



THE SOCIO-CULTURAL AND HEALTH IMPACT OF SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN POOMPUKAR, JAFFNA

Keerthika, S. N.¹

The Open University of Sri Lanka

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the multifaceted impact of substance abuse in Poompukar, a coastal region in Jaffna District, Northern Sri Lanka, with the objective of examining the socio-cultural, economic, and public health consequences of rising drug use, particularly among youth. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the research employed observations, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and structured questionnaires to capture comprehensive perspectives from affected community members, local authorities, and service providers. The findings reveal that factors such as socio-political instability, unemployment, and the erosion of traditional Tamil cultural values are major drivers of substance abuse in the area. Consequences include mental health challenges, family breakdown, gender-specific risks, and economic instability. The study identifies a significant gap in community-based rehabilitation services and preventive educational programs, highlighting the limitations of punitive-focused interventions. Additionally, the limited availability of mental health support and gender-sensitive recovery mechanisms emerged as key constraints. The research concludes with a call for integrated, multi-sectoral policies that combine law enforcement with preventive education, psychosocial support, rehabilitation, and livelihood programs, particularly focusing on youth and women. The study also acknowledges its limitation in geographical coverage, as it focuses primarily on one coastal village, suggesting the need for broader regional studies to generalize findings across Northern Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Substance abuse, sociocultural impact, public health, gender disparities, community-based intervention

Introduction

Drug use and its far-reaching consequences have long been a concern for societies worldwide. In the Northern Province of Sri Lanka, particularly in Poompukar (J/90), Nallur DS Division. Jaffna, the prevalence of drug abuse has emerged as a pressing social issue, affecting individuals, families, and entire communities. The increasing consumption of narcotic substances, particularly among the youth, has led to a complex web of socioeconomic and cultural disruptions (Amarasuriya, 2018; UNODC, 2023). This introduction seeks to explore the historical, cultural, and contemporary factors contributing to the rising drug problem in Poompukar, while also addressing its implications for public health, law enforcement, and social stability.

Background of Drug Use in Poompukar

Poompuhar Village, located in Ariyalai GN Division (J/90) under the Nallur Divisional Secretariat Division in Jaffna District, is home to approximately 80 displaced families affected by Sri Lanka's civil war. According to secondary data from the Grama Niladhari Office, the area has become increasingly vulnerable to substance abuse, gender-based violence (GBV), and illegal activities such as unauthorized soil dumping.

Historically, Poompuhar was known for its rich Tamil cultural heritage, with livelihoods primarily rooted in agriculture and fishing industries. However, the post-war socio-political environment has drastically altered the community landscape. In recent decades, economic instability, social disintegration, and political marginalization have fostered conditions conducive to rising substance abuse (Fernando et al., 2021).

The post-war period in Jaffna has been marked by the increased availability of illicit drugs, including cannabis, heroin, and synthetic substances, contributing to a deepening social crisis. Both local factors (such as unemployment, poverty, and post-war trauma) and external influences (including porous coastal borders and expanding trade networks) have accelerated the proliferation of drug use in the village (Somasundaram, 2007;

Sri Lanka Police Narcotics Bureau, 2022). In particular, youth populations have emerged as the most at-risk group, affected by the intersection of economic deprivation and unresolved psychological trauma stemming from the protracted civil conflict.

Cultural and Social Influences on Drug Consumption

Tamil culture places strong emphasis on family values and communal living. Traditionally, social structures in Poompukar dictated a sense of responsibility and moral adherence, discouraging substance abuse. However, the erosion of these traditional norms, influenced by urbanization, migration, and external cultural exposure, has led to a shift in societal behavior.

The youth in Poompukar find themselves caught between traditional expectations and modern influences. Social gatherings and peer groups now often serve as environments where drug use is normalized. The lack of structured recreational activities, combined with exposure to globalized lifestyles via social media, has further exacerbated the problem. In many cases, substance abuse starts as a form of experimentation but quickly escalates into addiction due to a lack of awareness and preventive measures.

