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**THE USE OF PSYCHOACTIVE DRUGS AMONG
STREET LADIES IN ABA METROPOLIS OF
NIGERIA: AN ASSESSMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH
IMPLICATIONS**

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THE USE OF PSYCHOACTIVE DRUGS AMONG STREET LADIES IN ABA METROPOLIS OF NIGERIA: AN ASSESSMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The use of psychoactive drugs among ladies is engaged in on an alarming increase in the postmodern Nigerian society, as it remains one of the public health and social vices that affects the contemporary human community.

Purpose: The objectives of this study were to identify the drugs mostly abused and to determine the risk behaviours they engage in when under the influence of psychoactive drugs.

Methodology: This study adopted a cross-sectional approach involving the use of oral interview and a semi- structured questionnaire as the instrument of data collection. This involved 20 interviewees in simple random selection. The data collected were analyzed using a descriptive statistics and statistical test of significance and results presented in charts.

Findings: Major findings in this study attest to the fact that the mostly abused psychoactive drugs are Cigarette, Indian hemp, tramadol and codeine, cocaine. The use of psychoactive drugs is precursory to mental health challenges, depression, and behavioural abnormalities among younger women. The risk behaviours engaged when under the influence of these psychoactive drugs are aggressiveness/ ready to fight, unrestricted sexual activities, desire for more drug use. Consequently, the study findings maintain that the perpetration of heinous crimes that are carried out in the society cannot be independent of the influence of drugs, since the abused psychoactive drugs alter the normal function of the brain thus affecting the mental health of the user.

Contribution to theory, practice and policy: Therefore, public health education and promotion with a focus on dissuading the unrestricted circulation and abuse of psychoactive drugs, especially among Aba young ladies is perceived profitable.

Conclusion and Recommendation: Community awareness regarding drug and substance among women and constant checkmating of the activities of street girls should be carried out.

Keywords: *Street Ladies, Mental Health, Psychoactive drugs.*

INTRODUCTION

A psychoactive drug, psycho-pharmaceutical, or psychotropic drug is a chemical substance that changes brain function and results in alterations in perception, mood, consciousness, cognition, or behavior. Based on their prevalent influences, psychoactive drugs can be classified as stimulants (nicotine present in tobacco, caffeine contained in coffee, cocaine, amphetamine, khat, etc.), depressants (alcohol, barbiturates, benzodiazepines, chloral hydrate, rohypnol, etc.), narcotics (heroin, morphine, codeine etc), hallucinogens (alpha-methyltryptamine, ketamine, phencyclidine, D-lysergic acid diethylamide etc), and cannabis (marijuana, hashish, hash oil etc) (Jamik, Kosticova, Pecenek, & Turcek, 2017). According to Dominni (1991), nicotine is a unique psychoactive drug which produces arousal, relaxation, promotion of REM sleep and skeletal muscle relaxation in both animals and humans in tobacco smoking concentrations. Psychoactive drugs are commonly used in the treatment of common medical conditions such as pain, anxiety and sleep disorders (World Health Organization (WHO), 2006), but they are also associated with substance abuse and drug diversion (Casati et al., 2012; Fischer and Rehm, 2007; Griffiths et al., 2014; United Nations (UN), 2014; WHO, 2006).

One group of people that may be prone to the abuse of these drugs is the women often involved in commercial sex work. Street sex workers are caught in a cycle of problems, including substance abuse, homelessness, violence, sexual and mental health problems, which make them an important target for public health and social services (Kurtz et al. 2005). Drug use is widespread among street sex workers in urban centers (Nuttbrock et al. 2004). Street sex work takes place in domains where drug use and trade are prevalent (Cusick 1998; Grella, Wugalter, and Anglin 1997). Drug users and sex workers population overlap (Maher 1996; Maher and Curtis 1992; Maher and Daly 1996). Female drug users may enter sex work to support drug habits, and sex work is a risk factor for female drug use (Inciardi and Surratt 2001; Kuhns, Heide, and Silverman 1992). It is clear from the foregoing that substance abuse may be common among sex workers in urban dwellings.

