

Navigating Challenges in Urban Slum Settlements: A Study of Disadvantaged Adolescents Through A Qualitative Lens

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Abstract

Adolescents residing in socio-economically disadvantaged urban slum settlements experience multiple developmental challenges shaped by poverty, overcrowding, limited resources, unsafe environments, and unstable interpersonal relationships. The present qualitative study explored adolescents' experiences and sources of stress, their coping mechanisms, educational and safety barriers, and the factors contributing to school dropout, early employment, and early marriage. It also explored the perspectives of parents and community social workers regarding adolescent needs and intervention feasibility. A purposive sample of 64 participants took part in eight focus group discussions, including three adolescent, two parent, and three social-worker groups. Data were collected through a focus group discussion guide and semi-structured open-ended questions and analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis. The analysis generated five themes: abuse and suppression in daily constraints; consistent adverse living and health conditions; generational resource scarcity for personal growth; disruptive interpersonal relationships; and sexual curiosity and suppression. The findings emphasise the need for context-sensitive, family-inclusive, and developmentally appropriate interventions for adolescents locally.

Introduction

Adolescence is marked as a critical developmental period characterised by rapid physical, cognitive, emotional, and social changes that shape an individual's transition into emerging adulthood and adulthood. During this stage, adolescents start developing their identity, autonomy, and interpersonal relationships, etc. As human development is strongly influenced by the interaction between individuals and their surrounding environments, this phase is also considered the critical phase where youth derive significant parts of their self-esteem from group memberships, leading to in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination. (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Healthy adolescent adjustment requires balancing autonomy-seeking with continued felt security, where supportive peer and mentor relationships buffer against psychological stress (Allen et al., 2003). All experiences that individuals face during their adolescence contribute to shaping their psychological well-being, social adjustment and life outcomes (Sawyer et al., 2012). This developmental phase is especially crucial because, on one hand, it provides the opportunity for growth and resilience, and on the other hand, it is a period of heightened vulnerability, specially for adolescents living in socio-economically disadvantaged environments.

Rapid urbanisation has resulted in the expansion of urban informal settlements (such as slums) across many low- and middle-income countries (for example, India). These settlements are typically characterised by overcrowding, insecure housing, extreme scarcity of basic human needs, limited educational and health care resources, limited exposure to the knowledge of permanent job opportunities and persistent poverty. Such environments expose adolescents to multiple and overlapping adversities, including community violence, substance use, perceived discrimination, family instability, etc. These structural disadvantages interact to create cumulative developmental risks for adolescents.

The current study aims to explore the lived experiences of adolescents residing in socio-economically disadvantaged urban informal settings, typically slums, as described by themselves, their parents and social workers.

Methodology

Design of the Study - The present study is a qualitative study that involved conducting Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to explore the micro-environment, challenges, coping mechanisms, and intervention feasibility among the adolescents and other key stakeholders, including parents and social workers. Further, the study used a thematic analysis approach to execute the objectives.

Sample of the Study - The total number of participants involved in the study was 64. The participants were divided into 8 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): 3 groups of adolescents, 2 groups of parents and 3 groups of community social workers, with 8 participants in each group.

Sampling technique - Purposive Sampling was chosen for the current study. The participants were recruited from local schools, NGO field offices, and residential houses in the target urban slum community at Kolkata in West Bengal, India;

who could provide detailed information on the target community's adolescent issues and were specifically recruited to conduct the FGDs.

Inclusion Criteria

For Adolescents:

- Age: 12–16 years
- Residing in the target community
- Currently studying or dropping out of school
- Ability to participate in the study

For Parents:

- Parents or legal guardians of adolescents
- Residing in the target community

For Social Workers:

- Professionally qualified community social workers working with the target community for at least one year

Exclusion Criteria

- Individuals unwilling to give informed consent/assent.
- Individuals who do not reside in the target community.
- Adolescents with physical or mental impairments.

