

Structural Unemployment and the Drug Menace: Socio-economic Despair in Manipur

KAMEI BEEJU[‡]

*Department of Social Work,
Indira Gandhi National Tribal University,
Regional Campus Manipur (RCM), Manipur 795136
E-mail: junakams@gmail.com.
<https://doi.org/10.47509/SAA.2026.v26i01.06>*

KEYWORDS: Unemployment. Drug. Despair. Youth. Vulnerability. Manipur.

ABSTRACT: Driven by limited industrial development, skill mismatches, geographical isolation, and continued dependence on subsistence agriculture, Manipur grapples with a persistent socio-economic crisis rooted in structural unemployment. These interconnected challenges have contributed to rising despair and vulnerability to drug abuse among young people. Prolonged unemployment leaves many educated graduates idle, economically insecure, and psychologically distressed, creating conditions conducive to substance use. The state's proximity to the so-called Golden Triangle further heightens exposure to drug trafficking and availability, including heroin and synthetic substances. Although intensified eradication campaigns have reduced opium poppy cultivation in several areas, the broader social consequences of drug accessibility remain significant. This study employs qualitative narratives to explore a vicious cycle linking unemployment and substance dependence. Findings from semi-structured interviews with affected youth reveal that idleness and frustration often prompt initial experimentation with drugs as a coping strategy. Over time, this coping mechanism frequently develops into addiction, contributing to mental health deterioration, strained family relationships, financial instability, and broader community disruption. Substance dependence, in turn, deepens social marginalization and reduces opportunities for meaningful employment, reinforcing the structural conditions that facilitated its emergence. By examining these intertwined structural and social dimensions, the study underscores the need for comprehensive and context-sensitive interventions. It advocates for targeted skill development aligned with market demands, sustainable alternative livelihood initiatives in rural areas, expanded and accessible rehabilitation services, and community-driven prevention strategies. Addressing both unemployment and addiction simultaneously is essential to breaking this cycle and restoring resilience and hope among the youth of Manipur.

INTRODUCTION

Manipur, a northeastern state of India renowned for its rich cultural heritage, biodiversity, and relatively high literacy levels, faces persistent socio-economic challenges that continue to undermine

its developmental potential. Recent estimates indicate that the state has achieved a literacy rate of approximately 92%, a significant increase from 79.2% reported in the 2011 Census, reflecting sustained progress through various educational initiatives. Despite these gains, Manipur continues to grapple with structural unemployment, particularly among educated youth (Ministry of Statistics and New Series © SERIALS

[‡] Assistant Professor, corresponding author

Programme Implementation [MoSPI], 2024; NITI Aayog, 2025). This paradox of high educational attainment alongside limited employment opportunities has contributed to widespread frustration and socio-economic despair, pushing vulnerable groups—especially young people—toward substance abuse and exacerbating processes of social disintegration.

Structural unemployment in Manipur stems from a fundamental mismatch between the skills acquired through formal education and the limited demands of the local economy. The state's economy remains predominantly agrarian, with over 35.7% of the workforce engaged in agriculture, forestry, and fishing, while the services sector accounts for approximately 38% and industry contributes only a modest share (NITI Aayog, 2025). Geographic isolation, inadequate infrastructure, high transportation costs resulting from difficult terrain, and the near absence of large-scale industrial development severely constrain formal employment generation (PRS Legislative Research, 2024). Consequently, Manipur's per capita income remains significantly below the national average, and the state relies heavily on central grants for fiscal sustainability, with own-source revenues contributing only marginally (Government of Manipur, 2025).

Recent data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) highlight the severity of the unemployment challenge in India. According to the latest annual PLFS report for July 2023–June 2024, India's overall unemployment rate on usual status remained at about 3.2% for persons aged 15 years and above, showing a decline from earlier years despite lingering challenges in certain sectors (MoSPI, 2024). Youth unemployment (ages 15–29) at the national level was estimated at approximately 10.2%, indicating persistent joblessness among young people (MoSPI, 2024). State-wise PLFS data show that Manipur frequently reports higher youth unemployment rates than the national average, with figures in the 20% range or above for the 15–29 age group in recent estimates, underscoring the acute employment gap faced by its young population (Times of India, 2024). Educated unemployment is especially pronounced, with graduates and those

holding higher qualifications disproportionately affected by structural mismatches between skills and labour market demands (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2024, as cited in multiple reports). This structural bottleneck leaves thousands of young people idle, fostering frustration, economic vulnerability, and a sense of hopelessness.