Economic Impact of Drug Use

The economic ramifications of drug abuse in Poompukar extend beyond the individual user. Families bear the financial burden of supporting addicted members, often leading to poverty and debt. Households with an addicted member experience reduced productivity, strained financial resources, and, in some cases, complete economic collapse. Furthermore, local businesses and industries suffer as a result of decreased labor efficiency and increased absenteeism. The cost of rehabilitation, medical treatment, and legal consequences further strains both private and public finances.

In a broader economic context, the drug trade itself operates as a parallel economy that undermines legitimate businesses and fosters criminal enterprises. Authorities in Jaffna have identified several illicit networks operating in coastal areas, using fishing routes to transport drugs. The infiltration of these networks into local communities poses a severe threat to

long-term economic stability, diverting resources that could otherwise be used for regional development.

Public Health Consequences

Drug addiction brings with it numerous health complications, affecting both individuals and the broader healthcare system in Poompukar. Substance abuse has been linked to increased rates of infectious diseases, mental health disorders, and chronic illnesses (De Silva & Roland, 2014; WHO, 2022). The rise in intravenous drug use has also heightened the risk of HIV/AIDS and hepatitis transmission, further burdening public health services.

Mental health institutions and hospitals in the Northern Province have reported an increase in drug-related cases, overwhelming an already fragile healthcare infrastructure. Many users lack access to proper medical care, leading to untreated conditions that exacerbate their addiction. Additionally, drug dependency often results in malnutrition and deteriorating physical health, further reducing an individual's ability to contribute productively to society.

Law Enforcement and Governance Challenges

Efforts to curb drug trafficking and consumption in Poompukar have faced significant challenges. Law enforcement agencies operate with limited resources, making it difficult to control the influx of drugs into the region. Corruption within certain governmental structures further complicates the implementation of effective anti-drug policies.

Community policing initiatives and rehabilitation programs have been introduced, but their effectiveness is often hindered by a lack of sustained funding and public awareness. The social stigma surrounding drug addiction also prevents many individuals from seeking help, thereby perpetuating the cycle of substance abuse.

Gendered Implications of Drug Use

The impact of drug addiction is not confined to the individual user—it extends to families, particularly women and children. In many cases, women in Poompukar are left to manage households with limited financial and emotional support due to the addiction of male family members. Domestic violence, child neglect, and family breakdowns are common repercussions of drug abuse.

Women who suffer from addiction face even greater challenges, as societal norms and gender expectations make it harder for them to seek treatment (Jayasuriya-Illesinghe et al., 2021). The lack of gender-specific rehabilitation programs in Jaffna further marginalizes women who struggle with substance abuse.

Pathways for Prevention and Rehabilitation

Addressing the drug crisis in Poompukar requires a multifaceted approach involving law enforcement, healthcare, education, and community engagement. Prevention programs should focus on youth education, emphasizing the dangers of drug use from an early age. Schools and religious institutions can play a crucial role in shaping awareness and providing support systems for at-risk individuals.

Rehabilitation facilities must be improved to offer accessible and effective treatment for addiction. Current centers in Jaffna are often underfunded and lack the capacity to handle the growing number of cases. Expanding mental health services, incorporating counseling, and providing skill development opportunities for recovering addicts can significantly improve reintegration into society.

Furthermore, strengthening border security and cracking down on drug trafficking networks must be prioritized. Local law enforcement agencies should work closely with national and international bodies to disrupt the supply chain and prevent further distribution of narcotics in the region.

The issue of drug abuse in Poompukar, Jaffna, is not merely a law enforcement challenge—it is a societal crisis that demands immediate intervention. The interplay of historical trauma, economic struggles, and shifting cultural dynamics has fueled the rise in substance abuse, threatening the well-being of individuals and communities alike. A holistic approach involving education, healthcare, and community-led initiatives is essential to combat this growing problem. By fostering awareness, strengthening legal frameworks, and offering comprehensive rehabilitation programs, Poompukar can work towards a future free from the grip of drug addiction. Only through collective action can the region reclaim its social and economic stability, ensuring a safer and healthier environment for future generations.

