

Women and Drug Abuse in Contemporary Nigeria: A cursory look at the Health and Social Effects

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Abstract

There is growing concern over the issue of drug abuse among women in present Nigeria; including married ones, some women use drugs as a result of abuse or violence, loneliness or feeling of being abandoned. These women believed that there is immediate pleasure in drug abuse as such; they use it as a means to attain pleasure and forget their problems. Women who abuse drugs are more likely to experience health related problems during menstruation, pregnancy and delivery. They often experience social disapproval for marriage and motherhood and the married ones are likely to be involved in domestic violence with in-laws and husband, (especially if their spouses are not like them). Some of these women usually end up with health problem, divorce and emotional instability. This paper seeks to examine, the sociological perspective of why people including women engage in drug abuse. It seeks to examine the social and health effect of drug abuse on women and their fertility, and aimed at proffering solution

Introduction

There is a growing concern worldwide over the issue of drug abuse, because it has been on the rise in different countries, causing health hazards, moral decadence, disorderly conducts and different kinds of social problems. Drug problems matters to all societies and cannot be ignored because of the consequences, the risk and cost involved. Despite the disadvantages of drug abuse that are too apparent, our contemporary women and young girls are getting themselves involved in it. Marijuana is said to be the most commonly used illicit drug amongst women of reproductive age or by women who are pregnant ¹

Some women use drugs as a result of abuse or violence, loneliness or feeling of being abandoned. Some other women believe that there is immediate pleasure in drug abuse; they believe that there are biochemical effects like mood altering, confidence attainment, feeling of floating on air, and feeling high, as such they use it as a means to attain pleasure, a means to forget their problems and traumas or as a means to meet the vogue of the time. A common reason both men and women hold, as an excuse to start using drugs or drinking is stress. Such people tend to neglect the addictive nature of drug and the different health and social dangers that are rooted in drug abuse.

In this piece of work, the concept of drug and drug abuse was briefly examined, some types of drugs and the street drug jargon were also discussed, the paper also looked at the sociological perspective of why people including women engage in drug abuse, at the end it examine the health effect of drugs on the fertility of women and social effect of drug abuse on women and aimed at proffering some recommendations to curb the menace.

Concept of Drug and Drug Abuse

A drug is any chemical compound used in the diagnosis, treatment, or prevention of diseases or other abnormal condition. It can also be defined as a chemical substance that affects the process of the mind or body. The term ‘drug’ has several definitions depending on the professional (2). Some writers explained that drugs are natural or synthetic substance which (when taken into a living body) affects its functioning or structure and is used in the diagnosis, mitigation, treatment, or prevention of a disease or serve as a relief of discomfort.

Drug abuse has been defined as the use of drugs, whether over the counter or prescription, for purposes other than those prescribed on the product label, often for recreational reasons. It has been defined in many ways, but a very simplified definition is “the use of illegal drugs or the inappropriate use of legal drugs. Drug abuse is the use of drugs in a way that differs from the generally approved medical and social practices (Oleyede, 2002), from this definition we can deduce that two types of drug usage have been identified, the medical and social usage. Medical use of drugs involves the use of drugs for the treatment of diseases and relief of symptoms, these drugs are only safe when prescribed by doctors and trained health personnel and also when legally obtained from the acceptable channels of health delivery system.

In our contemporary Nigerian society there are different kinds of drugs and substances that are commonly abused by people including women; they are cannabis, alcohol, heroin, benylin, tutolin, tramol, roch, sholly, inhalants (glue solution) codeine, caffeine, pawpaw leaves, pentazocin etc. Some other substances that are also abused are cocaine, amphetamine, hypno-sedatives (especially valium, lexotan, ativan) and volatile solvents. A relatively common pattern of abuse is the frequent and addictive use of pentazocin a strong drug which was meant to be use as pain-killer based on doctor’s prescription. Lately in contemporary Nigeria a trend among students and women is the abuse of codeine based cough syrup. Abusers purchase large quantities of cough syrup from medicine stores claiming that that they are afflicted with cough related conditions. They often swallow the content of a bottle of cough syrup in one go

