



**PERCEPTIONS OF SUBSTANCE  
ABUSE IN URBAN SLUMS**

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A PHOTO NARRATIVE





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# 43% OF UNEMPLOYED POPULATION ADDICTED TO DRUGS

*-Dhaka Tribune  
27 February 2019*

“Among them, 80% are youth, of whom, 50% are involved in various criminal activities.”

“Anyone can buy drugs now from home by placing an order over phone or online,”

# ALARMING RISE IN DRUG ABUSE

*-The Daily Star, 03 Jan,2020*

“Authorities later searched their luggage and recovered the yaba pills worth an estimated Tk 1.2 crore, which was hidden in the folds of their sari and blankets..”

“During the drive, 1,505 Yaba pills, 3.3 kg hemp and Tk 566,960 in cash were seized from their possession...”

# TWO WOMEN ARRESTED WITH 40,000 YABA

*-Dhaka Tribune  
24 February 2020*

# MOTHER, SON HELD WITH YABA PILLS AND HEMP (IN CHATTOGRAM)

*-Daily Sun, 24 Feb*

“The government’s failure to address the most fundamental issues about the drug abuse, including the availability of drugs and treatment of addicts and large-scale anti-drug awareness programmes, has made little impact on the countrywide anti-drug drive over nearly two years in the country.”

## **UNADDRESSED DEMAND UPSETS ANTI-DRUG DRIVE IN BANGLADESH**

*-New Age Bangladesh, 1 March 2020*

## **BORDER GUARD BANGLADESH SEIZES DRUGS, VALUABLES WORTH TK 97.18CR IN JANUARY**

*-New Age Bangladesh, 1 February 2020*

## **CABINET OKAYS BILL TO TRY DRUG CASES IN COURTS**

*-Dhaka Tribune , 10 February 2020*

“The cabinet on Monday approved in principle a draft of the “Narcotics (Amendment) Act, 2020”, keeping a provision to hold trials of drugs related cases in local courts instead of tribunals.”

“The seized drugs and alcohol included 7,23,685 pieces of Yaba tablets, 40,741 bottles of Phensedyl, 11,792 bottles of foreign alcohol, among others...”

*\*The following are real headlines taken from local newspapers.*



# PERCEPTIONS OF SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN URBAN SLUMS

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**“নেশা যখন পেঙ্গা”**

**“WHEN TAKING DRUGS BECOMES YOUR JOB”**

**“কীভাবে বের হবে?”**

**“HOW DO YOU GET OUT?”**



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This book is dedicated to the adolescents, men, and women who opened up and shared stories about their lives and personal experiences with us.



Hollywood

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## NOTE FROM THE DEAN

Urban slums have been a topic of research in Bangladesh for many years, charting the ebbs and flows of populations migrating from rural parts of the country and into cities. For a better life for themselves and their children, people moving to Dhaka city end up living in slums and do not expect the myriad of challenges they face. Parents might not think their children can partake in harmful practices like under age use of tobacco, alcohol and other illicit drugs. But due to various problems in their daily lives, youth can easily be led astray and fall victim to substance abuse. This photo narrative book is based on a study examining adolescents' perceptions of substance abuse in the urban slum context. We were able to take on this new study, thanks to our partners and donors from the "Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE)" project under Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and UK Aid. We hope the findings can help to further enrich the data for the GAGE multi-country, longitudinal study. I am delighted to share this book as a project output with all those in our stakeholder networks and beyond.

**Dr. Sabina Faiz Rashid**

Professor and Dean, BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University





## PREFACE

In 2019, when we began this study, little did we know that the people we approached would be so eager to talk about the issue of substance abuse. We embarked on a journey to not only uncover what adolescents thought, knew, or experienced around substances, but also to understand multifaceted problems they face to gain a holistic picture of adolescents in urban slums. We wanted to understand what drives these young people and how circumstances like poverty, violence, injustice and corruption can divert them from reaching their full potential.

During this six-month study, we conducted qualitative interviews with adolescents and adults who lived in three slum communities of Dhaka city. We interviewed 30 adolescent boys and girls aged 15–19, conducted six focus group discussions with adults who have adolescent children and interviewed three key informants working on programs in these communities.

We spent a lot of time building rapport with our respondents. They seemed accustomed to researchers entering their homes, asking intrusive questions about their health, well-being and more. But as researchers, we were not prepared to ask such personal questions about substance abuse. This topic can be dangerous; saying the wrong thing could potentially provoke or attract unwanted attention. However, to our surprise, we received a lot of honest insights from our respondents. We hope the case studies in this book will help bring a more nuanced perspective to the cycle of substance abuse among this group.

**Anushka Zafar**

Research Fellow at the BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health,  
BRAC University 2019



# INTRODUCTION

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## BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

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Structural violence consists of social structures that harm people by preventing them from accessing basic needs [1]. Cycles of poverty, injustice, and corruption are forms of structural violence in urban slums [2]. Research from around the world demonstrates that due to existing structural violence, slums are also hot spots for drug trafficking and substance abuse [3]. Substance abuse refers to the dependence and use of not just illicit drugs, but also tobacco and alcohol [4]. For adolescents in urban slums, substance use can have major long-term social effects and health implications [5]. However, in Bangladesh, there is a scarcity of analysis that sheds more light on factors behind substance abuse among this group. With the growing population in the capital, the number of adolescents in Dhaka's slums is also increasing. This makes it

exceedingly difficult to implement and ensure effective provision of basic health and wellbeing policies for the urban poor [6].

Dhaka's urban slums are informal settlements that are the result of mass migration from rural areas. The main reason for rural to urban migration is loss of livelihood due to natural disasters (cyclones, floods) [7]. This forces families to move to the city in search of better opportunities. However, after migrating to the cities they are still unlikely to find stable employment [8]. Through rural-urban migration, many children who come along with their parents are uprooted from their homes at a young age and forced to integrate. Life in the city can be very hectic and stressful compared to their previous lives in rural villages [9]. Research shows that with the

*Left: Small shops like these (called "mudir doka" in Bangla) can be commonly found on every street. People can buy basic amenities, tea, snacks, cigarettes, paan, jorda and gul in these local corner stores.*



sheer number of migrants moving into urban slums, there are not enough job options. This might lead people to rely on informal economies like selling illegal drugs [10]. According to local news reports, large quantities of illegal substances like yaba, Phensedyl (cough syrup) and cannabis are frequently stored and found hidden in various slums across the city [11, 12]. But substance abuse in these settings has a particular implication for adolescents: a combination of poor mental health and lack of recreation for youth can easily lead them to abuse substances as a way to cope with stress in their daily lives [13]. Additionally, being unable to afford childcare or place them in schools, parents living in urban slums often have no option but to leave their children unsupervised while they are at work. Without parental supervision, adolescents become more vulnerable to exposure to substances through

others, including peer pressure from friends that can lead to joining gangs that participate in criminal activity like violence and trafficking drugs [14]. Illustrating the pervasive nature of criminality, a 2007 study conducted by the World Bank in Bangladesh revealed 93% of slum residents had experienced or were directly involved with some type of crime. The report states that local thugs known as “mastaans” often use violence to extort people (like toll collection); they are involved in trafficking drugs and alcohol, land grabbing, gambling, violence against women and children, illegal arms business, arson in slums, murder and kidnapping, and domestic violence that includes sexual, physical, and psychological torture and abuse. Furthermore, the study participants reported that the widespread problem of alcohol and drug abuse was often linked to crime and violence (e.g. trafficking, crime to support substance

