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Help for Afghan women addicts

KABUL: Anita lifted the sky-blue burqa from her face, revealing glazed eyes and cracked lips from years of smoking opium, and touched her belly, still round from giving birth to her seventh child a month ago.

"I can't give breast milk to my baby. I'm scared he'll get addicted," said the 32-year-old Anita, who declined to give her full name.

She was huddled with other women at the United Nations-funded Nejat drug rehabilitation centre here.

With little funding and no access to substitution drugs such as methadone, treatment is rudimentary at Nejat for a problem that is growing in a dirt-poor country.

Like many of Afghanistan's female drug users, Anita picked up the habit from her husband.

Nejat estimates around 60,000 Afghan women regularly take illegal drugs. They send their children to collect scrap and bottles to help pay for their habit, or resort to begging.

"My husband took a second wife and began to ignore me, so I started to smoke his opium and now must beg," said Fauzia, 30, a petite mother of five sitting in the corner of Nejat.

Treatment options are sorely limited. A pilot project launched two years ago by Medecins du Monde, which gives methadone to drug addicts, is the only one in the country.

The National AIDS Control Programme wanted to roll it out across the country, but the Ministry of

Counter narcotics objected, saying it would introduce yet another narcotic onto the black market.

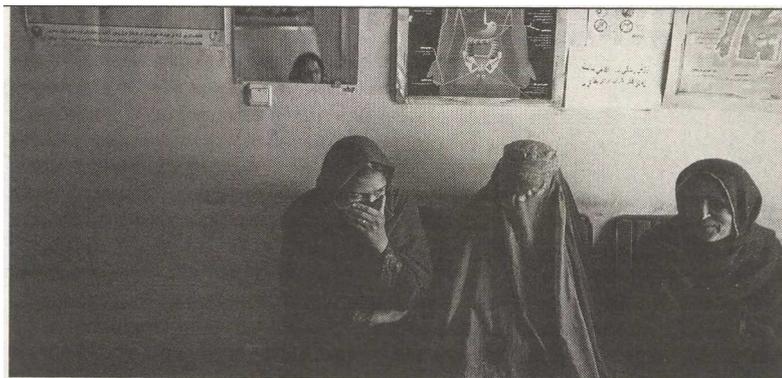
Afghanistan's female narcotics problem is now filling the country's largest women's prison here.

Of its 164 inmates, 64 were opium and heroin users, double what it was when the clinic started in 2008, said clinic doctor, Hanifa Amiri.

"There are simply more drugs out there available to women now."

A new strategy being rolled out by the Health Ministry to target more women in counselling and HIV testing is being met by opposition from the strong conservative forces in Afghan society.

"HIV and drug use are viewed as evil in Muslim society, and even more so for women," said specialist Mohammad Hahn Heddat. **Reuters**



Afghan women drug addicts visiting a United Nations-funded drug rehabilitation centre in Nejat. **Reuters pic**