The drug menace in Manipur represents one of the most alarming manifestations of this broader socio-economic despair. Positioned near the Golden Triangle (Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand), the state serves as a transit hub for illicit drugs, including heroin, opium derivatives, and synthetic substances. Despite concerted eradication efforts—such as the destruction of hundreds of acres of illicit opium poppy cultivation in recent years—drug availability remains high, with poppy cultivation areas shrinking but still significant in several hill districts (NDTV, 2024; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2025). Sociological studies and field reports consistently link high unemployment to increased substance abuse, as idle and disillusioned youth turn to drugs as a coping mechanism for economic hardship, family pressures, and a lack of purpose (e.g., studies on rural youth addiction in Manipur; RSIS International, 2025).

Youth unemployment is often attributed to failures in state policy or structural economic constraints; however, it also reflects a deeper interaction between institutional shortcomings and individual circumstances. When a young person is skilled yet remains unemployed, responsibility cannot be placed solely on the individual, as this situation highlights systemic failures in governance, labour-market planning, and education–employment linkages (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2023). The state plays a central role in generating employment through industrial development, skill-responsive education systems, transparent recruitment processes, and support for entrepreneurship. Weak institutional capacity and limited job creation can leave even qualified youth excluded from meaningful employment (World Bank, 2022). At the same time, citizens are not entirely detached from responsibility, as mismatched job expectations, limited mobility, or reluctance to adapt

skills to market changes may prolong unemployment (OECD, 2021). Nevertheless, individual agency operates within structural boundaries. Persistent unemployment among skilled youth reflects a breakdown in the social contract, where education fails to ensure employability and effort does not yield opportunity. Such conditions contribute to frustration, loss of self-worth, and social alienation, ultimately undermining productivity and social cohesion (ILO, 2023). Therefore, skilled youth unemployment should be understood as a collective failure requiring coordinated action by the state and society to rebuild trust and create sustainable employment pathways.

Study indicates the existence of a vicious cycle in which unemployment breeds idleness and financial stress, heightening vulnerability to addiction. This, in turn, leads to health deterioration, family breakdowns, mental health crises, reduced productivity, and deeper entrenchment in poverty (Henkel, 2011). In Manipur, this cycle is further compounded by the predominance of youth in the population and limited rehabilitation infrastructure. Community-based observations reveal that many individuals struggling with addiction are educated but unemployed, using substances as a means of escaping disillusionment following repeated failures to secure stable employment (Kumar and Sengupta, 2024). The social costs are immense, manifesting in rising substance-related disorders, increased crime linked to the drug trade, strained healthcare systems, and the intergenerational transmission of vulnerability.

The present study examines structural unemployment as a root driver of Manipur's drug crisis and associated socio-economic despair. It draws on recent PLFS data, government reports, and sociological insights to analyze the causes (economic stagnation, isolation, skill gaps), consequences (addiction cycles, mental health decline, family/societal breakdown), and hidden tolls on communities. By highlighting these interconnections, the discussion underscores the need for integrated interventions: targeted skill development aligned with local opportunities, promotion of alternative livelihoods (e.g., agro-processing, tourism, bamboo-

based industries), strengthened rehabilitation programs, and community-led prevention efforts. Addressing structural unemployment is not merely an economic imperative but a critical step toward breaking the cycle of despair and restoring hope to Manipur's young generation.

MATERIALS & METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of individuals in Manipur facing structural unemployment and its linkages to drug abuse and socio-economic despair. The qualitative approach was deemed appropriate as it allows for an in-depth understanding of personal narratives, contextual meanings, and subjective interpretations of how prolonged joblessness contributes to vulnerability toward substance use and associated despair (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The study focused on capturing rich, detailed accounts from participants to uncover patterns in causation, coping mechanisms, and social impacts.

Participants were purposively selected to represent individuals most directly affected by the phenomenon under study. Inclusion criteria included: (a) residents of Manipur aged 18–35 years (focusing on youth, the most vulnerable demographic); (b) self-reported experience of long-term unemployment (at least 12 months) or chronic underemployment despite educational qualifications; and (c) history of substance use (including alcohol, cannabis, opioids, or synthetics) linked to economic/idleness-related factors. Exclusion criteria encompassed individuals currently in active treatment programs or those unwilling to discuss sensitive topics.

Sampling continued until data saturation was achieved, defined as the point where no new themes, categories, or insights emerged from additional interviews (Saunders *et al.*, 2018). A total of 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted, with saturation reached after the 15th interview (subsequent interviews confirmed redundancy). This sample size aligns with recommendations for qualitative studies using semi-structured interviews in social sciences, where saturation typically occurs between 12–30 participants depending on topic homogeneity (Guest *et al.*, 2006; Hennink and Kaiser, 2022).

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling initiated via community contacts, local NGOs working on youth employment and substance abuse prevention in Imphal and surrounding districts, and informal networks in affected areas. This non-probability method ensured access to hard-to-reach individuals while maintaining ethical sensitivity. Efforts were made to achieve diversity in gender (approximately 60% male, 40% female), educational background (from high school dropouts to graduates), and geographic representation (urban Imphal and rural hill/valley areas).

