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Over the last two decades, the use of illegal drugs has spread to practically every part of the globe. No nation remains immune to the devastating problems caused by drug abuse. Perhaps the biggest problem is that it makes its deepest impression on those most vulnerable. Women, who traditionally appeared to have some kind of immunity to drug abuse, at least in terms of 'social inoculation', are now recognised as also being susceptible to drug use and its related problems.

Women can be seen as being involved with drugs from three perspectives (World Health Organization, 1997):

- Women non-drug users with drug abusing families or partners.
- Women who themselves consume drugs.
- Women who are involved in the production and/or distribution of drugs.

Impact on Women of Drug Use in the Family

Drug abuse poses various problems impacting not just the individual user, but also his or her family and community. The adverse impact of drug use on families is tremendous. It is the family to, or on which, the dependent user turns during crises of many kinds. Relationships suffer, financial sources are depleted, and health costs increase. There are greater employment problems and increased emotional stress. The consequences of drug abuse are often more severe for families in precarious or poverty-stricken circumstances. There is also a serious risk of transmission of HIV, STD and other blood borne viruses to

partners of infected drug users. Drug use is often associated with domestic violence, which in turn aggravates the physical and emotional distress of the family. Common family responses include depression, stress and resentment. The non drug using partner may also take to drugs or alcohol for solace (UNODCCP, 2000, Shankardass, 1998).

Within the family, it is often the woman, in the role of wife or mother, who is most affected by an individual's drug use and has to bear a significant part of the burden on the family. This impact is even more pronounced in a developing country like India, where women already face social disadvantages. This aspect of the burden of drug use on women in India has received scant attention.

Drug Abuse among Women

Like many other societies, India is undergoing transition. Changing roles, increased stress and alterations in lifestyle bring with them newer problems, including drug abuse. Although the problem of drug abuse among women is being increasingly recognised, this phenomenon and related problems do not usually show up in official drug statistics. This is partly due to the limited number of women drug users and the largely subordinate position of women users in the drug subculture. However, women are likely to suffer greater consequences than men due to drug abuse.

Drug using women are likely to be more stigmatised than their male counterparts because their activities are regarded by society as 'double deviance' – as deviance from both



accepted social codes of behaviour and from traditional expectations of the roles of wife, mother and family nurturer (Fagan, 1994).

Women's Involvement in Drug Production and Distribution

While the 'big business' of illicit trafficking is a male-dominated activity in its upper echelons, women are frequently involved in cultivation, processing and drug dealing. A study of New York City cocaine markets in the late 1980s confirmed female involvement at the retail level as part of a diversified income strategy, which included legitimate activities and consensual crimes such as prostitution (Fagan, 1994). Poverty and intimidation are known to drive women into becoming drug couriers.

Women and Drug Abuse: the Problem in India

The relevance of a gender focus has been emphasised both in the *World Drug Report* (United Nations International Drug Control Programme, 1997) and the *South Asia Drug Demand Reduction Report* (UNDCP, ROSA, 1998). Drug use raises very distinct issues for women, from both the socio-cultural and physiological perspectives. In particular, the rising number of wives/partners of HIV positive drug abusers who have contracted the virus has drawn the attention of the international and national communities to gender issues in relation to interventions in the area of drug abuse.

Gender issues have largely been inadequately addressed in drug abuse research. In the South Asian sub-region, drug abuse among women has been even more poorly researched than in other parts of the world (UNDCP, ROSA, 1998). This is because the traditional estimates of drug abuse among women have been low, and it has simply been presumed that research findings applicable to men can be extrapolated to women drug users as well. This is clearly not the case.

This monograph attempts to provide a keyhole view into the world of women affected by drugs from two major perspectives – from the perspective of having a drug user in her family and from the perspective of being a drug user herself. It draws from three recent research initiatives undertaken by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (Ministry), Government of India, and the United Nations

International Drug Control Programme, Regional Office for South Asia (UNDCP, ROSA).

As part of the project titled 'National Survey on Extent, Pattern and Trends of Drug Abuse in India', the UNDCP and the Ministry commissioned two focussed thematic studies that examined the issue of women and drug use in India from the two dimensions mentioned above:

- Burden on Women due to Drug Abuse by Family Members (referred to as the Burden Study), co-ordinated by Mala Kapur Shankardass (2002).
- Substance Abuse among Women (referred to as the Women's Study), co-ordinated by Shoba Lal Kapoor (2002).

Data on drug abuse on women is also available from the RAS, which was carried out in fourteen sites under two broad groups – one co-ordinated by Suresh Kumar (2002), and the other by Luke Samson and Jimmy Dorabjee (2001). This study throws an important light on women and substance use, especially in affording a comparison to male drug use.

This monograph presents a comprehensive view of the various dimensions of drug abuse among Indian women in the context of findings from these three studies. It draws attention to several important issues pertaining both to drug use among women and its antecedents and consequences from a gender perspective. However, it is neither an exhaustive compendium nor a comprehensive critique on research in this area, nor does it address in detail the larger and complicated issue of gender inequality and its implications for the drug abusing woman. This monograph is only a preliminary step towards understanding the complex and dynamic issues regarding women and drugs, and relevant issues in treatment, support and prevention of drug related problems among women. It is important to bear in mind that all three studies mentioned above were focussed surveys on the specific problems of women and drug abuse, for which respondents were selected through a process of purposive sampling. The study findings, therefore, are not generalisable for the country as a whole. The studies give us an important first glimpse into the problems women face vis-à-vis drug abuse.

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