognized the medical enthusiasm for using salts of morphine, given that they were effective in relieving pain and even in curing "moral diseases." Nonetheless, he warned against the consequences of leaving decisions about the administration of the drug in the hands of patients or their family members. In his opinion, the lack of experience with morphine addiction on the part of his colleagues often led them to trust patients to administer the drug themselves, "thus opening the door to vice." He also levied criticism at the pharmaceutical guild, which would be echoed by legislators years later: the unrestricted sale of the drug without strict controls of the authenticity of medical prescriptions would surely lead to intoxications.<sup>(65)</sup>

Out of the six observations he carried out in Buenos Aires in 1891, Almeida documented only one woman. It was the case of a "distinguished Lady" who presented a "bout of hysteria" and was admitted to "the Psychiatric Institute." The medical record indicated that the 37-year-old woman had no family history that would explain the condition, although she was described as having "a good character, yet nervous and impressionable." The most notable feature of this case was that in order to alleviate pain during her previous pregnancy, the woman had used morphine injections, extending its use and increasing the dosage even after pregnancy.<sup>(65)</sup> The origin of the morphine addiction was not explained as iatrogenesis, but rather by the availability of the drug without medical supervision.

This case along with others shed light on the effects caused by the use of drugs considered to be essential to medical practice.<sup>(4)</sup> In 1923, the physician Leopoldo Bard, National Deputy for the Capital from the UCR and one of the sponsors of the legislative reform, surveyed a number of luminaries in the local and foreign medical field and published the results in the *Journal of the Argentinian*

*Medical Association*. There, he was able to show that leading figures in the Argentinian medical sciences such as José Arce, Carlos Udaondo, and Mariano Castex all warned of how difficult it would be to perform medical treatments without the use of morphine or cocaine. In fact, one contradicted one of Bard's central arguments, contending that drug addiction was actually very uncommon in Argentina.<sup>(66,67)</sup>

In this sense, Almeida's thesis provided another key element. In his analysis, he used alcoholism as a reference model for characterizing the psychopathological condition of morphine addiction. This parallel was fundamental to the arguments of lawmakers, given that in the context of a "drinking epidemic," the prohibition of alkaloids seemed like the most logical preventive action to ensure that their use would not spread.

## WOMEN THAT USE ALKALOIDS: VICTIMS OR PERPETRATORS

The first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ushered in transformations in gender relations, evidenced by both demographic change and a decrease in the birth rate. Alongside the growth of urban middle classes, in the City of Buenos Aires women held roles in public life that would have been previously unthinkable.<sup>(68)</sup> These processes attracted the attention of diverse experts, who increasingly analyzed the behavior of women in their writings. The established institutional framework at the time favored the advancement of State control carried out by physicians and police, privileging collective morals over and above individual autonomy, especially when it came to women.<sup>(69)</sup>

In this context, the previously mentioned bill was presented to the Chamber of Deputies of the Argentinian Nation in 1920, aimed at the "Regulation of alkaloid commerce." As physician Gregorio Berman outlined in 1926,<sup>(70)</sup> two models entered into tension in this debate: one focused on the sale of these products, and another emphasized their consumption. The latter model based its arguments on the user's

“weakness of spirit” and the role of physicians in facilitating access to these drugs. In the presentations of lawmakers – many of them physicians as well – vague delineations of this phenomenon were commonplace: it was both an “elegant vice” as it was an “exotic custom.” Etiology interpreted them in terms of moral conduct, as “the comfortable situation of not taking action: the laziness caused by those abnormal situations.” The supervision of alkaloid consumers came to be seen as necessary, given that unrestricted use not only did harm to the users themselves, but also endangered the future of the society as a whole, degrading the race (Exposition of motives of Deputy Roydero, August 31, 1920).<sup>(5)</sup>

This was the beginning of a process of change in which certain drugs would begin to be considered “illegitimate.”<sup>(7,20)</sup> This gave way to discursive transformations regarding the role of physicians and pharmacists – facilitating the access to psychoactive substances<sup>(20)</sup> – as well as the establishment of “victims and perpetrators.” By 1919, an order of the National Department of Hygiene restricted over-the-counter sale of cocaine, morphine, ether, cannabis, and their derivatives.<sup>(3)</sup> These measures prompted other processes that caused alarm among lawmakers. In his intervention on June 10, 1920, Deputy Capurro was shocked to report that

