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Stigma and Social Exclusion : The Marginalization of Women Drug Abusers in Punjab

Rajni Bala

Associate Professor and Head, Department of Sociology,
BUC College, Batala, District Gurdaspur, Punjab (India)
E-mail: <drrajnibala@gmail.com>

Abstract

This study explores the experiences of stigma and discrimination faced by women who abuse drugs in Punjab, India, and examines the impact on their healthcare-seeking behavior. The rising number of female drug abusers is a growing concern, yet their struggles often remain underreported due to societal stigma. This research aims to shed light on how gender, drug abuse, and cultural contexts intersect to marginalize women, limiting their access to appropriate care. This study uses a qualitative approach, relying on secondary data from reports and studies incorporated to support findings. A thematic analysis is employed to identify key barriers, such as societal stigma, lack of gender-specific facilities, and financial constraints. The theoretical framework of Erving Goffman's stigma theory guides the study, focusing on how societal labeling of female drug abusers as "tainted" affects their identity and limits healthcare access. The study emphasizes the need for gender-sensitive addiction treatment programs and reducing societal stigma to ensure better healthcare access for women battling drug addiction in Punjab.

Keywords

Women drug abusers, Stigma, Discrimination, Healthcare-seeking behaviour, Punjab.

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Editorial Office : D-59, Shastri Nagar, Meerut - 250 004 (INDIA)

Ph. : 0121-2763765, +91-9997771669, +91-9219658788

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1. Introduction

The widespread issue of drug abuse poses a pressing problem globally, impacting nearly all countries with varying severity. India is no exception to this issue, with an increasing number of drug addicts noted daily. Particularly in Punjab, the problem has taken a dire turn among the youth, prompting grave concerns. This problem contributes to a host of societal issues including family discord, violence, crime, productivity loss, disease transmission, overuse of healthcare resources, and domestic violence. However, an underreported aspect of this issue is the increasing prevalence of drug abuse among women. This overlooked issue has far-reaching implications, especially as it's compounded by the social stigma attached to women addicts.

2. Objectives of the Study

Objectives of the present study are two-fold :

1. To explore the experiences of stigma and discrimination faced by women who abuse drugs in Punjab.
2. To examine the impact of stigma and discrimination on the healthcare-seeking behavior of women drug abusers.

3. Methodology

The methodology involves a systematic review of key documents, including reports from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), studies by the National Institute of Social Defence (NISD), and surveys conducted by various organizations like the Society for Promotion of Youth and Masses (SPYM). Additionally, media sources such as reports by NDTV and the Hindustan Times are utilized to examine the societal discourse surrounding female drug abuse.

The analysis focuses on synthesizing findings from these diverse resources to identify patterns and challenges faced by women who

use drugs, particularly concerning stigma, discrimination, and access to healthcare. Through thematic analysis, the study highlights critical issues such as the lack of gender-sensitive treatment facilities, financial barriers, and the cultural stigmatization of women drug abusers, providing a robust understanding of the structural and social challenges influencing their lives.

4. Theoretical Perspective

Erving Goffman's theory provides valuable insights into the experiences of women drug abusers and the discrimination and stigma they face. Goffman defined stigma as a deeply discrediting attribute that reduces the person "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one." Women drug abusers are often stigmatized, reducing their social identity to the status of 'drug abusers'. This stigmatized label tends to overshadow all other aspects of their identities, causing social rejection and discrimination. It's this "spoiled" identity that is seen by society, rather than their complete self. Goffman's idea of impression management refers to how individuals try to control how others perceive them. In the case of women drug abusers, they might attempt to hide their drug use to avoid the stigma associated with it. They may lead a sort of "double life", presenting a socially acceptable front to the world while hiding their drug use. Our self-identity is largely shaped by the way society sees us. Thus, the stigma and discrimination faced by women drug abusers can significantly impact their self-perception and self-esteem. The internalization of this stigma can lead to a host of negative psychological effects, such as guilt, shame, and low self-worth.

5. Review of Literature

The severity of the problem can easily be accessed through the different studies conducted in this area. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), the number of women arrested for drug-related offenses in Punjab increased from 332 in 2010 to 848 in 2019. This represents an increase of over 150% in just nine years as is evident from table-1 which depicts data provided by NCRB for Crime in India from 2010 to 2019) on the next page.

The above mentioned table provides an insight into the rising number of women drug abusers. The total number of drug abusers arrested in the year 2019 was 23,770 and among these, 848 were women. It is also shocking to get from this table that among 1609

drug abusers who are under the age of 18 years, 112 are girls. This is a big number, which shows that drug addiction among the younger generation is increasing day by day and girls are not far behind. However, it is important to note that the data only captures drug abusers who have been arrested and reported to the authorities. The actual number of drug abusers in Punjab may be much higher, as many drug abusers do not come to the attention of law enforcement.