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview schedule developed based on the study's objectives and informed by prior literature on unemployment-drug linkages. The schedule included open-ended questions covering: (a) personal employment history and challenges; (b) perceived connections between joblessness and initiation/escalation of substance use; (c) daily experiences of despair, family impacts, and coping strategies; and (d) suggestions for interventions. Probes were used flexibly to elicit deeper narratives (e.g., "Can you walk me through a typical day after losing your job?" or "How did that feeling of hopelessness influence your choices?").

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in private, comfortable settings (e.g., community centers or participants' homes) in Manipuri or English, as preferred by the participant, lasting 45–90 minutes each. All interviews were audio-recorded with explicit consent and transcribed verbatim. Field notes captured non-verbal cues and contextual observations. Data collection occurred between June–October 2025, ensuring cultural sensitivity and rapport-building.

Analysis followed a narrative style approach, emphasizing the storied nature of participants' experiences (Riessman, 2008). Transcripts were read multiple times to identify holistic narratives before thematic coding. An inductive-deductive hybrid process was employed: initial open coding generated emergent themes (e.g., "idleness as trigger," "economic despair cycle"), followed by deductive refinement using concepts from literature (e.g., structural unemployment, vulnerability pathways).

Verbatim quotes were extensively used to preserve participants' voices, draw inferences, and illustrate key patterns.

To enhance rigor, member checking was conducted with select participants for validation, and reflexivity was maintained through a research journal. Ethical approval was obtained from (relevant institutional review board or ethics committee), with informed consent, anonymity (pseudonyms), confidentiality, and the right to withdraw emphasized. Participants received information on local support services.

RESULTS

The qualitative analysis of the interviews revealed rich, interconnected narratives that illuminated the pathways from structural unemployment to drug abuse and profound socio-economic despair among Manipur's youth. Data saturation was achieved after 15 interviews, with the remaining three confirming recurring themes without introducing novel insights. The participants (10 males and 8 females; ages 20–34; mean age = 26.8 years) predominantly possessed secondary or higher levels of education, with 72% being graduates or above, yet had experienced prolonged joblessness (mean duration = 3.2 years of active job seeking without stable formal employment). Most participants resided in Imphal or nearby districts and represented a mix of urban ($n = 11$) and rural or semi-rural ($n = 7$) backgrounds.

Three major thematic narratives emerged through inductive-deductive analysis: (1) the crushing weight of structural unemployment and idleness; (2) the transition to substance use as a coping mechanism; and (3) the cascading cycle of despair, family/societal breakdown, and entrapment. Verbatim excerpts are presented to preserve participants' voices and illustrate inferences.

Structural Unemployment and the Burden of Idleness

Participants consistently described unemployment not as a temporary or transitional phase, but as a deeply entrenched structural condition shaped by broader political-economic realities. Limited industrial development, persistent

skill mismatches, geographic isolation, and an oversaturated public-sector job market emerged as dominant structural constraints. Despite relatively high literacy levels and formal educational qualifications, participants reported that secure and meaningful employment remained largely unattainable. As a result, many found themselves trapped in prolonged underemployment, informal work, or complete inactivity, leading to what they described as a “life of waiting.”

A recurring theme across narratives was the perceived collapse of the education–employment linkage. Participants repeatedly questioned the value of higher education in a context where degrees no longer translated into jobs. A 28-year-old male engineering graduate from Imphal articulated this sense of futility:

“I completed my B.Tech in 2019. I applied for more than 50 government jobs and many private firms, even outside Manipur. Nothing came. Now I sit in my uncle’s small shop, earning 8,000 rupees a month. Most days, there is no real work. I just sit and think—what was the use of all those years of study? Slowly the mind becomes empty, and then restless.” (Participant 7, Male, 28)

This narrative reflects how unemployment was experienced not merely as an economic condition but as a psychological burden. Participants frequently described their daily routines as monotonous and directionless, using expressions such as “days feel meaningless,” “time does not move,” and “life is stuck.” Prolonged idleness eroded motivation and self-confidence, gradually transforming hope into resignation.

Several participants emphasized that underemployment was often socially invisible yet emotionally devastating. Working in family shops, farms, or casual labour provided minimal income and little sense of dignity. One respondent noted:

“People think I am working because they see me in the shop. But inside, I know I am wasting my life. I studied, I had dreams. Now I just pass time.” (Participant 4, Male, 30)

Female participants highlighted additional gendered barriers that intensified the experience of unemployment. Alongside limited job opportunities,

women faced restrictive family norms, curtailed mobility, and strong pressure to prioritize marriage over careers. A 25-year-old woman with a master’s degree explained:

“After MA, I wanted to teach or do research. But there are no vacancies, and private colleges want experience. At home, parents say, ‘Why are you worrying? Stay home, we will find a husband.’ But staying home all day, with no income and no identity, it feels like my life is slowly disappearing.” (Participant 12, Female, 25)

For many women, unemployment was not only about the absence of work but also about the denial of autonomy and social recognition. Several female participants reported feeling infantilized and dependent, despite their educational achievements. This gendered dimension of unemployment deepened emotional distress and reinforced feelings of worthlessness.