The application of the [National Department of Hygiene’s] order sadly demonstrated that some consumers were underage girls. Nor was there want for the account of a poor woman who turned up at the door of the physician’s office pleading for a permit to purchase cocaine, which she could no longer access freely once the prohibition was in effect. (Exposition of motives, June 10, 1920).<sup>(5)</sup>

References to women and girls reflected lawmakers’ attempts to highlight the damage caused by the legality of certain practices, even when the available statistics did not justify cause for such alarm. This was not a lineal process, however, given that the introduction of the type of prohibition desired involved

multiple dimensions that needed to be taken into account. While lawmakers from the UCR supported prohibition in order to prevent illegitimate uses of these drugs, representatives of the Conservative Party from the Province of Buenos Aires countered in their favor arguing that they constituted significant industrial products, as was the case of ether (Exposition of motives of Deputy Silvio Parodi, September 1, 1920).<sup>(5)</sup> The list of drugs and products that would be included in the prohibition was still under discussion, as were the criteria for considering them “problematic.”<sup>(20)</sup> During the September 1, 1920 session, the Deputy for the Province of San Juan from the UCR Marcial Quiroga proposed including hashish – “that eternal dreamer” – and his arguments were based on “the disorders that it causes in women.”<sup>(5)</sup> He also denounced the effects of mercuric chloride tablets – used to treat syphilis – for men, women, and children, given that it produced acute chlorosis and hemorrhages in pregnant women. According to the congressman, between 1915 and 1920 the capital’s “Ramos Mexia Hospital” (*sic*) registered 240 cases of women poisoned by mercuric chloride tablets, many of them young women between 15 and 22 years old, some of whom were “in labor, thereby causing infanticides” (Exposition of motives of Deputy Quiroga, September 1, 1920).<sup>(5)</sup> The legitimacy of their use was therefore a gray area: while on the one hand it was common to prescribe these products to pregnant women in order to prevent the degeneration caused by syphilis, on the other hand it was observed that some women used these drugs excessively for purposes other than treatment.

In the early 1920s, restricting women’s place in society to the role of mother was a point of agreement between secular and Catholic sectors: while the former saw this in terms of providing the workforce necessary for the future of the Nation, the latter considered it part of the perpetuation of Catholic moral values.<sup>(53)</sup> This was a time in which analyses of the role of women, from the standpoint of expert discourses, were guided by eugenic theories that considered their reproductive and maternal functions as central.<sup>(38,69)</sup>

Even though political processes that sought to debate, redefine, and question the role of women in Argentinian society had existed for several decades, for the majority of women the ideal of feminine normality was circumscribed to the private sphere and strongly linked to the role of mother. This ideal entered into tension with their increasing presence in the labor market, as well as calls for civil rights and access to education.<sup>(71)</sup> The medical establishment – dominated by men – called attention to behaviors such as habits and clothing as an issue of moral control. The visibility of women in public spaces, and particularly in relation to certain practices, were indicators of their dangerousness and degeneracy.<sup>(53,68,72)</sup>

The cases presented by Leopoldo Bard in order to defend the idea of prohibition outlined two profiles of female drug users, differentiated by social class: on one hand, women from eminent families who were turned to drug addiction, victims of degenerate husbands; on the other, women from subaltern groups, prostitutes, thought of as “born criminals” who would lure “weak spirited” elite men into consuming.

### ***The case of the superior degenerate and the degradation of a cultivated spirit***

This case was described in an article titled “Morphine addiction in criminal law” published in the *Journal of Criminology, Psychiatry, and Legal Medicine* in 1918, and was cited by Deputy Roydero in the August 31, 1920 session, and taken up by Bard in his 1923 work *The Dangers of Toxicomania*. Upon presenting his proposal for the reform of the criminal code, Bard cites the judicial decree, which describes the victim as

