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Reimagining responsive approaches to curbing substance abuse by female students in Zimbabwe's secondary schools

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Abstract

The rise of substance abuse among youths in Zimbabwe has reached disturbing levels, with female secondary school students increasingly falling victim. Historically, substance abuse was viewed as a male-dominated issue, with girls and women largely excluded from its narrative. This study, conducted in the Harare Metropolitan province, explores the factors contributing to female students' engagement in substance abuse and the subsequent impact on their educational experiences. Utilizing a qualitative research approach, the study employed grounded theory to collect, analyze, and present data on the issue. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques, with data gathered via focus group discussions with teachers and in-depth interviews with school administrators and affected students. This study highlights that substance abuse among female students is primarily driven by immediate environmental factors, particularly within the family unit. The prevalence of broken homes and parental absenteeism, often resulting from migration, increases young girls' vulnerability to substance abuse. It reveals a rise in substance abuse among female students, leading to serious implications for their academic performance and general schooling experiences. Key consequences include higher dropout rates and declining academic performance, triggering anti-school behaviors such as truancy, neglect of responsibilities, and violence. It also exposes them to mental health issues, vulnerability to sexual violence, exposure to STIs, and early pregnancies. In response, a concentric model is proposed to effectively address and curtail substance abuse among secondary school students.

Keywords

Academic performance, gender dynamics, hard drugs, school dropout, substance abuse.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of substance abuse among youths in Zimbabwe has reached alarming levels, particularly during the COVID-19 lockdowns [1]. This study focuses on the increasing involvement of female students in what has traditionally been a male-dominated arena of drug and substance abuse. For many years, substance abuse was considered a 'forbidden enclave' for girls and women in Zimbabwe. Conducted in the Harare Metropolitan province in 2024, this research posits that boys and girls experience substance abuse differently. The study aims to explore the factors that influence female secondary school students' engagement in substance abuse, the impact of this behavior on their educational experiences, and potential measures to mitigate these issues. Alarmingly, reports indicate that children as young as 10 are

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using intoxicating substances in schools [2]. While many studies in Zimbabwe have examined youth substance abuse broadly, few have disaggregated data by gender or highlighted how substance use exposes female students to risks such as sexual exploitation, early pregnancies, and academic underachievement. In this context, this study is both novel and significant to the field of gender-transformative education. It aligns with the objectives of Sustainable Development Goals 3(a) — preventing substance abuse and treating substance use disorders — and SDG 5, which aims to protect girls from gender-based violence and abuse. To capture the complexities of substance abuse among female students, the study integrates social control and emancipation feminist theories into a cohesive framework. We will first analyze global trends alongside the Zimbabwean context regarding youth substance abuse, followed by an examination of its effects on the schooling experiences of female secondary school students.

The global landscape of drug and substance abuse reveals a troubling upward trend, despite ongoing efforts to combat this issue. According to the UN's World Drug Report [3], approximately 275 million people globally abused drugs in the past year, marking a 22% increase since 2010. Projections indicate that by 2030, drug use could rise by 11% worldwide, with Africa potentially experiencing a staggering 40% increase. A study by Olawole-Isaac et al. [4] highlights a prevalence rate of 41.6% in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated these issues, pushing over 100 million people into extreme poverty and resulting in the loss of 114 million jobs in 2020 [5]. These dire circumstances create an environment where many seek solace in substances to escape the harsh realities of poverty and suffering. The pandemic's impact on unemployment and reduced opportunities disproportionately affects vulnerable groups, including the poor, youth, and women, making them more susceptible to substance abuse [6].

Substance abuse poses significant social challenges, affecting individuals and communities in various ways. Research by Mahir and Wazeema [7] identifies numerous social consequences, such as substance use disorders, physical violence, untimely deaths, and crimes of passion, including rape. The implications of these issues on the educational experiences of secondary school female students remain largely unexplored.

