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Enhancing Safety and Security at Oliver Reginald Tambo International Airport: A Gender-Sensitive Analysis of Female Drug Mules and Mitigation Strategies

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Abstract

The Oliver Reginald Tambo International Airport (ORTIA) is Africa's key aviation hub. However, it still faces security challenges, notably drug trafficking facilitated by female drug mules, putting South Africa's tourism and hospitality industry at risk. Criminal activity, safety, and security influence the tourism and hospitality industry in South Africa. Consequently, by prioritising safety and security, South Africa can enhance its attractiveness as a tourist destination, promote economic growth, and support sustainable development. This paper investigates enhancing safety at ORTIA through a gender-sensitive approach. Integrating qualitative interviews with eight female drug mules and quantitative data from 100 security personnel, it highlights recruitment methods, operations, and arrest experiences of drug mules, assessing the efficacy of current security measures. The study advocates tailored gender-sensitive strategies for ORTIA to mitigate drug trafficking risks. These gender-sensitive strategies include education and awareness campaigns, specialised training, enhanced security measures (enhanced detection and screening technologies, regulation of luggage handling, implementation of risk-based security measures, regular review, and enhancement of security protocols) and gender-sensitive policies. Ultimately, improving safety for travellers and benefiting the broader tourism and hospitality industry.

Keywords: Drug mules; drug trafficking; mitigation strategies; Oliver Reginald Tambo International Airport (ORTIA); safety and security

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Introduction

The Oliver Reginald Tambo International Airport (ORTIA) is Africa's premier aviation hub, serving over 21 million passengers annually and connecting airlines across five continents. Located in Kempton Park, South Africa, it plays a vital role in domestic and international air transport, enhancing the country's socio-economic connectivity in the aviation sector (Airports Company South Africa [ACSA], 2024; Alfehaidet al., 2024). Boasting a capacity of 28 million passengers per year, ORTIA is a significant economic asset facing various security threats, notably illicit drug trafficking facilitated by drug mules (Bhengu, 2023). Consequently, this poses risks to South Africa's tourism and hospitality industry, contributing about 3.2 per cent to the Gross Domestic Product GDP (Cowling, 2024). Given the unique dynamics of female involvement in drug smuggling, tailored responses are essential for effective mitigation. Drug mules, tasked with smuggling illegal drugs across borders, employ various concealment methods, including ingesting capsules or hiding drugs in personal items (Fleetwood & Leban, 2023; Castillo-Algarra & Ruiz-Garcia, 2022; Harry, 2022; Rajbhandari et al., 2021). Women in drug trafficking fulfil diverse roles, from transportation to logistical coordination, often targeted due to vulnerabilities like economic hardship or exploitation (Selmini, 2020; De Seranno & Colman, 2023). They face risks such as arrest, imprisonment, and exploitation, with sociocultural norms impacting their susceptibility (Klein, 2020; Mnguni & Thobane, 2022; Sumter et al., 2024; Fleetwood & Laban, 2023; Grundetern, 2015). Traffickers exploit these vulnerabilities through financial incentives, false promises, or coercion (Selmini, 2020). Women involved in smuggling may face legal repercussions and violence, enduring emotional trauma (Klein, 2020; Mnguni & Thobane, 2022; Sumter et al., 2024). A growing body of research is emerging on female drug mules, although it tends to be restricted by geographical context and associated cultural norms (Fleetwood & Leban, 2023; Guerreiro et al., 2022; Interpol, 2021; Méndez, 2020; Sumter et al., 2024; Wijkman & Kleemans, 2019). Research tends to focus on describing drug mule roles rather than informing targeted airport safety strategies (Castillo-Algarra & Ruiz-Garcia, 2022; de Campos & de Oliveira, 2023; De Seranno & Colman, 2023; Klein, 2020). This study, leveraging data concerning ORTIA, aims to fill this gap by offering insights for tailored mitigation strategies. The paper delves into safety, security, and gender dynamics at ORTIA, aiming to boost airport safety and security. It proposes gender-sensitive interventions to prevent recruitment, exploitation, and trafficking involvement, while also offering support and alternatives for at-risk individuals.