Table-1 : Age and Gender Distribution of Drug Abusers arrested in Punjab in 2019

Age Group	Male	Female	Total
Under 18	1497	112	1609
18-30	12,235	526	12,761
30-45	7,351	169	7,520
45 and above	1,799	41	1,840
Total	22,882	848	23,730

Source : *Crime in India 2019-Statistics*, National Crime Records Bureau.

A study conducted by the National Institute of Social Defence (NISD) found that women accounted for approximately 5% of all drug abusers in Punjab. The study also found that women were more likely to use injectable drugs, which can lead to serious health problems such as HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C. (Drug Abuse in India - National Survey: 2018). Another study conducted by the Society for Promotion of Youth and Masses (SPYM) in 2016 found that approximately 10% of all drug abusers seeking treatment in Punjab were women. The study also found that women who used drugs were more likely to experience mental health problems such as depression and anxiety, and were at higher risk of overdose and other health complications.

Previous research on stigma and discrimination against women drug abusers has provided valuable insights into this area. Studies have indicated that women who use drugs often face multiple layers of stigma due to their gender, drug use, and social context. They experience various forms of discrimination, including exclusion from family and social networks, limited access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities, and moral judgment from society. The stigma and discrimination faced by these women have been found to have detrimental effects on their mental health, self-esteem,

and overall quality of life. Women with drug addiction face unique challenges and barriers in accessing addiction treatment services.

A March 2018 study (PGIMER) revealed that out of 3.2 million people dependent on any substance, a staggering 0.1 million are women. Another PGIMER study found that 1% of the women surveyed were opioid dependents. The true extent of this problem is likely to be much higher as these numbers only represent those who sought treatment.

The limited availability of exclusive facilities, coupled with societal stigma, and a state of denial, often discourage women from seeking help. In government-run de-addiction centers, women often face long waiting times and judgemental stares, creating a hostile environment for them to seek help. An insightful study by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) underlines that female drug use often goes undetected, resulting in a lack of tailored treatment facilities. As social expectations vary for men and women addicts, treatment progress also differs.

Women are more likely to seek help from private centers, where privacy is better maintained. Private rehabs like Hermitage De-addiction Home for Women, established by Dr. Bhatia in Amritsar, have seen an alarming increase in the number of women addicts seeking help. A 2001 study by the Institute for Development and Communication exposed that the consumption of poppy husk was most common among women. Similarly, Navjivan Rehabilitation Private Centre at Daulatpur in Patiala reported frequent inquiries about treatments for female addicts.

Different researchers have highlighted the Challenges and barriers in providing access to addiction treatment services for women in Punjab. Kaur (2020) found that stigma and discrimination, lack of gender-sensitive care, and financial constraints were the most significant barriers to accessing care. Sharma et al. (2018) used a cross-sectional design to examine the healthcare access and utilization patterns of women who use drugs in Punjab. The study found that lack of financial resources, lack of transportation and lack of awareness about available services were significant barriers to accessing healthcare. Dua et al. (2021) explored that stigma and discrimination, lack of awareness about available services, and lack of social support were significant barriers to accessing care.

A study conducted by the National Institute of Social Defence (NISD) in 2018 found that drug addiction among women in Punjab

was on the rise. The study found that women were increasingly turning to drugs due to stress, depression, and other psychological issues. Another study published in the *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment* in 2017 found that women in Punjab faced unique challenges in accessing drug treatment services. The study found that women often faced social stigma and discrimination when seeking treatment for drug addiction and that many treatment facilities were not equipped to provide gender-specific care. It recommended the development of specialized treatment programs for women, as well as efforts to address social stigma and improve access to care, should be initiated. A study published in the *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* in 2016 found that women in Punjab were more likely to use opioids and other prescription drugs than men. The study also found that women who used drugs were more likely to experience mental health problems such as depression and anxiety, and were at higher risk of overdose and other health complications. The study recommended that efforts to address drug addiction in Punjab should prioritize the needs of women and address the unique challenges they face.

These studies highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions to address drug addiction among women in Punjab. Such interventions should prioritize the unique needs and challenges faced by women and should be designed to promote gender-specific care and address social stigma and discrimination.