*Left: Mothers in urban slums sometimes struggle to work and supervise their children at the same time.*

abuse) [15]. The scale and diversity of crime and violence in Dhaka slums means that it has become normalized into everyday life, creating conditions in which gangs are likely to grow. This can have further detrimental effects on youth lacking parental guidance and at risk of being recruited by gangs. For example, another study from Bangladesh found that vulnerable groups like street children work as 'illicit laborers', doing what they can to make money and survive on the streets. This includes working for "mastaans" (Bangla word for organized crime bosses) by carrying weapons, selling drugs, collecting extortion money, and committing political violence or even contract killings [16]. Therefore, the existence of corruption and lawlessness in urban slums also creates the access for adolescents who

might perceive this as a method of income generation and survival. Moreover, in Bangladesh there is hardly ever any monitoring of under-age smoking or implementation of laws that prohibit tobacco sale to adolescents [17]. While alcohol is illegal in Bangladesh, it is also easily accessible through the black market. In addition, although Bangladesh is a secular country, since the majority of the population is Muslim, consuming alcohol openly is culturally taboo. However, evidence shows that depending on personal perceptions and preferences, some individuals in Bangladesh consume alcohol, especially at social gatherings or festivals. The types of alcoholic beverages consumed depend on the affordability of the product as well as the access. For example, lower income

*Right: Remnants of paper and foil can be found scattered in desolate areas. Foil is usually needed in order to smoke yaba, which is then inhaled using an empty pen or rolled piece of paper.*



## NATIONAL DRUG STATISTICS\*

**7.5 MILLION**  
drug addicts

**80% ARE YOUTH**  
of whom, 50% are involved in  
various criminal activities

**43%**  
Addicted women  
use yaba

**1.6 LAKH**  
Drug traffickers operating across  
Bangladesh; 27,000 are women

**BDT ₳ 56,000.00—90,000.00**  
(Approx USD \$660.00 – 1,060.00)  
Average yearly spending of drug users

*\*Source: The Dhaka Tribune 2019  
<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangla-desh/dhaka/2019/02/27/43-of-unem-ployed-population-addicted-to-drugs>*

groups say they prefer to drink locally distilled spirits which are produced unregulated at a lower cost and are therefore purchased at a cheaper price; whereas income-generating groups can access international alcohol brands which cost more and can be purchased at a licensed hotel, bar, shop or through the black market [18]. While laws and policies exist as means to control the illegal trade and consumption of drugs and alcohol in Bangladesh, the reality remains pervasive in people's lives. In the study examining substance abuse among older adolescents (age 15-19) living in urban slums of Dhaka, participants were unanimous in saying that drugs and alcohol were easily accessible and being heavily abused in their community. The findings of the study demonstrate that substance abuse can adversely affect several aspects of a person's life. The repercussions can be

physical, psychological, familial, social, and economic. This study particularly sheds more light on how substance abuse impacts the lives of young people and other community members in urban slums; this photo narrative book aims to illustrate some key findings of the study using case stories of those interviewed. The photographs intend to provide a window into the lived realities of young people interviewed for this study as well as the other community members as they describe how substances like drugs or alcohol have impacted their lives. Subsequent sections of this book include a summary of the methodology that guided this study, ethical considerations, and key findings which are followed by case stories that provide more details on how substance abuse is affecting individuals on various levels.

## METHODOLOGY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study sites included one low-income and two peri-urban slums in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Data collection took place between October and December 2019. Qualitative research methods were undertaken to explore perceptions about substance abuse. Through convenience sampling 30 in-depth interviews with 15 adolescent girls and 15 adolescent boys (age 15-19) were conducted, as well as six focus group discussions (FGD) with parents of adolescents and 3 key informant interviews. To ensure privacy of participants and to avoid unethical conflicts of interest, parents included in the FGDs were not parents

of or in any way related to the adolescents who were interviewed. The study also received ethical approval prior to data collection, and written and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Full confidentiality has been maintained with respect for the respondents' privacy. All names have been changed to protect their identities. Written consent was also provided by all participants who agreed to be photographed and shown in this publication. Those under 18 required consent from their guardian or school authorities.

*Right: Adolescent boys who are school dropouts can often be found working as helpers in local corner stores or tea stalls in the hope of making money.*









## KEY FINDINGS

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## PERCEPTIONS OF SUBSTANCE ABUSE

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The Bangla word “nesha” directly translates to “addiction” in English and all study participants used the two words interchangeably. Both adolescents and adults said nesha is a “disease” that is hard to overcome. They also connected violence and poor mental health with substance abuse. Some recognized that society is often too harsh on those suffering from addiction, ostracizing them instead of creating a conducive environment for them to recover. But overall, adolescents perceived substance abuse as a bad habit or delinquent behaviour. Cigarettes and biri (local term for rolled cigarettes) were viewed as commonly used and socially acceptable because they are consumed by older people, specifically men (i.e., fathers, uncles, older

brothers, etc.). Thus smoking was viewed as something normal rather than a form of substance abuse. *“Compared to other drugs, cigarettes are commonly smoked openly and no one is bothered about it. Its side effects are not as bad as other substances. Cigarette smoking is a continuing tradition that has been going on and on openly and legally for generations and will not be stopped”*, said a 15-year-old adolescent boy to whom cigarette and biri are socially acceptable substances. While underage smoking is frowned upon socially, boys attributed cigarettes with establishing their masculinity. During FGDs, parents explained how young boys start smoking cigarettes only to look older and manlier. More than half of adolescents also referred to the

*Right: Smoking is prohibited for those under 18 by law; however most sellers are unregulated and do not bar tobacco sales to youth.*



emerging popularity of vapes (electronic cigarettes) but did not perceive the harm compared to traditional tobacco products. Respondents said drinking alcohol (beer or mod) is frequent during festivals and celebrations like Bengali New Year or Eid. But the common understanding was that it is an “open secret” since drinking openly is considered “haram” (forbidden in Islam). They were also aware of the major negative effects of becoming drunk and incapacitated and also argued that it could turn into instances of violence. Therefore drinking alcohol was viewed as acceptable only when done with discretion, unless people develop a dependency or become a public nuisance. During an FGD with the mothers of adolescents, most of them

admitted to being aware of the fact that young people do drink alcohol, particularly during wedding programs, but it is being done discreetly. A mother said, *“whenever there is any celebration or wedding it is very common for them to drink alcohol. But they drink it secretly. Nobody will drink by informing their parents!”* Cannabis, which respondents referred to as “gaja”, was reported as the most commonly available drug and acknowledged that it has been traditionally used in Bangladesh for multiple purposes including hemp fiber, hemp oils, and medicinally. But respondents also clearly distinguished that nowadays, it is an illegal substance and therefore consumed secretly. Many respondents said they were familiar with the smell of gaja