In Zimbabwe, substance abuse trends mirror global patterns, particularly escalating during Covid-19 lockdowns. A study by Matutu and Mususa [8] confirms a rising prevalence of drug and substance abuse, especially in urban areas, with Maraire and Mariamdaran [9] noting a 57% rate of substance abuse among Zimbabwean youth. Furthermore, a report by the Zimbabwe Civil Liberties and Drugs Network (ZCLD) documented a dramatic increase in youth drug abuse cases, from 85,000 in 2009 to 290,000 in 2020 [1]. The year 2020 saw the most significant surge, attributed to lockdown measures.

Tawanda Murepa, director of the Young People Mental Health Trust, remarked on the situation, stating that Covid-19 has driven youth towards drug use as a substitute for socializing [10]. Alarmingly, the age of onset for drug abuse has decreased, with reports of children as young as ten engaging in substance use [11]. Statistics reveal that drug abuse among youths in Zimbabwe rose from 43% in 2017 to 57% in 2019 [12]. In Kwekwe district, there has been a marked increase in drug abuse, bullying, and school-related gender-based violence [13]. Additionally, a Harare High School expelled eight female students for violating the drug policy during a trip, highlighting the increasing involvement of girls in this traditionally male-dominated space.

Zimbabwean youths tend to abuse various substances, including Bronclear, marijuana, and increasingly, crystal meth (methamphetamine). Known locally as mutoriro, guka, or dombo, crystal meth has gained popularity during lockdown for its stimulating effects [10]. Despite the existence of some support organizations for substance use disorders, the country lacks a comprehensive program to address these issues [1].

The Women's Affairs minister reported nearly 5,000 teenage pregnancies within the first five weeks of 2021, suggesting that substance abuse significantly contributes to this crisis. This study posits that these statistics may only scratch the surface of a broader issue affecting many girls due to substance abuse among both genders. Substance abuse profoundly impacts families and communities, as drug use by one member can disrupt the entire family dynamic [14]. Drug abusers often exhibit hostility, rebellion, and irrational anger, compromising community harmony and productivity [15], [16]. The

exposure of youths to drugs jeopardizes the social well-being of society at large.

Theoretical framework: Social control theory and emancipation theory

Historically, women have been marginalized in discussions of criminal activities, such as substance abuse, which has predominantly been viewed as a male domain. Heidensohn [17] argues that in patriarchal societies, men exert control over women and girls, both within the home and in public, discouraging them from deviating from established social norms. This societal pressure compels women and girls to conform to traditional values, resulting in stricter supervision by parents compared to boys. Girls are often tasked with household responsibilities, confining them to the domestic sphere and consequently limiting their opportunities for engaging in criminal or delinquent behavior. In contrast, males frequently spend their leisure time in public spaces where the potential for deviance is greater, such as socializing on street corners at night. As they transition into adulthood, women remain influenced by their childhood socialization and are further controlled by male partners. However, recent observations indicate that women and girls are increasingly breaking into this "forbidden enclave," committing the same crimes as their male counterparts, including substance abuse.

The Emancipation Theory posits that traditional societies were characterized by patriarchal oppression. Yet, in contemporary society, this patriarchal grip is loosening, allowing women to attain greater autonomy. Adler, as cited in Haralambos and Holborn [18], suggests that as societies become less patriarchal and women's economic opportunities converge with those of men, the rates of female criminality rise. This shift implies that women and girls possess agency—the capacity to make choices regarding their behavior. This framework posits that substance abuse affects girls and boys differently, with female youths facing heightened vulnerabilities. As women and girls gain access to public spaces, they also encounter opportunities to seek solace in various substances. This study aims to explore how these changing dynamics contribute to the engagement of female students in substance abuse, highlighting the unique challenges they face in this evolving landscape.

Research question

The study sought to answer the question—to what extent are secondary school female students in Harare metropolitan province involved in drug or substance abuse?—through the following research questions: (RQ1) What factors are influencing secondary school female students to indulge in drug or substance abuse?; (RQ2) How does substance abuse affect the schooling experience of secondary school female students in Harare Metropolitan Province?; and (RQ3) What solutions can be proffered to contain substance abuse by secondary school female students in Harare Metropolitan Province?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach to collect, present, and analyze data on substance abuse among secondary school female students in the Harare Metropolitan Province of Zimbabwe. Grounded theory was adopted to generate data that informs the development of a concentric model aimed at curtailing substance abuse among these students. Grounded theory is defined as “a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived theory about a phenomenon” [19]. Neuman [20] further elaborates that grounded theory builds towards an abstract theory through comparisons of empirical observations. The objective of using grounded theory was to create a robust model to address the rising rates of substance abuse among secondary school students. Strauss and Corbin [19] note that this theory is inductive and developmental, representing the views of participants relevant to the subject matter. Therefore, grounded theory guided the development of a model that reflects the pervasiveness of substance abuse among secondary school female students in Harare.