...a completely healthy person, diligently educated and cultured in spirit, with a generous character, who captivated all with her moral and physical beauty, evidencing a rare innocence; not only did she not suffer from any physical ailment, but she had no vices or customs that would make one suspect that she even

took interest in alcohol, morphine, or other toxins. (Bard, 1923)<sup>(3)</sup>

According to the documentation, this was an upper-middle class couple, and the woman’s morphine addiction could be explained by her husband’s diagnosis as a “superior degenerate.” According to Magnan’s classification,<sup>(57)</sup> this was one of the four types of degeneracy. Among the distinctive features of this subtype was a “normal and intelligent appearance,” where a neurophysiological imbalance triggered a lack of will. The woman’s husband “was not only a physician, but rose to the rank of chief of medicine;” his intelligence was unquestionable, but due to a hereditary degeneracy and certain events that worsened his condition, he succumbed to degenerate behaviors such as the inability to control his morphine use.<sup>(57)</sup>

The relevance of this case had to do with articulating the figure of the physician who had strayed from his role as “the savior of humanity”<sup>(71)</sup> with that of the “despicable physician” who used his power dishonestly.<sup>(7)</sup> In consonance with this idea, part of Bard’s reforms had to do with regulating commerce and introducing more control over the medical and pharmaceutical professions.

Despite the fact that this case culminated in the woman’s death, it is worth noting how different experts who referenced it – both lawmakers in Congress and legal medicine experts writing in academic journals – place the victim in a passive role. This naturalization was grounded in the prevalent conception of women as part of a man’s property, such that free will or autonomy could not explain drug use.

### ***The good-time girl, the lady of the night***

Women who led “wicked lives” had several characteristics that made them a danger to health. Habits such as alcoholism and care-free lifestyles were central to understanding the origins and spread of a number of pathologies, given that they were seen as negative behaviors both in men and in women.<sup>(53,72)</sup>

This notion of the “wicked life” was seen as a place where crime and madness overlapped,<sup>(72)</sup> where women associated with prostitution were linked to alkaloid use. An article published on January 3, 1920 in the newspaper *Crítica* asserted that “the return of coca” included those “good-time girls:” “any one of them that does not take drugs lacks the most sensual and seductive appeal provided by the most complicated and repugnant refinement of the century” (cited by Bard in *The Dangers of Toxicomania* in 1923).

Prostitution was the object of analysis both for legal experts as well as physicians.<sup>(73,74)</sup> In 1908 Eusebio Gómez published *The Wicked Life in Buenos Aires*. There, he described prostitution as a state “equivalent to or derivative of criminality,” a sort of moral madness with a biological basis. According to his definition, prostitutes were born criminals who were characterized by “a lack of maternal instincts [...] a passion for drinking bordering on insatiable, and a complete lack of shame, the greatest of her degeneracies.”<sup>(74)</sup> Despite this biologicist bias, the criminal law expert pointed out the importance of moral education and of attending to the determinants that created fertile ground for the spread of wickedness. A fundamental distinction in his conceptualization must be pointed out: that between migrant prostitutes and “criollas.” Gómez attributes positive characteristics to the latter, such as having “noble traits,” “a passion for true love,” and “shortcomings in their eagerness to accumulate money;” he portrays them as more emotionally unstable, as quickly falling prey to temptation and as having a taste for alcohol.<sup>(74)</sup>

This distinction can be observed in the two types of stories cited by Bard: on the one hand, cases of women for whom prostitution was part of their degenerate nature, who clearly had a desire to corrupt the weak spirited not only with drug addiction but also with syphilis; on the other hand, cases that fit the description of “acquired degeneracy,” in which a woman’s transgressions against her father’s rule corrupted her spirit and led to drug use. Both made it possible to neutralize the arguments of other lawmakers and

physicians that attempted to dismiss the dangers of drug addiction.

### ***The case of Juana Rosa***

After a frustrated first attempt to prohibit the use of alkaloids without a prescription in 1920, Leopoldo Bard returned to this project in 1923. In an article published in the magazine *Caras y Caretas* he decried the grave error in delaying this endeavor rooted in his colleagues’ classism, who thought of drug addiction as a condition only present in a “certain class of women.” At the start of the new legislative session he contended that the spread of this condition had become such a problem that the only solution was “energetically repressive legislation.”<sup>(75)</sup>

At the 1<sup>st</sup> National Sanitary Conference held in 1923, a session was organized with an Order of Speakers that would cover different aspects related to “Social Hygiene. Prevention of Syphilis. Regulation of Prostitution. Toxic degenerative vices: alcohol, alkaloids, and derivatives of opium, cocaine, etc.”<sup>(76)</sup> There, Bard gained the support of illustrious physicians such as Gregorio Aráoz Alfaro and Cabred himself, in addition to representatives from other provinces.

