

## **Título**

The discursive construction of women in public campaigns against drugs: looking into its ideological work

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**Abstract:** This paper analyse the way women are talked about in portuguese public campaigns against drugs, using a critical discourse approach, Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996), Wodak (1997), van Dijk (2001). When women are chosen as topics of discourse, they are constructed as two types of mothers: as mothers in the problematic family that gives raise to addiction, and as addict mothers. My aim is to show the role of various linguistic resources and of its interplay with semiotic ones in the construction of these two social figures. I argue that parental discourse in prevention campaigns functions to reinforce gender diference by maintaining a sexist ideology, one that serves to obscure public responsibility for the conditions under which women are likely to be pregnant and perform mother-work, and that places undue burdens on women. At the same time, this kind of ideological work also functions to reinforce the otherness of drug users and, through that, to justify policy decisions.

Anti-drug public campaigns are studied mainly in the domains of (north-american) Social Psychology and of Communication Studies with the purpose of increasing messages` s persuasive effectiveness regarding drug demand. This article has a very different focus and purpose. I want to focus on the “content and form” of the messages exchanged in this kind of public campaigns and on the relationship between messages and their local and societal contexts. In concret, I analyse the way women are

talked about, that is, to know what is said about them and how are they talked about. I want to show the role of linguistic and visual resources on the construction of gender identities and relationships and to examine whether these discourse structures play any ideological role, in other words, what kind of interests do they serve or suppress: regarding the dynamic of power between drug-using women and men in the field of drugs; regarding the action/inaction of governments and their drug policy and regarding the dominant “gender regime” of portuguese society, Connell (1987). By undertaking such a task I want to understand and explain the role of gender difference on the construction of drug users` s otherness in Portugal, as well as to link anti-drugs public campaigns and its discourses with other “women`s” issues. This option brings to the agenda of drug prevention campaign studies a problem that deserves more attention than it had so far, e.g. Donahue and Bukoski (1991), Morel et al. (2001). Through that it can contribute to demystify the ideological neutrality of these campaigns, enlarging ideology critique to another domain of drug policy, CampBell (2000). The same kind of remark goes to the neglect of the power of discourse and of the way language and other kind of semiotics resources are used in concret prevention materials. It should be said this is a lacuna also in other western countries.

### **Principles And Dimensions Of Analysis**

Discourse is here understood as spoken, written or visual language, seen as a social interaction between language users that is socially and historically situated, but that is also socially shaping, or socially constitutive, Fairclough and Wodak (1997). By taking this approach we enfatize that discourse is not merely a certain kind of text or image, nor the a produt of individual activity, but a part of a concret social interaction between social actors that identify themselves with groups, professions, organisations (and their ideologies) in a society and culture. We postulate that the relationship between properties of text/image and political and social structures and processes is mediated through the cognitive interface of social actors, van Dijk (2000). In these case, we focus on social attitudes and ideologies about women and drugs, namely, on the way they influence linguistic and visual choices and its effects. The interpretative principle that underpinned the analysis is relationality, Lazar (2000), that is, we will show how

men are systematically represented in ways that women are not; and how women are systematically represented in ways that men are not. This task involves a selection of discourse structures (linguistic and visual) that work in tandem to manifest a particular type of representation of gender relationships.

For written texts the choice of discourse structures is guided for written texts by the grammar of Teun van Dijk (1998):

- discourse global semantics: selection of topics;
- discourse local semantics: lexicalization, implications, presuppositions, local coherence (e.g. explanations);
- expression level: modalities, pronouns, logical connectors.

For text and image, I use the visual grammar of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), following Halliday's theory of triple meaning-making (1994):

- ideational structure of two types: 1) action (transactional and non-transactional) and reaction structures realized by vectors of various sorts 2) conceptual processes, which includes classificational ('kind of') and analytical (part/whole way);
- textual composition, include, for example, such categories as salience — realized by relative size and sharpness of focus, and information value — realized by relative position (centre or margin) within a frame, or page.