*Right: Since Over-the-counter (OTC) medication like antihistamines, sedatives, etc. are sold in most local pharmacies without prescriptions in Bangladesh, they can be easily misused by those looking to get high.*



because people frequently smoked it in the slum's alleyways and streets. Yaba was the second most common drug and was identified as the most alarming substance in recent years. Yaba was perceived as highly socially unacceptable, as it was associated with criminal activity (i.e., stealing money to buy drugs) and considered hazardous for health (i.e., inability to sleep due to high doses of meth and caffeine). Respondents perceived that the advent of yaba decreased the demand for heroin, which they said was more commonly available in the 1990s and early 2000s. Thus, they said that the heroin problem was simply replaced with yaba; they claim the government failed to address the former and are continuing to ignore the latter. Overall, coverage about yaba in local news

shows that it is the most pervasive substance problem in Bangladesh today, which is in line with our findings also. Other substances mentioned by respondents included paan, jorda and gul; however, they were not entirely perceived as substances that are abused, but rather a common part of Bangladeshi culture. Substances that were clearly demarcated as harmful and addictive were glue, jhakka and Phensedyl. Solvent glue and the ingredients to make jhakka are readily available over the counter in pharmacies and markets. However, Phensedyl was banned in India in 2016 [23], which in turn decreased its demand in Bangladesh and made it more difficult to find, even through the black market.

*Right: Paan (betel leaf) is extremely popular in South Asia and sold in tea stalls or local corner stores; but not all paan products contain stimulants.*





## MOST COMMON SUBSTANCES\*

Type	Description
Tobacco products	Contains nicotine; includes cigarettes, biri (rolled cigarettes), gul (tobacco powder), jorda (boiled tobacco) and vapes (electronic cigarettes)
Paan	Betel leaf; has stimulant properties; usually combined with jorda; used as mouth freshener
Mod (alcohol)	Includes local varieties like Bangla mod and other international liquor brands; also includes beer
Gaja (cannabis)	Contains tetrahydrocannabinol (THC)
Glue	Referred to as “dandy” or “pasting”; usually sniffed and used by street children
Jhakka	“Jhakka” (meaning “shaken up” in Bengali) is made from mixing carbonated beverages like energy drinks with over-the-counter (OTC) medication like sleeping pills
Heroin	Illegal and highly addictive drug that is either injected, smoked or sniffed
Phensedyl	Cough syrup containing codeine; referred to as “Dyl” (pronounced “dial”); now banned in local market
Yaba	Tablets containing mixture of 30% methamphetamine (powerful and addictive stimulant) and 70% caffeine

*\*As reported by study participants.*

## REASONS BEHIND SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN URBAN SLUMS

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The findings show that a lack of quality education and income generating opportunities in urban slums become push factors behind substance abuse, especially among idle young men. Findings show that access to education is a problem for both boys and girls due to conservative social norms. For instance, girls often have to fight against their family, relatives, or other community members to continue their education instead of getting married and starting a family of their own at a young age. A 17 year old girl said, “People are against me studying and they do not like that I am studying and do not want me to have a future other than getting married and having children.” In 2019 Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS) reported the completion rate of secondary level for girls was lower (62.33%) than boys

(64.48%). Early child marriage was listed as a major barrier for girls’ educational attainment. However, boys are equally vulnerable. The Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS) also showed that although the completion rate of secondary education for boys is higher than girls, their drop-out rate is also much higher compared to girls in the primary education level [19]. The social expectation faced by boys is that they are encouraged to find jobs and earn money to support their family as soon as they can. A mother from the FGDs who is a housewife said that her 17 year old son is going to school but also working part-time at a pharmacy because he needs to help earn money for the family. Rather than being career-oriented or ambitious towards achieving higher education, adolescent

*Right: Adolescents attending school must often take on part-time work to contribute to the family.*



males said they prefer vocational training and other opportunities leading to faster employment. However, without the education and skills necessary to access formal sector jobs, these young people are left with opportunities in the informal sector like daily wage-based laborers (i.e., construction workers), street vendors, or other hired labour. The combination of high expectations from parents to make an income, social pressure and lack of opportunities might discourage many adolescents from working towards their goals. Demonstrating this, one male respondent who is only 15 years old said: *“My first priority is my mother and my four siblings, I am doing my work along with taking care of my mother and building a house in our village...I just built a boundary wall on my land, if I can build that house I will send*

*my mother and siblings there, I will earn whatever I can from here, this is my goal right now.”* Such aspirations show that young men as young as 15 years are aware of the responsibility they have to become the main breadwinner of their family some day. But eventually the stress of providing a better future for their family at such a young age can affect their mental health. With a lack of mental health support, easily impressionable adolescents can look to other coping outlets like using substances. When asked about why adolescents get into drugs, an 18 year old boy explained, *“A major reason why people do drugs is because of family stress, negligence and depression. Individuals love sharing their thoughts, be it with their parents or someone else. Once you share your inner pain and sorrow you feel lighter. But people who*

*Right: Unemployment, high expectations, social and family pressure, can affect adolescents' mental health and lead the easily impressionable adolescents to look for other outlets like substance abuse to cope with the pressure.*





*are unable or have no one to talk to, tend to overcome their loneliness and their pain by doing drugs. When the pain and sorrow is uncontrollable and there is no one to share it with, that is when some people get involved in drug abuse."* Furthermore, since parents said they do not have the time and capacity to always keep an eye on their children, an even bigger problem is the lack of entertainment in urban slums. All adolescents regardless of age or gender said besides schools, communities have very few safe spaces for adolescents to spend time or play. For those out of school, there are even less options. In Bangladesh, particularly overpopulated and crowded Dhaka, there is a severe housing crisis which is even more so in slums. According to a key informant interview with a Ward Commissioner from one of the study sites, it was found that with barely any space for people to live, there is hardly any

consideration for entertainment spaces for children. It was shared by some parents that they preferred to keep children as busy as possible by sending them to school and tutors to ensure that they were not left alone at home until they return from work; this reduces vulnerability of what they described as being lured by gang members who aim to recruit unattended children. While the majority of respondents generally perceived substance abuse as a male problem, some of them reported that girls can also be involved with substance abuse and trafficking. The respondents said this is because girls are less expected to have access to or use substances because they must uphold an image of purity in the eyes of society. This also demonstrates that their perceptions around substance abuse are dictated by patriarchal societal norms regarding how girls and boys should act and behave. For

*Left: With no space or opportunity for entertainment and recreation, adolescents are more likely to be at risk of getting involved with substance abuse.*



example, the stories some parents from FGDs shared about girls using drugs or smoking were full of negative connotations suggesting they are doing something “immoral”. There were two specific instances discussed by two study participants who had first-hand experience around women using substances. The first was a 16-year-old girl who admitted trying alcohol once and said she would never do it again because it is considered bad. The other was a father who said he was shocked to see a homeless woman on the side of the street smoking heroin and blowing the smoke into her infant child’s face. “*The image still haunts me,*” he said. However, while the use of substances was perceived by the majority of participants as gendered and involving mostly men, these two anecdotes shared by the participants shows there is also a possibility for girls in the urban

slums to be at risk of partaking in these detrimental behaviours.