A sequential exploratory research design was employed (see Figure 1), beginning with focused group discussions with secondary school teachers, followed by in-depth interviews with key informants, including school heads and female students with experience in substance abuse.

This qualitative approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, attitudes, feelings, and perceptions regarding substance abuse [20]. Focus group discussions and in-depth interviews provided multiple perspectives, allowing for a comprehensive

understanding of the research issue and enabling data triangulation to enhance reliability. By gathering data from various sources, the study aimed to develop defensible conclusions on how substance abuse affects the schooling experiences of female students. The combination of diverse methodologies, empirical materials, and perspectives added rigor and depth to the inquiry.

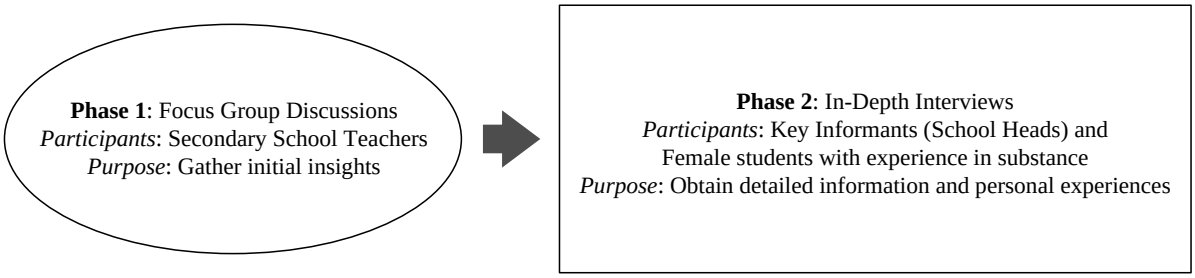

Figure 1. Sequential exploratory research design

Sampling

Participants were identified through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Snowball sampling, also known as chain referral or network sampling [20], is particularly useful for reaching difficult-to-identify populations, such as female students involved in substance abuse. Given the criminal nature of substance abuse, those involved may be reluctant to disclose their experiences. Snowball sampling allowed for the identification of social networks associated with substance abuse. Once initial participants were identified, they referred others, continuing until data redundancy (where no new information emerged) was reached.

To mitigate the potential bias inherent in this method, multiple snowballs were utilized. Ultimately, six female students and four male students engaging in substance abuse were identified through this technique, alongside three rehabilitation officers, six school heads, and 20 teachers from selected schools in Harare Metropolitan Province, resulting in a total of 39 participants. Although the study focused on female students, the inclusion of male participants provided valuable insights to validate the experiences and perspectives of female students.

In-depth key informant interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with six secondary school female students abusing drugs, three rehabilitation officers, and six school heads. These interviews aimed to facilitate a deeper discussion on substance abuse and its impact on female students' retention and academic performance. The interviews followed up on issues raised in focus group discussions that required further clarification. They explored factors influencing drug use among female students and potential strategies to mitigate substance abuse.

Participatory focus group discussions

Focus group discussions were held with 20 secondary school teachers, divided into two groups (one per residential suburb), each consisting of ten participants (five males and five females). Discussions focused on the reasons behind the increasing drug use among female students, the prevalence of substance abuse, and its impact on academic retention and performance. Teachers also shared their perceptions on strategies to combat substance abuse.

Data analysis

The study utilized an interpretive analysis model to identify emerging patterns and themes from the collected data. Gall et al. [21] and Cohen et al. [22] describe interpretive analysis as examining case studies closely to uncover constructs and themes that explain the phenomenon under investigation. Braun and Clarke [23] note that a theme captures significant aspects of the data in relation to the research questions. The data collected from focus groups and interviews were coded according to specific research questions and emerging themes.