The chairman of the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), Buba Marwa opined that one in every five Nigerians using illicit drugs is a woman (Business Day, 2021). He further observed that over 10.6 million Nigerians use Cannabis while 4.6 million use Opioids and Tramadol. According to him, the drug use prevalence among Nigerians aged between 15 and 65 years is approximately 15 percent, three times the global average of 5.5 percent prevalence rate. The problem is more compounded as different categories of drugs are produced, consumed and trafficked in the country. Research findings uncover that substance abuse problem in Nigeria has been aggravating over the recent years (Hemeson, 2015). Hemeson observed a very dangerous type of marijuana; “Black mamba” has made its way into the country and is widely consumed by young people in the country. Alake (2014) asserts that alcoholic liquors are the most available among the substances consumed by women in Nigeria. The statistics that one in every five Nigerian using illicit drug is a woman is alarming considering the role women play or are expected to play in the development of the family and the society at large. Few studies have however focused on this group of people in Nigeria and this study is specifically conceived to identify the types of drugs mostly abused by street ladies, the reason contributing to the abuse and the associated risk behaviour of the abuse.

The Concept and practice of abusive use of psychoactive drugs

History holds records of ancient psychotropic plants having psychotropic substances were used in altering mammalian brain. The use of these psychotropic substances paves way for the modern understanding of the concept and phenomenon of drug abuse. Certain substances have been long abused in the history of human society. Since the nineteenth century, the abuse of

drugs and substances seem to have climbed to a rapid increase as the rate of drug addict increase on daily basis in virtually every nation on the globe, most illicit use of drugs in the modern time starts at the age of 16-17 years of age (Barerah, 2018). Marijuana moved from being unrestricted to become tightly controlled and acute restriction with addition of the regulation and placing of taxation of the use of marijuana in legal forms. Today the numeric strength of those who abuse or addicted to drugs rises on alarming rate. In United States, it is estimated that the number of those with alcoholic use disorder fluctuates between 15 (fifteen) to 16 (sixteen) million people. At the same time, over twelve million human beings are estimated to be struggling with the use of various psychoactive drugs.

There is strong assumption that about one hundred and fifteen people die on daily basis in the United States from the overdose usage of opioid. Thus, the problematic usage of such drugs develops to addiction, since the brain has become acquainted on the impact created on the neural homeostatic circuitry. Therefore, human society had long ago been involved in drug usage and drug addiction since ancient time. Scientists still maintain that the origin of mammalian brains and the existence of psychotropic plants complement each other as far as the issue of the historical reflection of drug addiction and abuse is concerned. Drug abuse could be so detrimental to anyone who engages in it. It does not only have effect on one side; it involves various severe health problems. It shuts down the emotional system and retires the affairs of the general body system. According to Knutson (2002), scientific researchers believe that while the origins of drug addiction in various forms may be traced to be generally genetic factors, the abuse itself is mostly caused by the combination of internal and external stimuli, as environmental and emotional stimuli may contribute immensely and serve as the catalyst towards the sustainability of the addiction in individuals. This is the preparatory ground for the battle of drug problems in the society.

Drugs use among young ladies

Globally, the study of drug use among women has become a major concern of various fields as findings do attract attention for further research. For example, study by Arpa (2017) attests that in the European Union 34.8 million women aged 15 to 64 are reported to have ever tried an illicit drug, compared with 54.3 million men. A data from the 2016 Statistical Bulletin, being the latest general population studies available from the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) indicate variations between countries in the lifetime rates of any illicit drug use among this group of women with European nations such as France, Denmark and the United Kingdom also having highest figures (Arpa, 2017). Substance abuse and addiction takes high costs from the society and government annually, as much as £15 billion in the United Kingdom alone. Such huge expense as being incurred every year is caused by drug-related crime and death. However, it is estimated that NHS spends approximately £500 million annually for the treatment of all kinds of physical and mental health conditions directly caused by drug and substance misuse (Andrew & Marnie, 2018). The drugs and substances frequently abused by women and are addicted to include cocaine, opioids, alcohol, tobacco, tramadol, codeine and marijuana. Women often use substances differently than men. In matters that have to do with dosage and quantity, women take smaller quantity than men. They usually begin with smaller quantity amount until they become addicted (Hagen, 2002).

Women also respond to drugs and substances abuse in different ways from that of men. Studies in Alderson (2007), shows that women do have more craving for drugs than men when they get addicted. This is a process that usually begins with smaller quantity amount until they become addicted. Women sex hormone is more sensitive when they are addicted to drugs than that of men who are addicted to drugs and substances abuse.