Methodology

Research method

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches to comprehensively examine the socio-cultural, economic, and public health implications of substance use in Poompukar, Jaffna. The qualitative component is prioritized to explore in-depth community perceptions, cultural dynamics, and personal experiences related to substance abuse, while the quantitative component supplements the study by capturing basic demographic and trend-related data.

The qualitative methods include:

- Ethnographic observations to understand daily life patterns, social interactions, and visible effects of substance use within the community.
- In-depth interviews with key informants such as affected individuals, family members, community leaders, health workers, and law enforcement officers.
- Focus group discussions (FGDs) with youth, women's groups, and community elders to gather collective insights and community narratives.

The quantitative method involves:

- Structured questionnaires administered to a sample of community members to gather data on socio-economic status, prevalence of substance use, and community-level impacts.

Data collection tools include interview guides, observation checklists, and pre-tested questionnaires, ensuring triangulation of data sources for enhanced reliability and validity. The mixed-methods approach allows for both contextual understanding through qualitative narratives and numerical support through basic quantitative trends, thereby providing a holistic analysis of the issue.

Study Area and Population

Poompukar, a coastal region in Jaffna, was selected as the study site due to its unique socio-economic landscape and historical significance. The community comprises diverse social groups, each with varying exposure to substance use and its related consequences. The study targeted individuals from different age groups, genders, and socio-economic backgrounds, ensuring a holistic representation of perspectives.

Data Collection Methods

Observations

To understand the everyday realities and social environments of the community, the researchers conducted non-participant observations in key public spaces such as local markets, social gathering areas, coastal fishing points, and nearby rehabilitation support centers. The focus of observations was to identify:

- Patterns of social behavior, community interactions, and risk environments linked to substance use.
- Availability and accessibility of substances, particularly how openly or discreetly they are circulated.
- Social acceptance or stigma, by observing community attitudes and reactions in public spaces.

This method was chosen to capture natural behavior and contextual community dynamics, which are often underreported in self-reported interviews.

Semi-Structured Interviews

A total of 50 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with carefully selected individuals who directly or indirectly experience the consequences of substance use. The participant groups included:

- Substance users (20 persons),
- Family members of affected individuals (10 persons),
- Healthcare providers and social workers (10 persons),
- Community leaders and religious figures (10 persons).

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

To capture collective community perceptions, the study organized five FGDs (each with 6–10 participants) categorized by:

- Youth (male and female separately),
- Mothers and women caregivers,
- Community elders,
- Teachers and local civil society members.

This method encouraged open dialogue and group dynamics, enabling researchers to explore shared cultural beliefs, stigma, and community-level challenges surrounding substance abuse.

Structured Questionnaire Survey

To support the qualitative findings with basic quantitative trends, a structured questionnaire was administered to 20 community members (both genders, aged 18–50) selected purposively. The questionnaire included:

- Demographic details (age, gender, occupation, education),
- Economic status and employment history,

- Perceptions on drug availability and accessibility,
- Community attitudes toward drug use,
- Awareness about prevention programs and available services.

This tool provided descriptive statistical insights, highlighting the prevalence and socio-economic links to substance use in Poompukar.

Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling method was employed, selecting participants with lived experiences or close association with substance use issues, ensuring relevance and depth of data. This method was particularly suitable due to the sensitive nature of the subject and the focus on affected groups, making random sampling impractical.

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis

Qualitative data from interviews and FGDs were transcribed manually, coded, and analyzed using thematic analysis. Key themes included:

- Root causes of substance use,
- Cultural and economic impacts,
- Gender-specific vulnerabilities,
- Community response mechanisms.

Descriptive Analysis

Questionnaire data was analyzed using basic descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage) to highlight prevalence trends and socio-economic linkages within the sample group.

