

DRUG ADDICTION AMONG STREET CHILDREN: A CASE STUDY OF DHAKA CITY

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Drug addiction among Street Children (SC), similar to many developing countries, is a growing problem in the urban life of Bangladesh. Wryly, till today this issue had been interpreted as an outcome of income poverty and the hidden reality of SC's life has been overshadowed under the guise of euphemistic term 'Pathokoli' (flower of street). Therefore, in many cases, their absence in the public and social policy has become common. This study, in pursuit of exploring the realities of the life of SC that contribute to drug addiction sought answers beyond the conventional stereotype regarding them: how they came to the street and what types of problems they face as well as opportunities they get which instigate them to take drug etc. have been explored in this study. In the process of exploring their realities, this study employed qualitative research method with semi-structured questionnaire and in-depth interview. It analyzed different issues and role of different actors to understand the causes and consequences of drug addiction among SC. This study also explored conflicts and contradictions of actors, ideas and realities for this sake. At the end, this study came up with the conclusion that drug addiction among SC, besides income poverty, is an out outcome of multifaceted issues consisting broken family, bad parenting, street sub-culture etc.

Keywords: Drug addiction, Income-poverty, Pathokoli, Street Children.

Introduction

Street Children (SC) in Bangladesh with their vagabond nature already are in the periphery of society, devoid of social opportunities like education, sanitation, health, security, etc. that should be availed customarily by a citizen. In addition, they are treated as social outcast once they are addicted. Consequently, they are maltreated, abused verbally and sometimes physically and even being used for smuggling, political picketing and prostitution. They are the most visible segment of child population publicly: drifting here and there and eking out through scavenging and other casual jobs. Ironically, they are the least present group in statistics and other public policies mainly due to their mobile nature. And hence, akin to global trend, in Bangladesh, numerating exact number of them remained an unresolved

issue. However, according to BIDS¹ and ARISE² survey, carried out in 2005, total number of SC in Bangladesh was 679.73 thousand in 2005 of which about half of them were found staying in two major cities: Dhaka consists of 249.20 thousand and Chittagong consists of 55.86 thousand, and rest 84.84 thousands are in other major cities like Khulna, Rajshahi, Barisal and Sylhet (unicef, n.d.). The study also projected about 1.14 million children in Bangladesh were on the street in 2014, fighting back with the agony of life and of which, as officials of Narcotic Control Opined, 14.5% of total SC in Bangladesh and 17% of total SC in Dhaka City (Biplob, 2011) fell prey to drug addiction.

SC, especially those are addicted, nevertheless, appear with pale countenance, torn clothes and disheveled hair in front of us in our every day's urban life but still their life reality remains largely hidden to us. A survey on SC of Foundation for Research on Educational Planning and Development (FREPD) in 2003 found 57% of their surveyed respondents eat three times, 39% eat two times, and the rest 4% eat less than two times a day. Moreover, 88% of them collect food from street shops, 5% from begging and less than 1% collect from dustbin. They also found 82% of the SC stopped school and the rest 18% continued along with work. Among the dropped children 61% never went to any formal or non-formal school whereas 30% attended formal school and 12% attended non-formal school and 3% of them attended both formal and non-formal school. Average age when started doing their first job by SC is 7.81 in which 66.22% started as non-street related jobs. Their working time varies from 5 hours to 12 hours a day with 10 mean working hours a day (FREPD, 2003).

Despite burgeoning literature are dedicated to understand various psycho-social aspects of child development even sometimes SC, but the issue of drug addiction among SC is suffering from emptiness; missing in statistics, research, academia and in other forms of initiatives. This emptiness further posters invisibility of their pain and sufferings. Consequently, this vacuum has been filled with conventional stereotyped mentality to them which inhibits further progression of our understanding on this issue and hence reiteration of the status-quo continues. Drug addiction among SC widely believed is an outcome of economic poverty. Poverty has strong legacy but not sufficient footing to establish causal link with drug addiction, simply because there are many children who are poor but not addicted. Similarly, there are also a number of addicted children from non-poor and solvent families. Moreover, life trajectories of drug addicted SC show certain juncture of their life mostly non-economic and unique to non-addicted SC, which led them to their present situation.