## **Data and Contexts**

This study is part of a larger project on critical discourse analysis of anti-drugs campaigns that I undertook a few years ago: 6 public campaigns that took place in Portugal between 1987 and 1994, Pinto-Coelho (2002). One of the main topics of these campaigns was about the way non-using parents should prevent drug use among young children. Only 9 of the 251 units that constituted the corpus were directed to women: two of them targeting "the potential" girl-user and exploring the topic of the risks involved in a broken heart; all the others were about drugs and pregnancy, or about drugs and maternity (see "Documents List" at the end). The parental guidance brochure I selected (*Our children, Us and Drugs*) is one among many documents directed to non drug-using parents, and was chosen as it allowed a combined analysis of linguistic and

visual structures. It is through this analysis that we will get in touch with the main female figure constructed in these campaigns: the “mother in the problematic family that generated addiction”. The construction of the other social figure, addict mothers, is shown through the analysis of two passages from texts directed to pregnant drug using women and published at national and local newspapers.

These campaigns were launched when the young middle class boy drug user got replaced by the male urban street junkie, and heroin was the main drug of use among known users. The public feeling towards drug policy was negative as the growing number of users was seen as an indicator of the failure of the state and of anti-drug agencies to fulfill their promises of creating a “drug free world”. Domestic drug policy was divided into two modes of regulation: criminalization and medicalization. The main aim was to eliminate drug use by “supply reduction” (making it impossible to obtain drugs) and “demand reduction” (legal sanctions; persuading young people not to use drugs, or removing the conditions which encourage them to be drug users). Anti-drugs campaigns were a part of this demand reduction or prevention policy. On the side of production and distribution, they involved, among others, experts working in the field of drug prevention and therapy, drug agencies, parents, and national and regional newspapers. The main targets of these campaigns were parents, teachers and peers. Among these publics, parents got the main attention of prevention authorities. This focus on parenting, that at the discourse level is translated by the proeminence of topics related to “the family”, is explained by the fact that parents were seen as playing an important role in the social environment which would influence the onset and continuation of drug use. The “dysfunctional family” explanation was, and still is, the central core of the dominant official ideology of prevention generated by therapists. Their focus was on mother-son relationship and on addiction as a pathology specific to modernity, that is, as a sign of changing social conditions of child rearing practices and of “gender role strain”. This explanation was useful to the governments of that time, to their commitments to “family values” and their firm belief that the family was both the cause and the solution to the problem of drug addiction. It also was coherent with the dominant western ideology of maternity, Phoenix and Woollett (1991), Forna (1998). Another explanation for the focus on parenting has to do with the fact that, by then, governments started to “decentralize” bypassing certain prevention and control

functions to “the community”, including families, in response to a retrenchment of welfare policies.

Regarding drug-using women is important to stress a more global problem that included (and still does) different kind of realities: male oriented treatment models and not prepared to address women’s multiple needs, Correia (1997), Costa (1997); public treatment providers that have the practice of denouncing to family court so that a removal of custody is effected (Biscaia et al. 1997); relationships between drug-using women and treatment professionals marked by hostility and rejection, Costa (1997) — a common opinion among these professionals is that “addict women are more disturbed than men” and so less controllable); on the repression side, women were proportionally more condemned to prison for drug crimes than were men, Cunha (2002).

### **The construction of mothers that “cause” addiction**

Let us start with the main female figure constructed through and by the discourse of the campaigns under scrutiny. In the brochure *Our children, Us and Drugs* the representations of gender identities and relationships are ambiguous and apparently contradictory: they activate elements of both conservative and egalitarian ideologies of gender relations. Apparently because, as we will see, the meaning that is privileged is a conservative one.

#### **1. Egalitarian representations of gender difference**

One of the ways gender equality is constructed in this brochure is by an invitation to see parentality as being identical for men and women. In many instances women and men are designated as a collective, constituting a single undifferentiated unity. We start by pointing relevant linguistic cues followed by examples, and proceed with images, doing the same kind of work.

Linguistic evidence:

- typical lexical choice: gender-neutral noun *parents (pais)*;
- typical choice of pronouns: collective *our/we* or the indefinite *you (você)*;
- putting the agent of action in the second plan.

Examples:

*(1) You, father or mother, can in this way contribute decisively to the stability of your child (Você, pai ou mãe, pode contribuir decisivamente para o equilíbrio do seu filho).*

*(2) To be able to talk is also to have time to be with the desired interlocutor: our child. (Poder dialogar e também ter tempo para estar com o interlocutor desejado: o nosso filho).*

*(3) Keep calm. Do not get angry! Do not make a drama! Specially, do not make threats. (Conserve a calma. Não se excite. Não dramatize! Sobretudo não ameace).*

Visual evidence:

### **Men and Women as joint participants**

The couple is shown in several joint action processes: listening to the son, hugging the daughter, suggesting that what they are doing is a joint effort. The two are at equal distance from each other, and are roughly equal in size and orientation. What this classification process suggests is that the couple belong to the same category of “parents”.

