

Rising use of New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) and its adverse mental health consequences among youth

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First of all, I would like to appreciate the commitment of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs of the UN for putting all the efforts in combating drug abuse including the new psychoactive substances.

Pakistan ranks amongst the top nations in regards to cannabis and cocaine consumption. Although Pakistan is committed to eliminating the menace of drugs to make drug free Pakistan and has strengthened the cooperation with many organizations to combat drug trafficking, drugs are still accessible.

NPS are synthetic substances that mimic the effects of illegal drugs and are produced by introducing slight alterations to the chemical structure of controlled substances to avoid drug controls. The market of new psychoactive substances is a threat to Pakistan and is an emerging phenomenon.

Synthetic drugs such as the use of ecstasy are easily accessible to young people within the educational institutions, in cafes, kiosks, parks, blind-corners, and restaurants. Young people, including males and females, usually start using drugs in Pakistan due to many reasons including but not limited to as an experimental thing or due to peer pressure, it, in most cases, turns into a chain addiction. The horrendous rising use of psychoactive substances among youth, particularly students has escalated mental health challenges among them such as memory loss, fatigue, psychiatric diseases, hallucination, social isolation, depression, schizophrenia, and suicidal tendencies. It has also resulted in their participation in drug peddling, violence, and extreme crime. One of the reasons is the lack of awareness about its consequences. There is no inclusion of courses on drug education at any level of education in Pakistan, which in my viewpoint can play a significant role in preparing youth to keep themselves away from drugs.

The national anti-narcotic policy of 2019 is a promising document that has highlighted the emerging trends of new psychoactive substances. It has underlined to prevent and counter the emerging challenge of synthetic drugs and new psychoactive substances (NPS) by developing the capacity to detect and identify those substances and strengthening law enforcement, criminal justice, and health responses.

I strongly request the policymakers and the educational institutions to introduce a mandatory course on human rights education and drug education at the national level, so that young people can take ownership, and refrain to get indulged in drug practices. Alongside this, we need to provide them guidance and counseling through the establishment of socio-counseling units at the institutional level.