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Living with devils and demons: Risk behaviour of street children in the Colombo City

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This qualitative, descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted with the objective of describing risk behaviour among street children in the Colombo city and to identify factors associated with such risk behaviour. Data were obtained through 20 semi-structured interviews with key informants, 10 focus group discussions and 25 semi-structured interviews with street children. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse data. The participants of this study were from Fort, Pettah, Maradana and Slave Island areas of the Colombo City. The majority of the street children were boys. The children who participated in this study, whose ages ranged from 8-18 years, represented all three major ethnic groups as well as all four major religious groups.

The social norms of the environment of street children demand that s/he engage in several forms of risk behaviour to obtain social respect as well as to survive. Risk behaviour among girls include usage of pornography, sexual promiscuity, prostitution, consumption of alcohol and the use of narcotic substances, and transportation of illicit alcohol and narcotic drugs. Risk behaviour of boys are more complex and include usage of pornography, sexual promiscuity, homo-sexuality, male prostitution, violence and robbing, smoking (including cannabis), transportation and sale of illicit alcohol and narcotic drugs, pimping, and the use of services of prostitutes.

Norms of the social environment where street children live in, the existence of gangs and peer pressure promote risk behaviour among children. Other factors that encourage and promote such behaviour despite punitive action by law enforcement authorities include the lack of socially acceptable alternative recreational opportunities, close ties between such behaviour and their income generating activities, lack of adult carers and inadequate caring and supervision by existing carers.

Risk behaviour of street children not only endanger their lives but also pose a risk to society in general. Measures to address this issue and reduce such behaviour among them must target the elimination of the root-causes of the identified risk behaviour.