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Understanding the Situation and Effectiveness of Adolescent Focused Tobacco Control Policies in Nepal : A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Background: Tobacco use is a major risk factor for non-communicable disease that contributes two third of deaths in Nepal. Tobacco related premature deaths are estimated to rise every year if effective interventions are not implemented. In Nepal majority of smokers start using tobacco in their adolescence. Despite the enforcement of tobacco control law in 2011, the use among adolescents remains high. Hence, this study was carried out to understand the situation and effectiveness of adolescent focused tobacco control policies.

Methods: Data were collected by focus group discussions in seven provinces of Nepal. Total 28 focus group discussions were carried out with four in each province incorporating both genders. Adolescents between age of 13 and 18 years attending both public and private schools were selected. Data were analyzed manually using a thematic analysis method in MS Excel and Word.

Results: Tobacco control law on prohibition of sale and distribution of tobacco products to minors and prohibition of sale within 100-meter radius of educational institutions were not implemented properly. Adolescents' students were not stopped and inquired about their age and could easily access tobacco at shops nearby school area. Shopkeepers were not hesitant to sell tobacco to adolescents in school uniform, if they are purchasing for their parents or family members.

Conclusions: The adolescent focused tobacco control laws have not been implemented effectively. The current provisions of tobacco control law needs stronger adherence and strict enforcement in order to protect the adolescents from the burgeoning epidemic of tobacco use.

Keywords: Adolescent; prevention; tobacco; tobacco policy

INTRODUCTION

Tobacco use is a major global health epidemic, killing more than 8 million people each year. More than 80 percent of the tobacco users live in low and middle income countries.¹ South-East Asia Region is home to top five producers of tobacco in the world where, over a third of world's children use tobacco.² Tobacco is the major risk factor for non-communicable diseases (NCDs) accounting two thirds of total deaths in Nepal.³

Nepal has enforced Tobacco Products (Control and Regulatory) Act 2011.⁴ The act prohibits sale of tobacco products to minors, and within 100-meter radius of education institutions. These regulations are focused on minimizing the early use of tobacco.⁵ Despite government's strong will to control tobacco use; it remains high among the adolescents. More than 21,000 children aged 10-14 years continue to use tobacco every day,⁶ while around 20% of the students' aged 13-15

have used tobacco products.⁷ So, this study explored the situation and effectiveness of adolescent focused tobacco control policies in Nepal.

METHODS

Adolescence is a critical period when it comes to tobacco use. This is the age when teenagers generally begin tobacco use and once it is started, they find it difficult to stop due to addiction issues. The age group is more likely to be influenced by friends to try risky behaviors like tobacco, alcohol and drugs. In order to reduce prevalence of all tobacco use, it is crucial to stop young people from starting the use of tobacco. The focus group discussion (FGD) explored teenager's knowledge, perception, and attitude towards adolescent focused tobacco control policies to gain insights into the effectiveness of the policies. Use of tobacco by adolescents is a major public health concern because the prevalence of smoking or use of tobacco in Nepal is

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underestimated as adolescents hide their tobacco use from elders and parents. National survey conducted by Nepal Development Research Institute (NDRI) has found that 71.5% think that the tobacco use among youth is increasing with young people agreeing about using tobacco.⁸

A qualitative study was carried out in seven provinces of Nepal to assess effectiveness of adolescent focused tobacco control policy implementation. Data were collected by Focus Group Discussion, using FGD guidelines developed by authors. Total of 28 FGDs were carried out with four FGDs in each province incorporating both genders. Separate FGDs with boys and girls were carried out in order to get better response and different perspectives.⁹ We selected six to twelve students in each group from grades 8 to 10 with age group between 13 to 18 years. Two FGDs each were carried out in private and public schools of each province.

After obtaining the verbal approval from the principal of the school, the participants were approached for the FGD. With the help of class teacher and head teacher we purposively incorporated the tobacco users and non-users in the group after taking their verbal consent. The reason of incorporating both users and non-users were to ensure the credibility of the information. Selections of non-users were to dig out the real world information about the exact situation of the tobacco law for adolescents from non-user's perspective. Users were selected to allow exploration about the practical situation of the tobacco law obeying. Tobacco users were those who were currently using any-type of tobacco products. But while selecting the participants, only class teachers and principal were involved in selection of participants and the identity of tobacco users were blind to the researchers. The identities of the participants were made anonymous, and no specific questions were put forwarded in order to safeguard their privacy. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to extract the knowledge, perspectives and attitude from the group. In the questionnaire there were four sections and each one contained the guiding questions to ease the discussion and assure that essential information were collected.¹⁰