Tools used –

Four main tools were used to collect data:

- Consent Form: Ensured voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw.
- Information Schedule: Collected participants' background and demographic details.
- FGD Guide: Provided a structured framework to explore core study topics.
- Semi-structured Interview Questions: Used open-ended questions to dive deep into adolescents' personal experiences and needs.

Focus Group Discussion Guide Questions –

Core aspect of the question and its rationale	Group – Parents	Group – Social Workers	Group – Adolescents
Icebreaker Rationale: Establishes comfort, reveals supervision levels, and explores recreation.	How do your children usually enjoy their free time?	How do adolescents in this community usually spend their free time?	How do you engage yourselves in free time?
Micro-Environment & Stressors Rationale: Uncovers immediate environmental barriers affecting personal development.	What are your main concerns about raising your teenagers in this neighbourhood?	What are the social/economical challenges in the neighbourhood for adolescents being brought up?	How is your life influenced by your home environment and neighbourhood?
Adolescent Transitions Rationale: Examines systemic drivers behind school dropouts and early marriage.	What do you think generally leads the adolescents here to leave school and engage elsewhere?	What factors contribute to school dropout and early marriage among these youth?	Why do some young people like you stop school, start working or marry early? What do you think?
Community Safety & Risk Exposure Rationale: Evaluates environmental hazards and specific community norms within the setting.	How safe do you feel the neighbourhood is for your children regarding influences like substance availability or local pressure?	What is the extent of exposure to substance abuse, child labour, or exploitation, and how does the community react?	What risky situations do you face residing here? How do you handle peer pressure?

Systemic Educational Barriers Rationale: Isolates structural educational failures from individual choices.	How do your children find learning difficult?	Which educational challenges affect the youth here?	What makes studying or reading easy or difficult for you?
Coping Mechanisms & Support Rationale: Identifies emotional behaviours used to cope with adversity.	When your children are stressed, how do they cope with stress?	How do the youth manage their daily life stress in this community?	When you feel stressed, angry, or overwhelmed by problems, what do you usually do to feel better?
Intervention Design & Engagement Rationale: Captures insights on facilitation style, rapport, and community alignment for program participation.	How can we best involve parents to ensure long-term support for your children?	What teaching and facilitation styles work best to keep you engaged?	What makes an after-school program safe and exciting enough to keep you coming back?

The above discussion guide was used as a flexible framework for conducting the focus group discussions.

