

A generation adrift

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Wars are not always fought on battlefields; some battles are waged within societies, silently corroding their foundations. Today, we find ourselves at the forefront of such a war — a war for the future of our youth.

While the narratives of national progress often center around economic indicators or geopolitical developments, an insidious threat looms in the shadows: the escalating drug epidemic. This silent crisis threatens not only our youth but the very fabric of our society.

The tragic murder of Mustafa Amir, a young man caught in the crosshairs of this drug crisis, has become a chilling symbol of what we're up against. Investigations have unearthed networks of drug suppliers operating with alarming efficiency, connecting students to narcotics through smartphone apps.

Shockingly, these operations involve individuals from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, exposing the pervasiveness of this menace. What's even more alarming is that our unique geography amplifies this crisis. Sharing borders with Afghanistan and Iran — two major narcotics hubs — positions us as a key transit point for global drug trafficking.

Afghanistan alone produces over 80 percent of the world's opium. Despite efforts to curb domestic poppy cultivation, the influx of synthetic drugs, often smuggled from India, the UAE, and Europe, is targeting affluent youth and complicating law enforcement efforts. It's not just a war on drugs; it's a war against a deeply entrenched system.

IPRI Policy Brief states that an estimated 11 million individuals in Pakistan use drugs. Of these, over 4 million are considered drug-dependent, with the majority falling within the age bracket of 18 to 39 years. Cannabis remains the most abused substance, but the rise of synthetic drugs among university students signals an evolving and more dangerous trend.

Every year, nearly 44 tons of heroin is consumed within our borders, while another 110 tons are trafficked internationally through our gateways. The economic cost? Staggering. Drug dependency costs our economy nearly \$2.7 billion annually in healthcare and lost productivity. But these numbers pale in comparison to the human cost — dreams shattered, families broken, futures destroyed.

The repercussions of this crisis are manifold, affecting the social fabric, health, and economy of the nation. Socially, drug addiction often leads to family instability, emotional distress, and relationship dissatisfaction. Families of addicts frequently experience economic hardships, as a significant portion of household income is diverted to sustain the addiction.

Health-wise, the rise in injecting drug users has contributed to an increase in HIV/AIDS cases.

UNODC suggested that there are from 46,000 to 210,000 HIV-positive individuals in Pakistan, with the epidemic being most prevalent among injecting drug users. Economically, the nation bears a substantial burden due to decreased productivity, increased healthcare costs, and the allocation of resources to combat drug-related crimes.

Adding fuel to the fire is the growing glamorization of drug culture. Influenced by social media and global pop culture, a dangerous narrative is taking root. Young minds, already grappling with societal pressures, are drawn to the allure of “gangster lifestyles” flaunted by influencers.

This isn’t just about rebellion; it’s about identity, about belonging to something larger than oneself — even if that something is destructive. Globally, we’ve seen where this path leads.

In Mexico, drug cartels have turned entire regions into war zones. In the United States, overdose deaths have reached epidemic proportions, with over 100,000 fatalities reported in recent years. Are we prepared to let our homeland become the next cautionary tale? This isn’t just about drug abuse; it’s about the soul of our nation.

Why celebrate goons and drugs? Why not celebrate real heroes? Instead of influencers flaunting their hedonistic lifestyles, let’s amplify the stories

of young Pakistanis achieving extraordinary feats in science, technology, arts, and sports.

Role models, who rose to global prominence against all odds, can inspire a generation to channel their energy into positive pursuits. Needless to say, a role model is someone others look to as a good example. Our country has many role models, who are worthy of imitation.

The Vietnam War taught us a sobering lesson: internal weaknesses can dismantle even the mightiest of powers. For us, this crisis is our Vietnam. The question isn't whether we can win this war; the question is whether we have the courage to fight it. The stakes are too high to look away.

Our youth are not just a statistic; they're our hope, our future, our pride. It's time to reclaim them from the grip of this crisis. Policies need to focus on strengthening education, providing better employment opportunities, and supporting community rehabilitation programs. By promoting positive role models and celebrating real-life heroes, we can inspire the younger generation to pursue meaningful paths.

We can turn the tide, but it starts with acknowledging the war we're in and committing to a future where our youth are free to thrive, unshackled by the chains of addiction.

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