

GIRLS IN RURAL BANGLADESH TAKE BACK THEIR FUTURES



Four years ago, Farzana Aktar Ruma, now 18, was almost married off without her consent.

Her parents had settled on someone they considered a reasonably wealthy young man with a good family background, and did not want to miss the opportunity to wed their eldest daughter.

Farzana's father, Mohammad Yusuf Ali, told IPS, "I thought it was a blessing when the proposal came to me from a family friend who said that the talented groom-to-be has his own business and ready home in the heart of a busy district town in Barisal, not far from where we live."

No one defies Yusuf, an influential man in Char Nurul Amin village in Bhola, an island district in coastal Bangladesh, where most people depend on agriculture and fishing to make a living.

So, without consulting his daughter, Yusuf promised her as a bride and asked the family to prepare for wedding.

Farzana was only 14 years old and did not want to get married, but she didn't know where to turn. Then Selina Aktar, who lives nearby, offered her help.

Aktar told IPS, "It was not surprising, but I was [still] shocked at how parents readily accept such marriage proposals without considering the age of their daughters."

On the eve of the wedding, Aktar arranged a meeting with Farzana's parents and asked them to call it off and let her stay in high school until she graduate.

Aktar is the facilitator of a seven-member Community Legal Services (CLS) organisation that advises students, parents and others on legal rights, including rights of adolescents.

"After several hours of discussions, we were able to convince Farzana's parents that an educated girl was more precious than a girl thought to be a burden for her family at her early age," Aktar said.

Abu Kaiser, a legal aid adviser with COAST, a leading NGO operating in the coastal regions of Bangladesh for more than three decades now, and whose work focuses mostly on social inequalities, told IPS, "The society is cursed with myths and most parents are still biased towards medieval beliefs favouring early marriage. A girl soon after her puberty is considered a burden to the family and parents look for

opportunities to get rid of her as soon as possible for so-called 'protection' of their daughters."

To challenge the traditional beliefs that still haunt many communities in this modern age, COAST promotes informal learning through various programmes which make a positive impact.

Executive Director Rezaul Karim Chowdhury told IPS, "The society needs to be empowered with information on the rights of such adolescent girls, and that is what we are facilitating. Most parents who may not have had opportunities of going to schools are expected to behave this way but our approach is to change this mindset so that a sense of acceptance exists."

Regarding the issue, Radio Meghna, a community radio operating with limited broadcast frequency

since February 2015 in south Bhola's Char Fasson, has been at the forefront of such advocacy programmes.

The station broadcasts programmes focused on dispelling myths through informal learning programmes.

Fatema Aktar Champa, a producer at the radio station. "We have a large audience and so we take the opportunity to educate adolescents and also their parents on merits and demerits of early marriage". On various occasions we invite experts talk about reproductive health, adolescents' legal rights, need for education and the values, social injustices and many more allied issues linked to challenges of adolescents."

"The power of knowledge is the key to success." Priyanka Rani Das, who quit school in 2012 due to extreme poverty but has since re-enrolled.



A group of girls are participating a Shonglap session in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. The peer leader (standing) is discussing about adolescent legal rights with the participation of the parents

Unlike other community radio stations, Radio Meghna is completely run by a team of about 20 adolescent girls.

Khadiza Banu, one of the producers, told IPS, "There is a general feeling that the radio team of Meghna has a wide range of acceptance in the society. On many occasions we broadcast programmes just to build trust on parents' decisions to prevent early marriage and allow continuing education."

Education is key to development, and girl's education is especially important since it is undermined by patriarchal cultural norms.

In Cox's Bazar district, COAST has taken a different approach to empowering adolescent girls to demand their rights and offering livelihood opportunities.

"We have a large audience and so we take the opportunity to educate adolescents and also their parents on merits and demerits of early marriage".
Fatema Aktar Champa, a producer at the radio station.

convinced Das that completing her education would help her earn a much better living in the long run.

Das told IPS, "I realized that girls are behind and neglected in the man-dominated society because of our lack of knowledge. So I left the job and joined Shonglap where they have demonstrated that the power of knowledge is the key to success."

Das is one of about 3,000 teenagers in Cox's Bazaar who returned to school after taking basic refresher classes and life skills training like sewing, repairing electronic goods, rearing domestic animals, running small tea shops, pottery, wood works and other activities that generate income.

Jahangir Alam, programme manager of the Shonglap of COAST told IPS, "Those who graduate are also



An adolescent girl is taking interview for a regular program of Radio Meghna named 'Jele Jibon' (Life of fishers)



At Radio Meghna in Charfasson, Bhola, Bangladesh, one of the teenaged girls is broadcasting a program

Despite traditional beliefs that devalue girls' education, especially in poor, rural areas, adolescent girls in many regions of Bangladesh are getting help from a programme called Shonglap – dialogue that calls for capacity building and developing occupational skills for marginalised groups in society.

Priyanka Rani Das, who quit school in 2012 due to extreme poverty, has joined Shonglap in South Delpara of Khurushkul in coastal Cox's Bazar district.

Part of a group of 35 adolescent girls, Das, who lost her father in 2009, has been playing a leading role among the girls who meet six days a week in the Shonglap session held at a rented thatched home in a suburb of Delpara.

Shy and soft-spoken, Das told IPS, "I had to drop out of school because I was required to work as a domestic worker and support my family of six."

A neighbour, Jahanara Begum, who had been attending informal classes at a Shonglap session nearby,

supported with interest-free loans to start a business – and so far over 1,600 such girls are regular earning members supporting their families."