Data were collected between December 2019 and January 2020. A semi-structured questionnaire and a guideline for the discussion were used. The questionnaire contained sections focusing on the use of tobacco by adolescents, understanding on effect of tobacco in health and perception on implementation of tobacco control law. Moderator guided the participants in the discussion and asked specific questions about tobacco use and their attitude towards implementation of tobacco control

policy in school surroundings. Participants in the group discussion were encouraged to communicate with one another and share ideas, knowledge and experience on understanding and perception towards tobacco. The language of communication with the participants was Nepali, which is the working language of the school and the mother tongue of the data collector. The discussion was recorded digitally and was translated by a researcher/ a note taker. The researcher kept the note of significant ideas during the discussion. Information from the discussion with the participants were transcribed immediately on the same day by the researcher.

The output of the discussion were segregated and analyzed theme wise.^{11,12} We used Braun and Clark's thematic analysis framework involving six phases of analysis- familiarization, initial coding, theme construction, reviewing themes, defining themes and producing the report.¹² We analyzed the data manually in MS Excel and Word. Authors coded the data and built the themes, which is in line with the objectives of the FGD. Authors were involved throughout in the process of data analysis. Credibility of the information was ensured by selecting both tobacco users and non-users and conformability was demonstrated by identifying themes and using illustrative quotes.

RESULTS

Thematic analysis revealed two themes and three sub-themes. First, adolescents' students could easily buy tobacco products. This theme consisted of information about access of adolescent students to tobacco products and how they were not stopped while purchasing tobacco. All of the students revealed that no minor students were stopped to purchase tobacco and none of sellers have asked their age before selling the products. Second, tobacco products were easily available in shops nearby schools. This theme underlines the situation of the law on prohibition of sale of tobacco products within 100-meter radius of educational institutions. According to the participants, there were many shops outside the schools and hospitals, from where they could easily buy tobacco products.

Implementation of tobacco control law on prohibition of sale and distribution of tobacco products to people below 18 years was not implemented properly. All participant students revealed that they were not stopped to purchase tobacco products and they could easily access it without any hurdles. Tobacco products were affordable for them and they could purchase with the pocket money provided by their parents. However, few participants admitted that shopkeepers hesitated to

sell tobacco products to students wearing uniforms.

No age restrictions: Adolescents seem to find the tobacco products easily accessible and available anywhere and there was no interference while purchasing tobacco for themselves and for their parents. There was no inquiry by shopkeepers about their age.

“I have few friends who consume tobacco. They can buy from anywhere and even they borrow from their parents.” (Boy student (16), Province 4)

“I usually go to general shop to buy cigarettes for my father but I have never faced any kind of interference from shop keeper.” (Boy student (14), Province 4)

“No one gets stopped from buying tobacco products and even a 5-year-old kid can get it.” (Girl student (16), Province 1)

“No one refuses to give tobacco products to us.” (Boy student (15), Province 3)

“We have never been stopped from buying tobacco.” (Boy students (13-18), Province 2)

Affordability For adolescents: Price of tobacco is affordable and they could use their savings of pocket money to purchase tobacco easily. Many participants emphasized that their friend purchase tobacco on the way to school, lunch break and after school hours. This indicates that school students can afford tobacco products with the money provided to them by their parents.

“Sellers are only concerned about money so they sell to underage people also.” (Adolescent students (13-18), Province 2)

“We purchase tobacco from the shops outside the school area. Our parents give NPR 30-50 per day as pocket money and we usually spend this money to purchase cigarette. And I have never been stopped by anyone from buying.” (Boy student (16), Province 4).

“I use tobacco at café away from school.” (Boy students (14 to 16), Province 3)

“I purchase tobacco from shops which is nearby my home.” (Boy students (16), Province 3)

Hesitation to sell when in school uniform: Some of the participant students revealed that being in school uniform makes the shopkeeper hesitant to sell tobacco

but if they are aware about the parents’ smoking status, they sell it.

“Shop keeper does not sell tobacco to us if we go there in school uniform. But if they know our parents and about their smoking habit, they give us easily.” (Girl student (16), Province 4)

“Tobacco is easily accessible in any shops and we can get it while we are not in school uniform.” (Boy student (18), Province 3.

Due to lack of proper implementation of the policy that prohibits selling of tobacco products in 100-meter span of educational and health institution, adolescent students have easy access for tobacco products in shops nearby school area. All of the student participants in FGD revealed that tobacco products can be bought everywhere around the school and hospital area.