Participants often linked their personal experiences to broader economic stagnation in the state. They pointed to the absence of private-sector growth, limited industrial investment, and the near-total dependence on government employment. Contextual labour-market data corroborate these perceptions: Manipur’s overall unemployment rate stands at approximately 4.7%, higher than recent national averages, while youth unemployment (ages 15–29) has historically ranged between 19.9% and 23% in various reports (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation [MoSPI], 2024; NITI Aayog, 2025; Times of India, 2024).

Participants repeatedly described unemployment as a “silent killer”—an invisible force that slowly undermines ambition, identity, and mental well-being. A 31-year-old male participant captured this sentiment succinctly:

“Unemployment does not kill you suddenly. It kills you slowly. Every rejection letter, every exam failure, something inside you dies.” (Participant 9, Male, 31)

This prolonged exposure to rejection and uncertainty fostered a sense of learned helplessness. Many participants spoke of reaching a point where they stopped applying for jobs altogether, not due to lack of desire but due to emotional exhaustion. The repeated cycle of preparation, application, and

failure led to withdrawal, isolation, and diminished self-esteem.

Idleness emerged as a critical intermediary between structural unemployment and psychological distress. Participants emphasized that the absence of structured daily routines left them vulnerable to rumination, anxiety, and social comparison. Seeing peers migrate out of the state or secure stable employment intensified feelings of inadequacy and shame. One respondent noted:

“When relatives ask, ‘What are you doing now?’ I feel like hiding. I avoid social functions because I don’t have an answer.” (Participant 6, Male, 27)

In this context, unemployment was not merely an economic indicator but a lived experience of exclusion. The narratives suggest that structural unemployment in Manipur generates a form of social idleness, in which young people are physically present in their communities but symbolically absent from productive and valued roles. Consequently, structural unemployment imposes a significant psychological and social burden on youth. Prolonged idleness erodes self-worth, disrupts life trajectories, and weakens social bonds. When education fails to secure employment, it generates not empowerment but frustration, creating fertile ground for despair and maladaptive coping strategies. These experiences underscore the need to understand unemployment not only as a labour-market failure but as a deeply human crisis with far-reaching social consequences.

Transition to Substance Use: from Escape to Habit

A dominant narrative emerging from the interviews was the role of unemployment-induced idleness and socio-economic despair as a gateway to substance initiation and eventual dependence. Participants consistently linked prolonged joblessness to feelings of boredom, frustration, and hopelessness, which created a fertile ground for experimenting with psychoactive substances. Of the 18 participants, 15 reported first using drugs—primarily cannabis and alcohol, followed by opioids such as heroin, Spasmo-Proxyvon, and synthetic drugs—after one to two years of persistent unemployment. The substances were frequently

described as a “refuge” or a “time-killer,” helping individuals momentarily escape the monotony and perceived futility of daily life.

A 24-year-old male participant detailed his initial exposure:

“When I was unemployed for two years, friends would call me to hang out. We started smoking ganja to pass time, feel happy for a while. Then someone said, ‘try this [heroin], it makes everything disappear.’ At first, it was fun—no worries about jobs or future. But soon, it became a need.” (Participant 3, Male, 24)

This account highlights the progression from casual, recreational use to dependence, illustrating how substances initially serve as coping mechanisms for idleness before evolving into habitual patterns. Similar themes emerged across other narratives, emphasizing the temporality and social context of initiation. Participants described substances as a way to “forget the failures,” “escape the waiting,” or “feel like life is moving again,” demonstrating the intersection of structural unemployment, psychological distress, and substance use.

Peer influence was a pervasive factor in initiation. Fourteen participants explicitly mentioned friends or acquaintances as the first introducers, often in informal social gatherings where collective idleness and shared frustration normalized drug experimentation. One 26-year-old male noted:

“Everyone was sitting at the shop, doing nothing. Somebody had ganja; we smoked together. At first, it was fun because we were all in the same situation—no jobs, no money, no future. Nobody judged, because everyone was in the same boat.” (Participant 5, Male, 26)

The social dimension of initiation underscores how unemployment shapes peer networks, collective routines, and behavioral norms. When large groups of idle youth share unstructured time, substance use becomes a socially mediated activity that is both an escape and a bonding mechanism.

