

Exploring Socio-Economic Determinants of Women's Substance Abuse in Dala LGA, Kano State, Nigeria

Jummai Modu¹, Sule Magaji², Yakubu Jafaru³

¹Sustainable Development Centre, University of Abuja

²Department of Economics, University of Abuja. ORCID ID: 0000-0001-9583-3993

³Sociology Department, University of Abuja. ORCID ID: 0009-0006-8171-6925

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ABSTRACT

This research examined the socio-economic factors influencing substance abuse among women in the Dala Local Government Area of Kano State, Nigeria. A mixed-methods approach was employed to gather data from 400 women through structured questionnaires, which were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The findings indicated that 42% of participants had used psychoactive substances, with codeine-based cough syrups (60%), tramadol (25%), cannabis (10%), and alcohol (5%) being the most frequently abused. Most users reported starting their use between the ages of 18 and 25, influenced by peer pressure, emotional distress, and financial difficulties. Chi-square and regression analyses showed significant relationships between unemployment, low educational levels, and the prevalence of substance abuse. Specifically, unemployed women were 2.8 times more likely to misuse substances, while those with limited education were 2.3 times more susceptible compared to their peers with higher educational attainment. Marital status also influenced substance use, with divorcees and widows reporting higher usage rates due to domestic stressors such as violence, neglect, and social isolation. The results highlight the complex factors contributing to substance abuse among women, stressing the need for comprehensive interventions that address education, economic empowerment, healthcare accessibility, and psychosocial support. This study adds to the existing literature on gender-specific vulnerabilities regarding substance abuse in Nigeria and suggests policy recommendations for targeted prevention and rehabilitation approaches.

Corresponding Author:

Yakubu Jafaru

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INTRODUCTION

Substance abuse has become a significant public health and social concern in Nigeria, with a troubling rise in cases among women in both urban and peri-urban areas. Historically viewed as primarily a male issue, the involvement of women in substance use has increased, especially in Northern Nigeria, where conservative socio-cultural standards often conceal its prevalence. In the Dala Local Government Area of Kano State, this escalating trend represents not only a health issue but also a deeper indication of systemic socio-economic inequalities that render women vulnerable to drug use and dependency (Adenugba & Okeshola, 2018).

Kano State, being one of Nigeria's most populated and economically dynamic areas, has been flagged by the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) as a critical zone for drug-related issues, including trafficking, misuse, and addiction (Yahaya, 2019). Within this framework, Dala LGA is particularly significant. It is one of the oldest and most densely populated regions in Kano, characterised by socio-economic variety, high poverty levels, and persistent gender inequalities. Limited access to education (Magaji, 2023), elevated youth unemployment (Magaji & Adamu, 2011), and deeply rooted patriarchal customs come together to create a climate in which women are especially vulnerable to substance abuse.

The socio-economic factors at play are multifaceted. Poverty, especially among widows, divorced women, and single mothers, serves as a crucial trigger, with many individuals resorting to drugs as a means of coping with economic struggles and social

exclusion. Unemployment exacerbates the situation (Enaberue et al., 2024), as women without stable livelihoods become susceptible to peer pressure and manipulation within informal drug networks (Ahmed et al., 2021). Low educational achievements also hinder awareness of the health implications of drug use, while limiting women's opportunities to secure better jobs or engage significantly in public life. Domestic violence and fractured family dynamics have also been associated with the onset and persistence of drug use, as impacted women frequently seek psychological escape through substances like codeine syrups, tramadol, and cannabis. Cultural and institutional elements further complicate the issue. In contrast to men, women who engage in substance abuse face increased stigmatisation—being marginalised by their communities and overlooked by governmental institutions. Limited availability of gender-sensitive rehabilitation facilities and mental health support leads many women to be stuck in cycles of addiction, poverty, and marginalisation. Their lack of visibility in policy discussions continues to maintain their exclusion from initiatives aimed at tackling substance abuse in Kano State (Yahaya, 2019).