Women's involvement in drug smuggling

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), drug trafficking is recognised as a worldwide problem (UNODC, 2022). The UNODC (2021) note that drug trafficking represents a global illicit trade that encompasses the cultivation, manufacturing, distribution, and sale of substances prohibited by drug laws. Bueno (2023) explains that drug mules, who are predominantly women, play a vulnerable role in global drug trafficking. They face greater victimisation than those leading the operation and receive minimal rewards while facing substantial risks (Bueno, 2023; Fleetwood & Leban, 2023;

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Selmini, 2020). Smuggling drugs across international borders and into foreign countries poses significantly greater risks for drug mules, as they face intense scrutiny from law enforcement authorities and the prospect of harsh prison sentences (UNODC, 2022). According to Fleetwood (2017), it is important to note that a drug mule is not limited to an individual who carries drugs on behalf of someone else across an international border - national or domestic markets are also applicable. The fundamental role of a drug mule involves being vulnerable to manipulation, coercion, and control by drug traffickers (Mekara, 2020). The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2022) notes that research on the involvement of women in the smuggling of drugs is insufficient, which could be attributed to its predominantly male-driven nature. Moreover, women constitute approximately 10% of individuals who are confronted with legal action for drug trafficking (excluding cases connected to possession and use of drugs); however, this ratio is based on various geographical locations (UNODC, 2022). Women also partake in drug-related activities in diverse ways and for profuse motivations. Klein (2020) states that, like men, women resort to criminal acts mainly due to socioeconomic disadvantages. Furthermore, in many cases, women take up this "job" with little to no comprehension of the repercussions of facing a lengthy prison term (UNODC, 2022; Chuenurah & Jeffries, 2019; Mnguni & Thobane, 2022).

The implications of criminal activity, safety and security on South Africa's tourism and hospitality industry

Criminal activity, safety, and security influence the tourism and hospitality industry in South Africa. The perception of safety and security affects tourists' decisions to visit South Africa. High levels of crime, particularly violent crime, can discredit the country's reputation as a tourist destination (Fourie et al., 2020; Musavengane et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2023). Moreover, safety concerns can directly impact tourists' experiences during their stay in South Africa. Fear of crime and bordering drug-infested communities may restrict tourists' movements, limiting their exploration of attractions, neighbourhoods, and cultural experiences. This can lead to a diminished travel experience and reduced spending on tourism-related activities (Apleni & Henama, 2020; Hunter, 2021). The tourism and hospitality industries contribute to South Africa's economy, providing employment opportunities and generating revenue (Nyasha et al., 2021). However, crime-related safety and security issues can result in decreased tourist arrivals, hotel bookings, and spending on leisure activities. This downturn in tourism can have far-reaching economic consequences, affecting businesses, job creation, and overall economic growth. Additionally, safety concerns can deter foreign investment in the tourism and hospitality infrastructure of South Africa (Olimovich, 2020). This reluctance to invest can hinder the growth and expansion of the tourism industry, limiting its potential to contribute to national development goals. The need for safety and security has become a very important factor that influences developments in the tourism business, primarily in the modern era (Darabseh et al., 2024). Consequently, by prioritising safety and security, South Africa can enhance its attractiveness as a tourist destination, promote economic growth, and support sustainable development.

Research methodology

Qualitative research delves into participants' perspectives, addressing dynamic social changes (Schurink et al., 2021), while quantitative research focuses on numerical data to establish connections between factors (Aidley, 2019; Fouché & Geyer, 2021; Ruane, 2016). The qualitative study adopted a phenomenological approach, exploring participants' perceptions and experiences (Käufer & Chemero, 2021), while the quantitative study employed a non-experimental design, measuring variables simultaneously (Fouché & Roestenburg, 2021). Both studies were conducted concurrently from 2020 to 2023. The paper's findings encompassed two participant groups. In the qualitative segment, the first author interviewed eight female drug mules arrested at ORTIA at the Kgoši Mampuru II and Johannesburg Correctional Centres using purposive and snowball sampling. The sample size was considered suitable for the study's qualitative nature and the marginalised status of incarcerated female drug mules, ensuring data saturation and relying on participants' willingness and availability (Daher, 2023).