The abuse of drug often lead to addiction to it, there are usually four stages involved in developing drug dependence (addiction). The first stage is the stage of experimentation, the second stage is called the stage of more frequent use (abuse)

the third stage is the stage of intense pre-occupation to experience the effects of the drug and the last stage is the stage of drug dependence (3) In which the abuser of drug uses drugs more frequently than he/she planned. The abuser may want to stop using, but feel powerless to do so. His/her life revolves around drug use; he/she spends a lot of time using and thinking about drugs, figuring out how to get them. Drug abuse creates addictions; any attempt to discontinue their use usually results in specific reactions and negative response from the human body (called withdrawal signs or symptoms) such as sweating, vomiting, and tremors which cease when the use is resumed. Drug abusers tend to neglect responsibilities, at work, home or school, for example flunking classes, skipping works and neglecting children because of drug use; they can also abandon the activities that they use to enjoy in the past, such as hobbies, sports and socializing.

The use of drugs has been in existence right from time immemorial, in the past most drugs evolved from crude natural herbs, in present times drugs are more of sophisticated and synthetic chemicals. Some drugs are medicinal and are meant for treatment in-order to improve people's health status while some are dangerous and can deteriorate people's health status. Social use of drug involves the use of certain substance for recreational and pleasure purpose, example the use of kolanuts, spit tobacco and some traditional herbs. Despite the fact that society does not consider the use of some of this substance as abuse, but there is absolute tendency of over-use and addiction, as such there is possibility of negative outcomes.

Some types of Drugs and the Street Drug Jargon

The licit and illicit drugs used by people worldwide are alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, cocaine, inhalants, sedatives, stimulants, (amphetamines and

hallucinogens), steroids, prescription drugs and heroin (Bartollas and Schmellegger 2008). Licit drugs are those that some society permits to users who are of certain age, while illicit drugs are those that are completely forbidden by law. The vocabulary of the drug world (street name for drugs) is unique and ever changing that is why drug abusers and traffickers use different code words or numbers in describing locations, drug types and monetary values.

Codeine is a type of opiate derived from the opium poppy plant and is related to the drug heroin. Some women referred to benylin and codeine as ‘slow’. Misuse and abuse of benylin and codeine sulfate poses a significant risk to the abuser that could result in overdose addiction. Codeine sulfate is an opioid agonist of the morphine type and a schedule II control substance. Maternal use of codeine can potentially lead to serious adverse reaction, including death. In addition, opioid analgesic can cross the placental barrier and produce respiratory depression and psycho-physiologic effects in neonate (4) Smoking is a practice that combines the dangerous features of alcohol and tobacco as well as a number of pitfalls of its own; it has negative effects on the vital system of the body, on immunity capacity of the body and resistance and on the brain and mind. In the drug world it is referred to as “Bhang, weed, grass, mary jane” (Becker, 2005), “A-bomb, Acapulco Gold, African black, aunt mary, baby, ashes, shit, panama gold, pot” (Bartollas and Schmallegger 2008). In Nigeria it is also referred to as monkey tail.

Heroin is a refined form of morphine, chronic heroin use appears to produce permanent physiological damage, it has been marked as a dangerous drug that causes heart disorder, stroke, hepatitis, etc. its street names are horse, boy, henry, black tar (Bartollas and Schmallegger 2008).

Cocaine is one of the drugs that destroy the human memory; snorting (inhaling) is the most common method of using cocaine, though there is the speed balling method which is the intravenous use of cocaine in combination to other drugs. Its street names are “crack, large-rock, hard-white, two-rock, blizzard, freeze and several others (Becker, 2005).

Inhalants are of different types used by adolescents, but the common feature of the inhalants is that the youths have to inhale the vapor to receive the ‘high’ that they seek, chronic use of some inhalants can lead to liver and kidney damage.

Sedatives or barbiturates are also frequently used by young people, they are in different forms, and are known by their color of their capsule. They are taken orally and have different street names; seconal pills are called red, amytal pills are called ‘blue devils’ and tuinal pills are known as rainbow.

Sociological Perspectives on Why Women Engage in Drug Abuse

The guiding perspectives adopted for this paper is a triangulation of problem behavior model posited by the Jessor, Merton’s anomie theory and Edwin Sutherland’s differential association theory. The Jessor model (1982) is a framework that comprised antecedent background variables and three systems of social psychological and behavioral variables which are the personality system, the perceived environmental system and the behavior system. The variable in the three primary systems interrelate to produce within the individual a greater or lesser tendency to become involved in problem behavior.