Recent research emphasises the importance of framing women's substance abuse within a broader socio-economic and political context. Ahmed et al. (2021) identify peer influence, family dysfunction, corruption in law enforcement, and inadequate mental health services as key factors driving this issue, while Adenugba and Okeshola (2018) highlight unmet aspirations, exposure to negative media, and socio-cultural expectations as reinforcing factors. These factors indicate that substance abuse among women in Kano is not merely a matter of individual moral failing, but rather a reflection of structural inequalities and systemic neglect.

In this context, this study examines the socio-economic factors contributing to substance abuse among women in Dala LGA, Kano State. It aims to explore how intersections of poverty, unemployment, low educational levels, domestic violence, and peer pressure influence women's drug use, ultimately contributing to policy discussions, bolstering community-led initiatives, and promoting gender-sensitive rehabilitation approaches. The study aims to shed light on the real experiences of women impacted by substance abuse while providing evidence-based recommendations to tackle the underlying causes of this crisis within the local socio-economic framework.

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Substance Abuse: Substance abuse refers to the harmful or risky use of psychoactive substances, including alcohol and illegal drugs. According to Oweibia et al. (2024), substance abuse in Nigeria is defined as “the indiscriminate use of drugs without medical supervision, often leading to social, psychological, and physiological harm.” Dukku (2021) notes that substance abuse includes both legal and illicit drugs, spanning from prescription medications to narcotics, which are utilised in ways that deviate from accepted medical or social norms.

Socioeconomic Factors: Socioeconomic factors encompass the social and economic conditions that influence an individual's behaviour and their ability to access resources (Yakubu et al., 2025). These factors encompass income level (Magaji, 2007), educational attainment (Magaji, 2008), employment situation (Adekoya et al., 2025), family structure (Jafaru et al., 2024), and healthcare accessibility (Ismail et al., 2024). Hassan and Ugwuoke (2023) describe socio-economic status as “a composite measure indicating an individual's economic and social standing in relation to others, based on income, education, and job type.” In the context of substance abuse, these factors often shape vulnerability levels, coping mechanisms, and access to rehabilitation services.

Women and Vulnerability: Women in Northern Nigeria face unique social, cultural, and economic barriers that increase their vulnerability to substance abuse. As noted by Adenugba and Okeshola (2018), women often begin using drugs through experimentation influenced by peer pressure, psychological challenges, and unfulfilled ambitions. Gender-related issues such as stigma, lack of childcare support, and limited access to mental health services further aggravate this situation (Ahmed et al., 2021).

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Several empirical studies have investigated the factors affecting substance abuse among women in Kano State and across different areas in Nigeria. Ahmed et al. (2021) conducted a study on illicit drug use among women in the Kano metropolis. They found that peer pressure, unstable family backgrounds, and corruption in law enforcement were significant contributors to substance abuse. Their findings revealed that a large proportion of women resort to substance use as a means of coping with frustration, poverty, and the desire to escape domestic violence. Abdullahi and Abdullahi (2023) examined the perspectives of female undergraduates in Kano, discovering that Benylin (a cough syrup containing codeine) was the substance most commonly abused among female students. The research highlighted how factors such as ease of access, lack of regulation, and emotional distress contribute to patterns of abuse. Adenugba and Okeshola (2018) provided a broader national perspective, identifying unemployment, psychological issues, and media influence as key socio-economic factors driving substance abuse among women in Nigeria. Their study emphasised the need for gender-sensitive strategies and community-centred rehabilitation programs.

Empirical research on women's substance abuse has increasingly pointed out the connection between socio-economic conditions and drug use. In contrast to previous studies that framed substance abuse solely as a personal moral failing, more contemporary research illustrates its origins in structural inequalities, gender vulnerabilities, and socio-cultural pressures.

Poverty has been established in numerous studies as a key factor contributing to women's substance abuse. A study by Adenugba and Okeshola (2018) conducted in Northern Nigeria found that women from low-income families were significantly more likely to use psychoactive substances as a way to cope with economic difficulties. Likewise, research by Ahmed et al. (2021) indicated that

widowed and divorced women in Kano metropolis exhibited higher tendencies to consume codeine and tramadol due to financial hardship and a lack of social support. Internationally, research conducted in India by Narain et al. (2019) further supported the notion that economic deprivation heightens women's susceptibility to substance use, as drugs often provide a temporary escape from socio-economic stress.