Ruksana Aktar, peer leader of the group in Delpara, said, "Shonglap is basically a platform for less privileged adolescent girls to unite and gather strength through common dialogues. Such chemistry for 12 months gives them the moral strength to regain lost hopes."

Mosammet Deena Islam, 17, comes from a family of cobblers and had never been to school. Islam always dreamt of pursuing an education but poverty prevented her from going to school, even though schooling is free in Bangladesh.

She joined Shonglap in Delpara and after a few months in the group, she enrolled in a state-run school where she now attends grade 9 classes.

Rasheda K Chowdhury, Executive Director of Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE),

Bangladesh's leading think-tank advocating for children's education told IPS, "Educational exclusion for girls is a major problem, especially in socio-cultural context in Bangladesh. Girls are still married early despite stringent laws against such punishable acts.

"Adolescent girls are encouraged to stay home after puberty to ensure 'security' and the most common reason is girls are used as earning members to supplement family income."

Chowdhury said, "I believe such an approach of building opportunities for youth entrepreneurship to poor girls (for income generating activities) who wish to continue education, can considerably change their lives."

Shonglap, spread over 33 districts in Bangladesh through a network of over 4,600 such groups, aims to give voices to these neglected girls and enable them to negotiate their own rights to life.

The Shonglap programme is being implemented by COAST and other NGOs with funding from Stromme Foundation of Norway.



Orientation of Nutrition at Union level, which is facilitated by adolescent trainer

Besides, another project is being implemented by COAST titled - "Community Based Child Protection Mechanism for Ending Child Marriage in Bhola (ECM)" supported by UNICEF, a major partner of COAST.

Md. Mizanur Rahman Project Coordinator of ECM said a total of 800 Adolescent clubs have been set up in three upazilas – Bhola Sadar, Charfassion and Lalmohon Upazila. The Adolescent clubs are unique and safe place both in rural and urban settings for adolescents. The goal of this project is to end child marriage through the adolescent clubs.

Mizanur said, "Our aim is to create an environment where the society itself understands and deny child marriage. For developing such level of understanding the society must feel the essence of girls' maturity both physically and socially. Nevertheless to say that today girls are not behind. Society feels equality is a right. So every parent must realize the value of a girl who is

socially and culturally accepted and they need time to be ready for marriage. We are advocating for this."

The objectives of adolescents club, he mentioned, are to socialize, empower and make adolescents active citizens. The clubs are managed by adolescent peer leaders, thus creating wider ownership and ensuring the participation of adolescents. As the platform for adolescents, clubs bring adolescents together in different programs.

Each of the club consists of average 30 adolescents, girls and boys, where 50% of adolescents are out of school or children with disabilities. Adolescent Clubs regularly assemble for weekly meeting in a common place on every Thursday.

Adolescents Health Protection

Having 33 million adolescents (20.5% of total population), Bangladesh is lagging behind in ensuring access to health services for about 16.5 million adolescent boys and 12.5 million adolescents girls. Annual national investment for



Parents meeting at Ward level where adolescent club's members and their parents participate

every adolescent's health protection is about 0.86 Bangladeshi Taka. In this backdrop, COAST Trust is implementing a comprehensive package of services (Child Protection, Nutrition, WASH, Education and C4D) to the adolescents under ECM Project. Adolescents are at the center of this holistic program supported by UNICEF.

To address the challenge of reaching adolescents of rural areas with accessible health protection facilities and 'Right to Reproductive Health Services', COAST has initiated the intervention of 'SaniMart' where sanitary napkins are being produced in the rural areas with high-tech machineries, storage facilities and supply management. The whole process are maintaining maximum level of hygienic technic.

Trained rural adolescents girls in an enabling environment are running the SaniMart.

Spotlight:

- Adolescents of rural areas are getting easy access to buy sanitary napkin themselves.
 - They are getting opportunity to use hygiene materials at low cost.
 - Adolescent health awareness is being increased significantly.
 - Easy access, low cost, less distance and marketing mechanism of sanitary napkin will create a 'value chain' in the local market and community.
 - 'Not for Profit' initiative of SaniMart sales centre will be projected as model health & hygiene access point for the rural women and adolescents.
 - At present, the 'SaniMart' has been running through community ownership.
 - Significant impact might be visible on reproductive health and reducing maternal death within the project period.
 - WASH facilities have been included in menstrual hygiene management and linkage with SaniMart. As a result, school attendance of adolescent girls during the period of menstruation will be increased.
 - SaniMart sales centre provides other facilities and services like water filter, soap, etc. along with Sanitary napkin an affordable price at the community door steps.
- Gender disparity on access to health and WASH services will be reduced.
 - Male dominated community and customary eyes will have adaptation through open up windows like 'SaniMart'.
 - Dignity of women and adolescents will be revised in the social context.
 - In a cumulative effect, through 'SaniMart' it will reduce 'Child Marriage' in a significant level in the community.

SaniMart @ Bhola

Gazaria bazar, Lalmohon
Cell - 01790 366376

Shikderpara, Aminabad, Charfassion
Cell - 01728 467291

Karikorkandi, Awaspur, Charfassion
Cell - 01758 397253

Ghuingerhat, Bhola
Cell - 01713 952319

Bankerhat, Bhola
Cell - 01790 163327

Photography:
Din Muhammed Shibly / COAST



One SaniMart sales centre and showroom has been established in Lalmohon, Bhola, it is run by adolescent girl



SaniMart caretaker is disseminating essential health information and marketing for Sani Mart from door to door



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