In addition to the above data, PGIMER, Chandigarh has also conducted several studies related to drug addiction in Punjab, with a focus on women drug abusers. A study titled "A Profile of Women Substance Abusers Seeking Treatment in North India" was conducted at PGIMER in 2019 to understand the characteristics and treatment needs of women with substance use disorders. The study found that the majority of women seeking treatment for substance use disorders in North India were married, employed, and had children. The study highlighted the need for gender-sensitive treatment services that address the unique needs of women with addiction. Another study (2021) conducted at PGIMER titled "Gender Differences in Substance Use among Treatment-Seeking Adults of Punjab" explored the patterns of substance use among men and women seeking treatment for addiction in Punjab. The study found that women were more likely to report the use of opioids and prescription drugs, while men were more likely to report the use of alcohol and tobacco. Another study conducted in 2022 on the

prevalence of substance use disorders among women living in rural Punjab found that women in rural areas were at a higher risk of substance use disorders due to factors such as lack of education, poverty, and limited access to healthcare services.

6. Discussions and Analysis

These studies highlight the complex and multifaceted reasons for drug use among women in Punjab, the importance of addressing social, cultural, economic, and mental health factors in addressing the issue of drug addiction, and highlight the need for gender-sensitive and culturally appropriate addiction treatment services for women in Punjab. These studies also underscore the importance of addressing the unique barriers and challenges faced by women with addiction, including stigma and discrimination, lack of awareness about available services, and financial barriers, and highlight the significant challenges, that women with drug addiction face in accessing addiction treatment services in Punjab, and the need for gender-sensitive and culturally appropriate interventions to improve access to care.

NDTV India aired a heart-wrenching story about a drug-addicted girl from Amritsar who was kept in chains by her mother in an attempt to control her addiction. She was sent to de-addiction centers multiple times but was always sent back within a few days, sparking her mother's skepticism about the efficacy of these centers. Another report by NDTV 'Every Life Matters', unveiled the harrowing reality of women addicts in Punjab. The report brought to light the societal stigma that dissuades women from seeking help at rehabilitation centers. It further exposed the grim reality of female addicts becoming trapped in a vicious cycle of dependence on male friends or family members for drug supply. In more extreme circumstances, low-income girls are lured into prostitution and drug peddling. These vulnerable girls become easy targets for exploitation, often surrendering themselves to the drug peddlers who take advantage of their desperation and despair.

6.1 Root Causes of Drug Addiction among Women in Punjab

Based on the studies, the following reasons can be cited for the problem of drug addiction among women in Punjab:

- ▶ **Male Partner Influence** : The foremost reason for drug addiction among women in Punjab is the influence exerted by

male partners. As in many societies, women often conform to the habits of their partners. Unaware of the catastrophic consequences, they may be coerced into trying drugs, eventually leading to addiction.

- ▶▶ **Relationship Issues** : Failed relationships or emotional trauma resulting from broken bonds can make women vulnerable to seeking solace in harmful substances. The resultant emotional distress often prompts them to use drugs as an escape mechanism, allowing them to temporarily evade the harsh realities of life.
- ▶▶ **Broken Marriages** : Broken marriages often leave women feeling emotionally devastated, isolated, and filled with despair. In a bid to numb their pain, they might resort to drug abuse, viewing it as a form of self-medication that offers fleeting relief from their agonizing heartache.
- ▶▶ **Domestic Violence** : Victims of domestic violence carry deep emotional scars that can lead to mental health issues like depression and anxiety. In their search for relief from their constant emotional torment, they may turn to drugs. The temporary euphoria offered by these substances provides a dangerous respite from their daily suffering.
- ▶▶ **Health Problems** : Severe or chronic physical pain can lead to the misuse of prescription drugs, notably opioids, leading to addiction. Women suffering from painful health conditions may fall into this trap, with their search for relief inadvertently leading them down the path of drug dependence.
- ▶▶ **Alcohol Addiction** : Alcohol addiction can often act as a gateway to drug abuse. Women who are heavy drinkers might find themselves more inclined to try illicit substances, and the co-use of alcohol and drugs significantly increases the risk of addiction.
- ▶▶ **Peer Pressure** : Peer pressure is the most common reason for drug abuse. The desire to fit in or to escape feelings of rejection can drive women to experiment with drugs. What starts as casual use in social settings can swiftly escalate to regular use and eventual addiction.
- ▶▶ **Poverty** : Women living in poverty are often caught in a cycle of despair and hopelessness, making them vulnerable to drug addiction. The lack of resources and access to quality healthcare

can exacerbate their plight, causing them to resort to easily available, low-cost illicit drugs as a form of self-medication.