Substance use among women has also been associated with unemployment. Akinyemi et al. (2019) found a positive correlation between female unemployment and the misuse of tramadol and cannabis in Lagos State, underscoring how economic marginalisation increases vulnerability. Similarly, a study in South Africa by Mchunu and Robinson (2020) discovered that unemployed women had a greater likelihood of abusing alcohol and drugs, particularly in urban slum areas where job opportunities were limited. These findings indicate that economic uncertainty directly increases the propensity for substance use, reinforcing the connection between structural unemployment and addiction.

The impact of education on the prevention or aggravation of substance abuse has been well-documented. Ahmed et al. (2021) reported that women in Kano with minimal or no formal education were overrepresented among drug users compared to those with higher educational levels. Education is viewed as providing not only greater economic prospects but also better awareness of the health risks associated with substance use. Similar conclusions were reached by Owolabi and Ibrahim (2020), who noted that women in northern Nigeria with higher education levels were less likely to engage in the use of psychoactive substances than those without any education. Research from outside Nigeria, such as that conducted by Kapiga et al. (2018) in Tanzania, also confirmed that low literacy rates among women elevate their vulnerability to drug abuse and health problems, especially in underprivileged urban areas. Domestic violence and dysfunctional family dynamics have been consistently recognised as significant factors leading to women's substance abuse. Research by Yahaya (2019) in Kano metropolis revealed that a significant number of women who used drugs reported experiences of spousal abuse and marital discord. Similar trends were observed by Ezeh and Okorie (2020) in Anambra State, where women experiencing intimate partner violence resorted to alcohol and prescription medications to deal with trauma. Global studies from the United States (Greenfield et al., 2019) also validate that women who encounter domestic violence are at an increased risk of substance use as a means of self-medication.

Peer pressure has been identified as another factor contributing to women's substance abuse. In a research study involving young women in Kano, Ahmed et al. (2021) discovered that social networks significantly influenced the initiation of drug use, especially among unmarried women and students. Likewise, Akinyemi et al. (2019) indicated that peer groups played a crucial role in facilitating access to substances such as codeine, tramadol, and cannabis. Similar findings from Uganda (Kaggwa et al., 2020) demonstrated that peer pressure was a key factor affecting young women's initial encounter with drug use, particularly in urban areas where limited parental supervision was prevalent alongside strong social influence.

Institutional neglect further exacerbates substance abuse among women. Yahaya (2019) pointed out that drug policies in Kano State often overlook the specific needs of women, resulting in inadequate rehabilitation programs tailored for them. Ahmed et al. (2021) assert that the lack of gender-sensitive measures contributes to ongoing cycles of exclusion and stigma, which subsequently pushes women deeper into dependency on drugs. These insights resonate with findings from global studies, such as those by UNODC (2020), which highlight that women encounter significant barriers in accessing treatment due to stigma, obligations related to childcare, and an absence of specialised rehabilitation services.

A synthesis of the empirical evidence reveals a consistent emphasis on socio-economic factors as pivotal influences on substance abuse among women. Interactions among poverty, joblessness, low educational levels, domestic violence, and peer pressure create a context where drug misuse acts as both a coping strategy and a reflection of structural inequalities. Research findings from both local and international contexts underscore the urgent need for comprehensive, gender-sensitive strategies that tackle the underlying socio-economic causes instead of solely focusing on criminalisation or health interventions.

The theoretical framework offered by Strain Theory, initially proposed by Robert K. Merton, provides a valuable lens for analysing substance abuse among women in Dala Local Government. This theory posits that societal pressures can compel individuals to engage in deviant behaviours when they are unable to achieve culturally accepted goals through legitimate means. Dukku (2021) notes that the relevance of this theory is evident in Nigeria, where economic challenges and social exclusion often drive people to adopt alternative coping mechanisms, including substance abuse. For the women in Dala, limited access to education, job opportunities, and healthcare, coupled with societal expectations and gender-specific restrictions, generates significant pressure that may lead to drug use as either an escape or an act of defiance. The theory elucidates that substance abuse is not simply a matter of personal failing but rather a response to systemic inequalities and economic distress.