The theory hypothesized that there are certain people who have tendency to engage in problem behavior particularly drug use and abuse, example are women

who are less invested in traditional versus deviant behavior, who are so keen and tied to peer groups than parents, and who are isolated, lonely, and alienated, and who feel they have low self esteem perhaps due to violence, or trauma. Such types of women are likely to engage in illicit drug abuse and activities.

The anomie theory of Merton (1968) explained that deviant attitudes like drug abuse result from discrepancy between the culturally defined goals and the institutionalized means of achieving the goal. He argued that in a stable and balance society equal emphasis is placed on both the culturally defined goals and the institutionalized means of attaining the goals. However the social structure place individuals in different positions as a result of which they have different opportunity for realizing their shared value. In a nutshell the anomie theory maintain that the social and cultural structure itself generate pressure for social deviants or criminal behavior upon people variously located in that structure.

Edwin Sutherland in his differential association theory explained that deviant and criminal behaviors are learned in interaction with other people, in this process they learn the techniques of committing the crime too. The theory argued that the principal part of learning bad behavior occurs within intimate personal group. Here we can assert that drug abuse behavior is not an inherited trait but rather an acquired one. The theory also explained crimes committed by the well to do individual and explained that apart from the poor even the rich ones do engage in deviant behavior, as such we can argue that both women and girls from both the rich and poor families do engage in illicit drug activities (which they learn from others in the process of daily life interaction).

There is no simple, single reason why people abuse drugs, but rather there are multiple factors that are certainly responsible for the use of mind altering

drugs. According to Ayodele (2008) some of these factors include pressure, peers, curiosity, and ignorance, alienation, changing social structure, urbanization, poverty and unemployment.

A cursory look at Health Effect, (including Infertility) and Social Effect of Drug Abuse on Women

It is believed that more men use and abuse drugs, but present studies revealed that the gap is narrowing as more female abuses drugs these days (5). In a similar research in Kano, a woman commander from National Drug Law Enforcement Agency reported that it is difficult to say the exact number of female drug addicts who are caught by the officers every week, she lamented that they arrest more of female drug abusers than male, and that women mix illicit drugs or substances in drinks during ceremonies and share it among themselves, the goal is to get them tipsy and give them the courage to dance and talk vulgar (6). More unconventional drugs are also being used, not just codeine-laced cough syrup which has become popular among married women, but solvents and powerful horse stimulants. Codeine is secreted into human milk; it can lead to higher than expected level of morphine in breast milk and can potentially lead to death in nursing infants

Researchers have reported that drug abuse poses more problems for women because women have less body water (than men of their similar body weight) and that women who abuse substances have physiological consequences, health issues and more medical needs related to gynecology; they are more vulnerable to organ damages, blood clot and skin tissue problems. In addition drugs and alcohol affect women's menstrual cycles causing increased cramping and heavier or lighter period, women don't metabolize drugs like men which lead them to feeling the

effects more dramatically, making it easier for women to become addicted more quickly (Peters et al, 2003).

Illicit drugs often have a negative effect on female fertility. For instance marijuana has negative effects on the vital system of the body, on immunity capacity of the body and resistance and on the brain and mind. It can also destroy the ability of women to give birth. Studies have reveal that women who smoke cannabis (marijuana) regularly secrete small amount of THC (delta-9-hydrocannabinol, the psycho active ingredient in marijuana) in their vaginal fluid and also have trace amount present in their reproductive organ, as such sperm that come into contact with the THC absorbs the drug and become over stimulated (7). Similarly street drugs including cannabis, heroin, cocaine and ecstasy often lead to ovulation dysfunction and reduced ovarian reserves. Steroids tend to inhibit the release of luteinizing and follicle-stimulating hormones needed for ovulation, it can completely stop ovulation. Cocaine can lead to tubal abnormalities in women and can cause long term fertility damage (8). The psycho active ingredient in marijuana is known to pass from the mother to the developing fetus through the placenta. And any form of smoking can disrupt the supply of oxygen and nutrients to the fetus, which can result in the restriction in the growth of the fetus. From other dimension women who have been abusing drugs and substances for a long time, especially heroine may experience amenorrhea (absence of menstrual cycle period), such condition tends to lead the women to have psychological feeling of infertility believing that they cannot conceive. Women who abuse psychoactive drugs are exposed to unintended pregnancies due to absence of self consciousness and during delivery they are likely to have poor birth outcome and reproductive weakness, due to drug complications.