6.2 Barriers in the way of Female Drug Abusers accessing Treatment in Punjab

Women drug abusers in Punjab face several challenges that make it difficult for them to overcome their addiction and seek treatment. Some of the challenges they face include:

- ▶ **Stigma** : Women drug abusers in Punjab face stigma and discrimination due to their drug use. They may be judged by their family, community, and healthcare providers, which makes it difficult for them to seek help or access services. Women may also face barriers to care due to social and cultural norms that limit their mobility and autonomy.
- ▶ **Lack of access to treatment** : These women may have limited access to drug treatment services, particularly if they live in rural or remote areas. This can be due to a lack of healthcare facilities, trained healthcare providers, or financial resources.
- ▶ **Gender-based violence** : Women drug abusers may be at risk of gender-based violence, including sexual assault and domestic violence. This can make it difficult for them to seek help or access services, particularly if they fear retaliation or further violence.
- ▶ **Childcare responsibilities** : They may have childcare responsibilities that make it difficult for them to seek treatment or attend support groups. They may also face challenges in finding affordable and reliable childcare options.
- ▶ **Lack of social support** : These women lack social support, particularly if they have lost touch with friends and family due to their drug use. This can make it difficult for them to recover and maintain their sobriety.
- ▶ **Dual diagnosis** : Women drug abusers in Punjab may be more likely to have co-occurring mental health disorders such as depression or anxiety. This can make it more difficult to treat their addiction and may require specialized care.
- ▶ **Economic challenges** : Women drug abusers in Punjab may face economic challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to education and job training. These factors can make it difficult for them to access appropriate treatment and support for their addiction.

Stigma and discrimination against women drug abusers in Punjab are significant barriers to their well-being and access to essential services. The discussions arising from this critical analysis highlight the importance of a multidimensional approach in addressing stigma and discrimination against women drug abusers in Punjab. Many drug treatment programs in Punjab are not designed to meet the specific needs of women. This can include issues such as childcare, pregnancy, and menopause, as well as gender-specific trauma and mental health issues. While interventions and policies should aim to reduce the social stigma associated with drug abuse, they must also address gender inequalities and cultural norms that contribute to the marginalization of these women. Moreover, healthcare providers and support services need to be sensitized and trained to provide non-judgmental and gender-responsive care. Creating safe and inclusive spaces where women feel comfortable seeking help is crucial to overcoming barriers to healthcare access. By taking a gender-sensitive and intersectional approach, policymakers and healthcare providers can work towards ensuring that women with drug addiction in Punjab have access to the care they need to achieve recovery and improve their overall health and well-being.

7. Conclusion

Addiction is a pervasive disease that transcends social, economic, and political boundaries. The politicization of drug abuse, particularly in the case of women has resulted in further stigmatization and created a hostile environment where victims hesitate to seek treatment. Women often conceal their addiction, and their families either deny or ignore the issue. Sometimes, the addiction is rationalized away as being 'haunted by evil spirits or ghosts', rather than acknowledging the reality of drug dependence.

Women battling drug addiction are more isolated from society than their male counterparts, largely because of inadequate treatment facilities, societal stigma, and a lack of understanding of their unique needs. They are especially susceptible to the pernicious cycle of drug dependence and are often underrepresented in both conventional drug surveys and treatment centers, making them a hard-to-reach population.

The weight of familial responsibilities often demotes their personal needs to a lower priority, leaving their drug dependence untreated. Societal disapproval, fear of exposure, lack of support,

and numerous other issues complicate their path to recovery. The fact that a significant number of these women are victims of sexual abuse and domestic violence only adds to their struggle, causing self-esteem issues and depression.

The government should take definitive action to increase the number of de-addiction and rehabilitation centers and ensure they are equipped with recreational facilities tailored to the needs of these women where they can receive treatment in a sensitive and respectful environment while maintaining their privacy. It's crucial to establish effective connections between health workers, community leaders, religious leaders, and educators to plan and implement comprehensive drug abuse prevention and rehabilitation activities.

The role of parents and other family members cannot be overlooked in this problem, as their acceptance, understanding, and support can greatly facilitate the recovery process. However, societal challenges and stigmatization can make the journey towards sobriety a daunting one. Not only is there a dearth of suitable treatment facilities, but these women also grapple with societal backlash and character assassination. Their pleas for help often go unheard, their needs ignored, leading to a further decline in their health.

The escalating problem of drug addiction among women in Punjab is an urgent issue that requires immediate attention. With women from all societal sections falling prey to drug abuse, often initiated by male friends or family members, it's evident that this problem is much more layered and needs a comprehensive, sensitive, and immediate solution.

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