This study utilised a descriptive cross-sectional survey design, which was suitable for evaluating the prevalence and socio-economic factors associated with substance abuse among women at a specific time. The design enabled the gathering of quantitative data to identify patterns, correlations, and predictors of substance misuse within the selected demographic.

The research took place in Dala Local Government Area, noted as one of the oldest and most densely populated areas in Kano State, Nigeria. Dala features both urban and peri-urban communities, characterised by considerable socio-economic disparities and diverse cultural backgrounds. The area has been identified by the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) as a hotspot for drug-related activities, particularly among women and youth, thus making it a strategically important location for this study.

The target demographic for this research comprised women aged between 15 and 45 years residing in Dala LGA. This age range was chosen as it includes adolescents, young adults, and middle-aged women who are especially susceptible to substance abuse due to social pressures, economic hardships, and gender-related challenges. Utilising Cochran's formula for finite populations, a sample size of 400 participants was established. A multi-stage sampling method was implemented to guarantee representativeness across various socio-economic strata and cultural groups. In the initial stage, five wards within Dala LGA were randomly chosen. The second stage involved systematically selecting households from each ward, while the third stage required intentionally choosing eligible female participants from each household.

Data were gathered using a structured questionnaire administered by interviewers, comprised of four sections. Section A collected demographic data from respondents; Section B focused on indicators of socio-economic status such as income, education, and employment; Section C investigated respondents' history and patterns of substance use; and Section D explored perceived factors influencing substance abuse and its effects. The questionnaire was adapted from validated tools previously employed in Nigerian studies on drug abuse to maintain consistency and comparability.

To ensure content validity, the questionnaire was evaluated by specialists in public health and sociology. A pilot study was carried out with 30 women from a nearby LGA, and the feedback was used to enhance the instrument. Reliability testing yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.82, indicating strong internal consistency. Data collection was conducted by trained female research assistants who were proficient in both Hausa and English. This process took place over two weeks, during which ethical standards such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were rigorously maintained.

Data analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and means, were utilised to summarise the demographic and socio-economic data. Inferential statistical methods such as Chi-square tests and logistic regression were applied to investigate the relationships between socio-economic factors and substance abuse among women in the study area. The threshold for statistical significance was established at $p < 0.05$.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings from a field survey conducted among women in the Dala Local Government Area of Kano State. Both descriptive and inferential statistical methods were used to examine the socio-economic factors related to substance abuse. For better clarity and understanding, results are displayed in tables and thoroughly explained.

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 4.1 presents the socio-demographic features of the 400 women surveyed.

Table 4.1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Serial No.	Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
001	Age	15–24	120	30.0
		25–34	160	40.0
		35–45	120	30.0
		Total	400	100
002	Marital Status	Married	220	55.0
		Single	140	35.0
		Widowed/Divorced	40	10.0
		Total	400	100
003	Education	No formal education	100	25.0
		Primary	80	20.0
		Secondary	140	35.0
		Tertiary	80	20.0
		Total	400	100
004	Employment Status	Employed	100	25.0
		Unemployed	300	75.0
		Total	400	100

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The results show that the largest age group was 25–34 years (40%), followed by 15–24 years (30%) and 35–45 years (30%). Most respondents were married (55%), with 35% single and 10% widowed/divorced. In terms of education, 25% had no formal education, while only 20% had attained tertiary education. Employment figures reveal that 75% of respondents were unemployed, suggesting a significant economic vulnerability among the study population.

Prevalence and Patterns of Substance Abuse

Out of the 400 respondents, 168 (42%) reported having used psychoactive substances at least once. This prevalence rate is higher than the national average (NDLEA, 2022), reflecting the unique risks faced by women in Dala LGA.

Table 4.2: Patterns of Substance Abuse

Substance Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Codeine Syrups	101	60.0
Tramadol	42	25.0
Cannabis	17	10.0
Alcohol	8	5.0
Total Users	168	100

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Codeine-based cough syrups emerged as the most abused drug, consumed by 60% of users due to availability and affordability. Tramadol use was also everyday (25%), while cannabis (10%) and alcohol (5%) were less prevalent.

These findings align with those of Ahmed et al. (2021), who reported similar patterns in Kano metropolis, suggesting that the accessibility of prescription opioids and syrups plays a central role in drug misuse among women.

