

Exploring Substance Use among Low-Wage Migrant Workers in Mauritius: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

There is little research conducted regarding substance abuse among low-wage migrant workers working in Small Island Developing States (SIDS). However, this phenomenon should not be taken lightly as it is a public health and social concern. Migrant workers often experience structural and psychosocial vulnerabilities in terms of low wages, precarious working environment, social isolation, discrimination and little access to support services which open the door to substance misuse. This qualitative research investigates how migrant workers use substance abuse particularly alcohol and cigarettes as coping mechanism to overcome emotional distress, loneliness and economic difficulties. Semi- structured interviews were conducted with 50 migrant workers working in different sectors such as construction, manufacturing, agriculture, hospitality, domestic care, seafood processing, cleaning services and retail sectors. Snowballing sampling was used to reach participants. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis developed Braun and Clarke six step framework. Four major themes emerged from this research as follows: (1) Substance use as a coping strategy against financial hurdles; (2) Substance use to overcome emotional distress and loneliness; (3) Substance use as short term escape against work pressure and burnout; and (4) Peer pressure and normalizing substance use. Despite, being aware of the negative health effects, many migrants reported their difficulties in putting a halt to substance use due to poor support, stress and addiction. The findings emphasize the need for multi-level strategies that comprises of work-based interventions, psychosocial support programs, substance use prevention and education programs. Professionals such as Social workers and Migrant care workers can be of great help in reducing substance abuse and improving the welfare of low-wage migrant workers.

Keywords: Migrant workers, Substance use, Small Island Developing State, Thematic analysis, Qualitative methods.

1.0 Introduction

The World Health Organization define substance abuse as any harmful or dangerous use of psychoactive substances that includes alcohol and illicit drugs. Undoubtedly, use of illegal drug

Published: 11 August 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/IJSSR.2026.v3.i4.301249>

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has a negative impact on the health of people. “Substances” comprise of alcohol and other legal and illegal drugs (World Health Organization, 2025). The 2024 Trafficking in persons report indicates that, in Mauritius drug traffickers can exploit migrants by means of consuming dangerous drugs (US Department of States, 2023). Drug use disorder relates to consequent burden in terms of impairment in a person’s major life roles and increased risk of suicides, neuropsychological problems, decreased in terms of quality of life and several infectious diseases (Meena et al, 2019).

Migrant workers play an important role in the global labor market, according to ILO in 2022 there were around 167.7 million migrants scattered around the world which represents 4.7 percent of the global labor force (International Labor Organization, 2024). Mauritius considered as an Small Island Developing States depends a lot on low-skilled foreign workers in sectors such as manufacturing, construction, agricultural and hospitality. As at July 2026, the country registered around 51,945 foreign workers (defimedia.info, 2026). Substance abuse among migrant workers in Small Island Developing States (SIDS) is a serious concern (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Addiction, 2023). This phenomenon is characterized by structural vulnerabilities that is related with low wages, precarious employment, discrimination, language barriers, social isolation, stress and other related psychosocial issues. Studies demonstrates that there are a range of high-risk factors that is directly linked with an elevated risk of experiencing substance use problems among low wages migrant workers (De Kock et al, 2020)

Mauritius being very active in terms of harm reduction program. Moreover, Government has intensified its commitment to eliminate the problems of illegal drugs in Mauritius, yet there has been limited research conducted regarding the problem of substance abuse among migrant workers in Mauritius. The aim of this study is to explore how migrant workers use substance abuse as coping mechanism to overcome emotional distress, loneliness and economic difficulties. The objective of the study is to examine how social support can be use as tool to support low-wages migrant workers against substance abuse.