Data Collection –

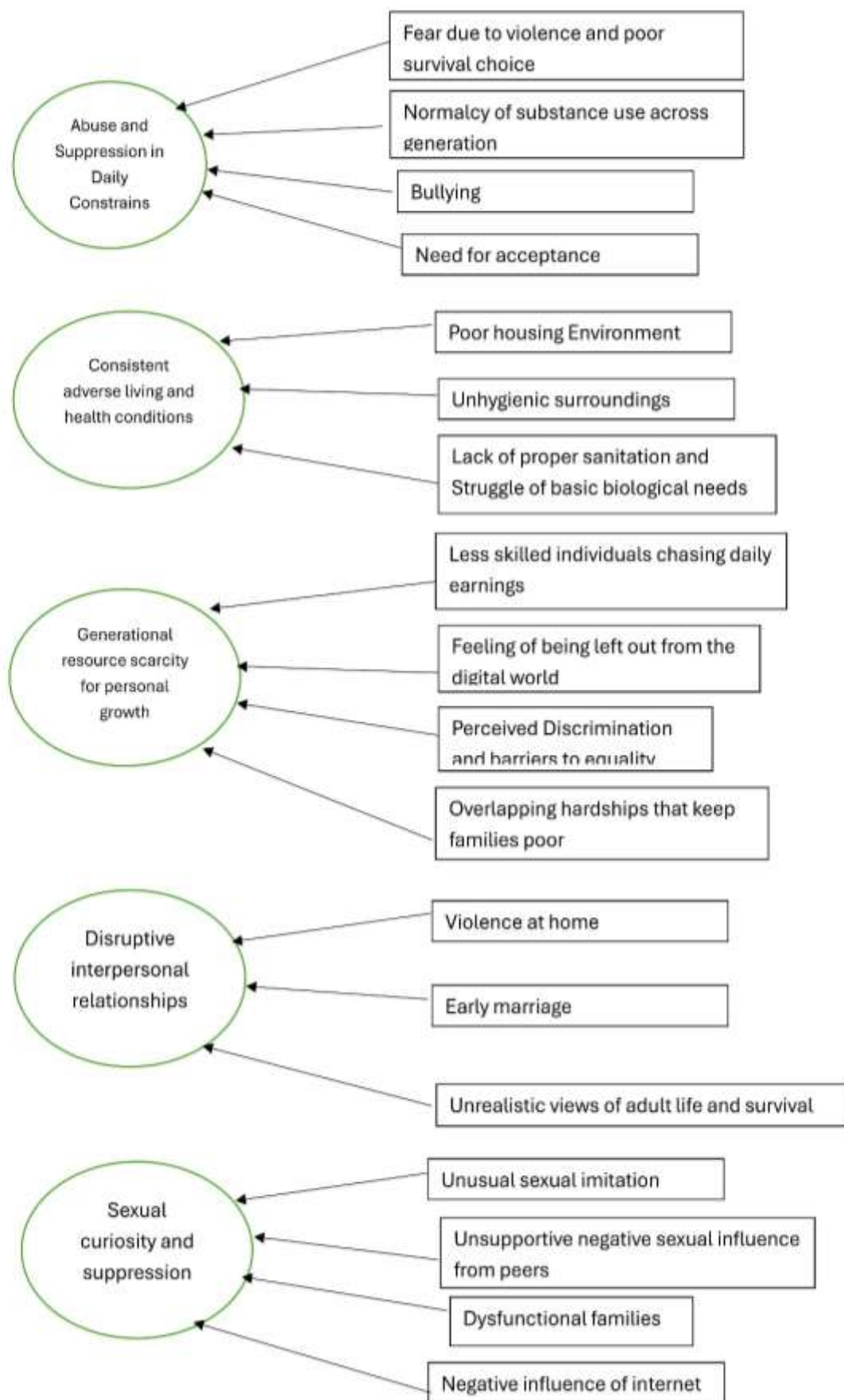
We used focus group discussions in quiet community spaces and centres, guided by a structured discussion guide. Participants first filled out information schedules and signed informed consent forms. We used active probing where needed during the sessions, which lasted 50 to 80 minutes each and were digitally recorded with full consent.

Interpretive technique - The FGD data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. The analysis involved: (1) familiarisation with the transcripts, (2) generation of initial inductive codes, (3) identification of candidate themes, (4) review and refinement of themes, (5) defining and naming the final themes, and (6) reporting the findings in relation to the research objectives.

Ethical Concerns - Informed consent was obtained from the participants, and they were made aware of voluntary participation and the right to withdraw. All the data were kept confidential.

Interpretative results –

The initial codes and sub-themes of the Thematic Analysis led to the following schematic diagram:



Discussion

Theme 1: Abuse and Suppression in Daily Constraints

Adolescents in disadvantaged settlements face constant exposure to violence and environmental risks that constrain their autonomy. Furthermore, territorialised public spaces and community powerlessness leave residents trapped amidst ongoing antisocial activities. One participant described the hostile response faced when attempting to correct such behaviour: “They would rather throttle you and ask who you are to question them”. Living around constant community violence creates a deep culture of fear and silence (Sharma, 2025). This unsafe environment plays a key role in how kids handle stress and grow up.