Several respondents also gave examples of girls being used by gangs to steal phones or money which they then use to buy drugs or alcohol. A 17-year-old adolescent boy shared, “*I saw three boys and a girl at the dighir-paar (lakeside) in the evening, trying to convince a man to borrow his mobile phone to make an urgent call. But he refused because I’m sure he knew they were going to steal it. If they had succeeded, they would have run away with the mobile phone and sold it to get the money for drugs.*” Therefore respondents believe that girls are usually influenced by boys who pressure them to take part in stealing and criminal activities, in exchange for giving them access to illegal substances. Moreover, they said when girls are involved with gangs they are

*Left: Corner shops often have televisions where people can watch various shows. This type of social gathering can play an important role in exposing young people to substance use, especially cigarettes.*

somehow inherently expected to be part of drug trafficking activities like carrying or hiding small amounts of substance on them as they are not expected to be associated with such forthright drug dealing. An example of this is demonstrated later in a case story, on page 61, where a 17 year old girl said, *“The police don’t expect girls to be selling yaba so they don’t randomly check them on the streets.”* Involvement in drug trafficking has major implications on the safety and development of girls in urban slums, where their lives are already in flux due to poverty, gender-based violence and other social barriers. The findings demonstrate the reason adolescents become influenced to try substances is due to a combination of curiosity, frustration about their lives and lack of opportunity. One of our key informants also said, *“One’s*

*surroundings and environment plays a very important role. There are times you will see boys taking drugs on the sides of the streets. Such boys and drug users make others around them curious through peer pressure and that is how others get involved with bad habits and substance abuse.”* This shows that the curiosity of urban slum adolescents stems from multiple factors; with few opportunities or spaces in their community for healthy recreational activities, they are left feeling bored. Due to the lack of productive recreational activities and increasing availability of substances in their community, they may end up giving in to curiosity, combined with peer pressure, and allow themselves to try various substances. A 16 year old adolescent boy explained how curiosity and peer pressure act together to increase the chances of

*Right: Mothers residing in slums say they are aware of substance abuse and try to keep their children away from it the best they can.*



getting involved with substance abuse, *“It starts with cigarettes, then they ask you to try drinking beer, then mod, then they want you to try ganja. If you keep doing it, you become addicted.”* Adolescent boys are more likely to give into substance abuse in the context of urban slums. When they have no one to talk to about their problems and have little to no parental supervision, they are at higher risk of finding other groups of adolescents to spend time with who may or may not be involved with gangs. This is further demonstrated, on page 82, by our case study Ali (name has been changed for anonymity) who claims “Level Eye”, the gang he is in, is like his family and that they provide him the protection he needs to survive in the slum. This places them at further risk of getting

inaccurate information from others who are experiencing the same type of frustrations but are unclear how to cope. For example, several boys expressed their perception that smoking cigarettes can help alleviate stress and that they learned this from other peers or from seeing their fathers. In line with this, a perception shared by a 16 year old female was, *“I heard taking drugs helps ease emotional pain and sadness, a lot of people think like this. But it’s a misconception. I’ve heard them say this, but I don’t exactly know why they do it.”* A father also said, *“Some people do it out of frustration, pain, or sometimes when they are angry.”* If they receive such messages about methods of coping, then they will more likely adapt to this kind of harmful behaviour.

*Right: Girls can also be abusing and trafficking drugs yet there is a thin veil of secrecy covering girls involved with substances.*



## GANG INVOLVEMENT

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In Bangladesh, a fragile political state, endemic poverty and pervasive slums predispose communities to organized crime and gangs [20]. Gangs were reported by all study participants as the main reason behind adolescents' involvement in substance abuse. Gang leaders are established as *boro bhai* (meaning "big brother" in Bangla); he is described as the leader of the gang making him the most respected or revered by the group. When males were asked who they looked up to, the majority referred to an individual as *boro bhai* who had some type of leadership role in the group or community. These older males may not

necessarily be a bad influence as some adolescents shared stories that demonstrated positive role modelling, but that was mainly from an older male family member or even distant relatives. It was in stories where boys befriended previously unknown older males that were more likely to lead to gang involvement. Findings revealed gangs are aware of the most impoverished households so that they can target adolescents to recruit. For example, one key informant explained that *boro bhais* approach vulnerable adolescent boys who are usually out-of-school and left alone at home while their parents are at work. He





said: *“When you are poor and your parents leave you alone at home, and you have nothing to eat or nothing to do, you can easily go off with a gang believing they know what is best for you instead of your real family.”* Adolescent male Ali (name has been changed for anonymity), who is a member of a gang, explained the process of recruitment. He said once the *boro bhai* befriends these younger and more impressionable boys, they eventually begin to peer pressure them to partake in gang activities like joining political riots, robberies and even dealing drugs. Slowly the adolescents also begin using drugs under peer pressure and eventually they begin to

alienate their own families. Ali’s life story (case story on page 82) demonstrates that without guidance, adolescent boys in urban slums can easily be led astray. A father in an FGD shared that his son began using drugs because of lack of supervision. He said: *“I didn’t realize he was spending time with the wrong people who would make him take drugs with them. So I had to send him away from here.”* Perceptions respondents shared about gangs illustrate that the combination of peer pressure, lack of parental supervision, and free time of out-of-school adolescents makes them highly vulnerable to substance abuse.

*Left: The boro bhai are mostly established as gang leaders respected by everyone else in the group and revered as the dominant member, who are often involved with substance abuse and its business.*





At the time of this project, local mayoral elections were taking place in Dhaka city and the slum communities were bustling with campaigners. Seeing groups of young men riding in the backs of trucks, chanting slogans for their political leaders is a common sight during local elections.

## LACK OF SAFETY AND JUSTICE

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Analysis of our findings from three research sites shows three different scenarios of lack of safety and justice in the community. In the peri-urban research site, even though we observed a very structured and organized system of authority where the local government bodies and policemen are strict about drugs, adolescents are falling victim to substance abuse and peddling. During a key informant interview with the Ward Commissioner of that community, he described the scenario to us, *“I did a number of meetings with the drug dealers along with the OC (officer in charge of a police station) of this community. I also went door to door to talk with the drug dealers. My message to them was about becoming a good person by giving up this drug*

*business and by doing so they will be given general amnesty and we will rehabilitate them to other businesses. However, some of them took this opportunity of general amnesty and later they started the drug business again. Now we are monitoring them closely.”* A key informant interview with the focal person of one of the local NGOs currently working in that area supports the assertions made by the Ward Commissioner, *“this community used to be a drug hub, with all sorts of criminal activities happening everyday. People from outside of this community feared to stay here after the sunset. After this new Ward Commissioner came, this place has become much safer”*. Regarding the involvement of the adolescents, the Ward Commissioner narrated the process through which they are



recruited in drug businesses, “When I asked the adolescents why they were absent in school they replied that they had been used by the drug dealers for selling gota (local term of Yaba). These kids are very young, 10-12 years of age. The drug dealers recruit them first by identifying which family is the needy one, then they lure them maybe by giving food or something. In this way, they make a relationship with them and drag them into the drug world at such a young age”.