Having been regulated in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, prostitution was practiced under the supervision of sanitary authorities as part of social hygiene measures related to syphilis. The threat posed by venereal diseases was not limited to increasing mortality rates, but also infecting the dignity of the family. Debates surrounding prostitution revealed the mechanisms by which different contending social forces legitimized the socially acceptable characteristics of women: “worthy of being seen in public,” mother to the sons and daughters of the nation.<sup>(77)</sup> As was the case with the dangers of syphilis, contact with “women of the night” and the toxic weakness of “well-bred boys” threatened to infect the institution of the family. On November 25, 1922 an article appeared in the local periodical *Nueva Época* in the province of Santa Fe that reported the case of two young men of distinguished social

background who had “succumbed to the terrible action of morphine use [...] dragging their distinguished name down to the criminal block.”<sup>(3)</sup> The journalist – who was later cited by Bard – reflects:

...what can be expected of young ladies and girls who take morphine behind closed doors? That question alone is enough to make one tremble. The most traditional virtues of the Argentinian woman are in danger; and with them, those of our whole people, as it is impossible to ignore that a society is only as good as its mothers. And mothers who are preparing themselves for morphine-fueled spinsterhood will engender nothing more than hereditary libertines. The advancement of this cursed drug among young men and women make it necessary to dedicate all of the resources we can to preventing it from being as freely available as it is today.” (*Nueva Época*, November 25, 1922, cited by Bard)<sup>(23)</sup>

In Bard’s collection of journalistic articles, which served as evidence for his prohibitionist crusade, it is possible to find descriptions of “irresponsible” men who frequent cabarets, gathering places of “women of the festive life among whom the vice of alkaloids is much more common.” They were the offspring of the “accommodated classes,” lured into vice “by those same women, thereby falling prey to the most humiliating moral and physical depravation” (*La Argentina*, August 26, 1922, cited by Bard).<sup>(3)</sup>

The case of Juana Rosa – which took place in Buenos Aires and was recounted in the Uruguayan newspaper *El Diario del Plata* on December 27, 1922 – was that of a 23-year-old single woman who held a license to practice prostitution. According to police, she had consumed a “large dose of cocaine that caused her death.” Police reports stated that she “was accused of being one of those poor women who had succumbed to alkaloid abuse, and on numerous occasions was brought in because she was suspected of their commerce.”<sup>(3)</sup> Armed only with the

information found in the newspapers, Bard used this case to link prostitution to crime, along with the idea that prostitutes recruited new drug users, which would explain how weak spirited young men could fall prey to such degenerate behavior.

### ***The Butterfly: from dignified virtue to a master of the art of suicide***

Along with literary figures such as the “little seamstress who took a misstep” and the *milonguita* (cabaret woman),<sup>(78,79)</sup> certain ideas regarding the dangers of rebellious behavior circulated in the social imaginary. These figures highlighted the consequences suffered by a virtuous and innocent girl from a poor *barrio* as she embarked on a “journey to the city center.” Her adventure invariably led to a life of nightlife and prostitution. This journey is associated with the figure of the *criolla* prostitute described by Gómez and which appeared repeatedly in different cultural expressions of the day.<sup>(80)</sup> Thus, *criolla* prostitutes were thought of as ingenuous and docile, which although it did not explain their tendency to vice, it at least justified it.