**Men: actively involved in family life**, in opposition with the traditional authoritarian, distant figure of the “breadwinner”

Visual evidence: images showing interactions between father and his children

- transactional structures: father talking to the son
- reaction structures: looking and smiling at the son
- analytical structures: these processes also contribute to represent a compound relationship between the father as a Carrier, and the son as an attribute of him.
- compositional structures: father occupies a central position; salience of father smiling and gazing at child; contrasts between the size of the father and of the son, of their lateral and front position concurred to stress the sensitivity of the father regarding the vulnerability of the son.

**Egalitarian Representations of Gender Difference**

***Men and Women as joint participants***

***Men: actively involved in family life***

Represent the father in an analytical way, that is, him and the other characters are represented as parts that compose the whole family

***Women: as mothers and professionals***

Although there are some visual and linguistic elements in this brochure that are indicative that this mother also has a career, the quantitative contrast between the images with this kind of indicators for man and woman, and the quantitative contrast between images that make the bridge between their domestic and professional lives is already revealing the presence of conservative gender ideologies in this brochure. On one hand it is suggested that the double identity is already a part of “the natural order of the family” but, on the other hand, women are blamed for its effects, as we will see in the next section.

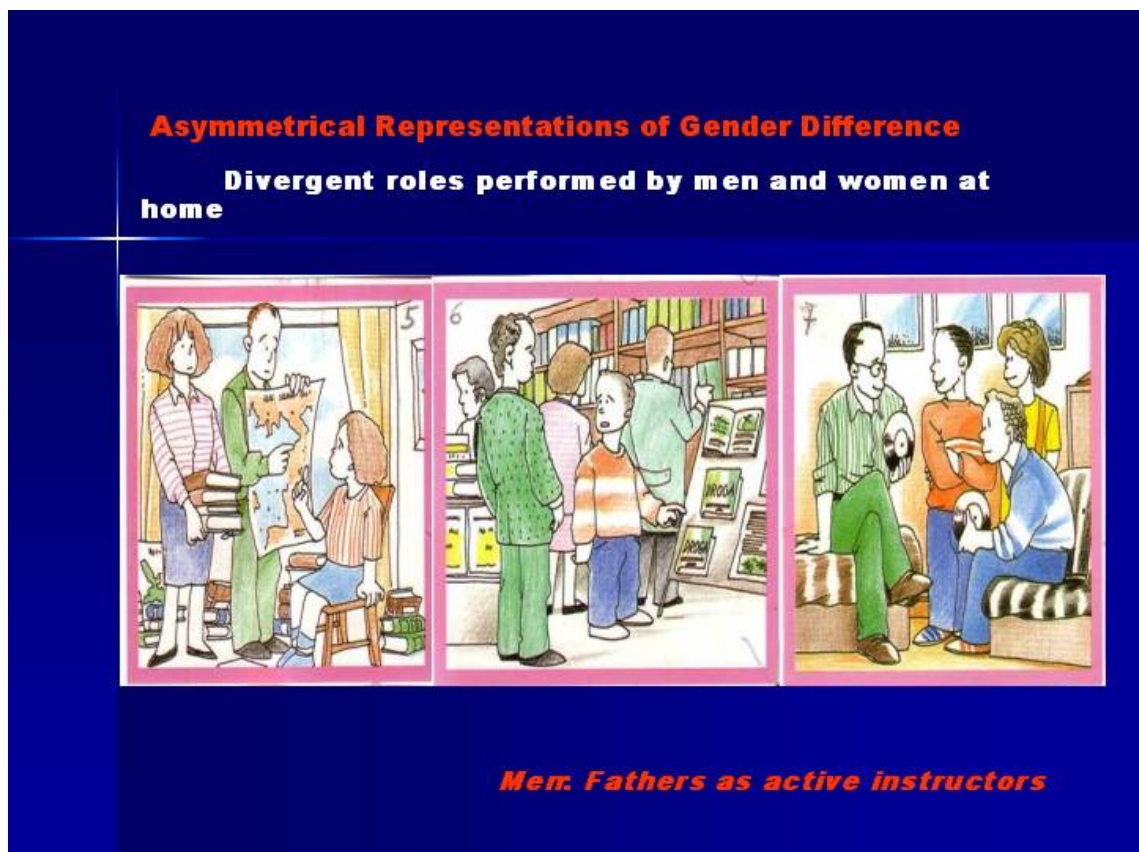
## 2. Assymetrical representations of gender difference

