

## WOMEN AND DRUG ABUSE IN MALAYSIA: A MARGINALIZED CLIENT OF DRUGS TREATMENT AND REHABILITATION

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper presents the issue of women and drug abuse in Malaysia. Women have always been associated with the marginalizing and vulnerable group in many countries especially in the under-developed and developing country. The engagements of women with drug abuse in the world are considered as a minority. However, related to the issue of drug abuse, women are facing with different barriers and obstacles as compared to men. The global trend is found similar with new emergence trend of women involving with drug abuse in Malaysia. Although, the engagement of women in drug abuse is considered as the minority; yet, the statistics released by National Anti-Drug Agency (NADA) indicates the rising number of women involving with drug abuse in Malaysia—in 2009 only 1.8% women reported as the drug user as compared to 3.8% in 2015. This is a serious issue as women involvement in drug abuse has a greater risk than men in the aspect of addictive behavior, spreading of HIV/AIDS disease and relapse. The situation becomes worse when the accessibility and opportunity for women to receive the treatment is low and limited as compared to men. The treatment provided also inflexible and there are many reasons that hindered women in seeking for aids and treatment such as personal, cultural, social and structural reasons. This indicates women still facing with the traditional obstacles and being marginalized as there are lacking in the appropriate evidence-based treatment for women with drug abuse problems. This is a signal to the country to be more concern on this emergence issue and executed a proactive prevention, treatment and enforcement holistically.*

Keywords: Women, drug abuse, treatment and rehabilitation

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### Introduction

This paper reviews relevant literature related to women and drug abuse in Malaysia. Drug abuse is one of the serious public health and social issues that have been discussed by many countries, regardless of developed or under-developed countries such as the United States, Sweden, Hong Kong, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia<sup>1</sup>. Currently, there were 27 million of people around the world were involved with this phenomenon (World Drug Report, 2015). In Malaysia, there were 127, 606 cases of drug abuse cumulatively reported by National Anti-Drug Agency (NADA) between the year 2010 and 2015. The majority of drug abuse were men, and women only comprised of 14.6%. Although women involvement in the drug is still considered minority statistically; however, it is a concern when the number of women drug abusers in Malaysia is increasing yearly (NADA, 2015). Further, research on women and drug abuse in Malaysia is limited (Norliza et al., 2014). The seriousness of drug abuse on women should not be undermined, as the implication on the women is greater than men. This are the gaps that this paper intended to highlight. The discussion of this paper begin with the current trend of women involvement in drug abuse, the risk of being drug abuse, as well as the factors which triggered women to involve with drug abuse. Further, this paper also discusses the treatment and rehabilitation program in Malaysia especially to cater the drug abuse among women. The drug treatment and

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<sup>1</sup> The number of drug abuse (including women) varies among countries. However, most of the country shows increasing trend of drug abuse for instance in United States (US) drug abuse has been increasing up to 9.4 percent (24.6 million of population) in 2013 as compared to 2002 only 8.3% of population (NIDA, 2015). Notably, these numbers only represent the reported cases (including Malaysia and other countries). It is argued that, actual number of drug abuse is higher.

rehabilitation program among women require more evidence-based and special care because of the involvement of women in drug abuse was different from men.

**Overview Of Women And Drug Abuse In Malaysia**

As presented in Table 1 drug abuse in Malaysia is on the rising, both among men and women. The statistics only represents cases of drug abuse recorded by NADA; however, the actual number of drug abuse in Malaysia is believed to be higher. The statistics recorded by NADA (2016) revealed an emerging trend of drug abuse in Malaysia—the rising number of drug abuse who holds high educational level (Diploma, Degree and Ph.D). This is worrying because those who have high education and are supposed to be able to think about what is good or bad, still trapped in the most unwanted situation in life—drug abuse.

**Table 1: total number of drug addict recorded by nada according to gender (2010-2015)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
2010	23,062	580	23,264
2011	19,041	490	19,531
2012	14,662	439	15,101
2013	20,219	668	20,887
2014	21,078	699	21,777
2015	25,655	1013	26,668

*Sources: Statistic Released by National Anti-Drug Agency (NADA), 2016*

Although the number of women drug abuse recorded by NADA is smaller compared to men; yet, the rising trend of women in drug abuse from 1.8% (2010) to 3.8% (2015) is considered a serious issue in Malaysia. The recent profile of drug abuse in Malaysia revealed a worrying trend of drug abuse involving female students—the number of female students who involved with drug abuse increased from 2.46% in 2010 to 4.09% in 2015 (NADA, 2016). Although this is only a slightly increased in percentage (increased of 1.63% within 5 years); this indicates the rising trend of women drug abuse in Malaysia, particularly among the younger generation. Female students who involved in drugs at younger age faced more challenges in their life as they are going to be the future mothers for their children.