Ethical considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the subject, the study adhered to strict ethical guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with consent forms completed before interviews. Participants were informed

about the study's purpose, potential benefits, and the estimated duration of each interview. Participation was entirely voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time. Due to the criminal aspect of substance abuse, maintaining participant confidentiality and privacy was paramount. Researchers provided assurances regarding the confidentiality of the information shared, addressing concerns from participants who feared potential legal repercussions. To protect anonymity, codes were used for all participants, along with aggregated job titles and data. The following codes were used; MT1 to MT10 for male teachers, FT1 to FT10 for female teachers, FS1 to FS6 for female students, MS1 to MS6 for male students, SH1to SH6 for school heads and RO1 to RO3 for rehabilitation officers.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Generally, the findings of this study reveal the proliferation of substance abuse by secondary school female students in the Harare metropolitan province. Substance abuse by female students has grave ramifications on their well-being and consequently, their schooling experiences.

The pervasiveness of substance abuse by female students

Focus group discussions with teachers in selected schools in Harare metropolitan province reveal that secondary school girls have started abusing drugs and intoxicating substances. One teacher shared her observations:

> *What I have observed over the years as a teacher is that boys were the ones who were caught abusing drugs. Of late, things are changing. Girls have begun abusing drugs too. Every year three or four girls are suspended for abusing drugs at our school. The problems seem to stem from the home environment and are brought to school by individual learners.*

MT 7 in the focus group discussions confirmed:

> *Traditionally substance abuse has been an issue with male students and not girls. However, anecdotes and observations show that girls have started taking drugs too. There are cases where girls are given drugs by male students who want to take advantage and sexually violate them. Due to the first excitement induced by the drugs, some girls continue taking the drugs until they get addicted.*

FT 1 in the focus group shared her experience:

> *I think you can agree with me that the young generations can be described as 'digital natives' because of their heavy consumption of digital media content. At times what they watch on the internet and TV at home gives them knowledge on substance abuse and get tempted to try drugs. Parents need to control what children watch on digital media because they become what they see on the screen.*

MT3 weighed in;

> *At our school, one prefect reported that she had seen two female students taking drugs by the school grounds. This prompted school authorities to search every student's bag. It was discovered that six girls and eight boys had satchels of drugs in their bags. Further inquiries revealed that the drugs were supplied by one male student from one of the affluent suburbs in Harare.*

FS3 shared her observations:

> *Another female student was found flat sleeping and had actually soiled her pants. Upon inquiry. It was discovered that she had been given some substance to sniff by a friend. She was taken home and suspended from school.*

The following anecdote is revealing:

> MT5: *I am an English teacher. One day during my lower six lesson one girl started laughing hysterically. All of a sudden she stopped laughing and started crying, hallucinating. A moment later she fell down and lay unconsciously. Her friends explained that she was sniffing some stuff and that she always do it. Maybe that time she had over-dozed herself. In short substance abuse by female students has become our reality, a menace that we need to deal with from the grassroots level.*

Substance abuse has recently emerged as a significant social problem in both developed and developing countries, with Zimbabwe being no exception. The country's economic meltdown has driven many, including women, to resort to substance abuse as a coping mechanism [24], [25]. Traditionally, the consumption of alcohol, drugs, and other substances has been deemed "normal" for males, while females have faced societal stigma for similar behaviors [26].

From a Social Control Theory perspective, Heidensohn [17] argues that in patriarchal societies, men exert control over women and girls, both at home and in public, discouraging them from deviating from social norms. Conversely, the Emancipation Theory posits that as societies evolve, the oppressive grip of patriarchy weakens, allowing women to attain greater autonomy. While substance abuse has historically been viewed as a masculine behavior in Africa, an increasing number of women, including female students, are engaging in substance abuse, often as a response to social and economic challenges.

Findings from this study suggest that female students turn to substance abuse for various reasons, including coping with difficult circumstances. UNICEF [26] identifies factors such as early exposure to substances, excess freedom, dysfunctional family dynamics, parental absenteeism, unstable home environments, and peer influence as contributing to this trend. The gender distribution of substance abuse indicates that 41% of users are women, while 59% are boys [26]. This statistic highlights a significant level of female involvement in substance abuse that has often been overlooked by society and researchers alike. Nhapi [25] notes that women's substance abuse has been an untold phenomenon in African societies.