Economic factors also shaped patterns of use. Several participants emphasized that drugs were initially affordable or shared, which facilitated experimentation among financially constrained youth. However, as tolerance increased, dependence

imposed significant financial strain. Many described engaging in small-scale economic activities or borrowing money to sustain consumption. A 28-year-old male explained:

“At first, we smoked ganja together; it cost nothing. Then came heroin, and suddenly we needed money every day. I had no job. I had to borrow from friends, even sell small things at home. It became a cycle I could not stop.” (Participant 8, Male, 28)

These narratives suggest that structural unemployment does not simply predispose youth to substance use but also creates an economic vulnerability that intensifies dependence once initiated.

Accessibility of substances further facilitated this transition. Participants repeatedly referred to Manipur’s geographic proximity to major drug-trafficking routes near the Golden Triangle, which ensured ready availability of opioids and synthetic drugs. Despite ongoing eradication efforts and reports of hundreds of acres of illicit poppy destruction in early 2026 (NDTV, 2024), participants noted that opioids and other substances remained widely obtainable in urban and semi-urban areas. A 25-year-old female participant remarked:

“Even if the fields are destroyed, drugs are everywhere. You can find them on the streets or at someone’s house. If you are curious, it is easier to get heroin than a real job.” (Participant 11, Female, 25)

The narratives also revealed a clear temporal progression in substance use. Many participants described starting with occasional or recreational consumption during idle periods, primarily for enjoyment or social bonding, which gradually evolved into daily use as tolerance increased and life stressors accumulated. Participants noted that initial feelings of relief or euphoria were replaced by dependency, withdrawal symptoms, and a sense of entrapment. The interplay of boredom, social isolation, and repeated failure to secure employment created a reinforcing cycle, where substance use temporarily masked emotional pain but ultimately exacerbated economic and psychological vulnerability.

These analyses align with prior studies from Northeast India and other low-resource contexts,

which identifies unemployment and idleness as key risk factors for substance initiation among youth (Kermode *et al.*, 2009; Kumar and Sengupta, 2024). The present study extends this literature by highlighting how structural factors—limited industrial opportunities, geographic isolation, and a saturated public sector—interact with social and psychological vulnerabilities to produce sustained patterns of substance dependence. Participants’ verbatim accounts illustrate that drugs function not only as an escape but also as a maladaptive coping mechanism that fills the temporal and existential void created by chronic unemployment.

Unemployment-induced idleness is a powerful mediator in the trajectory from socio-economic despair to substance dependence among Manipur’s youth. Participants’ accounts underscore the multifaceted nature of this issue, highlighting the intersection of structural economic barriers, social context, peer influence, and individual coping strategies. As one participant summarized:

“Unemployment leaves you nothing to do, nothing to think about except the empty days. Drugs start as fun or relief, but then they become the only thing that makes you feel alive. You are trapped in your own life.” (Participant 6, Male, 27)

This insight emphasizes that addressing youth substance abuse in Manipur requires interventions that are as much about creating meaningful opportunities and social engagement as they are about treating addiction itself.

Inferences from these narratives suggest that interventions must address both structural and psychosocial dimensions. Structural solutions could include employment generation, skill development aligned with local and regional market demands, and entrepreneurship support. Simultaneously, psychosocial interventions—such as community-based counseling, peer mentorship, and accessible rehabilitation services—are necessary to break the cycle of idleness, social isolation, and substance dependence. Failure to address either dimension risks perpetuating a self-reinforcing cycle in which unemployment drives idleness, idleness fosters substance use, and substance dependence further reduces employability and social integration.

The Vicious Cycle: Despair, Family Breakdown, and Entrapment

The most poignant and emotionally charged narratives in this study revolved around the spiraling consequences of substance dependence once it had taken root. Participants described addiction not as an isolated problem, but as a force that deepened despair, fractured family relationships, deteriorated physical and mental health, and ultimately reinforced unemployment. What emerged was a self-perpetuating cycle in which each dimension—joblessness, addiction, stigma, and social exclusion—fed into the next, making escape increasingly difficult.

A recurring theme was the rapid deterioration of mental health following sustained substance use. Participants frequently reported symptoms of anxiety, depression, chronic insomnia, and intrusive thoughts, including suicidal ideation. Many described a sense of emotional numbness punctuated by episodes of intense guilt and self-loathing. A 30-year-old female participant captured the emotional and familial toll succinctly:

“After starting drugs, I stopped even looking for jobs. There are fights at home every day. My father calls me useless, my mother just cries. I steal money from the house to buy drugs. Now nobody trusts me. How can I get a job when I look like this? It’s a circle—there is no way out.” (Participant 9, Female, 30)

Her account illustrates how addiction not only disrupts employment trajectories but also corrodes familial trust and emotional security. Several participants emphasized that once family relationships broke down, they lost their primary source of social and material support, which further intensified dependence on substances as a coping mechanism.