Further, when comparing between states in Malaysia, less developed states such as Perlis, Kelantan and Sabah recorded a higher number of women involvement in drug abuse (NADA, 2015). This is also another concern that drug abuse cases in Malaysia occurred regardless their gender, educational background and the area they are living (whether urban or rural areas). While there is no exact statistics that shows the actual age of women involvement in drug abuse; however, Marican, Mohamed & Ismail (2007) claimed that the age of women involvement in drug can be from teenage age which is 13 to 18 years old up to 40 years old (Marican, Mohamed & Ismail, 2007).

The trend of women addiction in Malaysia was slightly different from men especially in term of types of drug abuse. Women in Malaysia were found consumed mostly synthetic drug as well as methamphetamine and heroin (NADA 2016). However, this trend was different from other countries in America and Europe whereby women mostly abused in pharmaceutical prescription drugs. While in term of quantity and effect of drug abuse, women tend to abuse small amount of the drug compared to men; but, women have a higher tendency to be addicted as compared to men (Marican, Mohamed & Ismail, 2007). The impact of drug abuse between men and women are different; this is influenced by different characteristics and lifestyles. Thus, in dealing with drug abuse issue, it requires different approaches to cater the problem holistically. There is no one size fits all approaches to overcome these problems. This is because, women who become victims of the drug are also a wife, a mother, kids and sibling or friends to the ‘predators’ (drug addict) who has initiated their involvement in drug abuse.

The above discussion on the changes in the trend of drug abuse in Malaysia—the rising number of women drug abuse—shows the shift in the ideology of Malaysian society where women perceived drug as safe consumed and their attitude towards the danger of drug decreasing. This ideology is no more applicable in the recent scenario of drug abuse in Malaysia. More women, educated, even in the rural areas were trapped in the drug abuse issue. This was supported with the study done by Loukadakis et al. (2000) who demonstrated that, the changes in the trend of licit and illicit substance in Greece were influenced by sociocultural and policy changes. Similarly, the changes of sociocultural and policy changes in Malaysia also influenced the pattern of drug abuse in Malaysia in this era. The involvement of women in drug abuse will lead to many other problems and jeopardize the future of the next generation because a child might be street children, homelessness, no education and no love to grow and to contribute to the development and growth of the country.

**Risk Of Women Involvement In Drug Abuse**

As compared to men, women involvement in drug abuse resulted in different and greater risks in their life. Women have a greater risk in term of addictive behavior, spreading of HIV/AIDS disease and also relapse. This is because the exposure, environment and social structure of women were different from men. Although they were addicted, women are still attached to the feminist view which required women to be as what women should be (Brady, et al. 2016). Further, the role and expectation to be a woman were different according to the culture, social and practices in every country. When women fail to be what they should be a strong stigma such as shamelessness towards her family, poverty, low dignity and others that attached to them. These will hinder women to seek help or being protected. Due to the personal, cultural and social structural reasons towards women who involve in drug abuse, the risk they bear is greater than men especially in treating their addiction, HIV/AIDS disease and relapse

cases. The barriers which hindered women in seeking treatment and rehabilitation put women to a more risky situation such as unsafe injecting drug because of difficulty in assessing the needles and syringe program (Park, 2010). Thus, women have to bear with a higher risk of infectious disease such as HIV/AIDS.

There is a growing number of HIV infection in Malaysia beginning from 1% in 1990 and the number has increased to 25% in 2011 (Wickersham, 2016). Further, the HIV infection among female in Malaysia has grown from 1:99 in 1990 to 1:4 in 2014 (Progress, 2015). From last two decades, women who have been infected with HIV have resulted from the male who injecting drugs, and the HIV infections were through sexual transmission. Women and infection with HIV were always being associated as a victim of HIV transmission from the male; but, the trend has changed as women also involved with sex work and drug abuse. According to (Wickersham, 2016) Malaysia has already become a major destination for sex tourism in this region. Therefore, the demand for women to involve in the sex industry is higher and this also has triggered women to involve with drug abuse. The involvement of women with sexual activity and drug abuse was not only harmful and destroyed their life, but also some of them are a mother who has the children. The impacts are bigger for their children and this might lead to other social issues such as homelessness, prostitution, involves in crimes and many others. The problem of drug abuse, particularly among women is becoming a complex issue, interrelated with many other social issues in Malaysia. Thus, drug abuse is one of the social issues faced in Malaysia that require serious attention by the government in order to ensure the holistic development of Malaysia in the future.