The impact of substance abuse among women extends to school environments, where teachers are increasingly challenged by the issue. The diaspora phenomenon has left many children vulnerable, leading to increased substance abuse [27]. This study highlights that children left to fend for themselves while their parents work abroad often gain access to intoxicating substances, which they then bring to school to share. Similarly, a study by Box [24] reveals that in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second-largest city, boys and girls frequently gather for "vuzu parties" in the absence of their parents, where drug use and sexual competition occur. At these parties, the girl who has the most sexual encounters is deemed the winner.

It is argued that substance abuse in Zimbabwe largely stems from dysfunctional family dynamics and parental absenteeism [28]. The reality is that substance abuse among female students poses a significant threat to school environments, societal stability, and overall development. Chidume and Mugambiwa [2] note that substance abuse in Zimbabwe is on the rise, despite widespread awareness of its harmful effects. Thus, it is clear that substance abuse transcends gender boundaries and has severe ramifications.

A holistic approach to addressing substance abuse should begin at the family level, tracing its roots through schools and into the larger society.

Consequences for substance abuse by female students

The following anecdotes and excerpts from female students who have had experience with substance abuse are revealing;

> FS1: *For me, I would say I was a victim of circumstances. My boyfriend laced my cup of coffee with some substance without my knowledge. All of a sudden I began to feel very high and excited. When I asked him what he had done to my coffee he showed me some white powder with which he had laced my coffee. I didn't get angry with him because I was enjoying the effect.*

When asked how she became an addict she said:

> FS1: *That very day I asked my boyfriend to give me some of the stuff to keep for myself. So every time I was down and bored I would spice my coffee with the stuff. The drug worked magically because instantly I would start feeling jovial and excited. It got to a point where I would crave for the drug and increased the dosage every time. I couldn't do without it. I am happy now because I went through some therapeutic process at one of the rehabilitation centres in our community and I am doing fine now*.

Another female student elaborated during an interview:

FS2: *I was introduced to drugs by a friend of mine who had also been introduced by her boyfriend. The stuff is magic. All of a sudden you begin to feel high, energetic and outgoing. I got expelled from school when another friend of mine behaved awkwardly under the influence of drugs at school and got caught. Upon interrogation she mentioned my name*.

An interview with MS1, a former addict

It's true that girls are beginning to do drugs. In many cases girls are tricked into drugs by their male friends. I used to lace my girl friends' drinks with drug and took advantage of their drunken stupor to sexually violate them. Because they are new in the game, they are usually caught by school authorities and sent away from school.

FS3, a former drug addict shared her experience:

For me I was doing it for fun. I sniffed my brother's stuff at home. All of a sudden I began to feel nice, happy and outgoing. So, time after time I would steal my brother's stuff and shared with friends. I got addicted to the extent that I would look for drugs from street peddlers. Someone directed to a place referred as the base in Mbare high density suburb where all drugs of all sorts were found. I was rescued from the base by my parents but it was a bit too late. I dropped out of school and contracted different types of STIs through sexual encounters at the base. I would like to thank the staff at this rehabilitation centre. I am beginning to get back on my fee again. I should be able to pick-up the pieces and go back to school any time.

FS6 who had been readmitted into school said:

As for me, I stayed with my niece at our house who was doing drugs. Out of fun I tasted her staff and in a moment I was feeling good. Time after time I would request for the stuff from my niece so that I would share with friends at school. The thing is you can't continue taking drugs without anyone noticing. We got caught and were expelled from school. After some counselling and rehabilitation I got readmitted into school. I don't think I will ever indulge into substance abuse again.

An interview with FS5 a drop out reveals:

The unfortunate thing is that I got raped by some guys whom I hardly remember. They took advantage of my drunken stupor and sexually harassed me. Unfortunately, from that encounter I fell pregnant which I successfully terminated with the help of my parents.