This study being critically linked with the existing grounding of our understanding regarding the issue, tried to analyze reasons of drug addiction among SC, and their very own perspectives. Overwhelmingly growing number of SC and drug addiction among them are two serious concerns erupted not only from the point of moral commitment of building an auspicious environment for them but also from the consideration of its diverse implications to our social life. Drug addiction of SC paralyzes the scope of achieving education, better health and living a worthy and meaningful life. Moreover, it creates threat for social equilibrium by facilitating and sometimes compelling to accept larky opportunities of begging, scavenging, hawking, theft, hijacking and prostitutions by the children.

Drug Abuse and Its Associated Realities of SC in Dhaka City

Drug abuse among the SC is widely perceived as limited to 'glue sniffing' but this research found various drug abuse practices with different multitude of effects on them. It is found that, similar to other drug users, most of the SC started smoking cigarette before taking drug. About 50% of the respondents of this study started smoking cigarette first and then turned to drug addiction. 'Glue sniffing' is second in the list; around 25% of respondents reported that they started taking drugs with 'glue sniffing'. As the SC become used to the drug addiction, they become used to multiple types of drugs but 'glue sniffing' precedes over other types of drugs. 'Glue sniffing' is prevalent almost among all the drug abusers on the

¹ BIDS, stands for Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, is a reputed government owned research institution doing research on various areas of development.

²ARISE is a project for the child development taken by Bangladesh Government and supported by UNDP.

street. Out of total respondents, 92.86% mentioned they are regular users of glue sniffing. Following to glue sniffing, second omnipresent drug abuse among the SC is their self-made solution called 'Zakki', which is created through mixing different types of pain killer tablets and energy drink or juice. Around 79% of the respondents use 'Zakki' as found in the study. However, intensity of taking different types of drugs varies but the list of drugs is longer, consisting of both cheap and expensive traditional drugs such as cannabis, heroin, pethidine, alcohol, beer, phensedyl, yaba, different types of tablets as well as very unconventional and self-made drugs like 'Zakki', tail of lizard, 'glue sniffing' etc. About 72% of the total respondents used to use various types of tables, 64% cannabis, 21% phensedyl, 17% heroin, 11% beer and 7% used yaba at least once in their life. Use of 'glue sniffing', cannabis, 'Zakki' and different types of tablets like Ten, Baba, Sonali etc. are much more frequent than other because they are less expensive and easily collectable compared to other types of drugs. Contrastingly, sometimes the SC use more expensive drugs like heroin, yaba through shared buying.

Impacts of drug abuse among the SC cause perilous damage to their health and behavior. These damages are not naively confined to them only, rather negatively fall on entire society. Drug addiction among the SC has a correlation with different social vices like stealing, hijacking, violence, sexual harassment etc. Drug abuse does enduring harms to children through altering their behavioral pattern, which has been confirmed by prevalent presence of violent behavior among the SC, so far found in this research. Moreover, drug addiction works as both means and ends of crimes. The SC involves with stealing or hijacking to collect money for obtaining drug, conversely they use drug as a protection shield against the pain of beating when captured in crime. It has been found in this study, almost all the respondents had involvement to at least one type of crimes. From the study we see 71% of the respondents were involved with stealing, 21% with drug trafficking and 14% with hijacking on the train. In train hijacking, a deadly crime termed as 'Satkamla' or 'Kanchonmala' by the SC, they snatch everything from the victim passenger and throw him/her from the train. Besides voluntary involvement in crime, they are also involved involuntarily in drug paddling, political picketing, and prostitution. Especially, female children are much more vulnerable than male children when it comes to sexual harassment, not because they are considered as sexpot, but because they are considered much weaker and vulnerable than other groups. Of total SC in Bangladesh, nearly 10% have been forced into prostitution for survival (Wargan and Dershem, 2009). However in this research, among two female respondents, both were found sexually abused by on and outside of the street people. Additionally, few boys were found sexually abused by their seniors on the street.