Table 1: Demographic information of qualitative participants

Pseudonym	Age	Race/Nationality	Drug type and quantity	Concealment method	Length of sentence
Mbuyi	42	African/Congolese	Heroin (4kg)	Luggage	16 years
Thandi	35	African/South African	Cocaine (10kg*)	Luggage	18 years
Isabella	33	Spanish/Brazilian	Heroin (2kg)	Body concealment	16 years
Ana	32	Spanish/Venezuelan	Cocaine (93 bullets/10g)	Swallowed	10 years
Mbali	48	African/South African	Cocaine (10kg; 1kg; 5kg; 1kg)	Swallowed, luggage and body concealment	27 years
Carolina	30	Spanish/Paraguayan	Cocaine (3.8kg)	Body concealment	15 years
Mpumi	44	African/South African	Cocaine (9.5kg)	Body concealment	10 years
Mariana	49	Spanish/Brazilian	Cocaine (2.8kg)	Body concealment	15 years

The kilograms of drugs denoted by an asterisk represent the quantity of drugs the participants claimed they smuggled. However, this same quantity was not corroborated during the trial. The quantitative data were gathered through online self-administered questionnaires from 100 security personnel at ORTIA, selected via simple random sampling from a pool of 276 individuals (Strydom, 2021). This yielded a representative sample of 36%, comprising 51% males and 49% females, with a majority being Black (75%) and aged 41–50 years (39%). Most identified as security officers (76%), with varied work experience, primarily between 5-10 years and 16-20 years (n=27% and n=25% respectively).

The first author gathered qualitative data through face-to-face interviews at correctional centres, lasting 60 to 90 minutes. Moreover, the first author recorded, transcribed, and translated data. Meanwhile, the second author used self-administered online surveys spanning six months. The second author sent out regular reminders to potential participants and provided his contact details for assistance in completing the questionnaires. Data quality, assessed for reliability, ensured trustworthiness by reflecting participants' viewpoints and experiences impartially, voluntarily, and without bias or assumptions. The qualitative study upheld credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability through member checking, peer

review, thick descriptions, audit trails, and rigorous methodology (Schurink et al., 2021). Quantitative data reliability was gauged through validity, ensuring accurate conclusions within the study's context and timeframe. Face and content validity were assessed, aligning the instrument with its purpose and exploring various dimensions of the phenomenon (Roestenburg, 2021). The authors analysed qualitative data thematically using Braun and Clark's (2006) approach, establishing preliminary codes and themes through multiple readings and refinement (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Quantitative data underwent descriptive analysis and was transcribed into Microsoft Excel for chart creation and frequency summaries to aid in clear presentation and interpretation (Bartley & Hashemi, 2021). Reflexivity was employed during analysis to scrutinise biases, assumptions, and values potentially affecting the research process. The qualitative and quantitative studies received ethical approval from the University of South Africa's Ethical Review Committee, adhering to informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant privacy. For interviewing marginalised communities like female incarcerated drug mules, priority was given to obtaining informed consent, ensuring voluntary participation, and maintaining confidentiality. Participants were treated with respect and empathy, and cultural perspectives were considered. Furthermore, power imbalances were addressed to foster equality and mutual respect (Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021).

Findings and discussion

Crime at ORTIA

The security personnel participants were surveyed regarding the primary crime concerns at ORTIA. They were asked to rank these issues on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 representing the most significant problem and 5 representing the least significant. Participants had the option to select multiple responses. The data was categorised according to the crime issues at ORTIA: high, intermediate, average, below average, and low categories. The most frequently cited crimes included theft, mishandled baggage (considered a crime in this context due to luggage theft), ATM crimes, burglary, robbery, illegal immigration, and drug smuggling. These criminal activities are commonly observed in airports worldwide (Marteache, 2018; McDonald, 2020; Mota et al., 2021). The above affirms that drug smuggling poses a significant challenge for ORTIA. South Africa has been recognised as one of the global hubs for drug trafficking (Machethe & Zenzile, 2022). The following section delves into a gender-focused investigation of drug smuggling.

