

8

The Rapid Assessment Survey: Gender Comparisons of Drug Users

Rapid Assessment Survey (RAS) is a methodology to obtain information on 'hard to reach' populations, in this case drug users. In the RAS conducted in 2000-01, a large amount of qualitative and quantitative data was gathered from key informants and drug abusers. In-depth unstructured interviews, focussed group discussions, city mapping and structured interviews were carried out in fourteen Indian cities: Amritsar, Jamshedpur, Shillong, Dimapur, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Thiruvananthapuram, Goa, Ahmedabad, Kolkata, Delhi, Chennai, Mumbai, and Imphal (UNDCP 2002b). The sample was identified through the snowball technique, hence the proportion of women drug abusers does not necessarily reflect the exact prevalence of the phenomenon in these cities. The data from this study should therefore not be generalised to project an estimated number of drug abusers (men or women) in these cities or the nation as a whole. Furthermore, the data was not uniform and complete in all regards and the information may apply to the (non-random) population studied. Despite these shortcomings, several important indices have come to light and tentative inferences can be drawn.

By bringing together information on both men and women abusers (though not randomly selected samples, and hence not truly representative), the RAS provides useful and necessary points of comparison on gender lines. It can therefore tell us something of import about drug abuse among women. After a summary of the RAS findings on women users, points of comparison are noted.

Number of Women Drug Abusers

Altogether, 4648 drug abusers were interviewed and 371 of them were women. Certain inter-centre variations were noticed. The Kolkata, Chennai, Jamshedpur and Ahmedabad samples had very few women. Goa had the highest proportion (20%), followed by Thiruvananthapuram (16%) and Mumbai (15%). In the remaining sites, the percentage of women varied between 4 and 11 percent (see Table 10).

Demographic Profile of Women Users

The mean age of drug users in Amritsar was 23 years, 28 years in Goa, 31 years in Thiruvananthapuram and 32 years in Mumbai. Around 45 percent of women users in Imphal were within the age group of 25 - 29 years, and about 80 percent of those in the Delhi sample were between 16 - 35 years of age. There were a sizable number of single women users (75% in Goa and Hyderabad, 60% in Thiruvananthapuram, and around 40 percent in Mumbai and Imphal). The proportion that was illiterate varied widely from centre to centre - from 6 percent (Thiruvananthapuram) to 71 percent (Delhi). The level of education was higher in some cities -66 percent of women drug users in Thiruvananthapuram had studied up to secondary school, and 37 percent from Goa were graduates. More than 75 percent of users in the Mumbai, Dimapur and Thiruvananthapuram samples were employed. In three sites, a large number of these women were homeless - the proportion varied from 51 percent (Thiruvananthapuram), to 66 percent (Delhi) and 79 percent (Mumbai). Women users in the remaining sites were living with their families.

By bringing together information on both men and women abusers, the RAS provides useful and necessary points of comparison on gender lines.

Table 10. Number of Women Drug Abusers in RSA samples

Site	Total sample size	Females	Percentage of females
Amritsar	327	16	4.9
Jamshedpur	353	1	0.3
Shillong	320	36	11.3
Dimapur	261	28	10.7
Hyderabad	300	29	9.7
Bangalore	275	12	4.4
Thiruvananthapuram	308	50	16.2
Goa	373	76	20.4
Ahmedabad	314	3	1
Chennai	300	0	0
Mumbai	356	53	14.9
Imphal	308	30	9.7
Kolkata	388	2	1.0
Delhi	465	35	7.5
Total	4648	371	7.9 (mean)

of initiation (60 - 90%) followed by cannabis (18 - 57%) in most of the centres. Some 45 percent in Mumbai and 27 percent in Imphal were initiated to drug use with heroin. In Amritsar, however, sedatives and tranquillisers were the first drugs of abuse among some.

Current Drugs of Abuse and IDU

Heroin, alcohol, cannabis and painkillers (in tablet form) were the dominant current drugs of

Heroin, alcohol, cannabis and painkillers (in tablet form) were the dominant current drugs of abuse in the RAS.

Drug Abuse by Family and Friends

The proportion of drug users with abuse by family members varied between 48 percent (Imphal) and 83 percent (Bangalore) for the five sites for which this information was available. Information on drug using friends was available from four centres – it ranged from 75 to 96 percent.