Age of Onset and Influencing Factors

Most respondents began substance use between the ages of 18 and 25, a critical transition period in life. Three significant factors were identified as influencing initiation:

- Social Influence: Peer groups and social networks provided the initial exposure to drugs.
- Emotional Distress: Depression, anxiety, and trauma pushed some women toward drug use as self-medication.
- Economic Hardship: Poverty and unemployment created conditions where drug use became a coping mechanism.

This finding reinforces Strain Theory, which posits that socio-economic pressures encourage maladaptive coping strategies such as substance abuse.

Socio-Economic Drivers of Substance Abuse

The survey highlighted unemployment, poverty, and limited access to healthcare as dominant drivers of substance abuse. Weak family structures, peer influence, and domestic violence further intensified the problem. These findings suggest that substance abuse is not just an individual health challenge but a manifestation of systemic inequalities.

Association Between Employment Status and Substance Abuse

A Chi-square analysis was performed to investigate the connection between employment status and substance abuse.

Table 4.3: Employment Status and Substance Use

Employment Status	Users	Non-Users	Total	χ^2	p-value
Employed	20 (20%)	80 (80%)	100		
Unemployed	148 (49.3%)	152 (50.7%)	300	18.76	<0.001
Total	168	232	400		

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The Chi-square value ($\chi^2 = 18.76$, $p < 0.001$) indicates a notable correlation between unemployment and substance abuse. Unemployed women are over twice as likely to engage in substance abuse compared to those who are employed.

Education and Substance Abuse: The analysis indicated a negative correlation between educational attainment and drug use.

- Among those with no formal education, 60% reported using drugs.
- The percentage for individuals with primary education was 45%.
- This rate decreased to 35% for respondents with secondary education.
- For those who attained tertiary education, only 25% reported using drugs.

This implies that higher educational levels may serve as a protective factor by enhancing awareness and providing greater social and economic opportunities. These results align with the findings of Owolabi & Ibrahim (2020), which showed that education significantly predicts reduced drug abuse among women in Nigeria.

Marital Status and Substance Abuse:

Women who are widowed or divorced exhibited the highest rates of drug use at 55%, followed by single women at 40%, and married women at 35%. Qualitative feedback suggested that widowed or divorced women frequently encounter domestic violence, emotional neglect, and social isolation, serving as catalysts for drug use.

This underscores that emotional well-being and social stability are critical factors influencing substance abuse among women.

REGRESSION ANALYSIS

A logistic regression analysis was utilised to determine factors associated with substance abuse.

Table 4.4: Logistic Regression Findings

Predictor Variable | Odds Ratio (OR) | Significance (p-value)

Unemployment | 2.8 | 0.01

Low Education | 2.3 | 0.03

Domestic Stress | 1.9 | 0.04

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The regression analysis reveals that unemployment, low education, and domestic stress are significant predictors of substance abuse. Women without jobs are almost three times more likely to engage in substance abuse than their employed counterparts. Likewise, women with minimal or no education are more than twice as likely to use drugs compared to their educated peers. Domestic stressors, which include violence and neglect, also emerged as a notable factor.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The results validate that socio-economic conditions are closely linked to substance abuse among women in Dala LGA. The prevalence rate of 42% highlights the pressing nature of the issue, with unemployment, low education levels, and family instability acting as major contributors. This aligns with Strain Theory, which suggests that socio-economic stressors elevate the risk of maladaptive coping methods such as drug use.

The study emphasises the necessity for multi-sectoral strategies, including economic empowerment initiatives, educational access, mental health support, and rehabilitation programs that are sensitive to gender issues.

Importantly, the results shed light on the gender-specific aspect: women in patriarchal societies encounter heightened risks, as stigma and insufficient access to gender-sensitive rehabilitation services diminish their recovery prospects. This aligns with findings by UNODC (2020), which state that women worldwide confront added challenges in obtaining treatment due to social exclusion and a lack of tailored services.

The results are consistent with previous studies conducted by Ahmed et al. (2021) and Abdullahi & Abdullahi (2023), which highlighted factors such as unemployment, peer pressure, and emotional distress as significant factors contributing to substance abuse among women in Kano. The significant prevalence of codeine use corresponds with national statistics reported by Oweibia et al. (2024), indicating a widespread concern regarding the availability and misuse of prescription drugs.