Among the other two research sites that are situated in the urban area, one was dominated by the gang members who are patronized by the local political leaders. “In this community, there are a lot of gangs. Each gang is led by boro bhais with gang members working for them. These boro bhais are, in turn, given shelter by the local political leaders of the community”, said Ali (name has been changed for anonymity), who is an active member

of one of the local gangs in the community. We illustrate this system of authority more elaborately in the case story of Ali on page 82. In the case of another urban research site, a powerful political family controls everything in the community. There is no one to speak against their illegal activities, not even some of their own family members. “Whatever goes on in this community, good or bad, that political family is solely responsible for it”, said a 17 years old adolescent boy. No one can speak or do anything against them. Dia’s (name has been changed for anonymity) case story, on page 61, reveals the situation of that community that has been dominated by a single political family over the years.

Respondents, mostly parents and key informants from local NGOs, believe police are involved in the informal drug trafficking economy. There is a general

*Right: Due to lack of space, narrow alleyways like these are common in slums. Respondents complained that they can frequently smell gaja in these spaces, even in broad daylight.*





মোঃ ফজল করিম সাধারণ সম্পাদক  
১৬ অক্টোবর বিজয়  
৪৯ নং ওয়ার্ড পুরশীলা

আওয়ামী যুবলীগ  
এই লক্ষ্য থেকে  
সর্বস্তরের জনগণকে জানাই  
বিজয়ের সুভেদা

mistrust of police, fearing that instead of helping to serve justice, they use slum residents as scapegoats to cover their own tracks. One of the fathers shared his experience where he described that he was returning home after praying at a “mazaar” (shrine) at 11 PM when suddenly the police stopped and interrogated him without any reason and tried to forcefully place a “bag of gaja (cannabis)” in his pocket. According to the father, the policemen were trying to blame their illegal activities on him in order to extort bribes. Another father said that to keep his son away from joining gangs and falling victim to police harassment, he sent them as migrant workers to Malaysia as there are no job opportunities for them in the slum. *“It’s better to keep him away from the trouble and give him a way to make money and have a better life,”* he explained. He also said, *“Once boys get recruited into gangs,*

*they have to follow the commands of other local political leaders who patronize the gangs.”*

Authorities occasionally decide it is time to crack down on dealers, arresting them only to let them go without any formal trials. A mother during a focus group discussion (FGD) shared, *“There is a boy who was in jail so many times but somehow he always escapes. I think the police catch him but also help him get out in the end.”* This cycle was described by slum residents as a common scenario of the community. Findings from parent FGDs reveal that local leaders receive a portion of the drug business profits for themselves. It was unclear how this functions but the common perception was that those dealing the drugs are provided protection from politicians because they also rely on the income it generates.

*Left: During local elections, the streets of the urban slums are covered with political posters and banners. This indicates the prevalence and importance of political activities in urban slums.*





Adolescents of this community use this path to get to school. But it is also where people come to buy cannabis and yaba. The moment this photo was taken, a woman was in the process of making a drug deal.



## CASE STORIES

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## FARIA'S STORY: THE GIRL WHO KNEW EVERYTHING

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Faria (name has been changed for anonymity) is 16 years old and studying in grade 9 at an NGO-run school. Every morning, she wakes up and gets ready for school where she spends most of her day. Although she is very social with her school friends, she chooses not to use Facebook. But she uses YouTube because she loves listening to music and watching videos of her crush, Bollywood actor Shahrukh Khan. Faria lives with her mother and two brothers. *“My parents got separated after having an intense argument,”* she explained. *“I have no clue why, but now we live in a different part of the slum than my father.”* Her mother drops her off and picks her up

from school every day. She is proud that her mother single-handedly raised the children, while working full-time as a tailor. Her older brother is a pick-up driver but he does not contribute financially to the family. Faria and her mother suspect he secretly gives part of his salary to his father. But Faria is not allowed to see her father; she only sees him when she bumps into him on the street. She wants to see her father, but she doesn't because it makes her mother upset. Faria's mother says, *“If you love your father so much, why don't you go live with him.”* This makes Faria feel guilty. She also believes the stress of the separation made her father start to smoke cigarettes. Faria claims to

*Left: Faria\* (pictured left) loves to spend time on the roof of the house where she lives.*





have spent most of her childhood alone, with little to no parental supervision because her parents had to work. *“This type of upbringing is common in slums, we all grow up this way”* she explained. Several years ago her older brother who was just 6 years old at the time, was kidnapped. No one knows how it happened, but the family went through turmoil searching for him for two years. One day Faria’s brother miraculously returned to their house but she doesn’t remember how. *“I only remember when they brought him back, he was so dirty he had the stickiest hair that took a whole month to clean”,* she said. *“He smelled like the sewer.”* Now her youngest brother, who is only 2 years old, must experience the same type of childhood. He stays home by

himself while his mother and brother go to work and Faria goes to school. She said, *“Mother prepares food for him and leaves it on the table. We turn the TV on so that he can watch cartoons when he wakes up. Of course we ask the neighbours to keep an eye on him if they can, but they don’t have time.”* Faria thinks that when adolescents like her don’t have anyone to teach them from right or wrong, they are more likely to do things like smoke cigarettes. *“I had a friend in Class 5. He seemed very innocent. He stayed away from bad boys, especially the ones that did drugs. But now you can see him on the streets smoking. One day I saw him walking around, almost like he was half asleep. I said, ‘Hey, what is wrong with you?’ He was being very strange, so I held his hand*

*Left: Faria uses the money she makes from tutoring on new makeup which she loves to experiment with, she also dreams of starting her own beauty parlor business someday.*

and made him sit down. I asked him if he wanted some tamarind juice or star fruit, because I heard eating sour food makes you less drunk. But he just wanted a cup of tea." Faria's best friend is named Chocolate, who is also a member of a gang. "His real name is Imran\* (name changed), but Chocolate is his gang name", she explained. She says Chocolate used to take drugs, but apparently stopped after listening to Faria's advice. She said Chocolate is her protector and always has her back. For fresh air, Faria loves to spend time on the roof of her house. "We used to have a neighbour who grew small plants there," she said. "I later learned that he was growing gaja (cannabis) and selling yaba. He used to use the roof for drug deals. One day my mother and I went up

to the roof to hang our laundry. I noticed that even though the sun was shining brightly, our neighbour was looking for something using the flashlight of his mobile phone. I asked my mother if I should help him but she said, no, he is just looking for some drugs he must have dropped, so don't go near him. It made me more curious. He seemed really desperate and even asked the building manager to help him look. The manager even asked me if I found anything that looked like a small red pill. I used to wonder how people take drugs like yaba, and then one day I actually saw someone use it. Before my parents separated, we used to live in a flat where the owners were very friendly. My family and I went to visit them at their house once. They had an empty room and I saw the man of

Right: Unlike other girls, Faria's mother (pictured) allows her more freedom to spend time outside the house and after school with her peers.