An in-depth interview with SH1, a female secondary school head reveals:

The observations I have made recently show that female students are increasingly indulging in substance abuse. In these affluent suburbs the main source of doing drugs is the family unit itself. During disciplinary hearings many students indicated that they had been introduced to drugs by relatives at home. More so, many parents have left for the diaspora in search of greener pastures. Many such parents have left their children under a caretaker or a relative who fails to monitor children adequately. Those students who get an opportunity to taste the drugs at home come to share with friends at school.

SH3 weighed in:

As a school we have established a substance abuse policy and a committee that superintends effective implementation of the policy. To uphold and maintain the virtues and values of the school, we have had to expel students who are doing drugs including five girls in the last two years. To me substance abuse particularly by female students is a scourge that demands a robust holistic approach to dismantle the deeply entrenched practice. Parents, teachers, members of community and society at large should work together to weed out this delinquent behaviour.

In an interview with SH4 revealed:

In the history of the school, we have never had challenges with female students doing drugs, no. It has always been the issue with boys. However, things have changed. We now have many cases of substance abuse involving female students. Unfortunately girls and boys are differentially affected by substance abuse. When girls take drugs they become more susceptible to sexual harassment and their academic performance deteriorates sharply. Some fall pregnant and drop out of school. It seems parents are abdicating their parental role because many a time substance abuse starts in the family and then cascades to schools.

RO1 shared her sentiments:

At societal level, a robust legal framework should be put in place to restrain drug peddlers and abusers. Prohibitive penalties should be enforced. However, the major cancer in our society is corruption. Some people bribe their way through until the drug reaches the intended market. Law enforcement agents should ensure that justice is done to perpetrators of substance abuse and corruption.

RO2 shared his perceptions as well:

Our communities need to resuscitate the neighbourhood watch concept and ensure that the communities are kept under surveillance all the time and disrupt any activities that have to do with substance abuse. If we are to restrain the substance abuse scourge, every community member must be involved. Substance abuse affects the whole of society.

During an interview, SH2 shared her experiences:

One of the most obvious consequences of substance abuse is deterioration in academic performance. Drug abuse diverts learners' attention to things of less importance. It may influence truancy, and school-related gender-based violence. Girls become more vulnerable to sexual violence. At this school, we have two girls who were sexually harassed under the influence of drugs. They fell pregnant and are now teen mothers. Because of the school pregnancy policy enshrined in the Education Act of 2020, we have had to re-admit them in school.

The Emancipation Theory posits that as societies become less patriarchal and women's economic opportunities converge with those of men, the rates of female criminality rise [18]. Substance abuse among female students has grave ramifications that extend beyond the school environment, significantly impacting personal health and contributing to a host of social problems, including gender-based violence, unwanted pregnancies, and elevated dropout rates. Muzondo [28] supports these findings, arguing that women who engage in drug use are particularly vulnerable to harmful practices following intoxication. The implications of substance abuse are not confined to individuals; they reverberate throughout communities and society at large [7].

Vulnerabilities and consequences

From the Emancipation Theory's view point, as women and girls gain access to public spaces, they also encounter opportunities to seek solace in various substances. Consequently, female students are exposed to unique vulnerabilities associated with substance abuse. Addiction often takes a toll on academic performance, leading to disciplinary actions such as expulsion when drug use is discovered. This creates a barrier to gender-transformative education, as the dropout rates among female students rise, undermining their educational and future economic prospects. The study findings indicate that intoxication places female students at an increased risk of sexual violations, which can result in teenage pregnancies and the potential for contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Muzondo [28] emphasizes that substance abuse exposes women to both domestic and public violence, as well as neglect—both self-inflicted and familial. The mental and physical health complications associated with substance abuse further exacerbate these challenges. Findings from a UNICEF [26] study reveal alarming statistics: 70% of gang violence involves schoolchildren, 40% of suicide attempts are linked to substance use, and 60% of learners drop out of school after being expelled for drug-related issues.