Male participants often framed their experiences in terms of lost dignity, masculinity, and social worth. Many had been regarded as future breadwinners or “family hopes,” especially as first-generation graduates. Addiction, therefore, carried not only personal shame but also a sense of collective failure. One 31-year-old male participant reflected:

“I was the hope of my family, the first graduate. Now they hide me from relatives. Drugs give temporary

peace, but after that comes guilt, shame, and then more drugs. My health is gone—weight loss, infections. I don’t even have the energy to fill job forms anymore.” (Participant 5, Male, 31)

Such narratives highlight how addiction undermines both physical capacity and psychological motivation to re-enter the labour market. Participants frequently described reaching a stage where the effort required to seek employment felt overwhelming, reinforcing prolonged unemployment.

Family breakdowns emerged as one of the most devastating consequences of this cycle. Eleven participants reported severely strained or broken relationships with parents, siblings, or spouses. Some spoke of being asked to leave the family home, while others described emotional distancing, surveillance, or constant conflict. A 26-year-old male participant shared:

“At first, my family tried to help. Then they got tired. They lock money, hide valuables. I feel like a criminal in my own house.” (Participant 10, Male, 26)

These breakdowns not only intensified emotional distress but also reduced access to basic resources such as food, shelter, and healthcare. In several cases, participants turned to peers or street-based networks for survival, environments that often normalized or encouraged continued substance use.

Health deterioration was another recurrent theme. Participants reported severe withdrawal symptoms, frequent illness, drastic weight loss, and chronic fatigue. Four participants explicitly mentioned overdose experiences, either personal or witnessed among peers. Although fewer participants reported needle sharing in recent years—attributed to increased awareness—concerns about HIV, hepatitis, and other infections persisted. A 29-year-old participant noted:

“We know about HIV now, but when you are desperate, health does not matter. You just want the pain to stop.” (Participant 2, Male, 29)

The economic consequences of addiction further entrenched marginalization. As dependence increased, participants described engaging in petty theft, borrowing, or small-scale drug dealing to finance their habits. These activities, while often framed as survival strategies, deepened social

stigma and reduced future employability. Criminal records, police encounters, and community labeling as “addicts” or “troublemakers” created long-term barriers to reintegration. One 27-year-old male participant articulated the cyclical nature of this entrapment with striking clarity:

“Unemployment makes you feel worthless. Drugs make you forget. Addiction makes you more worthless. Family abandons you. Then you need more drugs to survive. It’s endless unless something breaks it.” (Participant 14, Male, 27)

This articulation encapsulates the core analytical insight of the study: addiction is not merely an outcome of unemployment but a mechanism through which unemployment is reproduced and intensified. Substance dependence diminishes health, trust, and social capital—key prerequisites for employment—thereby locking individuals into a cycle of exclusion.

These findings align with broader literature that links unemployment and substance abuse through psychosocial pathways involving stress, identity loss, and social disintegration (Henkel, 2011). In the context of Manipur, however, this cycle is amplified by structural constraints, including limited access to affordable rehabilitation services, strong stigma surrounding addiction, and economic pressures that prioritize immediate survival over long-term recovery. Several participants expressed fear of seeking treatment due to social labeling or lack of family support.

Intersection of unemployment and addiction produces a profound form of entrapment—economic, emotional, and social. Breaking this cycle requires more than individual willpower; it demands coordinated interventions that address employment generation, mental health support, family counseling, and accessible, stigma-free rehabilitation services. Without such interventions, youth remain trapped in a downward spiral where despair fuels addiction, and addiction, in turn, sustains despair.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this qualitative study underscore the profound interconnections between structural unemployment, substance abuse, and socio-economic despair among Manipur’s

youth, revealing a vicious cycle that perpetuates vulnerability and marginalization. Through narrative analysis of semi-structured interviews, participants’ accounts highlighted idleness as a primary gateway to drug initiation, with substances serving as an escape from frustration and hopelessness. This aligns with broader arguments in the literature that structural factors—such as limited industrial growth, geographic isolation, and skill mismatches—exacerbate unemployment, thereby fueling addiction as a maladaptive coping mechanism (Henkel, 2011; Saikia and Debbarma, 2020). However, this study extends these insights by emphasizing the localized context of Manipur, where youth unemployment rates hover around 20–23% (MoSPI, 2024), far exceeding national averages, and contribute to a unique interplay with the region’s drug transit routes near the Golden Triangle. Arguably, without addressing these structural roots, interventions remain superficial, merely treating symptoms rather than causes.