Right: Faria was an outlier for us. A special case, the only girl who admitted to be interacting with males of her age and older, unlike other girls we interviewed in her school. She was very open-minded and slowly opened up to the interviewer about her best friend who is a boy and also an active gang member. The gang name of her friend was Chocolate who also used to take drugs from time to time. The picture involves Faria with another friend of hers to depict how she is one of the few girls in the area openly talking to her male friend in a tea stall, situated in a conservative, strict neighborhood.





the house walking in. It seemed like he was going to cook, but it looked suspicious. I secretly followed him in and saw him holding a red pill and folding a piece of paper into a pipe. He placed the pill on the paper, burnt it with a lighter and inhaled the smoke. I understood that he was taking drugs. I waited for him to come out to see if his behaviour would change, but he seemed totally normal. He even casually came out of the room and told his wife that he was going to bed. I myself tried drinking alcohol once. I stole some from my brother who was drinking with his friends. I was very curious so when they left the room, I ran in to steal a sip. I carefully poured some into the bottle cap but as soon as I drank

it, I felt like throwing up. My ears were on fire. I did not like the taste or the smell. I felt really hot after drinking it. My friend Sarjil\* (name changed) was with me and he drank less than me but started acting very strange. He barely had a few drops! But he ran to the fridge and ate four tomatoes, took two showers and kept saying he felt hot. He stayed at my house that night, and slept in the other room. When I woke up and got ready for school he was still asleep. So I went to wake him, but he was unable to open his eyes. He looked terrible! A few hours later he managed to get out of bed and come to school. After that we promised each other never to drink alcohol again."

## DIA'S STORY: THE GIRL WHO DISOWNS HER FAMILY TITLE

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Dia (name has been changed for anonymity) is only 17 years old and already the owner of her own tailoring business. It's not every day that you come across a young girl in an urban slum with her own tailoring shop, let alone one that she has named after herself. *"My father helps pay the rent for this shop",* she explained. *"But he wanted me to be able to work and make money for the family."* When we approached Dia in her shop, she politely told us she was busy. But she asked us to wait for her at her friend's house nearby. We agreed and followed her through the narrow, winding streets, deep into the slum until we reached a small gate. Behind it was a very small and crowded housing complex. Dia left us there with a friend and some of her family members.

Curious as to why we were there, people started coming out of houses and crowded around us. That is when we were approached by a girl named Smriti\* (name changed). After explaining our research and getting her consent, we tried to begin our interview but we were immediately interrupted by a woman who barged in and told Smriti not to speak with us. *"They might be with the police!"* she said. *"They might misuse the recording of your conversation."* We decided to leave and politely said goodbye to Smriti and the others. We walked back to the tailoring shop and asked Dia why she had taken us there in the first place. *"That place is my grandmother's house and where all the drug dealing takes place,"* she said. *"This is why I took you there. I want everyone to know what*

*Right: This is Dia's tailoring shop; although her father helps her pay the rent for the store, Dia is still one of the only female business owners in this slum.*







*happens in this family. I want all of this to finally end! Smriti, the girl you spoke to, thinks children are involved as well. She has seen them smoke cigarettes.”* Dia explained that her grandmother is part of a drug dealing ring in the slum selling gaja and yaba. She did not provide us with further details but she acknowledges the dangers involved and wants no part of it. She explained to us how powerful and influential her family is in that community and how every single person in that locality recognizes her family title with awe and dread. However, she feels ashamed of her family title and deliberately tries to disown it whenever she can. When we asked Dia

if she has ever tried drugs or other substances she said, “Never. I’m afraid that if I try it once, I might get addicted to it.” Dia shared a story from when she was 12 years old, about a time she delivered drugs to someone unknowingly because of pressure from her grandmother. “It was the first time I saw what yaba looks like. I had to deliver a small packet with almost 500 pills.” Dia says she does not want to go to jail. During a recent police raid in their housing complex, she got really scared. She no longer wants to see her family suffer. Now her grandmother has absconded from the slum. With several members of her family involved in her grandmother’s business, Dia said

*Left: Dia says she watches YouTube videos to learn new embroidery and sewing techniques; her business helps keep her busy and away from trouble.*

that some individuals have asked to no longer involve the small children. “My uncle suffers the most because they use all three of his sons to deliver drugs”, she said. Two of her male cousins have become drug dealers, while her uncle has been in and out of rehab five or six times. Listing family members who are involved with drugs made Dia emotional. “Honestly sometimes I feel bad, no matter what, they are my family. We do not want them to be beaten up or taken to jail, yet we are also guilty by helping them.” Dia’s family is both protected and used by local power figures whenever they need. The people who throw them in jail are the same people who pay their bail and patronize their businesses. For some of the men in her family, being taken to jail for a night or two is very common,

“One of the boys in the family came back from jail just last week, but now a girl of the family is currently in jail.” Because of her grandmother, a lot of other young girls in the community became involved in selling and delivering drugs. “It was like a trend,” said Dia. “People were scared of them and because they were girls, no one expected them to be drug dealers so they weren’t caught.” Eventually, when police realized girls were also involved, they began arresting them. It didn’t matter anymore whether they were boys or girls. Dia explains, “If a girl’s reputation gets ruined because of her involvement with drugs, her life is finished. No one will marry her.” Dia says she has seen many girls from well-off families come to this slum and take drugs. She has seen them come in with private cars, sitting

*Right: Dia’s relatives do not trust the police and fear that they too will be arrested, even though they are women.*





Dia's younger cousins were often used by her grandmother to deliver drugs. Now with her gone they have restarted attending school.



at the tea stall with boys, smoking cigarettes. Then they go into a room of one of the houses, buy drugs, sometimes take them there and then leave. *“I wondered why girls from good families were coming here to ruin their life,”* said Dia. *“This one girl who used to frequent the slum, she used to be really beautiful. But after taking drugs, something happened to her glow.”* Talking more about this girl, Dia said she used to come to the slum with a group of boys to buy drugs. *“The girl was very nice, I even talked to her once,”* she said. *“I asked her why she was doing*

*this, and she answered: ‘I had no clue when I first tried it that it would become an addiction. The first day I tried it was when my friends were doing it. On the second day, I did it voluntarily then by the third day, I could not live without it. Now I’ve reached a point where I cannot live without it.’* Dia claims the girl was gang raped once, but could not provide further details. *“I think girls do drugs because they want to be like boys,”* Dia said. *“They want to show people they can do what boys can do, but my question is, why can’t you do something else?”*

*Left: The only high-rise building in this slum is the home of the local leader’s family which towers above like a symbol of power.*



## RIAZ'S STORY: DO-IT-YOURSELF ADOLESCENCE

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17 years old Riaz (name has been changed for anonymity) is in grade 9 at a local school and works part-time at an electronics shop. He also attends a vocational training program on the side. Riaz wants to be in the army someday and if that does not work out, he said he wants to go abroad for higher studies. His father works but his mother stays at home and Riaz also has a younger sister. Because of the nature of his father's work, he is barely at home and does not get time to interact with the children. This adds to his parents' already strained

relationship. Violence is also very common in the household. "Most of the time my parents fight at night and they end up hurting each other physically. Sometimes my sister wakes up and I have to calm her down. By morning, my parents become totally calm. But as soon as the sun goes down, they start fighting again. I cannot run away when they are fighting at night but if they have a disagreement during the day, I just leave the house. I don't want to see them like this...". Riaz has been injured many times trying to stop his parents from fighting and he has even been taken to