Gender dynamics and socioeconomic implications

Importantly, the study highlights a troubling trend: an increasing number of female students are engaging in drug use, with significant implications for social and economic development [2], [25]. From a feminist theory of crime perspective, the patriarchal hegemony prevalent in contemporary African societies is gradually weakening [17]. This shift has rendered girls and women more susceptible to substance abuse, traditionally viewed as masculine behavior, thereby altering the gender dynamics surrounding drug use. Substance abuse consequently influences female students' dropout and negatively affects their academic performance.

Socioeconomic disparities in drug exposure

While substance abuse is pervasive across various residential areas, the nature and types of drugs accessed by female students often depend on their socioeconomic backgrounds. Students from affluent suburbs may have access to hard drugs like cocaine and heroin, while those from lower-income neighborhoods are more likely to encounter marijuana, crystal meth, and alcohol. Children in impoverished areas frequently turn to drugs as a coping mechanism for social issues such as poverty, anxiety, and idleness [2]. Conversely, students from more affluent areas may initially engage in drug use for recreational purposes, only to find themselves ensnared in addiction.

Socialization and peer influence

Substance abuse is often socialized through familial and peer influences within the school environment. The normalization of drug use in these contexts creates a cycle that perpetuates addiction and its associated consequences. Addressing the substance abuse crisis requires a comprehensive approach that dismantles the deeply entrenched social norms and behaviors that school officials contend with daily.

Proposed concentric model

In light of these complexities, the study proposes a concentric model to better understand the nuances of substance abuse among female students. This model aims to encapsulate the multifaceted factors contributing to substance use, including individual vulnerabilities, familial dynamics, peer influences, and broader societal structures. By adopting this holistic framework, stakeholders can develop targeted interventions that address the root causes of substance abuse, ultimately fostering healthier educational environments and communities.

Strategies for restraining substance abuse in schools and communities

Building on the findings of this study, we have developed a concentric model designed to address and regulate substance abuse both in schools and within the broader community, see Figure 2. This model synthesizes the strategies suggested by participants, transforming their insights into a comprehensive framework aimed at curbing the pervasive issue of substance abuse. By implementing this structured approach, we aim to create a supportive environment that mitigates the risks associated with substance use, fostering healthier communities and promoting the well-being of students.

The concentric model provides a comprehensive and holistic framework aimed at curtailing the scourge of substance abuse in Zimbabwe. This model emphasizes the child's immediate environment, particularly the family unit, as a critical social setting where substance abuse behaviors can be socialized. Parents play an essential role in educating their children about the dangers of substance abuse and must remain vigilant for signs and symptoms indicating potential drug use.

The model draws upon Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which posits that a child's behavior and personality are significantly shaped by their immediate environment [29]. By centering the child in this model, it underscores how the family, as a primary agent of socialization, can become either a protective factor or a source of risk for substance abuse, depending on the family structure and dynamics.

Multi-level intervention strategies

Family-level: The family unit is the first line of defense against substance abuse. Parents are encouraged to engage in open dialogues about the risks associated with drug use and to model healthy behaviors. Educational programs aimed at parents can enhance their ability to recognize and address substance abuse issues in their children effectively.

School-level: Schools represent the next critical environment for intervention. School officials should complement parental efforts by

implementing robust drug policies, establishing peer education programs, and creating guidance and counseling units. Regular searches of students' backpacks for drugs can also help deter substance use. Furthermore, integrating substance abuse awareness into the school curriculum can foster a culture of openness and education regarding the risks of drug use.