### Divergent roles performed by men and women at home

#### *Men: Fathers as active instructors*

Visual evidence: image 6 where the father and the mother are co-present indicate different understandings of the kind of care that each of them is supposed to give. The mother is carrying the books, while the father points at the map to instruct their child, instead of being the other way round.

Visual support: image where the father is the Actor and his child the *Goal* or *Beneficiary*.



#### *Men: Fathers as heads-of-households*


Visual support: image at the beginning of the first part of brochure, where the father occupies a central position in relation to the members of his family.



- Analytical structures: the father is represented in relation to his family as a *Carrier*, with members of his family represented as his *Attributes*. The father is represented as the main figure, sided by the wife, slightly in front of him, and their children in front of both of them, the girl in front of the mother, the boy in front of the father. The father has an arm around the mother, which defines her relation to him as *his* wife, and an arm around the little boy, that defines the child in relation to him as his son.

**Asymmetrical Representations of Gender Difference**

**Divergent roles performed by men and women at home**



**Men: Fathers as heads-of-households**

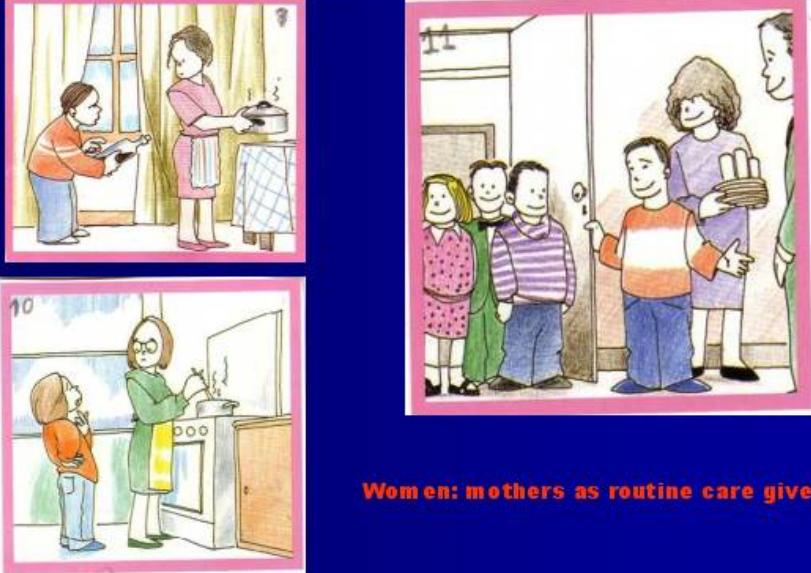
**Women: Mothers as routine care givers**

Here we have a construction of a giving mother, completely devoted to the household, and to the satisfaction of the basic needs of the whole family, but that is rarely the focus of the children's attention, unlike the father.

Visual support: Image where the whole family is co-present;

**Asymmetrical Representations of Gender Difference**

**Divergent roles performed by men and women at home**



**Women: mothers as routine care givers**

### Different ways of conciliating public and private identities

**Men:** are represented as if they can have it all, that is, the identities of father and professional are reconcilable without one compromising the other, even where there are admissions that a man's career commitment may compete with his father role.

Visual support:

- many images that make a bridge between family life and paid-work life: the father is shown wearing long sleeved shirts and ties, that is, as if his professional identity is inscribed upon his body.
- admission of incompatibility: Image that shows the father arriving home, where he is represented as the Goal of the little girl's Action: his facial expression, body position suggests that he is feeling exhausted;


Visual and linguistic evidence:

**Asymmetrical representations of gender difference**

**Different ways of conciliating public and private identities**

(4) *"Let your children talk to you even though you are worried, have work to do, have an headache or wish to rest."*  
(Deixe os seus filhos falarem consigo mesmo que tenha preocupações, trabalho, dores de cabeça ou desejo de descansar).