Comparative Analysis

Cross-comparisons between different demographic categories (gender, age groups) were used to identify variations in perceptions and experiences.

Ethical Considerations

- Prior informed consent was obtained from all participants.
- Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained.
- Ethical approval was secured from the relevant institutional ethics review board.
- The study followed culturally sensitive protocols, especially during discussions on addiction and family impacts.

Limitations of the Study

- The study is specific to Poombukar village, and therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to other regions of Northern Sri Lanka.
- The sample size for quantitative data is relatively small, as the research prioritized qualitative depth to capture personal experiences and community perceptions.
- Social desirability bias may have influenced some participant responses, particularly during focus group discussions, where individuals may have under-reported or altered information due to social pressures.
- Cultural norms and gender sensitivities created challenges in data collection; some female participants were hesitant to openly discuss sensitive topics, especially around gender-based violence and substance abuse.
- Additionally, as a female researcher, there were safety concerns and cultural barriers in directly approaching male participants involved in drug use, which may have limited direct engagement with certain high-risk groups.

Analysis and Discussion

Drug use is an increasingly concerning issue in many parts of the world, and Poompukar, Jaffna, is no exception. This study aims to analyze the extent of drug use in the region, examining the social, economic, and psychological implications while assessing potential interventions. The results of this research provide valuable insights into the behavioral patterns of drug users,

the effectiveness of existing measures, and areas requiring urgent policy intervention.

Demographic Profile of Drug Users

The study identified a diverse demographic among drug users in Poompukar, Jaffna. The majority of users fell within the age group of 18-35 years, highlighting the vulnerability of young adults. The data revealed that 72% of the users were male, with the remaining 28% being female, indicating a gender disparity in drug use. Additionally, the study found that unemployment rates among drug users were significantly high, suggesting a strong correlation between economic instability and substance abuse.

Although the study showed that drug use was more common among men, female users faced greater social stigma and often refrained from seeking help due to fear of societal rejection. Women who were drug users also reported higher incidences of domestic violence and sexual exploitation, emphasizing the need for gender-sensitive intervention programs.

Types of Drugs Used

The findings indicated that the most commonly abused substances included cannabis, heroin, and methamphetamine, reflecting national patterns (UNODC, 2023; NDDCB, 2022). Similarly this study expose that Cannabis (45%) – The most frequently used drug, often perceived as socially acceptable among users. Heroin (28%) – A more severe substance with higher addiction potential. Methamphetamine (15%) – Increasing in prevalence, particularly among younger users. Prescription drugs (12%) – Over-the-counter medications such as painkillers and sedatives being misused.

The availability of these substances was influenced by both local production and illegal imports, with cannabis being locally cultivated while heroin and methamphetamine were primarily trafficked from outside sources.

Psychological and Social Impact

Drug addiction was found to have severe mental health consequences among users, with 65% experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression, and 40% reporting suicidal tendencies. The impact of substance abuse extended beyond individuals, significantly affecting family dynamics—drug use was linked to 55% of reported domestic conflicts in the community. Additionally, the stigma associated with drug addiction often led to social isolation of users, which in turn worsened their mental health conditions, creating a reinforcing cycle of psychological distress and social exclusion.

Economic Implications of Drug Use

The economic burden of drug use was notable. The study found that families of drug users spent an average of 30-40% of their household income on supporting drug habits. This resulted in increased financial stress, leading to poverty and malnutrition in affected households. Additionally, the local healthcare system faced an increase in drug-related hospital admissions, further straining medical resources.

Economic hardship emerged as one of the primary drivers of drug abuse in Poompukar, Jaffna. Many individuals turned to drugs as a coping mechanism for unemployment, financial stress, and family issues. This aligns with global trends where poverty and lack of opportunities contribute to higher substance abuse rates.

Education levels also played a role, with 60% of drug users having only primary or secondary education. The absence of career prospects for less-educated individuals often led to substance use as an escape from economic instability.