Effects of psychoactive drugs on ladies

Generally, abusive use of drug works in three dimensions which include the biological, the social and psychological. It is well established that women with drug abuse disorders present for treatment with significant psychiatric co-morbidity. Most Scientific studies about drug use have discovered that women who use drugs are prone to medical issues related to hormones, menstrual cycle, fertility, pregnancy, breastfeeding, and menopause (NIDA, 2020). Women show higher rates of certain co-occurring psychiatric disorders compared to men, such as major depression, social phobia, post-traumatic stress disorders, and eating disorders (Denier et al 1991). According to Westermeyer, Kopka and Nugent (1996) gender differences in depression are generally perceived to be related to the interface of biological and psychosocial factors. In this case, the occurrence of higher rates of depression is seen among women who are poor, lowly educated, those who experience poor welfare, as well as women who are unemployed. As drug and substance abuse depression is common among women who are experiencing drug abuse problems, Schutte, Seable, and Moos (1997) observe that such problems could be detected among greater women population. Hence, gender differences in the relationships between depressive symptoms and drinking behavior have been reported in problem drinkers, this is an indication that drugs and substances related depression can play double or more dangerous roles among women (Tuchman, 2010).

Study Area

This research was carried out in Aba town, which is the commercial hub of Abia State in the South Eastern geo-political zone of Nigeria, having 35,000/km² (91,000/sq mi). Aba is a major urban settlement and commercial center in a region that is surrounded by small villages and towns (Falola et al, 2008). The indigenous people of Aba are the Ngwa clan of Igbo land. Aba is well known for its craftsmanship and the most populous city in the South Eastern Nigeria. As of 2016 census, Aba had an estimated population of 2,534,265. The city lies along the west bank of the river of Aba, being at the intersection of roads leading to Umuahia, Port Harcourt in Rivers State, Ikot Ekpene in Akwa Ibom State, and Owerri in Imo State. The city became a collecting point for agricultural products following the British made railway running through it from Port Harcourt to the northern part of Nigeria (Holberg, 2010).



Figure 1: Map of Aba metropolis

METHODOLOGY

The study was descriptive-exploratory and cross-sectional in design. This implies that it described certain features of the population using data collected and unraveled relationships and associations between the selected variables. The research is also cross-sectional because the field work was conducted within a short period of time without any further attempt to evaluate the changes in trends over time. An oral interview was conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire to get deep insight into issues that are crucial to address the objectives of the study. The geographic focus was set as the Aba metropolis with the focus group as the street ladies commonly found in places such as night clubs, brothels, drinking joints and other fun spots. Twenty (20) members of this group were initially identified using simple random selection. They all agreed to participate in the interview but two of them later opted out. In total, eighteen participants were interviewed resulting in a response rate of 90%. The data collected were analysed using a descriptive statistics and statistical test of significance. The hypothesis that there is no significant association between psychoactive drugs commonly abused and the associated risk behaviors was tested using the Chi-square (χ^2). The results were presented in statistical charts

FINDINGS

Result of the findings made in this study shows the groups of psychoactive drugs and substances most abused by street girls and various factors responsible to that.