- The connector *even though* sets up a presupposition that if a man is having a career, it can be expected that he will be absent; the advice also has a censorious dimension, meaning that men should balance better their roles as fathers and professionals. Nevertheless, it is also suggested that men can have it all, and this kind of treatment is not given to women.



**Men are represented as if they can have it all.**

With this image we have the following advice:

*Let your children talk to you even though you are worried, have work to do, have an headache or wish to rest. (Deixe os seus filhos falarem consigo mesmo que tenha preocupações, trabalho, dores de cabeça ou desejo de descansar)*

The connector *even though* sets up a presupposition that if a man is having a career, it can be expected that he will be absent; the advice also has a censorious dimension, meaning that men should balance better their roles as fathers and professionals. Anyway, it is also suggested that men can have it all, and this kind of treatment is not given to women.

### **Women**

Visual and linguistic support: only two images make the bridge between women's family life and career life.

The interplay between these two images and the text suggested that children whose mothers also have a career have bigger risks of using drugs than the others.

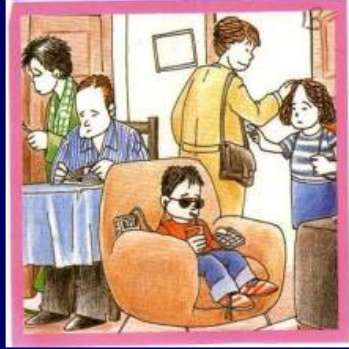
First case: Image + linguistic resources (justaposition of sentences set a causal relationship)

Image presented on left top side of the page: this special distribution may mean that the image is seen first than the text

- transactional structures and compositional ones
- We see the mother from the back, at the entrance door, dressed as if she is going to work, touching her daughter, as if she is saying bye-bye, while the father (that has a lateral position) is having breakfast, and one of the sons (also in lateral position) is walking in the opposite direction of the front door, and the other one (lateral) is seating on the couch, wearing sun glasses and with head-phones. They are all presented as looking in opposite directions.

## Asymmetrical Representations of Gender Difference

### Different ways of conciliating public and private identity



(5) "We know that addiction is a very complex phenomenon, that is, the dependence on drugs is a behaviour that can be explained by a variable set of causes. In spite of this, there are factors that we know are common or at least more frequent that lie at the roots of the problem. Examples: emotionally dysfunctional families, (...)."

*We know that addiction is a very complex phenomenon, that is, the dependence on drugs is a behaviour that can be explained by a variable set of causes. In spite of this, there are factors that we know are common or at least more frequent that lie at the roots of the problem. Examples: emotionally dysfunctional families, (...). (Sabemos que a toxicoddependência é um fenómeno muito complexo, ou seja, a dependência de drogas é um comportamento explicado por um conjunto de razões. No entanto, há factores que sabemos serem comuns ou pelo menos mais frequentes na raiz deste problema. Exemplos: famílias emocionalmente desorganizadas, (...)).*

The interplay between text and image seems to suggest that emotionally dysfunctional families are the ones where women are absent due to their careers. This implicit blame of the mother becomes more obvious at the end of this part of the brochure.

Second case: Linguistic resources+ Image n


Linguistic Support: presuppositions set by the negative

*Parents must be aware. You must have an active and important role. Do not let things happen....(Os pais devem estar atentos. Você deve ter um papel activo e importante. Não deixe que as coisas aconteçam...).*

Visual Support: the image is showing a man reprehending the mother we saw before (pointing to at his watch, suggesting that she is late) is just arriving at her office,

**Asymmetrical Representations of Gender Difference**  
**Different ways of conciliating public and private identities**

(6) *"Parents must be aware. You must have an active and important role. Do not let things happen..."*



standing still, taking off her coat and looking at her “boss”.

By choosing the negative the belief that parents let bad things happen is also activated, but the image shows that parents here mean *the mother that also has a career*. This scare tactic makes women responsible for the ways in which their children misbehave and suggest that good mothers are the ones that put their children above themselves. Regarding the balance between a career and family, we see that the balance is constructed unequally, in favour of prioritizing women’s family role with the underlying threat that she may be responsible for the deviance of her children. This means that mother identity is prioritized for women as their core identity.