Methodology

SC, in lieu of conventional wisdom regarding urban life, constitute a very different body of knowledge: their life is full of diverse experiences which they most of the time intentionally hide from us, and conversely, sometimes exaggeratedly expose themselves to us. Therefore, quantitative approach, to understand their life, especially, sensitive issues like reasons of drug addiction will be very inadequate. Qualitative approach has been chosen to conduct this study because conventional survey-based quantitative approaches are unable to create a trust relationship between the interviewer and child (Alessandro Conticini, 2006). This research, mainly employed participant observation, semi-structured interview and in-depth interview methods, collected information from 28 respondents to understand the reasons of drug addiction among the SC with greater focus on their life reality. Respondents have been chosen from mainly two sources: Shahbagh, Nilkhet and Newmarket area which is the abode of roaming for SC and another source is APONGAON, a rehabilitation center for drug addicted SC situated at the outside of the capital Dhaka City.

Results and Discussion

Dominant narrative regarding the reasons of street migration and drug addiction among SC in Bangladesh, is more or less same that they are on the street or drug addicted because of poverty. But this generalization is not unanimously accepted among scholars. World Bank's study states that, poverty and lack of food is most compelling reasons to be on the street (Iffat Mahmud, n.d.). FREPD found 38% of their survey respondents were on the street due to poverty (FREPD, 2003) whereas another study on Khulna City found 89% of its respondents moved street due to poverty (Taslina Khatun, 2013). Similar to street migration, it is argued that drug addiction is also directly or indirectly is an outcome of poverty: children come on the street due to poverty and take drug as a coping mechanism. In lieu of common claim of researchers in Bangladesh about street migration, Alessandro Conticini and David Hulme (2006) argue that social reasons especially violence and abuse of children in the family and local community are the cause of street migration in Bangladesh. Therefore, they suggests to put much emphasis on social policy, especially on how to reduce the excessive control, and emotional, physical and sexual violence that occurs in some households. In accord with Conticini and David Hulme's study, this research also found multiplicity of reasons behind street migration sometime independent of poverty and in few case though poverty was there but children migrated for other reasons.

Poverty does not have auto correlation with Street migration and consequently with drug addiction. It, certainly, have important role in street migration of the children but is not sole factor and as robustly determining factor as described by existing literature. Every one of 26% of total poor people and 15 million of urban people in Bangladesh are not struggling with street migration issue. Moreover, every SC are also not from poverty stricken families. This research found all the addicted children are not from poor family: few of them are from very solvent and some of them are from very wealthy family. Despite the economic status of SC's family, poverty may not is the prime cause for the children to migrate on the street. Felsman (1989) found that 97 per cent of his sample of Colombian children in street situations had actively abandoned their households due to a non-conducive family environment. Other researchers such as Veale's (1992) study on drug addicted SC in Sudan and Ireland also found similar result regarding family relationship and street involvement. Nonetheless, reiteration of poverty as an omnipotent reason for street migration overshadows other reasons of street migration in Bangladesh. Street migration is the outcome of multiple socio-economic factors including poverty, which requires our grave attention. Drug addiction among SC is outcome of several complex issues involving multiple interlinked socio-economic-political factors, usually started with street migration but not linearly correlated with street migration over the periods.

Relationship among the family members especially relationship between parents is very important determining factor for street migration. In a congenial family environment, no matter if there is poverty or not, it is less likely for a child to migrate on the street. In contrast, it is very likely for a child to leave home where parents' conjugal relationship is bitterly unfavorable and in that situation poverty multiplies the vulnerability. Uncomfortable relationship between parents withdraws their supposed attention from the children. Moreover their unpalatable life affects child's bonding with family and, therefore, escaping from the home to street, in due situation, become easier for them. In this research, except those children who had escaped family in pursuit of free life, all the children had one or other types of bad memories regarding their family life. Some of them explained that their father used to beat their mother almost in everyday which was unbearable to see. And some showed anger telling that if I could do I would have severely punished my father and relieved my mother from him. Staying in the home was not possible, therefore I left. Though few of them had unquenchable thirst to meet their family members especially mother and youngsters but they did not go to family and even do not want to go back to the family.