Regarding the issues of women and drug abuse treatment; generally, the treatment and rehabilitation module developed more focuses on the needs of male drug addicts. However, the involvement of women with drug abuse requires different approaches and needs. In Malaysia, all institutionalize or non-institutionalized center which caters for the drug abuse problem mostly provided the treatment and rehabilitation in favour of men. Previously, the concept of treatment and rehabilitation was based on punitive approaches. The outcome of the program was not as good as the expected. After releasing from prison or drug rehabilitation centers, 70% to 90% of drug users relapse. This situation arises due to little or no support from the society such as it is harder for them to find a job because of a prison record and they also have the potential to end up in criminal activities (Balasegaram, 2016). The earlier support from the treatment and rehabilitation they have received being wasted because of insufficient support and opportunity for them. The choice to relapse and involve with drug abuse depends on themselves but the environment is also a crucial determinant to influence their choice.

Even after receiving the treatment, the risk for women who involved with drug abuse is higher than men. Women had twice risk to relapse after receiving the treatment more than men (Maehira et al., 2013). This is due to the unstable life condition whereby they have lack of family support or not having responsibility such as family or children to take care and need to sell sex in exchange for money. In other words, after receiving the treatment and rehabilitation program, these women still become a vulnerable group of relapse as they have not enough support and purpose to continue their life. Women are vulnerable to many risks due to the involvement in drug abuse. Despite their involvement in drug, undergone the treatment, these women still have rights to look for a better life. Hence, they need more support to change and continue their life.

### **Factors Contributing To Women And Drug Abuse**

Women and involvement in drug abuse have resulted from many push and pull factors from the environment. There are various factors associated with this situation; however, this paper only three main factors were highlighted such as poverty, victims of violence and trauma as well as lose weight and beautification.

#### **Poverty**

The main factor contributing to drug abuse in Malaysia are poverty (Progress, 2015). The multiplier effect of poverty is huge; among of them is people or society have less education, low income and a high rate of unemployment as well as contribute to the increase in criminal activities. Besides, due to poverty, women were oppressed and became the victims to be involved in sex trading and become sex workers. Similarly, this is also among the impact of poverty towards substance abuse in the United States which leads the women to be part of sex trading and vulnerable to involve with drug abuse (Rash et al., 2016). The drug is used to support their job as the sex worker; that is why the demand of drug is high due to the demand in the sex industry. This situation is similar in US where the drug has become part of sex workers life, as described by (Rash et al, 2016).

In Malaysia, drug abuse among women also resulted from the influence of other people around them such as spouse, parents, boy friends or friends. This was triggered by the life pressure and the negative environment that these people involved. The issues of poverty are a longstanding issue, intertwined with many social issues. In the case of drug abuse, the poor who faced challenges in their life, and were trapped with the drug, will become poorer and will not think about their life, and finally will continue to be the burden to the country.

#### **Victims Of Violence And Trauma**

A study from Melorose, Perroy, & Careas (2015) demonstrates that women who involved in drug abuse faced repeated cycle of fluid family structure and instability; they were suffering from pain and difficulty. They perceived marriage as a way to protect themselves but it only the fantasy which turns into scaring a dream such as the traumatic separation from their children and depression of life such as divorce and being abandoned by their spouse. The situation becomes worse when there is lacking in the service provided or they do not aware on where to seek help for their abusing problem and this directly minimized their opportunity to change and undergo a better life. A single mother who does not have the income, shelter and protection will open

the chances for them to involve with drug abuse. This shows inter-connections between factors contributing to drug abuse among women. Women who faced family or marriage problem, being violence and abused, live in high pressure and depression turned to the drug for a short-term heal. Drug change their life forever and they will continue to be in the repeated cycle of fluid family structure and instability. According to a study done by Marican, Mohamed & Ismail (2007), women in Sabah involved with drug abuse due to low motivation to live and personal factors such as frustration, curiosity and depression. Women who involved with drug abuse also tend to make violence to their children. This repeated cycle of violence will create another drug abuse and hostage in the future. Therefore, a comprehensive and proactive measure should be taken by the government and society to curb this matter from the roots of the problems.

### **Lose Weight And Beautification**

Another emerging factor contribute to the rising number of women involvement in the drug abuse in Malaysia was due to the lose weight and beautification. The society especially women who eagerly to be beautiful and slim tend to easily influence to use the synthetic drug such as ecstasy to lose their weight and become slim (Utusan Online, 17 February, 2016). The trend of using the drug for the purpose of beautification is not a new issue as this has been reported by the National Anti-Drug Agency since before the year 2007 whereby this is one of the reasons for the involvement of women in drug abuse. This trend also has been reported by Marican, Mohamed & Rosnah Ismail (2007) in their study, where 61.1% of respondents become the drug addict because of beautification. The involvement of women in drug abuse normally resulted from other social issues such as poverty, victims of violence and other push factors; but, ironically, in current trends, the involvement of women in drug abuse also resulted from the changes in socio-culture which is the eagerness in physical beautification. Women also perceived drug as safe consumed and their attitude towards the danger of drug decreasing (Loukadakis et al., 2000). Although this is also one of the isolated issues in drug abuse; however, the impact will be bigger if there is no further action to educate and prevent the society to involve with drug abuse in the future.