2.0 Social capital theory

Bourdieu (1986) define social capital theory as “*potential or actual resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network or from institutionalized relationship or mutual friend*” (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital theory apply in the context of migrant workers means available resources or information or assistant that migrants received from their social bonding. Migrant workers can have access to resources or services such as psychosocial support, interpersonal ties based on friendship or through shared bonding they have in a particular country that connect the migrant workers together (Massey et al 1993). Migrant social capital resources are information or direct assistance that are provided to migrants which can be in terms of job opportunities, services available such as healthcare, living arrangement facilities. These resources are helpful in improving the life of the migrant during their stay in a foreign country. The advice are often received from experience migrant workers who have already stayed or have worked as migrant workers and share similar bonding, background or same nationality, language and culture (Coleman, 1988). The benefits of having strong ties with similar background of people is that it provide migrant workers with immediate support and

help. Also, it helps these people to cope with their difficulties such as stress, poor living or working conditions. On the other hand, this can reinforce isolation from local people or may strengthen harmful coping behaviour such as substance abuse (Xu et al., 2021).

2.1 Social determinants of health (SDH) framework

Social determinants of health (SDH) were developed by the World Health Organization (WHO). The SDH characterized that health of people are largely influenced by the conditions in which people have taken birth, live, grow and age rather than by merely individual choice. Health behavior is an important factor in the SDH framework. Substance abuse and other health related behaviors are considered as socially constructed and related with structural, political and economic circumstances. WHO stresses that discrimination, poverty and poor social arrangements that are related to income, work, housing, education and access to basic services such as health, clean water, electricity and proper road network are the main causes of health disparities (World Health Organization, 2008). The SDH framework are relevant in the context of substance abuse among low-wage migrant workers. The issue of substance abuse among migrant workers cannot just be explained by factors such as pathology or moral failure. Instead, it replicates systematic vulnerabilities that arise due to intersecting social determinants such as: (i) Income inequality and low wages; (ii) Employment conditions; (iii) Poor housing and limited access to healthcare; and (iv) Irregular migration status (Bhundhoo, Coolen, & Fraser, 2025) (Kaplan, 2006).

2.1.1 Income inequality and low wages

Low wages, limited access to healthy food, poor healthcare, limited leisure time and chronic financial issues increase stress, anxiety and hopelessness. Consequently, substance abuse in terms of alcohol, cigarettes, drugs may be used as an alternative, affordable and immediate relief mechanism.

2.1.2 Employment conditions

Migrant workers are often employed in low-status jobs, long working hours and unsafe and exploitative labor conditions. Such environment directly exposes migrant workers in terms of work- related stress, physical burnout and social marginalization. Thus, substance use may emerge as a solution for managing work related stress and tiredness.

2.1.3 Poor housing and limited access to healthcare.

Overcrowded and housing not as per legal norms are common issues among migrant workers. Limited access to healthcare, absence of psychological and social support can open doors to the use of substance abuse among these migrant workers.

2.1.4 Irregular migration status

Illegal migrants and non-compliance to the migrant legal visas exposes migrants living in fear of deportation and exclusion. As a result, the people are reluctant to seek formal support or seek advice from professional healthcare specialist or social workers. These again are factors that push migrant workers towards substance use.

3.0 Methodology

This study was conducted among low wages migrant workers working in Mauritius in different sectors namely, construction, manufacturing, agriculture, hospitality and tourism, domestic, care services, seafood processing, cleaning services and retail chains. This study uses qualitative research design. Semi-structured interviews were selected to collect data from the low- wages migrant workers living in different regions of the island. The rationale behind using semi-structured interviews allows participants to relate their real lived experiences, perceptions and meanings related to substance use and provide the possibility to probe emergent themes. Initially participants were identified through community contacts and informal networks and then snowballing sampling strategy was applied. While conducting the research, all ethical guidelines were observed regarding confidentiality, legal status and stigma associated with substance use. All migrant workers were above 18 years old and has stayed and worked for a minimum of one year in Mauritius. The study was conducted after getting informed consent from all the 50 respondents (35 male and 15 female). Data was analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-step approach from Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Four main themes were derived from the data collected as follows: (1) Substance use as a coping strategy against financial hurdles ; (2) Substance use to overcome emotional distress and loneliness; (3) Substance use as short term escape against work pressure and burnout; and (4) Peer pressure and normalising substance use.