Furthermore, situation becomes much more acute when father or mother decides to leave his/her spouse. In that situation, vulnerability particularly of women in Bangladeshi culture, when their husbands leave them, is disproportionately high. Furthermore, their vulnerability accelerates child's propensity to leave home. In this research, almost three fourth of the respondents are from broken family, having strong detachment from the family. Of those who came from broken family, all the respondent's father except

two's had left their mother and remarried with another women and after that their mother, those were in village, migrated with the child to Dhaka in search of livelihoods. And those were staying in Dhaka had started working as house-maid and left child unsupervised which later cause street migration. Situation of children becomes much agonizing when they stay in fathers' family with stepmother. It is found from two respondents that they had to escape from home to avoid torture of their stepmother. Even it is found in one female respondent is that her mother forced her to earn through prostitution. She escaped from home to street due to avoid that situation.

However, violence, to a certain degree has been accepted as norms of society as a means of proper upbringing of child, causes street migration of many children in Bangladesh. Violence within the family varies in terms of intention, nature and intensity. Based on different criteria CEDAW (United Nations, 1979) defined four types of family violence against children namely control (restrictions, sanctions and surveillance), emotional violence, physical violence, and sexual violence. However, except sexual violence, other three forms of violence are not well-recognized as violence and those are practiced frequently within the family and even local community. Senior members of family and even neighborhood have the socially legitimate monopoly of authority to exercise control over the junior in the name disciplining and inculcating good manner whereas juniors, as a social norms, is supposed to be controlled whether they like or not. In case of physical violence, demarcation line between violence and disciplining is very much blurred and hence parents and other family members, without considering it as wrong, exercises violence in different intensities based on their situational temperament. Therefore, even if a family is solvent and comfortable in terms of economic sense, children move on the street to escape violence.

Notwithstanding to social norms regarding violence, children in Bangladesh face different array of violence and respond according to their own-way namely street migration. Many respondents of this research pointed to the violence they had faced during the time when they were with parents in the family. Almost four types of violence defined in CEDAW were found as reasons for children to leave home. One respondent left home because his mother forced him to study in *Hifz Madrasa*.³ Eventually, he left out of that madrasa then enrolled in school. About quarter of respondents mentioned they had faced severe physical violence from their parent. It is also found that a father had poured eyes of his child with red chilies because the boy slept early in the night instead of assisting him in his cooking job. Almost half of the respondents experienced mental violence in different forms: some had been severely scolded by mother, stepmother and father, some have experienced discrimination in treatment from stepmother and father after second marriage and some were forced to contribute to the family income. One female respondent reported that she had been forced to prostitution by her stepmother. Regardless of society's perception of violence, children have their own demarcation line of violence which they perceive as injustice and leave the family as protest to that.

Street life though austerely scarce of basic necessities required for child's development, but contains opportunity of absolute freedom which is alluringly pertinent for a child who had been suppressed by family and neighbors to migrate on the street. Children face different types of problems on the street like lack of food, shelter, sanitation, security etc. but "the parallel feeling of empowerment and freedom experienced when running away makes street life attractive"(Alessandro Conticini, 2006) to them. Children are staying on the street by own: no one is there to monitor the behavior, to restrict the movement and to force them to do what they are not willing to do. Moreover, they have different bonding pattern among themselves for which they may steal and do whatever necessary. The relationship they have on the street, though does not developed always fully relying on trust but substitutes their previous family relationship with the feeling of belongingness. They feel empowered being loved by their fallow mates and their independence of doing whatever they like. Respondents in this research opined that initially they were maintaining communication with family but after few months they have stopped communicating with family members. In addition to belongingness, street environment also offers,

³ Hifz Madrasa is a religious educational institution where Muslim students memorize the Holy Quran. Tender child are normally enroll in those Hifz Madrasa so that they can memorize Quran early.

regardless of social value judgment, opportunity of adventure liked by few of them. Therefore, children those who were perceived notoriously naughty by their family members and neighbors find street migration suitably enjoyable option though later repent for their decision. Few of the respondents candidly stated that they were naughty: they used to playing whole day, used to smoking and used to stealing small things from the neighborhood, because of that their parents were so disgusted and punished them several times. Thus, with the guilty feelings, they came on the street and found their previously did jobs are considered heroic here which they liked most and decided to stay on the street.

