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Glue-sniffing among the Street Children in Bangladesh: The Intersection of Hunger and Addiction

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Dear Editor,

Solvent inhalation among the street children for momentary enjoyment and loss of appetite has been a long-standing crisis in Bangladesh, especially in the urban areas. Solvents or inhalants are chemicals which are volatile at room temperature and produce effects similar to alcohol or anesthetics when their vapors are inhaled; for example - toluene, gasolene, carbon tetrachloride, etc and certain drugs used to induce anesthesia - halothane, nitrous oxide, etc (1).

Street children are economically awfully poor &/or homeless who usually live on streets. An immense number of street children are alarmingly getting addicted through glue-sniffing to lessen their appetite, hence suppressing their hunger and get temporary relief from the harsh realities of their life. Over the time, it has become an addiction they cannot escape from. Glue, popularly known as 'Dandy' in Bangladesh, is commonly used in repairing shoes, electronic products, electrical appliances, plastic consumables, leather, etc. It is adhesive glue that contains toluene - a sweet smelling and intoxicating hydrocarbon. Street children carry glue in a polythene or plastic bag and put their noses and mouths in the bag to inhale and exhale. The solvent causes hallucinations as well as dampens hunger pangs (2). Hunger exacerbates the vulnerability of street children, driving them to seek support and escape from their harsh realities through substances like glue. With limited access to food and basic necessities, these children often choose to substance abuse as a coping mechanism.

Study of the UNICEF and the Bangladesh government states that over 3.4 million children in Bangladesh are living on the streets (3). The UNICEF and the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics study shows, among the street children 82% are boys, aged between 5-17 years. Of them, 82.9% experience abuse or harassment from pedestrians, 79% are unaware of support services, 71.8% are illiterate, 37.8% leave home due to poverty or hunger, 30.1% live and sleep without basic amenities. Number of street children is highest in Dhaka division (48.5%), while Sylhet possess the lowest (4.0%). Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, is the hub of street children (4). Of the street children, 64% don't want to go back to their

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families, parents refused to take back 21.3% and 15.9% have no family ties (5).

The UNICEF and the Department of Narcotics Control (DNC) report states that 58% of country's street children are grappling with drug addiction – about 14% of them start taking drugs even before becoming 10 (6). A World Bank study pointed out that Dhaka's 249,000 street children are addicted to drugs (2). An estimated 75,000 street children addicted to glue-sniffing in Dhaka, according to the UNICEF and the DNC report (6).

The World Health Organization (WHO) report says that the reasons to inhale volatile substances are that these products are readily available, relatively cheap, easy to buy or steal, provide an escape from the real world of poverty and deprivation, help users to forget hunger, give an artificial sense of warmth (helpful for sleeping outside), afford some dulling of the pain of abuse, provide an enjoyable feel especially with group of friends, etc (7). These make glue a very convenient substance to abuse. Intoxicated by glue, children engage in violent activities which often lead to criminal involvement and in drug peddling, picketing, mugging, human trafficking, etc. to fuel their addiction (6). These can carry on a cycle of poverty, substance abuse and criminal behavior.

Street children of Bangladesh are very much fond of glue-sniffing as these are not illegal and the feeling of sky-scraping happens very quickly. It is tragic that glue is cheaper and more affordable than food for them. Cost of a small pot of glue is about Tk. 60 to 80 – a single pot can be sniffed 3 times for 3-4 hours each time (8). Glue is a toluene-based adhesive and toluene is a controlled precursor chemical in Bangladesh. Its use is limited in industrial sector under strict control and monitoring of the DNC. But the finished products of toluene, the adhesive, are not restricted as they are widely used in various industrial and household purposes (9). Glue abusers are taking the advantage of this gap of regulation on adhesive.

After opening a solvent pot, glue is poured in a polythene or plastic bag and the vapor is inhaled and exhaled until it is exhausted. Inhaled solvent vapors are absorbed through the lungs and rapidly reach the brain. Repeated or deep inhalation causes disorientation, loss of control, unconsciousness, etc. If the method of application obstructs breathing and the sniffer becomes unconscious, death from suffocation may occur. Long-term solvent abuse results in lung, liver and kidney damage and brain impairment. Whilst sniffing repeatedly, 'hangover' effects of pallor, fatigue, forgetfulness, loss of concentration, etc tend to become a recurring daily pattern (1).

Glue-sniffing has started about 40 years ago in many other countries (2). Lack of information and study on glue-sniffing has contributed to the low sketch of this serious concern. As a result, addicted children can sniff glue openly and the community and the law enforcement agencies have hardly taken any effective preventive measures.

Despite the formulation of a number of acts and policies to protect the rights of children, the number of street children and their vulnerability is mounting due to fast urbanization, which contradicts Bangladesh's development ambitions. It will hamper the accomplishment of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) as well (10).

Drug abuse creates physical and behavioral difficulty of children and affects the socio-economic aspects of the country. Legislation alone will not be able to prevent the street children from using drugs (2). Raising awareness and nurturing community commitment through preventive trial could add to improving the circumstances. Responsible authorities should take immediate initiative to build a safe and sound pathway for the street children.

Keywords

Street children, Glue-sniffing, Hunger, Drug addiction, Crime, Bangladesh.

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Conflict of Interests

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Code of ethics

None.

Authors' Contributions

Conceptualization, K. D, H. A. N, S. D; Data curation, K. D, H. A. N, S. D, B. C, C. C; Formal analysis, K. D, H. A. N, B. C; Investigation, K. D, H. A. N, S. D, B. C, C. C; Methodology, K. D; Supervision, K. D, S. D; Validation, H. A. N, S. D, B. C, C. C; Visualization, K. D, S. D; Writing - original draft, H. A. N, S. D, B. C, C. C; Writing - review & editing, K. D; Approval of final manuscript, K. D, H. A. N, S. D, B. C, C. C.

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