### **Drug Treatment And Rehabilitation For Women**

Drug treatment and rehabilitation program in Malaysia started from the introduction of the Drug Treatment and Rehabilitation Act 1983. In the earlier of the implementation of this act, the punitive approaches were adopted. Through this act, any person who involved with the drug problem has to undergo two years of mandatory treatment and rehabilitation and two years community supervisions. The punitive treatment and rehabilitation concept were unable to reduce drug addiction problems because 70% to 90% of ex-drug addict relapse and little medical care resulted from corporal punishment (Tanguay, 2011). In 2010, through government transformation program the concept of drug treatment and rehabilitation program has been shifted to the human health policy. The concept emphasized on the voluntary of a drug addict to seek help, regarded the drug addict as a client not a criminal and promoting fun, effective and friendly treatment and rehabilitation. This is a good move by the government. However, the treatment and rehabilitation program provided for women was still considered as limited. This is due the treatment and rehabilitation developed are generally for men. Hence, the implementation of the treatment and rehabilitation is argued limited for women.

In Malaysia, the number of drug treatment and rehabilitation program centers for women is limited as compared to men. Among the center are Cure and Care Rehabilitation Centers (CCRC) Bachok, Kelantan, Kota Kinabalu Women Prison, Tawau and Sandakan Prison (Marican, Mohamed & Ismail, 2007). All of these centers are among the main centers that provided the services for women who involve with drug abuse problem. As discussed above, women required special treatment from men because the effect and impact of drug abused were different. Therefore, more evidence-based treatment and rehabilitation treatment and rehabilitation program should be provided to the women. This is because according to World Drug Report 2015, there is lack of evidence-based treatment and rehabilitation program for women. Globally, one out of three drug users is a woman and from that portion only one out of five drug users in treatment is woman. The small number of women seeks help in treatment and rehabilitation because of many barriers that hindered them in receiving the drug treatment and rehabilitation program. This is a crucial issue that should be highlighted especially in Malaysia because of the growing number of drug abuse among women.

The drug treatment and rehabilitation for women should be decentralised or increased in number. This is because there is a limited number of treatment and rehabilitation service center in certain part of the country; this has contributed to the factors which discourage women for seeking help. Women have to leave their children or family to obtain the treatment which is far away from their home or the society shows the negative stigma towards women who involved with drug abuse. There were many isolated issues regarding the treatment and rehabilitation program especially involving women in Malaysia and the world. This issue should be highlighted because the emergence of many new factors which contributed to the woman's involvement in drug abuse such as to lose weight and beautification as well as other related factors. This indicates women still facing with the traditional obstacles and being marginalized as there are lacking in the appropriate evidence-based treatment for women with drug abuse problems. This is a signal to the country to be more concern on this emergence issue and executed a proactive prevention, treatment and enforcement holistically.

### **Conclusion**

Women involvement with drug abuse should no longer be marginalized issues in Malaysia and should be discussed openly (Norliza et al., 2014). The country such as United States (US) has establishing Office of Research on Women's Health to specifically focus on this issue related to women and drug abuse (NIDA, 2016). In Malaysia this effort should be considered, this is because the seriousness of the involvement of women in drug abuse should not be underestimating. This effort also able to contribute to the expanding of knowledge in the study of drug abuse in Malaysia. Further, the traditional view on feminism which

required women to be what she should be is also should not become the barrier for women who have involved with drug abuse to seek help. The government also plays the crucial roles in providing the drug treatment and rehabilitation program. The growing and rising number of drug abuse in the world until recently gives a signal to the government and society to execute progressive effort to alleviate the drug abuse problem. The effort not only focuses on the aspect of drug treatment and rehabilitation but also involving the enforcement and prevention. The current trends on drug addiction, especially among women demonstrate the past mistake and unsolved issues. The government and the society should play their role in facing with this enemy. However, as long as the demand and supply activities of the illegal drug throughout the world does not stop, the issues of drug abuse and other related social issues will not come to the end. The flexibility and effectiveness of drug treatment and rehabilitation program also are among the crucial factors in determining the growing and development of the drug abuse problem, especially among women. The rising number of women involvement in drug abuse is not a good signal because a woman is the important person in the development and guidance of the young generation in the family, society and country. Hence, the proactive of current efforts in enforcement, prevention as well as treatment and rehabilitation will determine future trends in drug abuse nationally and globally.

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