Drug addiction grips Dhaka’s slum youths

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A field visit to various slum areas reveals a grim reality where substance abuse is tearing apart families and futures.In Koral slum, Ripa recounts her father’s tragic downfall. Once a hardworking man, he now spends his days intoxicated, leaving Ripa and her mother to toil as domestic workers to sustain the family.

Their story is not unique as it echoes throughout the slums, where addiction is claiming lives and livelihoods Atiya Khatun, another resident, fights a daily battle to survive. “My husband is no longer around. My son used to work in a shop, but addiction took hold of him, and now he refuses to work. I used to clean two houses; now, I clean six just to make ends meet. If I don’t give him money for drugs, he turns violent.”

Sixteen-year-old Sifat, who works in a shop and dreams of going back to school, explains the gravity of the situation: “Many of my friends worked here, but they’ve all been lost to addiction. They use yaba, various pills, cannabis, and other substances. They buy drugs from bars and Raja Bazaar. Their parents don’t even know. They just take money from them and spend it on drugs.”Slum residents pay around Tk3,500 to Tk4,000 for a single cramped room, leaving them with little to cover other expenses.

Asma Khatun (not her real name) highlights the economic desperation that drives many to extreme measures. “There is barely any work available. Employers offer Tk4,000-5,000 for an entire day’s labour, but rent alone consumes most of that. Many women are forced to beg or engage in unethical activities just to survive,” she said.Despite the hardships, some slum families prioritise education. Nasima, a mother, proudly shares: “My son is studying in a madrasah, and my sister’s two sons are in college and university.”

Russell Sarwar, Inspector of Banani police station, acknowledges the challenge: “Hundreds of thousands of people live in the two parts of Koral slum. We conduct daily raids and arrest an average of 5-6 individuals each day. Many young people here are addicted. Growing up in such an environment makes it hard for them to develop positive habits. However, a few manage to escape through education, and that is encouraging.”In Rupnagar, Mirpur, the story repeats itself. Fourteen-year-old Shahana was once a student, but addiction shattered her family’s stability. “My father used to work, but now he stays intoxicated. I had to drop out and start working with my mother in homes to survive.”

One anonymous boy shared a personal battle: “I, too, gave in to peer pressure and tried drugs. My parents were furious and forced me back into school, but most of my friends are still addicted