One example of this metaphoric “journey to the city center” was the case of The Butterfly (*La Mariposa*). On June 7, 1923 the newspaper *La Montaña* reported that 25-year-old Argentinian woman María Dolores Burgell had been found dead in a “brothel house” due to a cocaine overdose. According to the journalist’s account, she had fled her parents’ home at the age of 18, flouting the “obstinate and violent opposition of her parents” that she would marry a young man. One and a half years after marrying, she was widowed. The pain of this loss led her to become closer to a female friend who was “already initiated in the vice,” and who suggested that she “search for excitement and artificial comforts.” At age 21, she was “like many others, stumbling down a fatal path [...] her virginal beauty and the vices of a satanic and irredeemable sinner. [She was known] in the underworld as The Butterfly.”<sup>(3)</sup>

In contrast to the other cases, María Dolores represented the figure of a virtuous young

woman who, disobeying the rule of her father, condemned herself to fateful defeat. In his fervor for enlisting people into support of prohibitionist reforms, Bard sought to show that the dangers of drug addiction were not limited to marginal classes and children of the elite. This danger was also very real for the burgeoning urban middle and proletarian classes. Characterized by their moral virtues, the working classes saw themselves as vulnerable to this threat. The idea of the “weakness of youth” – especially in the case of women – evidenced the urgent necessity of repressive reforms.

## CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this article was to describe cases of women who used psychoactive substances in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These cases were presented by experts in the legislative and medical-legal fields in Argentina, as well as in the press. First, during the Viceroyalty, expert knowledge advanced while discrediting subaltern knowledge related to the production and administration of medicinal preparations. In these discourses, the relationship between women and drug use was not limited to their role as consumers, but also to the production and administration of drugs in the home and in the community. The modernization process surrounding the art of healing was centered on questioning this relationship between women and the uses of drugs. This involved the crystallization of a classification, differentiation, and hierarchization of knowledge, practices, and subjectivities.

A second shift related to this modernization process was produced in relation to advancements in medical interventions on the female body, which were accompanied by the increased use of pharmaceuticals. This was a period of increased medicalization of numerous medical conditions and physiological events of the female body for which the prescription of opiates was central. Mitigating the ailments associated with women’s “congenital weakness” was a process

not exclusive to Argentina, but rather a trend common to Western countries.<sup>(10,52)</sup> In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, this trend became evident in the consolidation of the availability of psychotropic drugs, making way for a “prescribed tranquility” centered on women.<sup>(81,82)</sup>

The female body was an object to dissect, to examine both physically and morally, and to a site to enact a process of intervention that allowed for the perfection of techniques and technologies. Drugs and substances with psychoactive effects became indispensable tools in the medical endeavor of domesticating bodies that presented themselves as indomitable. Their flesh contained a spirit pursued by the dangers of unabashed passions, that was at the same time the source of maternal love. This period also witnessed the consolidation of policy that conceived of women as the “reproductive receptacle” of the race.<sup>(38,83)</sup>

When the “appetite for alkaloids” became evident in men and also in some women, this issue again began to draw the attention of lawmakers and specialists. Practices associated with self-medication were analyzed, such as the use of drugs indicated for the treatment of syphilis, but also their use in inducing abortions. Unauthorized uses of different drugs became a topic of debate. The common element was not their psychoactive effects, but rather their use without medical supervision and for purposes questioned by lawmakers for being immoral and punishable.

In their presentations before Congress, lawmakers characterized women in a diffuse manner, both as victims and as perpetrators. On one hand, the virtuous woman who had fallen prey to a disturbed man who put drugs at her disposal; on the other, the perverse “woman of the life,” innately criminal, perpetrator of “infanticides,” who had it in her nature to debase weak spirited men. Even in accounts that only discussed women’s overdoses, there was a clear intention to show the social contexts in which dangerous drugs circulated.

According to English-speaking authors, women had an innate propensity to madness. Their French colleagues held that women possessed an unstable equilibrium that not

only cast doubt on their rationality, but also provided justification for not recognizing them as full citizens.<sup>(10)</sup> In Argentina, women were thought of as a threat to weak spirited men, to the social body, and to the progress of the nation.

In order to legitimize this process, different cases were publicized and explanations were developed regarding the etiology

of drug addiction. It was only in the third of Bard's prototypical figures that it was possible to identify a triggering event: going against the rule of the father led to the process of "acquiring" the degenerating vice of drug addiction. These shifts made it possible for the Chamber of Deputies of the Argentinian Nation to pass Act No. 11331 on July 26, 1926, initiating almost a century of prohibition.<sup>(84)</sup>

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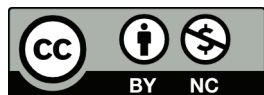
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