Behavioural risks are deeply rooted in the socio-physical structure of the community. Due to severe overcrowding, adolescents spend considerable time in communal lanes and gathering spaces where substance use is openly visible. A stakeholder noted, “In some cases, their families themselves are involved in selling alcohol or running such businesses”. This indicates that the adolescents get involved in substance-related activities; that too not only in their community setup but also within their home. Furthermore, the constant and frequent exposure to humiliating behaviour creates a feeling of being socially excluded among adolescents. One participant reported, “I do not feel like going to school; nobody wants to mix with me because I live in a slum. Even teachers ask me to sit on the last bench”. Structural marginalisation spreads from under-resourced communities to schools, shaping adolescents' desires and life possibilities. One practitioner described how children are routinely exposed to adult survival strategies within the community, stating, “Some of the mothers dress up because they are sex workers. And the children are witnessing this. Like every night. So, a little girl would like to dress up like the mother. So, you can't really give them an alternative dream. That is very difficult.” This observation highlights how repeated exposure to limited occupational models can constrain future aspirations and normalise cycles of social disadvantage. At the same time, participants emphasised that these patterns are not inherent to the children but are strongly shaped by situation. In this context, a practitioner noted, “When children moved away from here to another environment, we observed significant changes in their hygiene, communication style, and overall behaviour”. This observation underscores the transformative influence of social environments on adolescent development.

Consequently, in such conditions, working with the parents is also equally important for the sake of the adolescents. As one stakeholder explained, “Before working with children, it is very important to work with parents”. This reflects an understanding that adolescent well-being is deeply embedded within broader family and community contexts.

These results are strongly consistent with previous research, which shows that urban slum exposure to poverty and violence heavily harms emotional well-being (Martin et al., 2024; Agrawal, 2024). Consequently, adolescents focus on daily survival rather than identity exploration.

Theme 2: Consistent Adverse Living and Health Conditions

Disadvantaged living conditions like overcrowding and poor sanitation heavily disrupt physical and psychological development. Because of these, adolescents struggle daily within cramped, shared homes. One explained, “We live in a slum. The house is very small, and even the bathroom is inside. Seven to eight people live there. Everything is difficult: sleeping, sitting, everything”. Such overcrowding limits privacy and creates tension among family members. Housing insecurity is another major challenge in their everyday routine. One participant shared, “I sleep on the footpath. It becomes very difficult when it rains. Even otherwise, I feel scared at night because drunk people pass by”. This account shows that some adolescents lack safe shelter and regularly face fear, discomfort, and insecurity; all these contribute to their mental pressure and hamper the ideal development process.

Poor sanitation and unsafe drinking water were also common concerns. A community member stated, “Water is available, but it is so dirty that it cannot be used. Children frequently get fevers, become weak, and even experience headaches and knee pain from a young age”. These experiences suggest that illness, physical discomfort, and poor health have become a routine part of life for many adolescents in the community.

Adolescent girls face additional difficulties because of limited sanitation facilities and lack of privacy. Another social-worker noted, “Many adolescent girls live in very small houses and share common toilets. This creates hygiene-related problems, and during menstruation many girls use cloth instead of sanitary products”. These challenges point to the gender-specific impact of poor infrastructure, particularly in relation to menstrual hygiene and personal dignity.

Overcrowding and poor living conditions in informal settlements heavily drive up stress and health issues (Gupta et al., 2017; Chaudhary, 2024). Without private spaces, adolescents struggle to cope with daily pressures and achieve healthy development.

Theme 3: Generational Resource Scarcity for Personal Growth

Intergenerational poverty and limited education trap families in cycles of unskilled labour. As one participant noted, "most of them are families of unskilled labourers... over generations, not being able to access education or skills, and so their condition has remained more or less the same," keeping economic insecurity locked in place.

A major challenge identified by participants was the digital divide. Even when adolescents show motivation to learn, many lack access to basic technological resources required for modern education. One parent explained, "Sometimes we do not even have a mobile phone, so studying becomes difficult, and it causes distress". These accounts highlight how resource scarcity directly disrupts educational participation and limits opportunities to acquire skills necessary in today's world.