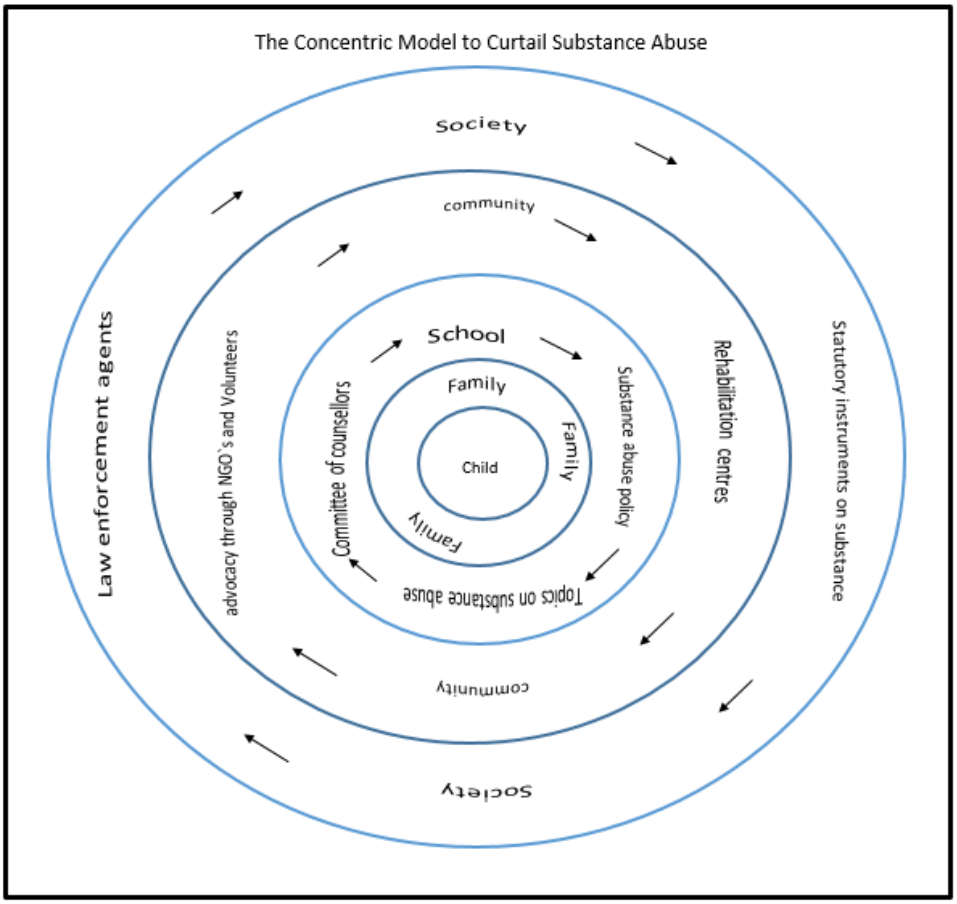

Figure 2. The concentric model (Source: fieldwork)

Community-level: At the community level, initiatives such as neighborhood watch units can help monitor drug peddling and other activities related to substance abuse. Establishing rehabilitation centers that collaborate with schools can provide support for affected students and their families. Community engagement in monitoring and prevention efforts is vital for building a supportive environment.

Societal-level: On a broader scale, governments should implement legal frameworks and regulations to combat substance abuse and drug trafficking. This includes enacting stringent laws with prohibitive punishments for both substance abusers and dealers. A dedicated research, monitoring, and evaluation unit should be established to track emerging trends in drug use and trafficking, ensuring that responses are data-driven and effective.

Role of civil society: Civil society organizations play a crucial role in supporting all stakeholders within this model. By providing resources, advocacy, and community programs, these organizations can enhance the collective effort to curb substance abuse.

CONCLUSION

Substance abuse among female students has emerged as a critical issue, transcending socioeconomic boundaries and affecting those from both high and low-income backgrounds. This study highlights that drug-related behaviors are profoundly influenced by immediate environmental factors, particularly within the family unit. The prevalence of broken homes and parental absenteeism, often due to migration, leaves young girls vulnerable to the perils of

substance abuse. Students from low-density suburbs frequently resort to drugs as a coping mechanism for poverty and anxiety, while those in affluent areas may initiate drug use for recreational purposes, leading to a cycle of addiction. The consequences of substance abuse are dire, resulting in mental health challenges, exposure to sexual violence, and heightened risks of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and early pregnancies. Furthermore, substance abuse significantly contributes to high dropout rates and declining academic performance, ultimately undermining social and economic development by squandering potential human capital. Addressing this multifaceted issue necessitates a holistic and robust approach. The proposed concentric model serves as a framework for stakeholders to implement integrated strategies that effectively combat substance abuse. By fostering healthier school environments and supportive communities, we can mitigate the factors contributing to substance abuse and promote the well-being and academic success of secondary school female students in Harare Metropolitan Province. This comprehensive strategy not only aims to curb substance abuse but also to empower young women, ensuring they can realize their full potential as future contributors to society.

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