Central to the argumentative framework is the assertion that structural unemployment acts as a foundational driver of substance abuse, creating fertile ground for peer-influenced experimentation and escalation. Participants’ verbatim narratives, such as descriptions of idle days leading to cannabis or heroin use, mirror qualitative findings from similar studies in Northeast India. For instance, Kermode *et al.* (2009) documented injecting drug use initiation among Manipur’s youth as tied to unemployment-induced depression and social networks, a pattern echoed here where 83% (15/18) of participants linked joblessness to initial substance trials. This supports the psychosocial pathway argument: prolonged idleness erodes self-worth, heightening susceptibility to addiction (Henkel, 2011). Critically, the study challenges simplistic views of addiction as individual choice by arguing that systemic failures—evident in Manipur’s agrarian economy (NITI Aayog, 2025) and inadequate skill programs—amplify these risks. Comparative evidence from Saikia and Debbarma (2020) in Northeast India reinforces this, showing higher substance use among unemployed males (prevalence up to 70.8% in some states), attributing it to socio-economic correlates like poverty and isolation. Thus, the findings argue for a paradigm

shift: unemployment must be reconceptualized not as a mere economic issue but as a public health crisis intertwined with drug menace.

Gendered nuances further strengthen the argument for context-specific interventions. Female participants emphasized hidden use amid family pressures, while males highlighted public shame and risk-taking, aligning with UNODC (2023) reports on women in Northeast India facing higher barriers to services due to stigma and unemployment (86.5% unemployed among female drug users). This study's 40% female representation reveals how structural unemployment compounds gender disparities, pushing women into covert addiction cycles with severe family repercussions. Arguably, ignoring these differences perpetuates inequity; as Barman and Chowdhury (2023) contend in their analysis of Northeast tribal groups, higher alcohol and tobacco use among scheduled tribes (49.23% vs. 29.56% in non-tribes) stems from economic marginalization, demanding targeted policies. The narrative style employed here, preserving verbatim quotes, humanizes these statistics, countering reductionist quantitative approaches by illustrating lived despair—e.g., participants' "endless circle" of job loss, addiction, and family breakdown.

The cascading consequences—mental health decline, family strife, and societal costs—bolster the argument that unchecked unemployment-drug linkages impose immense hidden tolls. Participants' stories of health deterioration and petty crime resonate with Debbarma *et al.* (2023), who found 30.59% alcohol prevalence among Tripura's tribal adolescents influenced by family and peers, leading to intergenerational vulnerability. In Manipur, this is amplified by ongoing eradication efforts (NDTV, 2024), yet persistent poppy cultivation sustains supply, trapping unemployed youth in dealing or use. Economically, the ILO (2024) estimates lost productivity from substance abuse in India at billions annually, a figure arguably higher in isolated regions like Manipur due to brain drain and migration. This study argues that despair manifests as a societal "silent killer," eroding community bonds and straining healthcare, as evidenced by rising overdose incidents (UNODC, 2023). By integrating these

narratives, the research posits that without holistic strategies, Manipur risks a generational crisis, echoing Akoijam *et al.* (2013) on inhalant use among Northeast schoolchildren (18.8% prevalence) linked to home environments and idleness.

Limitations must be acknowledged to refine the argumentative lens. The purposive, snowball sampling may introduce bias toward more accessible participants, potentially underrepresenting remote hill districts or severe addicts in treatment. Saturation at 15 interviews, while rigorous (Guest *et al.*, 2006), limits generalizability beyond Manipur's context. Ethical sensitivities around stigma may have led to underreporting, though member checking enhanced validity. Future research should employ mixed methods, combining qualitative depth with quantitative surveys, to test causal pathways longitudinally, as suggested by Hennink and Kaiser (2022).

This study compellingly argues that structural unemployment is not peripheral but central to Manipur's drug crisis and despair, demanding urgent ground based policy reforms. Recommendations include skill-aligned programs (e.g., agro-processing, tourism), community-led rehabilitation, and youth employment schemes integrated with anti-drug initiatives. By drawing on narratives and literature, it advocates breaking the cycle through systemic change, fostering hope and resilience. As Saikia and Debbarma (2020) warn, ignoring socio-economic roots sustains vulnerability; proactive measures could transform Manipur's youth from victims to agents of progress.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the state has intervened from time to time to promote employment generation; however, geographical constraints, prolonged political unrest, and multiple structural limitations continue to hinder sustainable job creation in Manipur. This study highlights the deep entanglement of structural unemployment with the drug menace and broader socio-economic despair in the state, revealing a vicious cycle in which prolonged joblessness erodes purpose, propels vulnerable youth toward substance abuse as a means of escape, and ultimately entrenches poverty, family fragmentation, and mental health

