



International Journal of
Gender, Science and Technology

<http://genderandset.open.ac.uk>

**Review of *Gendered drugs and medicine: Historical and socio-cultural perspectives*
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PUBLICATION DETAILS

Date: 2014

Published by: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., Surrey

ISBN: 9781409454045

REVIEW

This book developed from a workshop at the University of Granada in 2011. It takes the form of a series of scholarly papers from eleven academic institutions and eight different countries, examining gender in relation to the history and sociology of drugs. Those with no expertise in the study of gender issues would probably view this book predominantly as a social analysis of the interaction between women and the world of drugs—both medicinal and non-medicinal—however, the book opens the whole topic for scrutiny by those with expertise in identifying the core issues.

The introductory chapter explains why the book focuses on the period from the late nineteenth century to the present day—this being the period in which developments in chemistry allowed the term “drug” to be applied to the pharmacologically active molecules that are used in today’s medicinal products. Although irrelevant to the book as a whole, the claim that the term “drug” was not applied to products used for healing prior to this period (p.3) might be challenged by pharmaceutical historians, as there is evidence that the term has been used in this way for much longer. For example, there are at least two instances in the sixteenth century plays of William Shakespeare that make reference to the reputable therapeutic use of drugs—for example this passage, in which therapy is being administered by the Abbess Emelia in the *Comedy of Errors*:

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Be patient; for I will not let him stir
Till I have used the approved means I have,
With wholesome syrups, drugs and holy prayers,
To make of him a formal man again. (Royal Shakespeare Company, 2007, act
5, scene 1, line 104-107)

Returning to the actual content of the book, it is divided into three parts, focusing on (1) women in pharmaceutical research, as consumers of medicines and in industry; (2) female contraception; and (3) the use and abuse of psychoactive drugs. Each section includes resources drawn from multiple countries, although some individual papers focus exclusively on a single country, these serving as case studies, the key themes of which can be applied to numerous scenarios. Sometimes a problem or solution might be country-specific, but there is no claim that such details have universal relevance.

Looking at the content in more detail, the first section is the most fragmented of the three, perhaps because it looks at three very different aspects of the interaction between women and the pharmaceutical industry. The initial paper looks at how the health risks associated with certain products have been handled by society in general, and women in particular. The second paper investigates the targeting of women as a marketing opportunity, followed by a third text that focusses on the role of women as researchers and senior executives in the pharmaceutical industry. The extent to which these issues are in fact contemporary is not discussed, however, the debates discussed in the opening and final papers have now surfaced and are scrutinized in wider public debates—although this is less true with regard to the second paper.

The section on contraceptives describes not only how issues such as the health-risks were handled, but also how pharmaceutical companies capitalized on, and manipulated, women's expectations. It also addresses the medicalization of birth control, and how the role of doctors was viewed in this respect. Religious and cultural pressures and responses to contraceptives are also discussed, demonstrating overall that the issue of "birth control" has been more about controlling women than contraception itself. Most of the evidence discussed covers the years before 2010, yet, as a controversy that arose in July 2017 demonstrates, the issues discussed here are not merely of historical interest in countries such as the UK. A major retail pharmacy chain's announcement that it would not stock or supply a low-priced Emergency Hormonal Contraceptive product (the "morning after" pill) on the grounds that it did not want to be accused of "incentivising inappropriate use" (Ellen, 2017, p.13), clearly demonstrates that the issues raised in this section of the book are still relevant today. However, pressure from women's groups and female members of the UK Parliament prompted a rapid change of view.

The final section of the book addresses the subject of "users and abusers." This engages with the place of women in the arena of abuse of psychoactive substances, regardless of whether the products were obtained legally or not. There is something of a paradox here, as the topic has long been one to which gender was considered relevant. Patterns of use (authorized or otherwise) often differ, but enquiry into usage has historically been beset by prejudice and lack of understanding. The fact that misconceptions and misinterpretations have been damaging to women is clearly an injustice, yet gender sensitive analyses have generated much useful data. Consequently, within the study of pharmacologically active substances used by both men and women, psychoactive substances are some of the few for which gender differences are widely recognized.

If there is one thing that the reader might regret, it is the absence of thoughts pertaining to the future. The future is touched upon in the context of substances used improperly, but is rather neglected from a medicinal perspective. This is a pity, because the use of medicinal drugs by women continues to be associated with problems that are sometimes overlaid with socio-political—and inherently gendered—arguments. Emergency contraception has already been mentioned, but here one may also think of attitudes towards medicinal support for pregnant smokers, or substance abusers.

Despite this lack of attention for more contemporary topics, the book does prepare its readers for these debates and offers a good grounding regarding issues and attitudes to which both they and society should be alert. Furthermore, by assembling and documenting examples, the authors clearly demonstrate that the interaction between society and the world of medicinal and non-medicinal drugs cannot be understood without a consideration of gender. For these reasons alone the book deserves to be widely read.

REFERENCES

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