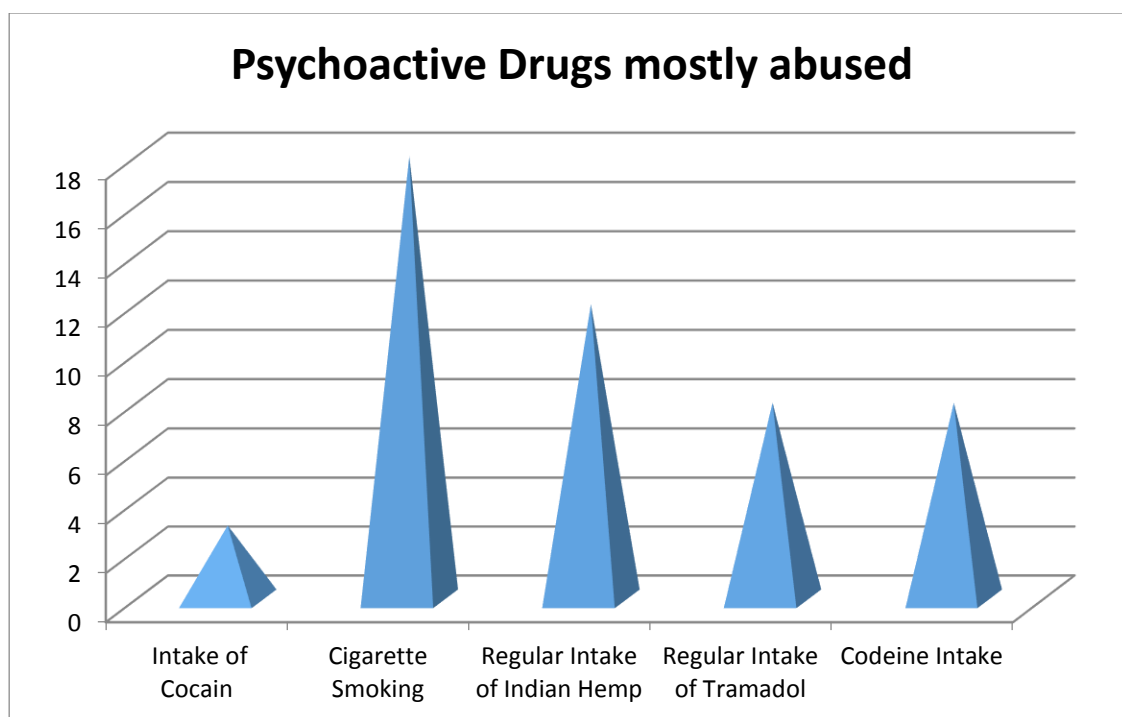


Figure 2: Psychoactive Drugs mostly abused by Street Girls

It is evident from the chart above that psychoactive drugs mostly abused by street girls in Aba consist of codeine, tramadol, hemp, cigarette and cocaine. It was however observed that 100% of the street ladies indulge in consistent smoking of cigarette. A high intake of Indian hemp was also observed with 67% of the street ladies found to be accustomed to a regular intake of Indian hemp. An equal proportion of the consumption of Tramadol and Codeine was observed in the study with the rate of intake standing at 44% each among the street ladies. Cocaine consumption was found to be the lowest among the psychoactive drugs usually abused among Aba

metropolis street girls. Only 17% of the group was found to be involved in the intake of cocaine.