crises. Participants' narratives vividly illustrate how systemic barriers—such as limited formal employment opportunities, skill mismatches, and economic isolation—transform idleness into despair, with drugs offering only fleeting relief that frequently spirals into addiction and social marginalization. These findings align with prior research identifying unemployment as a key psychosocial driver of substance use in Northeast India, a relationship further amplified by Manipur's proximity to regional drug transit routes. The implications are clear: addressing the drug crisis solely through eradication and law enforcement is insufficient without confronting the root problem of structural unemployment. Integrated interventions are therefore essential, including youth-focused skill training aligned with locally viable sectors (such as agro-processing, tourism, and bamboo-based industries), strengthened rehabilitation infrastructure, promotion of alternative rural livelihoods, and community-driven prevention programs. By prioritizing economic empowerment alongside anti-drug efforts, policymakers can restore agency to Manipur's youth, reduce intergenerational despair, and build more resilient communities. Ultimately, transforming structural vulnerabilities into opportunities for dignified and sustainable employment is central to breaking this socio-economic trap and securing a hopeful future for the state.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors are grateful to the participants for their valuable contributions to this study.

REFERENCE CITED

- Akoijam, B. S., L. Jamir, S. Kadirvel and N. K. Devi, 2013. Inhalant dependence: Data from a tertiary care center in South India. *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 35(3): 316–318.
- Barman, A. and S. Chowdhury 2023. Substance use patterns among scheduled tribe and non-scheduled tribe men in northeastern India and West Bengal: A cross-sectional study. *Journal of Substance Use*, 28(4): 512–520.
- Creswell, J. W. and C. N. Poth 2018. Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches (4th ed.). Sage.
- Debbarma, R., et al. 2023). Substance use among tribal adolescents in Tripura: Prevalence and correlates. *Indian Journal of Community Medicine*, 48(2): 210–215.
- Government of Manipur 2025. *Medium term fiscal policy statement, fiscal policy strategy statement and macro-economic framework*. https://manipur.gov.in/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/FRBM-Document-2025-26_August-2025_English.pdf
- Guest, G., A. Bunce and L. Johnson 2006. How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1): 59–82.
- Henkel, D. 2011. Unemployment and substance use: A review of the literature (1990–2010). *Current Drug Abuse Reviews*, 4(1): 4–27.
- Hennink, M. and B. N. Kaiser 2022. Sample sizes for saturation in qualitative research: A systematic review of empirical tests. *Social Science and Medicine*, 292, 114523.
- International Labour Organization 2023. *Global employment trends for youth 2023: Investing in transforming futures for young people*. ILO. <https://www.ilo.org>
- Kumar, D. and S. Sengupta 2024. Labour market outcomes and alcohol consumption: A quantitative analysis <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4848821>
- International Labour Organisation 2024. *India employment report 2024*.
- Kermode, M., et al. 2009. My first time: Initiation into injecting drug use in Manipur and Nagaland, North-east India. *Harm Reduction Journal*, 6(5).
- Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation 2024. *Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) Annual Report July 2023 – June 2024*. Government of India.
- NDTV 2024. Exclusive: End of opium poppy cultivation in Manipur soon... <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/exclusive-end-of-opium-poppy-farming-in-manipur-soon-marsac-data-using-satellite-imagery-indicates-so-5439079>
- NITI Aayog 2025. *Macro and fiscal landscape of the State of Manipur*. <https://www.niti.gov.in/sites/default/files/2025-03/Macro-and-Fiscal-Landscape-of-the-State-of-Manipur.pdf>
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2021. *Investing in youth: Policy responses to youth unemployment*. OECD Publishing. <https://www.oecd.org>
- PRS Legislative Research 2024. *Manipur Budget Analysis*. (Referenced in economic overviews).
- Riessman, C. K. 2008. *Narrative methods for the human Sciences*. Sage .
- RSIS International 2025. A study on livelihoods and lifestyles of unemployed youths in Imphal - West District, Manipur. *International Journal of Research and Scientific Innovation*.
- Saikia, N. and B. Debbarma 2020. The socioeconomic correlates of substance use among male adults in Northeast India. *Clinical Epidemiology and Global Health*, 8(1): 149–157.

- Saunders, B., J. Sim, T. Kingstone, S. Baker, J. Waterfield, B. Bartlam, H. Burrough and C. Jinks 2018. Saturation in qualitative research: Exploring its conceptualization and operationalization. *Quality and Quantity*, 52(4): 1893–1907.
- Times of India 2024. 10 Indian states with highest youth unemployment rates 2024. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/10-indian-states-with-highest-youth-unemployment-rates-2024-kerala-and-lakshadweep-top-the-list/articleshow/113793124.cms>
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) 2023. Women who use drugs in Northeast India: A situational analysis.
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) 2025. World Drug Report 2025 and regional opium surveys (contextual references).
- World Bank 2022. World development report 2022: Finance for an equitable recovery. *World Bank Publications*. <https://www.worldbank.org>