4.0 Results

4.1 Theme 1: Substance use as coping strategy against financial hurdles.

Participants reported that insufficient income and the fear of losing jobs leads to high level of stress that encourage participants to have recourse to substance use as a way to overcome the daily struggle of their lives. One male participant working in the construction sector reported that “ *with high cost of living prevailing in Mauritius, it is difficult to save sufficient money and to send to my family who are relying on me when it comes to financial responsibilities. When I think too much and when family complains that the remittance is not enough, this increase my level of stress and prevent me from sleeping. Drinking alcohol helps me to forget about these financial hurdles and helps me to forget my sorrow for some time*”. Several interviewees explained their difficulties to meet remittance expectations increased feelings of remorse and nervousness. The stress of not being able to fulfill their responsibility as primary breadearners, coupled with lateness in payment of salary, fear of job loss causes additional mental pressure of the migrants. One respondent said “ *with the increase in cost of living prevailing in Mauritius, it is difficult to live in Mauritius and to meet my financial obligations in terms of house payment and other expenses. Moreover, I have contracted debts before coming to work here. Now it is becoming harder and harder to make both ends meet and at the same time send money as a breadwinner to my family* (Female migrant working in hotel sector). With the stress I am facing, drinking and smoking helps me to forget my sorrow temporarily. This narratives, highlight the negative consequences of financial strain that transforms into psychological distress, sleep disturbances. Thus, alcohol consumption appears as a temporary escapes from overwhelming thoughts and emotional pain.

4.2 Theme 2: Substance use to overcome emotional distress and loneliness

Being away and separation from family for long time is another alternative to substance abuse. One female participant reported that *“when I heard my children crying and looking for me during video calls, as a mother it is very painful. I feel extreme level of distress being away from my family, particularly when my children are ill and I am helpless. Also, during special occasion such as festivities, I feel extremely lonely here in this country. Drinking helps me to overcome my emotional distress temporary”*. Many participants reported that because of their language barriers and cultural difference, they feel socially disconnected and lack of recreational opportunities. Consequently, they have limited social interaction with local people. Another respondent stated that *“after hard working day, when I get home, I have nothing to do, I feel like going out to meet people, but language is a major barrier. I feel alone, so I drink alcohol sometime alone or at times with friends from same country. This helps me to forget my loneliness and hard day of work”* (Male, supermarket worker). From these statements, it is cleared that substance use is consider as a way to fill the emotional emptiness, that provides temporary relief from persistent solitude.

4.3 Theme 3: Substance use as short term escape against work pressure and burnout.

Long working hours and works that require extensive physical strengths is another reasons that pushes low-wages migrant workers towards substance misuse in terms of cigarettes and alcohol. One male respondent working in the construction sector informed that *“ Everyday, I start working at 7am and finishes around 6Pm. Working as mason in this hot weather is not something easy. In addition, we have work target and deadline to respect, there is tremendous pressure to complete the work on time. Since I came to work in Mauritius, I have started to smoke 2 packets of cigarettes per day compare to 1 cigarette per day in my home country. Cigarettes helps me to feel good as it helps me to feel less tension at work. When reached home, I am already exhausted, I need to consume alcohol (rhum) on a daily basis to be able to sleep without feeling any pain in my body”*. This narratives highlights how substance use is considered as a normal functional mechanism rather than a recreational choice. From the statement, it is noted that, cigarettes were used as a means of managing work related stress during daywork and in the evening alcohol used as a form of self-medication to lessen physical pain, muscle fatigue and sleep disturbances arises due to long and hard working hours. Moreover, the findings revealed that substance abuse among low-wage migrant workers is entangled with abusive labor conditions. Long working hours and physical hardness of the work. Substance use in this aspect is used as a maladaptive yet easily accessible coping strategy to endure the hard work environment.