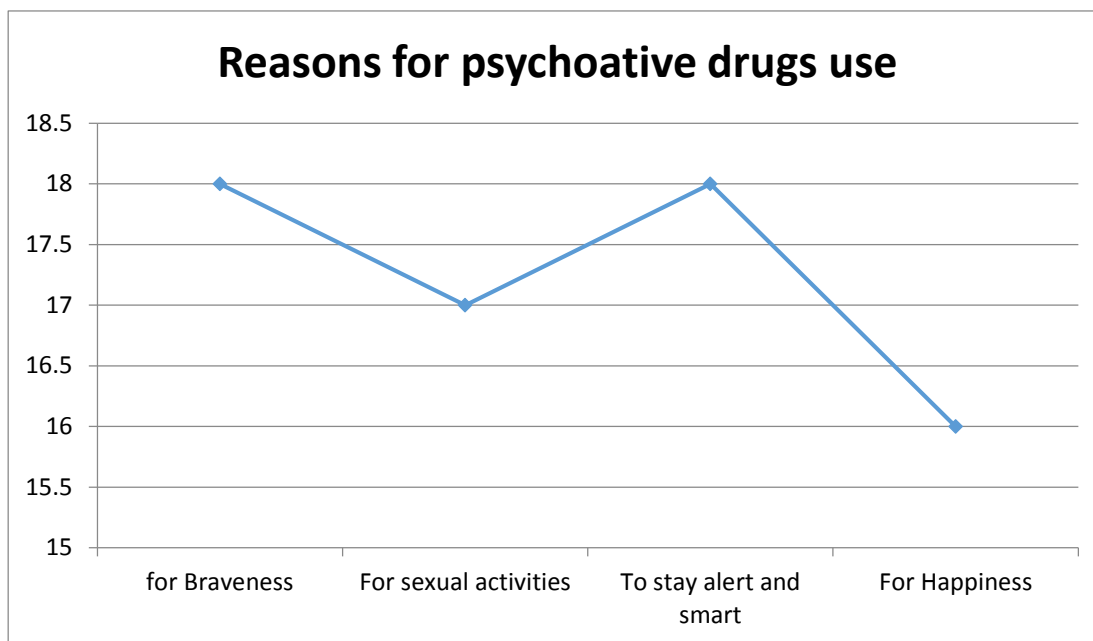


Figure 3: Reasons for Abuse of Drugs

The reasons for the use of psychoactive drugs by street girls in Aba as observed in the study include for braveness, for sexual activities, for happiness, and for alertness. Findings show that approximately 100 % of Aba street girls use psychoactive drugs in order to stay alert, ready to parade the street or stand for long period of time waiting for their clients and also for the purpose of making them brave. It was also observed that 94% of cases use psychoactive drugs for sexual activities while 89% of cases claimed the use of these drugs give them happiness.

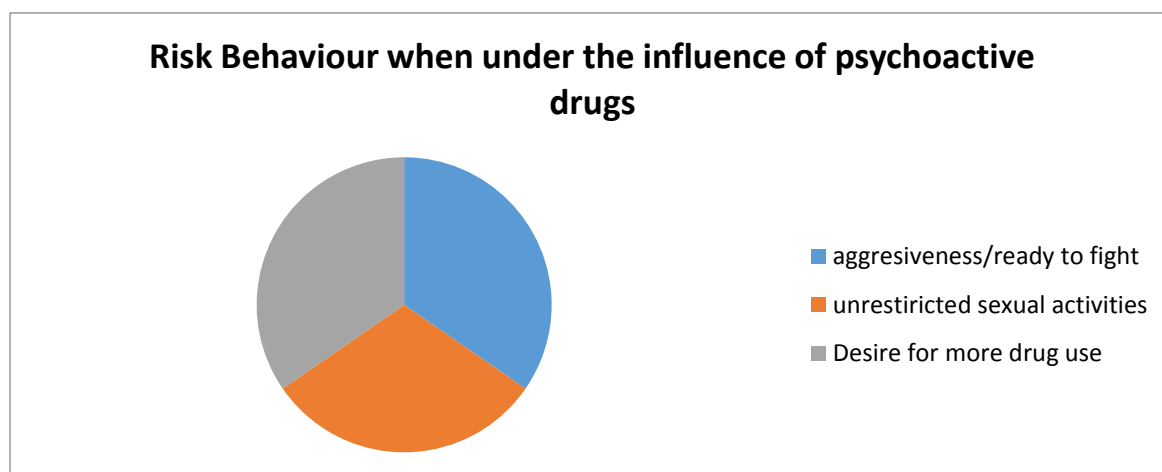


Figure 4: Risk Behaviours

The above figure presents the findings on the risk behaviors associated with the use of psychoactive drugs among street girls in Aba. Each 1/3 part or 33.3 % of the pie chart shows that the use of psychoactive drugs by the street girls lead to aggression, unrestricted sexual activities as well as the crave for more drug use. It can be deduced that all the participants are at risk of exhibiting aggressive behavior and readiness to fight under the influence of psychoactive drugs.