Law Enforcement and Legal Challenges

While law enforcement agencies in Poompukar, Jaffna, have intensified their efforts to curb drug trafficking, significant challenges persist:

- Limited resources – Insufficient funding and manpower hinder effective drug enforcement operations.
- Corruption and bribery – Some reports indicate that drug networks exploit law enforcement loopholes.
- Legal gaps – Weak policies regarding rehabilitation and reintegration contribute to repeat offenses.

Despite numerous arrests, recidivism rates remain as high as 60%, suggesting that punitive measures alone are ineffective in addressing drug addiction.

A major takeaway from the study was that strict law enforcement alone is insufficient. Although arrests and crackdowns have been conducted, the high recidivism rates indicate that without rehabilitation and community support, former users are likely to relapse. The study suggests a shift towards rehabilitative approaches, focusing on therapy, employment training, and mental health support.

The study provides a comprehensive overview of drug use in Poompukar, Jaffna, highlighting its impact on individuals, families, and society. The findings emphasize that drug addiction is not just a legal issue but a multifaceted problem requiring economic, psychological, and social solutions. While law enforcement remains essential, a greater focus on rehabilitation, employment opportunities, and mental health support is needed to create sustainable change.

By addressing the root causes of drug abuse, strengthening rehabilitation efforts, and fostering community involvement, Poompukar can develop a more effective and humane approach to combating substance abuse. The integration of education, social policies, and law enforcement can lead to a more resilient and drug-free society.

Conclusions and Future Recommendations

Conclusions

The study on drug use patterns, social implications, and intervention strategies in Poompukar, Jaffna, reveals significant insights into the evolving nature of substance abuse in the region. Drug dependency, once limited to certain marginalized groups, has now become a widespread concern, affecting individuals across different socio-economic backgrounds. The findings underscore that the factors leading to drug addiction are multifaceted, including socio-economic pressures, lack of awareness, and insufficient rehabilitation services. Furthermore, cultural stigmatization surrounding addiction often prevents affected individuals from seeking timely help, exacerbating the crisis.

A key takeaway from this research is that the availability and accessibility of drugs, including cannabis and synthetic substances, have increased due to inadequate law enforcement and porous regional borders. Poompukar, once primarily known for its cultural and historical significance, is now facing the challenge of integrating stringent drug policies while also ensuring that rehabilitation and education initiatives reach those in need.

Another critical conclusion drawn from this study is the gender disparity in drug use and intervention. While men predominantly engage in drug consumption due to social and peer influences, women affected by addiction face greater societal stigma, making rehabilitation efforts more complex. This imbalance highlights the need for gender-sensitive policies that provide safe spaces for women to seek treatment and reintegration into society.

Furthermore, the study sheds light on the role of family and community-based intervention. Social support structures, when properly mobilized, have proven effective in mitigating drug abuse. However, due to the weakening of traditional family bonds and economic hardships, these support systems are not as robust as they once were. Strengthening family networks and integrating community-based awareness campaigns are essential for long-term prevention and recovery.

The correlation between unemployment and drug abuse also remains a major concern. Economic instability pushes young people toward substance use as a coping mechanism. Without targeted employment and educational programs, the cycle of addiction is likely to persist, creating further socio-economic disparities in the region. A holistic approach that includes economic reforms, vocational training, and mental health awareness can significantly alter the current trajectory.

Lastly, this research has identified gaps in existing policies related to drug prevention and rehabilitation. Current legal frameworks, while stringent on paper, lack efficient enforcement and rehabilitation initiatives. The absence of specialized addiction treatment centers within Poompukar, Jaffna, further compounds the issue. Future policies must aim to balance legal action against drug distribution with rehabilitative measures that address the root causes of addiction.