## CONSTRUCTION OF ADDICT MOTHERS

Here I take mainly into account what is not said to and about drug-using men, when compared with drug-using women:

- Women that use drugs are reduced to their reproductive identity and their role as mothers; that is not happening with men.
- Addict women living with HIV are advised not to get pregnant, but men in the same situation are not advised to use condoms.
- Texts about the effects of drugs on the foetus or the children do not make any reference to masculine habits, although the clinical literature also links men's habits with damages on the health of the foetus;
- Exclusion of the topic of the effects of masculine violence over the foetus, in spite of the ethnographical studies that show the presence of high levels of domestic violence on the lives of drug-using women.

## EXAMPLES

These passages were chosen because they allow us to see that the degree and the nature of mothers' blame varies according to the kind of drugs they use the most: legal or illegal. The reason why this happens can be explained by class prejudices, that is, the use of legal drugs is associated with middle-class women while the use of illegal drugs is associated with lower-class women.

Here I look at the way the relationship between mother and the foetus is constructed, by considering the explanations that are given and their modality: the way causality is expressed by grammatical choices and juxtaposition of statements. I also considered lexical wording.

### **7: “A Safe Pregnancy”**

*Daily tensions sometimes make the pregnant woman use tobacco or alcohol, or other drugs as a way out of her problems. So one needs to know that all drugs are passed on to the baby through the placenta, and that due to its fragility, the*

*developing foetus is unable to defend itself from such an aggression. And by drugs we mean any natural or synthetical substance that has effects on person's behaviour, body or brain. The first three months of pregnancy are the most important regarding this subject, as the foetus may be damaged in an irreversible way, being born with physical or mental deformities. (Text ?, A safe pregnancy", 1988, Jornal de Noticias, Linha Aberta, Projecto VIDA)*

*(As tensões do dia a dia fazem com que, por vezes, a grávida procure no tabaco ou no álcool, ou ainda noutras drogas, uma saída para os seus problemas. Torna-se pois necessário saber que qualquer droga é transmitida ao bebé através da placenta, e que, dada a sua fragilidade, o feto em desenvolvimento não é capaz de se defender dessa agressão. E por drogas queremos significar quaisquer substâncias de origem natural ou sintética que tem efeitos sobre o comportamento, sobre o corpo ou sobre o cérebro. Os primeiros três meses de gravidez são os mais importantes neste aspecto, pois o feto pode ficar afectado de forma irremediável, vindo a nascer com mal formações físicas ou mentais).*

The construction of a direct causal relationship between pregnant women's drug behaviour and the health of the foetus, together with an emotional-centred explanation of the reasons why pregnant women use drugs, work in tandem to put all the blame on individual women, as if they alone control the circumstances under which they use drugs or become pregnant. Moreover, studies on the pharmacological effects of illegal drugs show the presence of a correlation, and not the presence of a causal direct link. And also show the importance of the kind of drug under discussion, a factor that is also excluded from the given explanation. These kind of simplistic explanations and lexical wordings (*drugs*) are very useful: they allow us to think that drug-using women "deserve" the blame that is directed towards them and, at the same time, they direct our attention away from the material effects of policy decisions on drugs (and on other subjects) that play a role on women's lives. So one can say that this individualist move also authorizes the institutions involved to act as they do.



**(8) “Pregnancy, Motherhood and Addiction”**

*Motherhood requires having initiative and responsibility, taking action, ensuring the child is regularly seen by a doctor and has his vaccine in order, taking the child to school, giving her/him a home, a family, food, clothes, friends, etc. etc. It means more than a wish for having a child, it really demands a wish for being a mother (...). There are many situations where the distance between pregnancy and motherhood is enormous. One of them is precisely the one of addict women. The great majority of addict women wish, or at least accept pregnancy. Having a child becomes in many cases the magical solution to all the problems (...) “finally I have something that is mine”, they sometimes say. And they demonstrate by this statement, or other similar ones, the solitude and emptiness that they know that exist inside of them. But they also express through this statement the way they see the child: as something that belongs to them. (1988, *Jornal de Noticias*, Isabel Pereira Leal, Projecto VIDA.)*