The recruitment of women as drug mules

Drug smugglers excel at minimising the dangers and amplifying the rewards when recruiting female drug mules. They exploit the vulnerable situations of these women by using any available information about them to ensure they transport drugs on their behalf (de Campos & de Oliveira, 2023; Selmini, 2020; Weber, 2019). Furthermore, UNODC (2022) and Fleetwood & Leban (2023) note that gender is not a primary factor in the recruitment process; however, it does influence the chosen concealment methods and adhering to conventional patterns associated with one's sex as ways of avoiding detection by law enforcement agencies. The following responses shed light on the methods used to recruit individuals as drug mules.

> A lady I knew told me how she got money for her business. She told me I could also do the same because I was also trying to do business on the side. So then, she said she would get money from her work trip to Brazil to help with her business. I told her I was interested, and she must introduce me to her friend. I met the guy; I told him my plans, and he said he could help me. So, then he told me that I would meet a lady in Brazil who would give me the stock for my business and for him also. He said it was a lot, so I must carry light clothes (Mpumi, 44-year-old South African).

> A Chinese man would come to my work for a massage with his wife like twice a week. He was a very nice person. He talked to everyone. We would also talk, not like friends, but I knew he was a businessman and owned a hair salon around the area. He asked me about my future and if I wanted to be a masseuse forever. That's when he told me he was opening a business in another country. I had known him for three months and he offered me a job. He was opening a massage business, and he wanted me to be the manager because I was good at my job, and I worked there for a long time (Mbuyi, 42-year-old Congolese).

> I asked my friend how she was making money because she didn't have a real job, but she seemed to be doing fine in her life. When I asked her, she told me the truth; she was smuggling drugs as well. I ended up telling her that I was willing to do the same to get money to support me and my children (Isabella, 33-year-old Brazilian).

> A man I knew from my salon, who would sometimes supply hair and hair products, asked me to recruit some ladies who needed money to smuggle the drugs, and he would give me $1000 for getting those ladies. It seemed like easy money because the ladies that smuggled the drugs would get more than $1000, so then I asked if I could also do it for more money (Mariana, 49-year-old Brazilian).

The responses from the participants reveal a multitude of factors driving recruitment. These encompass misrepresented business prospects, feelings of desperation, and influence from peers. Yet, these factors are ultimately driven by the primary motivation of financial gain. Scholarly literature corroborates this assertion, as the leading cause of involvement in drug trafficking as a mule can be traced back to economic insecurity, particularly stemming from widespread poverty and its disproportionate impact

on women (Fleetwood & Leban, 2023; Klein, 2020; Sumter et al., 2024; Weber, 2019). The firsthand accounts provided by the research participants revealed a diversity in the recruitment process – while some individuals were not actively recruited, they volunteered willingly, exercising their agency. Moreover, both Isabella and Mbali acknowledged their willingness to traffic drugs in exchange for monetary compensation, establishing direct connections with drug dealers. Their willingness to engage in such activities for monetary compensation suggests a certain level of agency, power, and ability to assert themselves in pursuit of their goals, albeit within the context of illegal activity.

Modus operandi: Concealment of drugs

The following sections detail various methods employed in smuggling drugs into South Africa. This section specifically outlines the diverse tactics used by the participants to transport drugs through ORTIA.

Luggage

In terms of luggage, the following quotes were extracted:

> In my suitcase, I didn't even know it was in there. I didn't carry a lot of bags because the meeting was not long. So, I took one bag and my handbag to keep on the plane. Before I left Brazil, one of the ladies asked me to please go with another small bag, it was like a hard suitcase. I had to give it to the person who would fetch me at the airport. I asked what it was, and she said it was samples of the new uniform for Brazil, and they need to approve it. I believed her and I took the bag. That's the bag the police in South Africa found the drugs. It had another layer inside for the hiding of the drugs (Mbuyi, 42-year-old Congolese).

> The guy who was doing all the arranging of my clothes and drugs in the bag packed the drugs so well in my suitcase, in very small bullets inside the linings and bricks of cocaine in the bottom of the suitcase. The suitcase was in the middle size. You honestly couldn't see them at all. It's like he had a technique (Thandi, 35-year-old South African).