However, even if the contested nature of the debate considering reasons of street migration resolves, we could not plainly conclude that drug addiction among them is simply an automatic outcome of street migration and hence is an outcome of poverty. There are many issues related to drug addiction that are yet to be explored to understand the dynamics of drug addiction among them. Street environment is consists of many dynamic factors, very much different from usual life, germinate and reproduce the practice of drug addiction among children. For example, SC has sub-culture within the broader culture of society. Though they have de-jury understanding of social norms and values regarding drug addiction but their de-facto conceptualization of drug abuse is just opposite, and, consequently, they have taken drug addiction as part of ritual in their sub-culture.

Pain and sorrow become common standing of SC for building a sub-culture on the street within which they find belongingness, feel empowered and most importantly a get collective identity, having its own way of cooperation and meaning of the world. That sub-culture, juxtaposition to many good jobs it does to them, also harms them because it uses drug addiction as part its formation process. Beazley (2003) argues that “a community of children living on the streets who have similar background problems and experiences can provide new children on the street with comfort, support and vital knowledge for survival”. When a new child come on the street, he find some of his aged people are empathetic, kind and helpful to him, cooperating in works, protecting from harms and even serving during illness. This sheer love and compassion initializes first step of association with sub-culture through creating a symbiotic relationship between two and some time among few children which later transformed into a larger group. Initially very small group, usually consists of 2 persons, turned into a large group consists of five to fifteen members through personal network: one person introduce his friend with another friend. This type of group particularly has its own way of communication, cooperation and collective action. For example they move together, eat together, use different types whistle in different situations like during stealing and sharing drug among themselves. Glue sniffing among them usually done as a collective practice and it is also found among the respondents that they buy some expensive drug through collective cooperation. A study on six cities of Nepalese SC found the same the findings. According to that study, 64% of the respondents use drug with their peers (Dhital *et al*, 2002). Vitality of sub-culture on drug addiction of SC can also be understood through seeing how SC initiated their drug addiction.

In their sub-culture, as part of its components, SC had adopted different types of drugs which they shares with fellow mates and newcomers as expression of their friendship and benevolence. So being a newcomer in the street sub-culture, newcomers go through the process of drug addiction if they feel they are one of them. Only around 7% of the research’s respondents had previously initiated drug before coming on the street and others initiated drug mainly due to peers in one and another way after coming on the street. Influence of fellow mates on the street found most widespread way through which SC started their first addiction. Influence varies from only just showing effects to persuasion. Similar to the study on Nepalese SC, this study also found 64% of the respondents started their first addiction because of peers’ influence followed by peer pressure consisting 14%.

Street sub-culture is also a space of mutual confluence where each individual tries to distinguish himself under their perceived superiority standard through portraying his adventurous vigor and drug addiction is perfectly match to that vision. Alternatively, being in socially deviant position, it can be seen as the process of constructing different self, resisting conventionally socially expected role, as Beazley found among Indonesian SC. As Beazley (2003) argues “the socialization to a subculture helps a young person redefine negative self-concepts by offering a collective identity and a reference group from which to develop a new individual identity and face the outside world”. Drug helps a child to fantasize his

heroism and maturity. It is widely perceived among the SC is that heroism and maturity is correlated with the severity of risky job like hijacking, stealing etc. and intensity and variety of drug abuse among them. If a child undertakes most risky task and can consume higher volume of drug, she/he is likely to be considered as most courageous and heroic among them. Consequently, apart from high volume of drug consumption, risky endeavor like stealing and hijacking are also done after taking drug. This tendency also found while interviewing them: everyone was pointing to one or two respondents as most courageous and heroic person among them. Although every SC does not undertake violently risky undertakings, but they like to dismantle their own socially held position with illusion which have mirrored as heroism, and therefore almost 72% of the respondents replied they take drug to show their strength and to see illusionary dream.