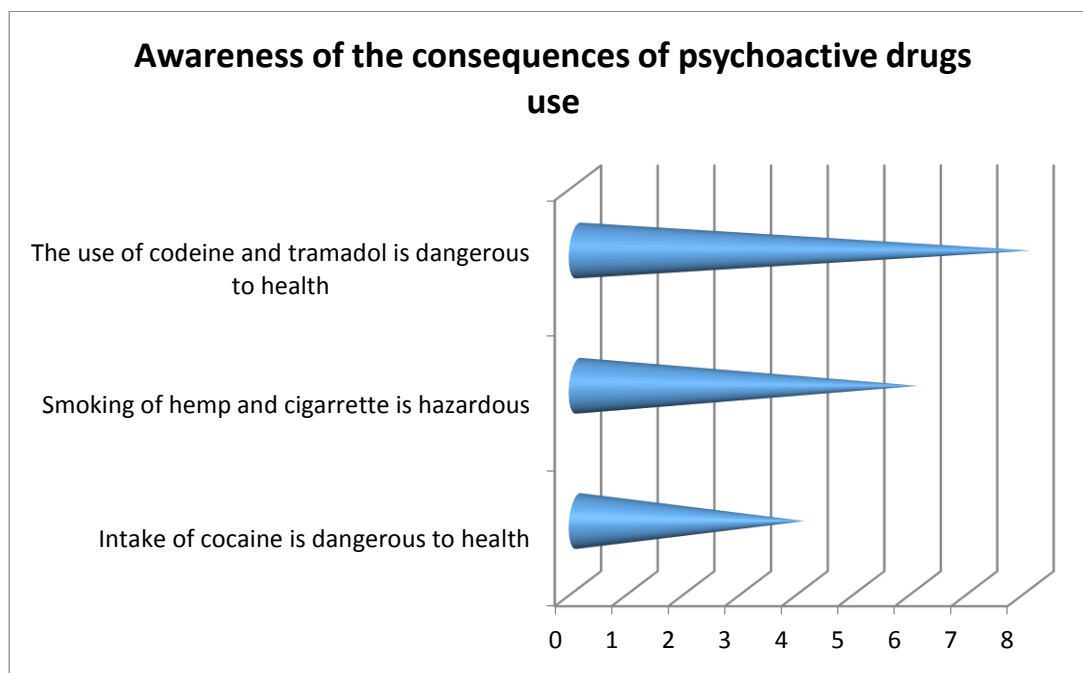


Figure 5: Awareness of the consequences of drug use

Findings in this study reveal a low awareness level of the consequences of psychoactive drugs use among street ladies. From the chart above, it can be deduced that about number of the individuals interviewed have no awareness of any associated consequence of psychoactive drugs use. There is however variation in the perception of the participants to the risk associated with the use of different psychoactive drugs. It evident that more than half of the participants are aware that the use of codeine and tramadol are dangerous to health. Less than half of the respondents express their awareness of the hazard pose by the smoking of hemp and cigarette. On the consequences of the intake of cocaine, less than half of the population of the individuals interviewed expressed awareness that the intake of cocaine is dangerous to health.

Test of Hypothesis

H₀: There is no significant association between psychoactive drugs commonly abused and the associated risk behaviors.

H₁: There is a significant association between psychoactive drugs commonly abused and the associated risk behaviors.

We reject H₀ if P-value is less than $\alpha = 0.05$. Otherwise we do not reject.

From the test of association conducted using Chi-square (χ^2), it revealed that $\chi^2 = 32.414$, df = 15 and P = 0.006. Thus P < 0.05. We reject H₀.

CONCLUSION

The high rate of use of cannabis observed in this study supports the assertion by the chairman of the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), Buba Marwa that one in every five Nigerians using illicit drugs is a woman. Several reasons were however identified as responsible for the use of psychoactive drugs among street ladies in this study. One of such reasons is the use of these drugs for sexual activities. Unrestricted sexual activities were also identified as risk behaviour of the use of psychoactive drugs. One implication is that the use of psychoactive drugs could derail the effort geared towards the spread of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV as has been established in the study that those cases that indulge in commercial sex work

sometimes engage in the act without protection especially when under the influence of psychoactive drugs. Ladies that indulge in psychoactive drugs are also at greater risk of exposure to violence. From the test of hypothesis conducted, we conclude that there is a significant association between psychoactive drugs commonly abused and the associated risk behaviors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As the number of recent studies on women with drug and substance use problems rise rapidly, there is need for increases and ceaseless emphasis with the undivided objective to the raising of community awareness regarding women and substance use in general sense, and women with drug and substance use disorders in particular.

The fight against the local production and trafficking of imported psychoactive drugs and substances should be decisively intensified. As the anti-drug trafficking and law enforcement agencies make a noble uncompromising duty to checkmate the trafficking routes and distribution of unlawful drugs. The activities of street girls should be drastically put under check, since such activities orchestrate and encourage the use of psychoactive drugs, thus making a potential and practical lucrative business for producers, smugglers and dealers.

A gender responsive health education incorporating women's needs in all aspects of their design and delivery is recommended. The education should be delivered in environments that are welcoming, non-judgmental, supporting and physically and emotionally safe; be holistic and comprehensive; promote healthy connections to children, family members, significant others and the community; and address socioeconomic conditions.

There should also be stringent measures aimed at controlling the illicit sale of psychoactive drugs. The law enforcement and other regulatory agencies should devise strategies to curtail the proliferation of these substances.

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