The responses from the participants accentuate the use of deceptive packaging, manipulation, coercion, and travelling with minimal luggage. Moreover, participants demonstrated a sense of assurance in the effectiveness of these techniques at that moment. Thandi commented on the precision involved in hiding drugs within luggage, noting that they can sometimes be concealed so effectively as to escape detection entirely. Thandi, however, was not aware that one of the bags contained drugs, thus resulting in her arrest. It is common practice for some drug mules to be unaware of the exact type or amount of drugs (usually large amounts) they are smuggling, as the drugs are already pre-packaged by the time they receive them (Castillo-Algarra & Ruiz-Garcia, 2022; Geldenhuys, 2022).

Body concealment

Four participants recounted their involvement in smuggling drugs through body concealment. This approach was characterised as uncomfortable and unpleasant by the participants, who described strapping drugs to their waist area, clothing, and undergarments.

> *I was supposed to swallow first, but I just couldn't. I tried one, but they also saw I can't. So, I wore big clothes so you can't see the drugs. They put them under my breasts and in between my legs, like a pad [sanitary towel]. It was very uncomfortable because the packets were cutting into my skin. I still have scars* (Isabella, 33-year-old Brazilian).

> *When we were in the house, two big guys (also Nigerian) came in and said we must stand up. They put the drugs on the table (already wrapped) and told us to take off our jerseys, and they wrapped the drugs on our stomachs almost like a bomb, you know, like on TV. They put the drugs around me with wrap and tape. It was hard for me to sit properly. That is when they gave us instructions* (Carolina, 30-year-old Paraguayan).

> *These men I've never seen before came in and talked to the lady I was with. They took out four bricks of cocaine on the table. They told me to take off my clothes, and they started taping them around my stomach. Two at the front and two at the back. They were very heavy, it was even hard to sit for long in the plane* (Mpumi, 44-year-old South African).

> *So, I wear big clothes because the other guy put the drugs inside my bra because I don't have big breasts. So, he put them there and on my thighs. They even made like small flat bullets of drugs and wrapped them in my shorts [the hem of the shorts]. It was very uncomfortable to walk* (Mariana, 49-year-old Brazilian).

The accounts above illuminate how participants' bodies were used to conceal drugs, exacerbating their discomfort and anxiety. Additionally, they emphasised the coercion and pressure exerted by others. Furthermore, the responses shed light on the preparation and planning inherent in the concealment process. Women are the least noticeable group when it comes to smuggling. While male and female drug mules use conventional hiding techniques such as luggage or hidden compartments in vehicles, women have gender-specific smuggling methods that drug dealers employ to minimise the chances of drug mules being caught (UNODC, 2022). As stated in the above responses, female smugglers also utilise vaginal cavity and clothing items

specifically tailored for concealment purposes; examples include breast or buttock implants and fake pregnancies, which are all aimed at concealing drugs more efficiently than men do (UNODC, 2022; Geldenhuys, 2022).

Swallowing

Ingesting drugs as a means of drug smuggling is a widely employed tactic among drug couriers (Cayenne, 2023; Geldenhuys, 2022). The following responses detail the participants' experiences of swallowing drugs in the form of small bullets.

> They told me how to do it. I practised how to swallow the cocaine bullets. It was very bad; I was vomiting because I hadn't eaten, and I was scared. They said if I swallowed the drugs, no one could see them. So, I did it (Ana, 32-year-old Venezuelan).

> They just showed me how to swallow the drugs once. It's not a very easy process. They're small but very thick. You have to practice for days first. You can't just do it now and go. Your body needs to get used to it, and you must make sure you don't eat or drink Coke or anything like that or it will burst (Mbali, 48-year-old South African).

The participants discuss the preparation and practice required for learning drug ingestion techniques. Additionally, they articulate their experiences of physical discomfort and health concerns, highlighting how these factors contributed to heightened risk and fear. Drug mules may conceal drugs in cling wrap inside their mouth, and these packages can either be swallowed or spit out to avoid detection by the airport police (Aw-Yong et al., 2020). Abedzadeh et al (2019) explain that detecting drugs has become more challenging due to advanced packaging techniques used by traffickers. However, even though the drugs have a small dosage level and are decreased in quantity, they are poorly protected for the digestive system, which may result in toxic symptoms and medical complications. Swallowing drugs as a smuggling method poses significant risks, as the stomach acids may dissolve the pellets, potentially leading to fatal overdoses as the body absorbs the drugs (Geldenhuys, 2022; Rajbhandari et al., 2021) Aw-Yong et al (2020) explain that there is a delayed onset of drug release, necessitating an eight-hour observation period in the emergency department starting from the time when ingestion is suspected. To facilitate the release of the drugs, drug mules consume oil, soft drinks, or laxatives (Cayenne, 2023). The methods employed by drug mules in this study corroborate those outlined in existing literature, despite ongoing ingenuity exhibited by drug trafficking syndicates as they transport illicit substances over land and sea. The use of drug mules continues to be a recurrent method used globally for smuggling drugs through the implementation of similar strategies internationally as well as nationally. The National Drug Threat Assessment (NDTA) (2021), issued by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), highlights that transnational organised crime syndicates continue to depend on traditional and conventional methods of drug smuggling, including the use of drug mules.