*Left: Riaz\* works part-time at an electronics shop. He hopes this will help lead him to a higher paying job in the future.*





the hospital to get stitches. He believes there are several reasons behind the disputes between his parents and money is one of them. He thinks his mother fights with his father because he does not earn enough to support the family. He also assumes that his parents' love marriage might be another reason for their hot and cold dynamics. But the most critical reason of all he said was because of his father's addiction to drugs. Riaz suspects that his father is addicted to yaba and smokes gaja but he has never seen his father do it in front of him. He

only sees his father smoke cigarettes. *"I asked my father why he smokes. He replied that it reduces his 'tension' (stress). But I'm not convinced, so I don't say anything else to him."* The boy also expressed doubts about his mother, connecting his suspicion to her inability to control her anger and emotions. He said, *"Why does she become so aggressive if it's my father who is doing drugs? I suspect that she is doing something as well, but I have never caught her red-handed. One day I saw her sitting in her room, where I think just a few moments before, my father was*

*Left: Adolescent boys can be easily exposed to substance use like smoking at local tea stalls where cigarettes are easily available.*

*taking yaba. Later I noticed that they were both awake all night. They were just laying in bed and listening to music.”* Family influence is critical for adolescent development. But for Riaz, he barely gets family support because his own parents are using drugs. Yet he said that he feels the happiest when his entire family spends time together, although that rarely happens. Riaz claims he does not have close friends because friendship requires a lot of time and that is something he just does not have. After school, he has to go to his training classes and then he

has to go to work at an electronics shop. Riaz is close to the owner of the shop where he works. He calls him ‘Uncle’ even though there is no familial link or relation. The owner always supports Riaz emotionally. In addition, Riaz says his neighbour, who he refers to as his *boro bhai* (“big brother”) has been like a mentor to him. So, Riaz likes to spend most of his time out of the home, with his neighbour. *“I think people should try everything at least once in their life,”* said Riaz. *“I’ve tried smoking a cigarette. But I didn’t like it, so I never continued. I just tried it out of*

*Right: Riaz calls his boss at the electronics shop ‘Uncle’ because he has been like a father figure.*





curiosity. I had a friend who chain-smoked and he told me to smoke, so I did. I remember taking two puffs and immediately not liking it. But then boro bhai found out what I did, and called me; when I went inside his house to see him, he grabbed me and started beating and scolding me.” For any young person, it is critical to get the support they need to develop into a healthy and contributing member of society. Although Riaz cannot get much

emotional support from his family, he believes he manages to get it from others. His uncle who owns the shop he works at is like a father figure to him and his *boro bhai* is his mentor who also guides him like his own kin. Riaz might come from a turbulent home environment, or claim to not have many friends, but at least he thinks he is happy because he does what he can for himself on his own. but at least he thinks he is happy because he does what he can for himself on his own.

*Right: Riaz with his mother and younger sister. His father live away from home because of his (father's) business.*







## SHAHIN'S STORY: STAYING AWAY FROM WHAT'S FORBIDDEN

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Shahin (name has been changed for anonymity) was elected the first ever head boy at his school. He goes to an NGO school for adolescents living in the slum that also provides vocational training. His father makes an honest living from selling vegetables and his mother stays at home, taking care of all five of her children. The entire family lives together in a very crowded, one-room rental home. Shahin has had several jobs since he was only 7 years old. He said, *"I started off selling tea, but I always wanted to work in a computer shop. So every time I passed by a shop, I*

*asked if they needed any help or if there is a job available. One day I got a job at a stationery store and they had a computer. I learnt basic computer skills which helped me get a job in the computer shop I work at now."* Working with computers gives him access to the Internet and he started using YouTube tutorials to learn more about computers. He proudly listed all his self-taught computer skills, including using Microsoft Word, Photoshop and video editing. *"Learning to use computers is important for everyone, especially kids like me who come from*

*Left: Shahin (pictured) prays five times a day and always wears his prayer hat, even at school.*

*the slum,” he said. Believing he can help others learn as well, Shahin has started his own YouTube channel where he uploads tutorials in Bangla, which he thinks are generally lacking. “The videos online right now are really complex and hard for most people to understand,” he said. “So I want to make videos that help everyone, no matter their age or level of expertise.” Shahin prays regularly and believes in leading an Islamic lifestyle. “Alcohol, smoking and drugs are all haram (forbidden).” When we started discussing substance abuse, Shahin became angry, especially at the mention of cigarettes. “I really hate*

*cigarettes, I cannot tolerate the smell,” he said. “Nowadays smoking has become a type of fashion or trend. I don’t have any problems with other drugs because they are not done in the open and have less chance of harming others. But cigarettes! People are smoking it in public places and making the environment unsafe for others. I cannot walk down the road without walking through cigarette smoke. No one cares about the laws. I would never try drugs or even cigarettes. If I do, I know that one day I will have to answer to God, so I would rather not try anything...”*

*Right: This is the room where Sahin lives with his parents and six brothers and sisters. The family owns a desktop computer which Sahin uses to make his YouTube videos.*





হিমলাসী পুথ আন্দোলন



## ALI'S STORY: THE GANG MEMBER WHO WANTS TO GO HOME

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Ali (name has been changed for anonymity) moved from Cox's Bazar to Dhaka with his mother when he was 12. His mother moved with him but the rest of his family stayed back. Six years later, Ali is now 18 years old but no closer to a brighter future; it simply remains a dream and he does not know what will happen to him. Even though a lot has changed in his life since he came to Dhaka, things have not changed for the better – they have gotten worse. Ali remembers a time when he was a healthy boy, but all that is left of his body is debris. He has not

eaten in the last eight days. Rough hair, sunburned skin, dull eyes, and bony structure are all that are left remaining of a once optimistic boy. So what went wrong in the last six years, turning Ali's entire world upside down? "I was an active and happy child," he said. "After coming to Dhaka, my mother started working and wanted to put me into school. However, I was too chan-chal (hyper); I only intended to enjoy life and explore Dhaka." Ali was placed in a school but the teachers complained that he did not show any interest. They gave up on him and kicked him out of

*Left: Ali and his friends feel comfortable enough to smoke openly because they frequent this cha tong (tea stall) all the time so everyone there knows their gang.*



the school. After being expelled, his mother and the rest of his family still in Cox's Bazar were very angry and disappointed in him. This made him increase the amount of cigarettes he was smoking. He started smoking cigarettes long before he moved to Dhaka. "One day I went to a tea stall in the new area we were living in", said Ali. "I wanted to smoke a cigarette. While I was smoking, a stranger who seemed to be the same age as my older brother, asked me where I lived. I said I was new to the area. The stranger was very kind to me and said I could come to this tea stall any time. His voice was very comforting, so I immediately felt close to him. My

elder brothers were always rough with me. They saw me as a lost cause. Seeing how warm and hospitable this stranger was made me want to be his friend. So I began coming to that same tea stall every day". Ali finally felt like he mattered to someone. Eventually the stranger became a close confidant. Ali was introduced to a lot of other boys his age and the man slowly transitioned into becoming his *boro bhai* (big brother) and protector. Ali was finally enjoying his life with his new friends. But he also started becoming completely alienated from his mother. "One day I started noticing that the older boys in the group would

*Left: Smoking yaba requires several additional items other than the pills. Since it is expensive, Ali has to use whatever he can find like scraps of used foil and paper.*