Reasons and Drugs of Initiation

Depression, tension, peer pressure, curiosity and pleasure were often reported as reasons for initiation. Alcohol was the most common drug

abuse. Abuse of heroin was reported more often from Delhi (99%), Imphal (80%) and Dimapur (56%). Ninety-four percent of users from Thiruvananthapuram reported poly-drug use. In Goa, the most common drug of initiation as well as current primary drug of abuse was cannabis (58%).

Some of these abusers were using drugs through the injection route. The proportion of IDUs (current and ever) varied between 3 percent in Delhi and 73 percent in Imphal. Many of them - between 75 percent (Thiruvananthapuram) and 86 percent (Imphal) – reported sharing needles and syringes. In these two centres most women drug abusers reported that they cleaned their needle and syringe with any available water, and some reported that the needles and syringes were easily available from pharmacies. The reasons sited for injecting drugs were: less cost, more pleasure and group behaviour. Several health hazards like blocked veins and abscess formation were reported. A case history from Ahmedabad illustrates this (see box on page 28).

Injection Drug Use (IDU)

Delhi	2.8%
Amritsar	6.3%
Mumbai	16.7%
Dimapur	17.9%
Thiruvananthapuram	18%
Hyderabad	34.5%
Shillong	36%
Imphal	73%

A married woman of about 30 years was found injecting drugs. The frequency of injecting was so high that she had developed wounds on her forearm. She was admitted to a private hospital where pus was extracted and wounds healed. Strangely, her family members were unaware of her addiction. Her mother-in-law was diabetic and was required to take insulin everyday. Only when the needles kept for the mother-in-law went missing did the family members come to learn of her addiction. It was found that the woman had been in love with a young man who had later married the addict's younger sister. She turned to this habit in order to get over the frustration of failure in love. Subsequently, she sought treatment at a private clinic.

Comparison of Drug Use Patterns of Men and Women

Some centres compared the available data for men and women. The following section discusses briefly the differences and similarities that emerged. Socio-demographic and drug use patterns in women differed from those of men within the same city, as well as across cities (Table 11). A remarkable finding was that a significantly larger number of female users were single in Hyderabad (75%), Thiruvananthapuram (60%) and Goa (75%). The respondents from Goa were better educated than their male counterparts (37% of women and 14% of men were graduates).

While at Amritsar and Thiruvananthapuram women had initiated drug use at an age later

Urban Drug Use – Some Current Trends among Women

- More single women
- More educated
- Many employed
- Early onset of drug use
- High levels of drug use in families
- Many drug using friends
- Early age of initiation into sex

than men, in Goa the mean age of initiation in women was 15.9 years compared to men (17.4 years). In the latter centre, interestingly, females had initiated drug use earlier than males (65% females compared to 30% males had started drug use between 14 and 18 years of age).

Table 11. Demographic Parameters and Drug Abuse History (Men vs. Women)

Variable	Hyderabad		Thiruvananthapuram		Goa	
	Females (N= 29)	Males (N= 271)	Females (N= 50)	Males (N= 258)	Females (N= 76)	Males (N= 297)
Mean age (years)	26	30	31	30	28	33
Mean age at initiation of drug use (years)	Not available	Not available	22	19	16	17
Married (%)	25	39	40	50	25	39
Positive family history of drug use (%)	50	9	73	82	24	28
Friends using drugs (%)	97	73	Not available	Not available	51	49
IDU (%)	35	16	18	38	Not available	Not available
First experience of sexual intercourse (age in years)	18	18	Not available	20	Not available	Not available

A remarkable finding was that a significantly larger number of female users were single in Hyderabad, Thiruvananthapuram and Goa. The respondents from Goa were better educated than their male counterparts. In the Hyderabad sample, more women reported injecting use than men.



Despite the small numbers of women gathered in its net, the RAS in urban settings reveals several interesting features- younger age, more educated women drug users, unsafe injecting and unsafe sexual practices.

Women And Drug Abuse : The Problem In India

In the Hyderabad sample, more women reported injecting use (35%) than men (16%). Drug use among friends of the respondents was fairly high (52% in Thiruvananthapuram, 51% in Goa).

When the sexual behaviour of drug users was compared in Hyderabad, women drug users reported earlier age at first sexual experience (17.9 years) compared to males (18.4 years). They reported equal number of sexually transmitted infections, greater number

of sexual partners (6.5 % compared with 4.7 %) and less frequent condom use. Disturbingly, all the IDU women in the Thiruvananthapuram sample had shared needles at some time or the other.

Despite the small number of women gathered in its net, the RAS in urban settings reveals several interesting features – younger age, more educated women drug users, unsafe injecting and unsafe sexual practices.