“Tobacco shops are very close to school area and tobacco is available in every general store.” (Girl students (13-18), Province 4)

“We purchase from the shops outside school area.” (Boy student (17), Province 4)

“It is easily available and accessible in the local stores as well as shops nearby the school from where young people can purchase it readily.” (Adolescent students, grade 8-10, Province 5 and 7)

“I have seen many students joining the tuition classes using tobacco.” (Girl students (13-18), Province 6)

“Tobacco products are easily available in local shops and nearby schools without any age restrictions.” (Adolescent girls and boys students (13-18), Province 6)

DISCUSSION

This study was carried out to understand the situation of tobacco control laws that focus on reducing tobacco prevalence among youth: law on prohibition of sale and distribution of tobacco products to people below 18 years and the law on prohibition of sale of tobacco products within 100-meter radius of educational institutions. The findings of focus group discussion among adolescent students revealed that tobacco prevention and control policies, which are directly focused to reduce supply to adolescents, have not been implemented effectively. These findings were consistent with the other studies findings.^{4,8,13-17}

The findings have shown that adolescents have easy access to any kind of tobacco products and they can easily buy them from general grocery stores without any restriction. There was no inquiry by shopkeepers about their age. The cross-country study carried out in Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri-Lanka shows that the easy or free access to tobacco products and lack of restrictions on sale to minors is increasing the youth tobacco use in Nepal.¹⁸ According to a national survey on socio-economic and political aspects of tobacco use conducted by NDRI, around 68.3% people have seen minors buying tobacco products.⁸ Another study carried out among high school adolescents of Sarlahi District of Nepal has showed easy access as one of the reinforcing factors to tobacco use.¹⁶ Likewise, a study carried out among junior college students in western Nepal has showed that 67.8% of current users purchased tobacco products by themselves from street vendors or shops and were not denied by the virtue of their age.¹⁴ Similarly, another study carried out among adolescents of Kathmandu district has found that 88.1% of the respondents bought cigarettes by themselves from shops.¹⁹ The easy access to the products without any age restrictions might have predisposed the adolescents towards use of tobacco products.

Our study found that tobacco products are more affordable to school students with their pocket money provided by their parents. Affordability is one of the associated factors in increasing use of tobacco products among the adolescent students. Higher pocket money was significantly associated with tobacco use among adolescent students despite existence of tobacco control regulations in a study conducted in Dharan municipality of Nepal.¹⁵ Another study carried out among adolescent students of Kathmandu showed that those students who received higher pocket money were ever smoker than getting less pocket money.¹⁹ Likewise another study carried out among high school adolescents of Sarlahi, Nepal revealed the low price of tobacco products is reinforcing the adolescents to use it.¹⁶

This study also revealed that being in school uniform makes shopkeeper hesitant to sell tobacco to them but they sell it if they are aware of their parent's smoking status. This is a major factor that needs to be controlled to reduce use of tobacco products among the adolescents. Studies have found that the motivational factors to initiate tobacco are due to peer pressure and family members using tobacco.^{8,15} A person who had ever purchased tobacco products for their family

members are more likely to have used any tobacco product. Therefore, children should be discouraged from purchasing tobacco products for family members.

This FGD showed that the adolescent students have easy access for tobacco products in shops nearby school area. This finding is similar to the findings of the study carried out among college students in western region of Nepal showed that most of the tobacco users purchased tobacco products by themselves from shops around colleges.¹⁴ Another study shows that the use of tobacco among school children of Nepal is higher than for Sri-Lanka and Bangladesh, and this might be due to the inadequate intervention for tobacco prevention and control for school going children.^{13,18} The sale of tobacco products within 100 meters radius of educational institutions making it easily available around the educational institutes is another factor due to which the new users and current user adolescents are attracted towards tobacco products.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study showed that the adolescent focused tobacco control laws and regulations are not implemented effectively. Despite the implementation of anti-tobacco laws and regulations in Nepal targeting to reduce new tobacco users the prevalence of tobacco use among the adolescents is still high. No age restrictions to purchase tobacco, affordable tobacco products, sell to children if their parents/family members are users, and rampant availability of tobacco products nearby educational institutions were found to be still prevalent and are the major reinforcing factors to early start of tobacco products. Considering the physical and economic burden of tobacco consumption by the adolescents, this is a high priority that needs to be addressed. Effective enforcement of the adolescent-focused laws is necessary and implementation of creative policies are necessary, and more priority must be given to tobacco prevention in the adolescents and youths. Tobacco control should be a social, public health, and quality-of-life concern rather than a business and trade issue.

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