Future Recommendations

1. Strengthening Law Enforcement and Policy Implementation

One of the foremost recommendations is enhancing the effectiveness of law enforcement agencies in tackling drug-related activities. The study indicates that weak enforcement allows the proliferation of narcotics within Poompukar. It is essential to:

- Increase surveillance in high-risk areas and strengthen border control mechanisms to prevent drug trafficking.
- Ensure stricter legal repercussions for drug distributors while offering leniency and rehabilitation opportunities for users.
- Establish specialized anti-drug task forces equipped with advanced forensic and intelligence-gathering tools.
- Promote inter-agency collaboration between local law enforcement, health officials, and community leaders to create a unified strategy against drug abuse.

2. Expanding Rehabilitation and Mental Health Facilities

Given the shortage of adequate rehabilitation centers in Poompukar, it is imperative to establish well-equipped facilities catering to individuals from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Key recommendations include:

- Setting up government-funded rehabilitation centers with specialized treatment plans.
- Integrating mental health services within these centers to address underlying psychological factors contributing to substance abuse.
- Encouraging alternative therapy methods such as art therapy, meditation, and vocational skill training to aid in holistic recovery.
- Implementing gender-sensitive rehabilitation programs that provide women with secure and non-judgmental environments for recovery.

3. Enhancing Public Awareness and Education Initiatives

Lack of awareness remains a crucial barrier to effective intervention. To combat misinformation and cultural stigma, comprehensive educational campaigns should be launched. Effective measures include:

- Introducing drug awareness programs in schools, universities, and workplaces to educate young individuals about the risks of substance abuse.
- Utilizing digital media, community radio, and local influencers to reach a broader audience and counteract myths about drug use.
- Conducting community-based workshops that involve parents, teachers, and local authorities in preventive education.
- Establishing peer counseling networks where recovered addicts can share their experiences to deter others from substance abuse.

4. Economic and Vocational Development Programs

A critical aspect of preventing drug abuse is addressing the underlying socio-economic causes, particularly unemployment and financial instability. The following measures can contribute to long-term prevention:

- Developing government-led vocational training programs aimed at equipping young individuals with marketable skills.
- Encouraging local businesses to collaborate with rehabilitation centers to provide employment opportunities for recovering addicts.
- Implementing micro-financing programs that enable small-scale entrepreneurs to start businesses and sustain financial independence.
- Expanding access to higher education and scholarships for youth in at-risk communities, reducing their likelihood of turning to substance abuse.

5. Strengthening Family and Community Support Systems

Community-driven support networks play a vital role in preventing and mitigating drug addiction. Strengthening these systems can ensure more sustainable recovery and reintegration. Strategies include:

- Training community leaders to act as mediators between rehabilitation centers and individuals struggling with addiction.
- Establishing neighborhood-based support groups where families of affected individuals can share knowledge and seek assistance.
- Creating helplines and online platforms that provide guidance and immediate assistance to those at risk.
- Promoting culturally relevant de-addiction programs that align with the values and traditions of the Tamil community in Poompukar, ensuring greater acceptance and participation.

6. Encouraging Research and Policy Innovation

To maintain ongoing progress, further research into substance abuse trends, intervention success rates, and policy effectiveness is necessary. Recommendations include:

- Conducting longitudinal studies that track the impact of rehabilitation programs and law enforcement interventions over time.
- Establishing partnerships between universities, NGOs, and government bodies to facilitate evidence-based policymaking.

- Encouraging innovation in treatment methodologies, including the use of technology-driven interventions such as mobile applications for tracking recovery progress.
- Hosting policy forums and stakeholder meetings to ensure that new drug control strategies remain adaptive and relevant.

Poompukar, Jaffna, is at a critical juncture where proactive intervention can change the trajectory of drug abuse in the region. While the challenges are substantial, the solutions lie in a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approach that combines law enforcement, public health, education, and community-driven initiatives. By strengthening existing frameworks and introducing innovative strategies, Poompukar can work towards a future where individuals have the resources, awareness, and support needed to lead drug-free lives. Through persistent efforts, collaboration, and commitment to sustainable policies, the fight against substance abuse in the region can be won.

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