*(A maternidade requer iniciativas, actuações, responsabilização, levar a criança ao médico, as vacinas, a escola, proporcionar-lhe uma casa, uma família, alimentos, roupas, amigos, etc., etc. Requer que mais do que desejar ter um filho se deseje ser mãe. Muitas são as situações em que a distância entre a gravidez e a maternidade são enormes. Uma delas é exactamente a que se refere a mulheres toxicodependentes. A grande maioria das mulheres toxicodependentes deseja, ou pelo menos aceita bem, essa gravidez. Ter um filho aparece em muitos casos como a solução mágica de todos os problemas. Tenho finalmente uma coisa minha, verbalizam muitas vezes. E traduzem nesta frase, ou em outras semelhantes, a solidão e o vazio que sabem existir em si próprias. Mas traduzem também aqui a forma como a criança é encarada: uma coisa sua).*

This is one of the texts where the writer has in mind heroin drug-using women. Once again, I look at the ideological functions played by explanations and modalities. In this case, the cause-effect relationship is implicit, and is set up linguistically by wording choice. The expression that keys the implicit explanation is ‘addict women’.

In fact, the writer claims that addict mothers are not “real mothers”, but she doesn’t ground her claim on an explicit argument. Instead, she is counting that the readers infer that mothers that have a problematic use of illegal drugs are different and worse than “normal” mothers just because of the drugs they take. As if their mothering is a direct result of drug-induced behaviour. By leaving this information implicit, the writer presents as a “matter of fact” what can be seen as a “matter of opinion”, if we as readers refuse to cooperate with the preferred meaning. In fact, there is an enormous debate in the literature about mothering and addiction. There are studies that show this difference, but there are also studies that show no differences in mothering between heroin users and non-using women. But what is important to stress is that addict mothers, like everybody else, are not completely dominated by their mental functioning, or by an irresistible drug’s need *per se*. This means that, under adequate sanitary and social conditions, addict women can behave as “normal mothers” are supposed to behave. So, once again, this semantic representation has a role in the pragmatics of justification: to put all the blame on women, and at the same time, to deflect attention away from considerations of what women might need to realize “their” responsibilities, that is, from issues of social justice and of public health that should play a bigger role on drug policies.

## CONCLUSIONS

We discuss how several discourse structures contributed to the construction of two types of women: the mother in the dysfunctional family that generates addiction, and the addict mother. In both categories systematic omissions and also the implicit play a fundamental role on the semantics of representation. Such a construction serves the pragmatics of justification of policy decisions and of institutional practices of drug prevention and care.

The justification strategy uses both a contrast between 'good mothers'/'bad mothers' and a victim blaming strategy whether it refers to the mother that causes addiction or to the addict mothers. In the first case, I've explored representations of men and women that indicated the co-presence of opposite gender ideologies

(egalitarian and conservative) in the brochure. By using linguistic and visual features, I've argued that the preferred meaning is a sexist one. Parenthood means different things for men and women. In spite of the presence of the *New Man*, men's identity is not confined to the parental role. Though, the opposite is suggested in relation to women who should favour their role as mothers. This is done by placing the onus of the onset of drug use on the mother who also has a career. She becomes the 'bad mother' and this helps to create the contrast needed to justify why families should get involved in the prevention business. Women's addiction is viewed through the windows of pregnancy and maternity. I've called your attention to the role class differences play on the harsh condemnation of mother's drug use behaviour. Heroin-using mothers are portrayed in an explicit way as challenging the central values of motherhood as they are understood in western societies: self-sacrifice, total devotion to others and to the role. Heroin-using mothers are subject to a double condemnation: as women they violate gender norms by using heroin; their use of heroin is seen as jeopardizing their moral and psychological fitness for motherhood.

Generally, we may conclude that the main social and political status of women in Portuguese public anti-drugs campaigns is of exclusion and invisibility. The only space given to women in these campaigns results from a focus on normative femininity and on sexuality, mainly reproductive health. Women are still and essentially described in relation to their family responsibilities, and also in relation to their ovaries and uterus. This exclusion proves how much the campaigns were male oriented, grounded on the assumption that masculine is the norm. As sociologists say, unless the use is extreme, drug use in men falls within cultural expectations while in women is always a gender deviance. This study shows how discourse plays an important role on the construction of this difference and of its stigmatization. Thus, it goes without saying that Portuguese public anti-drugs campaigns do not perform the pedagogical role of replacing the male oriented field of drug use with a more balanced one, giving attention to women's rights without reducing them to their sexuality. Instead they might have had the effect of reproducing the dominant gender regime of Portuguese society in this field.

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**\* For a complete description of these documents and its integral reading, see our site:**

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