Airport arrest experience

The process of inspecting for smuggled drugs via drug mules commences before their arrival, often without their knowledge of an impending search (Jupe & Keatley, 2020; Oolman et al., 2019). According to Cayenne (2023), the initial hurdle for drug mules is navigating through checkpoints, irrespective of their anticipation of being apprehended. Upon arrival at the airport, police authorities may be present, occasionally conducting searches on passengers. Nonetheless, Mariana speculates that law enforcement officials may possess the photographs and details of prospective mules before they arrive at the airport, stating"I get to O.R Tambo and I get off the plane because it's transit but now when I get off there are police waiting for us (passengers), but I didn't understand because the guy in Brazil said to me only one policeman will know me because he sent him my picture and the details of my plane. So, when I saw a lot of police there, I got a bit worried now because I'm confused" (Mariana, 49-year-old Brazilian). Drug trafficking syndicates sometimes take pictures of the drug mule for the police officials that they are working with to be aware of the drug mule that they need to allow to pass at the checkpoint; however, as explained by some participants in this study, their pictures can also be used for their arrest. Airports Company South Africa (ACSA) has stressed its stance against lawlessness at South African airports, stating that such behaviour will not be tolerated. The security team has intensified its presence and will persist in conducting random searches where suspicious activity is suspected. In a report conducted by First Coast Criminal Defense (2023), smugglers actively seek out weaknesses in airport security to facilitate drug smuggling. However, airports remain vigilant against security threats, particularly illegal drug transportation. To counteract these activities, airports implement sophisticated security measures to detect drugs. The airport arrest experience for drug mules presents multiple challenges. When apprehended in foreign countries, drug mules often encounter language barriers, with no available translators in some instances, and lack access to legal representation. Moreover, the experience of being caught at the airport induces profound shock and anxiety among drug mules. They undergo interrogation by both police officers and customs officials and, in some cases, are subjected to X-ray scans, leaving them uncertain about what will unfold next. The drug mules in this study reported being informed about the legal repercussions, which typically entail imprisonment. Drug mules, especially foreigners, must adapt physically and mentally to life in a correctional centre.

Security measures and their effectiveness

The vast majority (98%) of security personnel affirmed the occurrence of random drug testing at ORTIA. A recent study found that randomized security checks contribute to decreased crime at airports. However, the authors suggest that such random checks may also inadvertently provide opportunities for criminals to commit crimes (Stotz et al., 2021). In South Africa, ORTIA

is recognised as a major trafficking hub (Pijoos, 2023). The security personnel were queried about the overall efficacy of security measures at ORTIA. The majority (68%) indicated that the security measures were somewhat effective, while 26% considered them very effective. Moreover, participants indicated that the security measures were somewhat ineffective (4%) and very ineffective (2%). These responses imply that there are opportunities to strengthen the security measures at ORTIA. Based on the findings highlighting the challenges and vulnerabilities associated with drug trafficking at ORTIA, the subsequent section will delve into a range of mitigation strategies aimed at enhancing airport security and mitigating the risks posed by drug trafficking.

Mitigation strategies

The following demonstrates mitigation strategies designed for ORTIA concerning female drug mules.

