A Social Ecological Examination of Substance Use and Sexual Risk Behaviors among Women Participants in Israeli Club Culture

Background
- The modern all-night dance club culture is found in nearly all major cities, and is common in the larger Israeli cities of Tel Aviv and Haifa. Tel Aviv is known as the 'nightlife capital of the Middle East' and is renowned for its active, diverse, and international scene.
- Club drugs are common in these settings, with substances varying over time, but generally include MDMA (ecstasy), powder cocaine, ketamine, methamphetamine, gamma-hydroxybutyric acid (GHB), and LSD. The attraction to these substances is the increased stamina for all-night dancing and reduced cognizance.
- Designers drugs, such as synthetic cannabinoids and emerging psychedelic/stimulant drugs (e.g., mephedrone, 2C-B) have recently become common in Israeli club scenes and are often marketed as legal and safe.
- The tendency to mix numerous substances puts these nightclub participants at high risk for health problems, HIV transmission risk, criminal justice involvement, and mental distress, such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. These health and social problems can be especially concerning for women who come from specific cultural backgrounds.

Purpose and Methods
- **Purpose:** The purpose of this analysis is to present preliminary data from an ongoing qualitative study of the social ecological factors influencing substance use and sexual risk behaviors among women participants in Israeli club culture.
- **Methods:** Data include participant observation in four large night clubs in Tel Aviv and Haifa. In addition, qualitative interviews with seven women respondents are also included. Targeted andsnowball sampling strategies are being employed to recruit eligible participants.

Participant Observation - Key Findings

- **Club A:** Evidence of the use of ready-made (MDMA), and other club drugs such as GHB and ketamine inside of the club included the large percentage of patrons consuming water or eyedrops that appeared to be "warming." In addition to these club drugs, the inhalant amyl nitrite (popper) was also observed. Security was not highly visible, and there were many dark alcoves in which to consume drugs. The guards will never call the police if they catch you [with drugs]. In all likelihood, they will just kick you out. Part of their job is to catch [the drugs]. A couple of the clubs were previously closed by the police because they found ketamine, methamphetamine, mephedrone, or MDMA in the water. The guards are not the police… But they need to appear as though they are the police.

- **Club B:** Evidence of ketamine use. The guard whoسكر iv (joint) in addition, already present in the clubs, could be trained and encouraged to conduct protective surveillance of women club patrons.

- **Club C:** The guards are watching, because their might be undercover cop around. Personally, I know there are, I am absolutely certain. Mostly they are just there for security. They are watching, and I don’t expect that agreeing to accompany a man into the bathroom for example, will lead to

- **Club D:** The entire experience at the club is not just about drugs. More importantly, it is about the social environment that facilitates drug use. The attraction to these substances is the increased stamina for all-night dancing and reduced cognizance.

Participants

- A total of 17 women participated in in-depth interviews. Participants ranged in aged from 23 – 28. All of the interviews were conducted in Tel Aviv, but previously came from other parts of Israel. Participants were interviewed in bars or restaurants.

Qualitative Interview Data - Key Themes

- **In Control of Being Out of Control**
  - I’m a person who needs to be in control. Coke actually increases one’s control over their body. That’s why a lot of lawyers and professionals use it. It forces you in an unbelievable way. With all the other drugs, you decide. It’s all psychological. You decide where to take the experience.
  - With hard drugs, coke is for sure, but MDMA also, it’s really important that there is someone familiar next to you. You want people with good vibes. You want to know someone. You need to feel secure. You don’t want to make a move if you don’t know who you are or who you’re with. It doesn’t matter if they are using too long as long as you know them you can get a grip on reality.

- **Sex and Drugs Are Intertwined**
  - “The bathroom is for dancing, using, running lines, sex, selfies in the mirror… sometimes you also pee.”
  - Usually you only go into the bathroom with friends and people you know. But if someone from security tells you to run, you are not allowed to go. It depends on the club. Last time I had a guy offer me a line from the stall, and we ended up in the bathroom. And then Thursday came around, and I drank a whole bottle with MDMA, and then remembered I wasn’t alone. So at club all of the guys are old and ugly and offer lines to get girls. It really depends on the club. Last time a guy offered me a line it was my boss, and we ended up in the bathroom. But if I don’t like the guy, I don’t get a line from the stall with him. For MDMA or coke, I just bat at a party and someone you know just asks if you want to run a line or take a sip from their water bottle. So at club all of the guys are old and ugly and offer lines to get girls. It works on some girls. There are girls who want to hear the bathroom waiting for someone to offer them a line. I think they are broken.

- **Security Doesn’t Care About Drug Use or Sex**
  - “I work at a club. Security is crucial in case something happens, but they have to be inside the club, not at the door. They [security] are there for the violence.”
  - “They [security] are not there for the drugs.”
  - “One time I saw a guard take a water bottle from someone and toss it. It was MDMA and they took the bottle and kicked him out of the club… maybe he [security] wanted it for himself.”
  - The guards will never call the police if they catch you [with drugs]. In all likelihood, they will just kick you out. Part of their job is to catch [the drugs]. A couple of the clubs were previously closed by the police because they found hard drugs on the premises, so now it’s part of what they do. But sometimes they will look the other way. Obviously they know the water isn’t the water, but they just don’t do anything about it if they catch you with powder or mixing. Then they kick it. They don’t look for it, they are not the police… But they need to appear as though they are watching, because their might be undercover cop around. Personally, I know there are, I am absolutely certain of it, though I’m not afraid of them. I guess that’s why we go in the bathroom stalls.

Discussion and Conclusions

Participant observation in four Israeli night clubs revealed some important social ecological influences on substance use and sexual risk behavior. Specific substances used by Israeli club-goers are similar to those reported by club-goers in the United States and Europe. A common occurrence across all four Israeli clubs was the presence of women who were exhibiting a loss of control resulting from substance use. Moreover, many of these women were alone and experiencing substance use-related problems (e.g., gastrointestinal difficulties) in addition to being very high. Security appeared to be focused on preventing and halting fights among club patrons, rather than mitigating drug use and sexual risk behaviors.

While the vulnerability of women was prominently observed during the authors’ field research, a prominent theme during in-depth interviews was idea of “being control of being out of control.” Women detailed heavy substance use and also described knowing and deciding how to control the effects and experience of substance use. Having other friends around to help them “get a grip on reality” was a key component of establishing a sense of control. However, women also described their friends as being highs at the same time. Thus, it is not surprising that so many intoxicated and vulnerable women, both alone and in groups, were witnessed during participant observation. This vulnerability is compounded by the club security personnel who are not concerned with substance use or intoxicated patrons inside the clubs. Added to this is the practice of engaging in concurrent drug use and sexual activity and/or trading sex for drugs in the club bathrooms. Women stated that agreeing to accompany a man into the bathroom for a line of coke, for example, will lead to some form of sexual activity. Though women may not view it as such, this practice presents a situation in which already vulnerable women are placed at greater risk, including complications for substance use, sexually transmitted infections, or victimization.

Findings from this ongoing study indicate that structural interventions may be a good way to reduce problems for women. Security personnel, already present in the clubs, could be trained and encouraged to conduct protective surveillance of women club participants. In addition, female security officers near bathrooms might mitigate sexual risks, substance use, and potential victimization.