4.4 Theme 4: Peer pressure and normalising substance use.

Peer groups often played an important role in normalizing substance use as a collective group coping mechanism. One female respondent explained that *“at work I have lots of Mauritian friends that often invites me for party, only to socialize with them I have started drinking and smoking when we go to club and party. Despite, I don’t like to drink and smokes, as I know it is not good for health. If I don’t follow my friends they will exclude me from socializing with them, thus I have no choice to imitate them by drinking and smoking. Before I use to smoke*

only during weekend, now I smoke every day. I am already addicted to cigarettes. I have tried to stop once but it was very hard". This narrative highlights the consequences of peer pressure that transforms occasional and situational substance use into habitual and dependent behavior. The response of the participant's demonstrates how substance use becomes social conformity and is used as norms to be accepted in a particular group. The fear of being socially excluded with limited social support systems further intensified participant's vulnerability and increase the chance of being addicted to substance use. Another male respondent reported that *"when I came to work in Mauritius five years ago, I was not drinking alcohol at all, but after long working hours in the retail sector in a warehouse, my colleague who is from Mauritius propose me occasionally to drink after work in the evening. Initially, I have started accompanying him by trying beer then gradually I shifted to alcohol rum and at times we also smoke cannabis. Now I can say that I am already addicted to alcohol drink daily. Without alcohol, my body started to tremble and feel palpitation. Only after consuming alcohol, I can have a proper sleep. Certainly, I can say that consuming alcohol has become my routine".*

5.0 Discussion

This study highlighted that substance use remains as a coping tool among low-wages migrant workers in SIDS. The research emphasizes on how financial difficulties, emotional distress, peer pressure, stress, loneliness and poor social support are contributing factors that promote substance misuse. Lack of psychosocial support, precarious work environment and social isolation are conditions that further accelerate the substance abuse. Participants narratives demonstrate to what extent they are vulnerable and easy victims to substance abuse in terms of alcohol and cigarettes consumption for temporary relief to overcome their grief, work pressure, isolation and mental stress. These findings correspond to the existing research of De kock (2020), that low-wages migrant workers suffered from structural vulnerability. This opens the debates for adequate policies for migrant in terms of social support, descent work conditions and descent salary. Moreover, the study demonstrates that emotional distress in terms of loneliness, homesickness, family separation, anxiety and depression are major factors that promotes substance abuse among migrant workers. It is important that these low-wages migrant workers have easy access to services of counsellors, psychologists and social workers for promoting psychosocial support and follow up with these workers.

Moreover, many participants understand the adverse consequences of substance abuse for their health, yet they are unable to put a halt in its consumption. This demonstrates that, there is an important gap in terms of substance abuse education and prevention and early interventions among migrant workers. Therefore, authorities or NGOs could help in devising prevention strategies such as targeted screening programs and intervention at the workplace or dormitories of the migrant workers could definitely play an important role in reducing substance misuse among migrant workers.

Social support is another important element in the fight against substance abuse. Social workers or migrant care workers can be of great help in fostering positive leisure activities and community engagement within the society. Promoting social support and social connection in terms of religious involvement act as protective factors in reducing dependency on substance

use. This idea match with the social capital theory which emphasize on the value of strengthening positive social networking.

6.0 Conclusion

This study highlights in-depth understanding and a critical insight regarding the complex and interrelated factors that causes substance abuse among low-wage migrant workers in Mauritius. From a qualitative perspective, the findings emphasize that, substance use cannot be determined only from an individual behavior perspective. There are other factors in terms of structural, financial, occupational, precarious working environment, social isolation, work pressure, family separation and peer pressure that are other possible causes that influence low wages migrant workers towards substance abuse as coping mechanism. Moreover, structural and institutional barriers comprises of limited access to healthcare and social support make migrant more vulnerable. Furthermore, this research shows that a multi-level prevention approach, together with Strategic Prevention Framework that emphasizes on Prevention, advocacy and early interventions can act as catalyst in providing psychosocial support, community-based interventions that can help to address the problem of substance use among low-wages migrant workers in SIDS. This research contributes to the existing research relating to substance abuse among migrant workers, consider as a growing public health concern, social justice and labor right problems. By strengthening migrant workers lived experiences, this research suggests for coordinated actions in terms of policy, health initiatives, labor laws, integration of community and all other stakeholders. If the problem of substance abuse among migrant workers is not given proper consideration, the consequences can be very serious at multi-layered, affecting individuals, families, workplaces and society. Therefore, systemic change is needed that promotes welfare and well-being and reduce vulnerability of the migrant workers and ensure sustainable living conditions for these foreign workers.

Funding Statement

This research received no external funding

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest in this research.

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