*always disappear. I started to wonder where they would go,” said Ali. “Some of the other boys my age started joining them too. I asked myself, should I go as well? Finally, boro bhai asked me to come along. I was so excited, I felt like I was becoming more and more part of the family. But when I realized what they were doing, it was already too late.” Ali was shocked to learn that the boys were sneaking off in groups because they were part of a purse-snatching gang. “They were robbing people to make a living,” he said. Boro bhai and the others were using knives to scare people and steal their bags. Ali knew that it was what brought them money.*

*“And money is the most important thing,” he said. “Without money, you can’t buy cigarettes, can you?” To deal with the guilt and fear – particularly the fear of being caught for stealing and beaten up by the police – Ali began sniffing glue with his friends. “It’s the glue that the muchhi (cobbler) uses,” Ali explained. “It makes you feel numb.” The glue-sniffing led to smoking gaja, then taking yaba, and even drinking jhakka (energy drinks mixed with sleeping pills and cough syrup). Ali has also tried heroin and drinks alcohol, namely Hunter beer which is locally produced. Substance dependency among those living in poverty is even more*

*Left: Ali is posing with his friends in a place where they usually hang round.*

challenging to address without family support, let alone access to treatment and rehabilitation. In the beginning, Ali would go back to his mother's house just to sleep but the distance between him and his real family continued to grow. *"Our gang is called Level Eye. They are my family. They are my home."* Ali explained that his gang is supported by local leaders in the community who have political backing. *"Whenever there is a political program in the slum, they hire our gang members to participate. Sometimes we are hired to make trouble,"* said Ali. According to Ali, there are several active adolescent gangs in this community and Ali has had so much

experience in gang fights that he jokingly says it has become his profession. His movement in the area is also limited due to the fear of boys from other gangs seeking trouble. Ali showed us that the headquarters of the gang is located in an office of a small TV cable company. The owner patronizes them and uses them for his business and political purposes in return for food and shelter. However, the main objective of the gang is to exert power and domination in the slum. *"Being a gang member keeps us alive and provides us with all the shelter we need,"* said Ali. Or that's what he says to justify himself, every time he

*Right: Sometimes Ali said when he is high, he doesn't come home for days; he knows this worries his mother.*



begins to recount his earlier life, when he first moved to Dhaka with his mother. Ali's mother has tried to send him to countless rehabilitation centres, but he claims they tortured him there. So every time, he would manage to run

away and come back to his friends in Level Eye. *"I want to get better, go back to our village in Cox's Bazar and be how I used to be... I think,"* he said, still sounding unsure.

*Right: The rare times he does spend at home, Ali likes to watch cartoons with his younger brothers.*



We were able to recruit many fathers for our study at cha tongs (tea stalls) like these. Men of all ages spend time here drinking tea and discussing current events and politics.







Elias (pictured) sells cigarettes at his tea stall, and has to bring the packets after he closes the shop back to his home, where he locks them in his cabinets for safe keeping.

*Elias's wife (pictured) says she wishes her husband didn't make her sons leave. She keeps their photos by her bedside.*





CONCLUSION

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*Above: This lakeside was referred to by locals as “dighir par” and offered some rare open space for slum residents.*

The findings revealed being idle, with lack of employment and recreational activities were perceived as major determinants behind substance abuse in urban slums. Our respondents, both adolescents and adults, expressed similar concerns on how lack of unemployment, proper parental supervision, recreational activities, gang involvement and depression can influence individuals to abuse various substances. When they lack parental supervision, adolescents are not just vulnerable to substance abuse but the

majority of the urban slum adolescents involve themselves with dangerous gangs, and partaking in other criminal activities. This leads to the second most identified reason behind substance abuse infiltration of gangs.

There are currently between 50 and 60 active gangs in Dhaka involving up to 10,000 youth [22]. Violence, drugs, guns and sexual misconduct are notoriously part of gang culture [23]. Our findings shed more light on gang dynamics, particularly through Ali’s (name has been



changed for anonymity) story. His case demonstrates how gangs are used by local politicians as hired muscle power and are almost always involved within the drug ecosystem via selling and buying. Toxic masculinity is deeply rooted in gang culture dictating boys should behave violently and partake in risky behaviour like substance abuse. Also, there is a strong brotherhood mentality and loyalty to gang members. They provide each other with protection, shelter, food and even drugs to survive in the urban slum, like a family.

To reduce the prevalence of substance abuse, it is necessary to further investigate and examine the reasons behind substance abuse and awareness should be raised among adolescents, parents, teachers and general community members. As much as the local community is aware of the harmful consequences of drugs and alcohol, more creative interventions and awareness initiatives need to be exaggerated so that the public is aware that legal substances such as cigarettes,

paan, and overdose of sleeping pills are equally dangerous and hazardous to one's health.

In 2018, changes to the Narcotics Control Act of 1990 added death penalty or life imprisonment for anyone who carries, trades, stores, or processes yaba weighing less than five grams. The law also finally classified heroin and cocaine as narcotics of the highest level [24]. Although these drugs seem less relevant than other more common forms

found on the streets like jhakka, glue and smokeless tobacco products (gul, jorda) which are still highly accessible. However, urban slum residents need to understand that beyond being legal and accessible, substance abuse is a social problem rather than only a law enforcement issue. Policies and programs should place more emphasis on the issue of addiction as a social issue.

Additionally, urban slums do not have playgrounds or if they do, it is not sufficient enough for all adolescents. Young people do not have many options available and this needs to be a higher priority for those in charge of infrastructure development and youth programming in urban slums. Therefore, creating safer spaces to play or forms of entertainment and other activities outside school for adolescents (i.e., youth clubs), is a critical need to prevent young people from abusing tobacco, alcohol or drugs. Lack of opportunity for adolescents is one of the key findings of

the study. It is clearly important to introduce more programs on vocational training for adolescents especially in urban slums, where adolescents are growing under the vulnerability of substance abuse.

Considering that urban slums are hotspots for substance abuse, more attention must definitely be placed on prevention and awareness raising at the ground level in these communities. The awareness programs and interventions should be dynamic enough to reach out to the targeted crowd. Therefore, creative and innovative awareness-raising methods involving influential speakers (such as, community leaders, teachers, NGO members, religious leaders, etc.) need to be involved as a strategy to attract more community members to actively participate in these awareness-raising campaigns and programs.

Adolescent girls' lack of economic empowerment and voice and agency in

urban slums conversely increases the chances that they will be targeted by drug dealers, since adolescent girls are less likely to be suspected by law enforcement agencies of being involved in the drug trade. Additionally, the lack of high-quality education in urban slums and the prevalence of early marriage makes girls more vulnerable to becoming involved with drug dealers and gangs. Evidence from the study reveals that females had been targeted by drug businesses and snatching gangs, and that they had been pressured by their communities to get married at a young age rather than continuing their education. In light of the findings, we strongly recommend that programmes be introduced in urban slums to provide adolescent girls with safe spaces in which to spend their leisure time and recreational activities to participate in so that gangs and drug dealers cannot target them during their vulnerable moments.

*Right: After school these adolescents are able to stay at home with their grandfather while their parents are still at work.*





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