Rigid school systems alienate first-generation learners who lack home support. As a social worker observed, schools built for privileged backgrounds leave informal settlement students behind, driving many to disengage entirely.

Economic pressures further contribute to high dropout rates. A community worker explained, "If someone can earn ₹400 a day driving a toto, families can easily stop education; therefore, dropout cases are common". Participants noted that adolescents themselves frequently evaluate education through an economic lens. Many children openly question, "How much income will I earn by studying?" Such statements reflect the dominance of immediate financial concerns over long-term educational aspirations. Structural gaps in education, tech, and vocational access drive school dropouts and trap youth in low-skilled work (Chugh, 2024; Asian Development Bank, 2026). Without resources, these kids just end up repeating the same cycle of poverty.

Theme 4: Disruptive Interpersonal Relationships

In such underserved settings, the adolescents often face severe home instability, marked by routine domestic abuse and negligible parental support. As one practitioner explained, "There is always some form of abuse at home. Mothers abuse fathers, fathers abuse mothers, both verbally and physically. Children witness these experiences from a very young age and often model the behaviour of their parents". This suggests that repeated exposure to such an unhealthy and disruptive environment is the direct cause of emotional distress in adolescents. This also contributes to adolescents' aggressive behavioural patterns.

Most of the adolescents are directly drawn to the conflict in their house, specifically when incidents of paternal substance use occur, and that disrupts family functioning. One participant shared, "My father creates problems and fights. My mother tries to stop him. As we grew older, we also started speaking up. We no longer consider who is younger or older". Unstable homes often push adolescents to seek belonging outside, leading to early relationships and underage marriages that derail their education and future. A key informant noted that "love affairs begin from 13, 14, even 12... mothers got married at fifteen... the same fate is getting repeated." These narratives point to the intergenerational nature of early marriage, where patterns experienced by parents are reproduced among their children.

Findings show many adolescents marry without understanding the financial and social demands of adulthood. As one participant noted, "All they need is a few plastic sheets and some bamboo sticks. So, they can have a house... they don't need any skill or anything to earn their livelihood." This, in turn, contributes to school dropout, economic dependence, and continued poverty.

Unstable homes harm adolescent development and often lead to early marriage (Daruwalla et al., 2019), perpetuating a cycle of poor health, limited education, and intergenerational poverty (Raj et al., 2009) that restricts overall social mobility.

Theme 5: Sexual Curiosity and Suppression

Although childhood sexual curiosity often creates anxiety in adults, it is a natural process and unguided children use observation and imitation to understand the relationships and media they are exposed to. This is reflected in the following account: "Children as young as seven or eight imitate adult intimacy and media through role-play, despite lacking direct access to explicit content." This observation can be understood through Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory. Children rely on imitation as a primary learning tool (Meltzoff & Moore, 1997; Bandura, 1977), driven by natural curiosity to mimic observed adult behaviours even without comprehending them (Friedman et al., 2017). A respondent stated: "The other children who observe this behaviour report it because they already know it is wrong," which reflects how children learn what is considered acceptable or unacceptable. According to Kohlberg's (1984) theory of moral development, children at this age often judge actions based on rules and punishment rather than a deeper understanding of consent or boundaries. Moreover, the lack of open discussion often creates confusion. One respondent described the following situation: "There are incidents of children mistaking condoms for balloons, and then getting corrected by peers... see, this highlights the need to understand where young children are getting their information."

Children naturally use existing knowledge to interpret unfamiliar concepts, which Piaget (1952) termed assimilation. Without adult guidance, they often rely on peers for information, risking misconceptions (Bearman & Brückner, 2001). Ultimately, childhood sexual curiosity is normal and requires age-appropriate guidance instead of silence.

Conclusion

These findings show that constant hardships—like extreme poverty, unsafe neighbourhoods, and severe family conflict—harm adolescent development and keep families trapped in poverty. To break this cycle, we need community programs that teach teens essential life skills and provide safe spaces for them to grow.

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