Education and awareness campaigns: ORTIA should initiate educational initiatives, through infographics and social media platforms, to educate individuals, particularly those in disadvantaged communities, about the dangers of drug trafficking. These campaigns should emphasize the legal, health, and social repercussions of involvement in drug-related activities, empowering individuals to make informed choices and resist recruitment attempts. Special attention should be given to women, outlining the specific implications of drug trafficking on them, their families, and their communities. A study involving air travellers and design specialists revealed that different sections of airport terminals affect stress levels differently. The security checkpoint emerged as the most anxiety-inducing area. Conversely, features like clear visual information decreased stress levels (Donnelly, 2021). Additionally, raising public awareness about security protocols and promoting the reporting of suspicious behaviours to security personnel and the South African Police Service (SAPS) is essential.

Specialised training: ORTIA should lead ongoing specialised training programmes for law enforcement officials and airport staff to enhance their ability to detect and intercept drug smuggling attempts. This includes training on identifying deceptive packaging methods and behavioural indicators, particularly in women. Additionally, training should concentrate on recognising indicators of coercion, exploitation, and gender-specific smuggling methods. Furthermore, specialised training for law enforcement officials and medical personnel is vital for identifying signs of drug ingestion and providing timely medical intervention when necessary. Continuous training and education programmes are essential for security personnel at ORTIA to ensure they have the requisite knowledge and skills for trafficking. Research indicates that inadequate employee training has financial implications and increases security threats. However, specialised training reduces threats and improves safety and security (Feltmann et al., 2021; Gechkova & Kaleeva, 2020; Poudin, 2019).

Enhanced security measures: ORTIA should continuously strive to enhance its security measures through the following strategies. One of the key approaches is to enhance detection and screening technologies that are capable of identifying concealed drugs specific to women to improve detection rates and deter drug smuggling attempts. Various strategies, such as screening the surfaces of passports for the detection of remnants of illicit substances using rapid equipment already deployed at border controls (Michelot et al., 2020), biometric identification technology and advanced imaging technology (Zhang, 2019), ORTIA can improve detection rates and deter drug smuggling attempts. Furthermore, ORTIA should adopt stricter controls on luggage handling procedures and increased oversight of baggage handling personnel. This can be fast-tracked through sophisticated technologies such as X-ray imaging and computed tomography, X-ray diffraction, phase contrast, and differential phase contrast (Cordova, 2022). Another fundamental is for ORTIA to implement a risk-based approach to security management at ORTIA, where resources are allocated based on identified threats and vulnerabilities. This could involve prioritising security measures in high-risk areas, such as baggage handling and passenger screening, to maximise effectiveness and efficiency. Additionally, ORTIA should conduct regular assessments of existing security measures at the airport to identify areas for improvement and implement enhanced protocols to address vulnerabilities. This could include increasing the frequency or randomness of drug testing procedures to deter drug trafficking attempts and improve detection rates. Moreover, regular audits, surveys, and feedback mechanisms must be conducted to solicit stakeholder input and make informed, data-driven decisions for enhancing security.

Gender-sensitive policies: Governing bodies should strive to develop gender-sensitive policies and protocols for law enforcement and border control agencies to ensure that the unique vulnerabilities and experiences of women in drug smuggling are recognised and addressed effectively. Giacomello (2020) argues that current drug policies are intertwined with patriarchal systems, contributing to violence against women while hindering gender equality and development. The global framework of drug control, primarily through prohibition, contributes towards underground drug markets and trafficking organisations that reflect dominant gender norms, treating women as expendable commodities. Additionally, the direct consequences of international drug policy include increased incarceration rates as a deterrent and a rising number of women imprisoned for drug-related offences.

Conclusion

The findings of this study accentuate the importance of addressing drug trafficking at the ORTIA through a gender-sensitive lens. As Africa's aviation hub and a key economic asset, ORTIA's vulnerability to drug trafficking poses significant risks, not only to the airport but also to South Africa's tourism and hospitality industry. The unique dynamics introduced by the involvement of women in drug smuggling necessitate scrutiny and tailored responses. The results highlight the need for gender-sensitive mitigation strategies specifically tailored for ORTIA, offering a valuable contribution to the ongoing efforts to improve safety and security at the airport. Despite the limitation of a small sample size, the amalgamation of research approaches has

reinforced the study's findings and overall impact. Future studies should examine current policies and regulations concerning drug trafficking and airport security to detect gaps, inconsistencies, and implications from a gender-sensitive perspective.

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