Drug abuse usually leads to change in attitude and mood alteration, it can give the victim immediate feelings of 'high' or 'floating on air' it can produce abnormal over confidence and out of control behavior, thereby denying the woman her ability to behave morally or maintain normal relationship. It can cause disturbed sleeping pattern, alteration in a woman's manner of talking, looking, and manner of interaction, it can affect her walking style, dressing styles and eating habit. Women who abuse drugs are more likely to meet more dangerous people, they are more likely to get involved in crime than normal women. Similarly, most girls who abuse inhalants or sedative drugs (secretly or publicly) usually end up in troubles, perhaps at school, home, workplace, or in relationship within and outside the family.

In our contemporary society a man who is a drug addict or alcoholic man may still be amidst of his children and wives despite his bad life styles, but an alcoholic or drug addict woman may instantly get divorced, because there is high expectation for women to be better people, not to breed bad social conducts, as such for a woman to take drugs is viewed as morally reprehensible than man. Society places high expectation on women with regards to their virtue, their cares for others, their responsibility to family and community, they are expected to be role models who consider others first. When they decided to go astray they are condemned fiercely because they are very important to society, as such self indulgent behavior like drug-taking among women and young girls is against the norms and values of most society.

A woman known for drug abuse will surely face discrimination and social disapproval for marriage, except after rehabilitation. As for the married ones, they usually live under fierce domestic violence with parents, in-laws and husband, (especially if their spouses are not like them). They are likely to give birth to

babies with poorer eyes sight, tremor, babies with a hole in their heart (ventricular septal defect), babies with chest pain, asthma, wheezing and other breathing problems (9). Some of these women usually end up in family conflict or with divorce document thereby exposing their children to the traumatic experience of broken home, domestic violence, social stigmatization, prejudice and bad reputation.

Conclusion

The paper has discussed the negative effect of drug abuse on women; the concept of drug and its types was not left out, despite the variations in definitions of concepts and types. The street drug jargon or the street names for some of the well known drugs were mentioned, these names which serves as codes in the drug world are unlimited and are use differently. Base on society and their languages, these street names for drugs are subject to constant updating and modification among the underworlds.

The triangulation of some sociological theories was attempted by the paper in-order to give a highlight on why people including women tend to involve themselves in drug abuse. The negative effect of drug abuse in the body and mind of women was briefly discussed; it is obvious that the lifestyle of drug addict is a lifestyle of illness. Facts are apparent that the examples that girls, women and mothers set will eventually affect the younger generation as such recommendations were put in place to help ameliorate the menace of drug abuse.

Recommendations

There should be honest policy that imbibes the spirit of commitment, accountability and transparency in order to combat the production, smuggling and transportation of illicit drug, so that public access to drugs will be made difficult. The culprits of drugs and their god-fathers must be apprehended and should not be ignored, favored, or left out in the fight against illicit drugs activities.

There should be a sincere poverty eradication programs for women and adequate provision of welfare services for them both economically, educationally and psychologically. Because when women are fit in all these aspect, it will be difficult for them to focus on drugs. Those who are already in the trap of drug abuse should be adequately rehabilitated.

Religious organizations and religious writers need to remind women about the danger of drug abuse and its prohibition in the law of the Almighty Creator. Educational institutions and NGOs need to adequately sensitize the general public (both men and women and children) on the danger of drugs and its effect on their offspring.

Different organizations and agencies should evolve to defend the right of women and their children from public and domestic violence (which can force them to drug-taking), and they should call for the persecution of whosoever violate women and force them to seek solace from drugs (either directly or indirectly).

There is the need for extensive mobilization of school girls and married women with regards to the menace of drug abuse through the media and other means; they need to be re-oriented that any form of smoking can affect their health, reproductive organs and even the growth of their babies in future pregnancy. They also need to be sensitized on their virtue and roles as custodians of the family, they

are the bedrock and foundation of every family, they are the basis on which every family sits.

Government and nongovernmental organizations should form association for girls and grown up women who are hair platters who go from house to house, and those who work in saloons, and girls who are henna designers in their different areas. These groups of women should be taught how to sensitize their customers about the danger of drug abuse. They should be mobilized, given adequate orientation and assistance and should be actively involved in the fight against drug abuse.

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