However, drug addiction, in addition to expression of valor, had been adopted by children as a means of soothing their pain. Along with sorrowful memories of their before street life, they are the victim of every day's injustice held on the street: they are devoid of basic necessities like food, health care and sanitation, education etc., they are blamed when any crime happens on the street whether they had the involvement or not, misused by local criminals, and most commonly harassed by police. Few respondents remarked police as the most terrorist of all on the street as they arrest randomly without having any valid reasons and sometimes take bribes from them. Some of street injustices had been portrayed in a featured-film 'Je Shohor Chorabali' through showing life trajectories of two children (one male and another female) who came to Dhaka and became involved in crime. Ultimately boy child faced prison and female child prostitution (Je Shohor Chorabali (The Whirlpool), 2009). To escape from all surrounded despair in their life, SC abuse drug to get pleasure and relief from the agony of their life. From the respondents, almost half mentioned that, along with other reasons, forgetting their sorrow as important reasons of their drug addiction. Some respondents mentioned they take drug as supplement of their food. Although drug addiction is cyclically reinforcing process: once a person is addicted she/he is likely to do it again and again until effective intervention are not taken to stop it. It is equally also an outcome of the realities SC faces within and outside of their sub-culture.

Role of street environment, outside of street sub-culture, consists of vangary⁴ shop owner, drug seller, smugglers, police, government policies etc., remained mostly out of academic discussion till today, has great role in drug addiction. If we consider entirety of push and pull factors of street migration and drug addiction as demand side situation for drug addiction, still we will miss supply side picture of that process until we look into external environment of street-subculture. Street environment external to street-culture has at least two types of contribution to entire drug addiction process of SC; firstly, it ensure unrestrained availability of drugs to SC, secondly, this environment provides some sort of indirect external validity to SC's drug addiction. In this research it is found that glue sniffing is the most widely held addiction practice due to its prevalently unrestrained availability. Anyone can buy gum from any chemical store. Moreover situation also found same for different tablets for which jakki is the second widespread practice in the list of addiction done by SC. Respondents opined they have easy accessibility to any kind of pain-killer medicine from any drug store of Dhaka city. Along with government policies regarding the issue of using pain killer, vacuum in the ethics of chemical and drug sellers and responsibility of police to prevent narcotics come into focus. Once combined role of drug sellers, law enforcement agencies and concerned stakeholders reluctantly negates their responsibility to be sensible in this regard supply driven cause of drug addiction among SC continues. Second and very critical issue related to the acceptance of drug addiction of SC to the entire society. Still today there is no visibly effective endeavor to break the supply chain of child sensitive drugs and, therefore, as present situation does not questioning present status-quo, it seems indirectly, it is validating existence of present supplying of tablets, glue to children is valid. Consequently, drug addiction among SC is not merely a demand side or child dependent issue rather is an issue of both demand side and supply side.

⁴ Vangary shop is a place where waste cans, waste papers and other broken materials are collected and recycled.

Conclusion

SC especially those who are addicted are the most underprivileged and unheard group in the society: deprived of all most all social decent necessities, unjustly exploited and missing in important policies that affects them much. Existing dominant stereotype posits poverty at the forefront as omnipotent reason of street migration and in similarly of drug addiction among the SC. However, this economic-centered approach to understand life dynamics of SC and their drug addiction cannot resolve important questions viz.; why the children of every poor family are not the victim of street migration and drug addiction, why every SC is not from a poor family, why children do not go back home after facing so much difficulties on the street, and why some SC are addicted while others are not? This research, refuting conventional stereotype that attributes poverty as the overarching issue for drug addiction among SC, argues that drug addiction among SC is the outcome of a sequence of social issues like family relationship, family violence, street freedom, sub-culture on the street, external favorable environment etc. those happen in different stages of child's life trajectory. Entire trajectories of children's life which has great role for drug addiction among SC can be divided into two parts: before street life and after street life. In the first part, the issue of parenting, family relationship situation, family violence, independence etc. plays as very determining role regarding street migration. Where family environment is supportive and having enough space for a child it is less likely for a child to migrate on the street and vice versa. In case of bad parenting, poverty supplements the problems and instigates a child to migrate on the street. Only poverty does not entirely explains the issue of street migration and hence drug addiction. In the second part sub-culture among the SC and external drug favorable environment they face are found very crucial reasons for a child to be addicted with his/her demand side problems that already she/he is facing. Consequently this research argues to pay greater attention on the issue parenting, demystifying street sub-culture and greater active attention to street environment to avoid present drug addiction among SC in near future.

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