These findings further support the theoretical framework of Strain Theory, suggesting that individuals dealing with socio-economic adversity may resort to deviant behaviours like substance abuse when viable coping mechanisms are unavailable (Dukku, 2021).

This research investigated the socio-economic factors influencing substance abuse among women in Dala Local Government Area of Kano State, Nigeria. Through a descriptive cross-sectional survey involving 400 women aged 15-45, the study identified several critical observations:

A substantial rate of substance utilisation: 42% of participants admitted to using substances such as codeine, tramadol, cannabis, or alcohol.

Socio-economic difficulties: Challenges such as unemployment, low educational attainment, and poverty were significantly associated with substance abuse.

Gender-specific stressors: Issues like domestic violence, emotional neglect, and social isolation were prevalent among substance-using women, especially among widows and divorcees.

Peer influence and accessibility: A significant number of women began using substances due to peer pressure and easy access to prescription drugs.

Cultural stigma and limited support: Women struggling with substance abuse frequently faced social exclusion and had limited access to gender-sensitive rehabilitation services.

These findings align with earlier empirical investigations (Ahmed et al., 2021; Abdullahi & Abdullahi, 2023) and reaffirm the applicability of Strain Theory, which interprets substance abuse as a response to socio-economic difficulties and constrained opportunities.

CONCLUSION

Substance abuse among women in Dala LGA is an intricate issue arising from socio-economic challenges, cultural obstacles, and systemic oversight. The findings suggest that:

Substance abuse encompasses more than just health concerns; it signifies a social and economic crisis that affects vulnerable women. The main contributors to substance use are unemployment, low educational attainment, and domestic pressures.

The lack of specific interventions for women exacerbates the problem, leaving many without the required care or support. Addressing this matter necessitates a multifaceted approach that integrates public health, education, economic empowerment, and community participation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

Economic Empowerment Initiatives: Government and NGOs should implement vocational training and microfinance initiatives targeting women in Dala to alleviate economic instability.

Education and Awareness Initiatives: Community-centred educational campaigns should be launched to raise awareness among women and their families about the dangers of substance abuse and available support systems.

Gender-Sensitive Rehabilitation Programs: The establishment of rehabilitation facilities explicitly designed for women should be prioritised, offering trauma-informed care, childcare support, and mental health services.

Policy Reform and Enforcement: Drug control laws should be strengthened, especially regarding the sale of codeine-based substances, with more stringent penalties for illegal distribution.

Community Involvement and Peer Support: Encourage the formation of women-led support networks and peer mentoring groups to build resilience and reduce stigma.

CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

This research makes several important contributions to both academic and policy conversations:

Gender-Specific Insight: It highlights the increasing issue of substance abuse among women, a demographic that is often neglected in drug-related research in Nigeria.

Socio-Economic Lens: By linking substance abuse to poverty, unemployment, and domestic stress, it reframes addiction as a socio-economic problem rather than merely a moral or medical one.

Application of Strain Theory: Utilising Strain Theory provides a conceptual basis for understanding how systemic disparities push women towards substance use.

Policy Relevance: The findings you present offer data-backed recommendations for local governments and NGOs to create gender-sensitive interventions.

Community-Level Data: This research provides localised data from Dala LGA, which can serve as a reference for comparative studies in other regions.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

To build on my research, future researchers could explore:

Longitudinal Studies: Track trends in substance use over time to gain insights into progression, relapse, and recovery patterns in women.

Comparative Regional Analysis: Examine the socio-economic factors driving substance abuse across different LGAs or states to identify regional variations.

Youth-Focused Research: Investigate substance use among adolescent girls to understand initial exposure and prevention strategies.

Cultural and Religious Influences: Study how cultural norms and religious beliefs shape perceptions of drug use and approaches to rehabilitation.

Effectiveness of Interventions: Evaluate existing rehabilitation programs and community outreach efforts to determine their successes and areas needing improvement.

Mental Health Correlations: Investigate the link between mental health conditions (such as depression and PTSD) and substance abuse in women.

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