

Adolescent Peer Organised Network BRAC, Bangladesh

Case study 3: Non-formal Education and
Skills Development for Adolescent Girls

Location: Dhaka, Bangladesh
Target groups: Adolescent girls
Strategic approach: Empowerment of adolescent girls through peer education
Area of operation: 58 regions of Bangladesh



Girl Power in Bangladesh: BRAC's Adolescent Peer Organised Network

Background and rationale

When Eti came to the Reading Centre in her village one afternoon, her friends noticed immediately that she was upset. Asked what was troubling her, the 13 year-old explained that her parents had arranged for her to be married soon, but she was totally against the idea - she wanted to continue her schooling, which would be impossible if she were married. Her friends decided to persuade Eti's parents to drop their plans for Eti's marriage.

"We met Eti's parents," her friend Mili later recalled, "and we explained to them that she was not yet fully grown up, and if a girl under 18 is married she runs a greater risk of death due to pregnancy. We also explained that it is a punishable offence to marry off a young girl without her consent. And if they, as educated parents, didn't understand these matters, who else would?"

To Eti's relief, her parents were not offended by this bold action by her friends, but listened carefully to what they had to say. Eti's parents

changed their plans for her marriage and informed her that she could continue at the Reading Centre after school.

Only a couple of years ago, it would have been almost impossible to imagine such an event happening in Eti's village, in Rajshahi region, Bangladesh. Teenage girls lacked not only the knowledge, but also the self-confidence and the negotiating skills needed to protect one of their friends from an under-age marriage. Such arrangements were traditionally decided by parents - the girls themselves had no say in the matter. A quiet but profound transformation is now taking place in the knowledge, attitudes, social skills and self-confidence of a large group of adolescent girls, not only in Eti's village but also in over 6,000 other villages in Bangladesh.

The driving force behind this transformation is the Adolescent Peer Organised Network (APON), a project designed and implemented by one of Bangladesh's leading NGOs, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC). APON addresses the particular prob-

lems and needs of adolescent girls. They are often unaware about matters relating to sexuality and reproductive health due to the conservative nature of traditional Bangladeshi society, which prevents them from acquiring this information.

The APON project grew out of a large BRAC programme aimed at providing basic education to underprivileged children, especially girls, who have not previously attended primary school. Known as 'Basic Education for older Children' (BEOC), this initiative established basic schools for 11 to 14 year-old adolescents, which were to close after operating for four years. The school buildings then became the basis for Reading Centres (*kishori pataghar*), open to former BEOC pupils and other young people, particularly girls, who wanted to maintain their literary skills by reading books, magazines and newspapers about topics of practical interest and value. The APON project, which started in 1998-99 in 25 regions, is now in 58 regions with 6,500 Reading Centres and aims to reach about 200,000 adolescents, mainly girls.

Objectives

The objectives of the APON project are to:

- Empower adolescent girls and develop their confidence and leadership skills.
- Develop adolescent girls' life-skills to become responsible members of their families, the communities and their country.
- Change traditional rural perceptions of the capabilities and value of girls.

- Provide adolescent girls with a network of peer support.
- Encourage adolescent girls to continue their education.

Programme components

APON's strategic approach is to empower adolescent girls through education and skills development, provision of employment opportunities and through increased awareness of sexual and reproductive health as well as gender issues.

1. Education and skills development through Peer Education

Development of support material through participatory process:

Through focus group discussions, BRAC learned that young women wanted to learn about reproductive health, contraception, sex education and sexually transmitted infections. They also wanted information on sensitive social issues such as inheritance law, oral divorce, dowry, women's legal rights, nutrition, children's health, physical harassment, acid attacks, and how to deal "diplomatically" with mothers-in-law. Based on this information, BRAC set up the Reading Centres in 1999 where girls could acquire knowledge and life skills that would enable them to make informed choices and to develop their leadership potential.

A set of 20 booklets on 40 different social, economic and environmental issues were developed for use in the Reading Centres. The booklets, developed with full involvement of the adolescent girls in all phases, aim to impart social skills to help girls and young women to cope with gender inequality issues. They also provide information about

whom to contact and what actions to take in the event of sexual abuse, symptoms of particular diseases, and how to obtain legal aid. Their preferences are reflected in the topics and format of the materials, and in the terms and the level of language used.

The BRAC programmers knew that making the 20 booklets available at the Reading Centres alone would not be effective. For the messages to be discussed, remembered and acted upon, an interactive learning process with facilitators/teachers was needed. Initially BRAC field staff was not convinced that teenage girls could be trained to lead the teaching and learning processes. They planned to use adult teachers to run the sessions in the Reading Centres.

BRAC carried out a study to compare the knowledge and teaching skills of adult teachers with those of secondary school students trained in peer education.¹ The results of this study showed that the trained students remembered the contents of the booklets significantly better than the adult teachers, although the teachers had the edge where methodology was concerned. Importantly,

adolescents retained knowledge much better when taught by the students than by the adult teachers. In light of these findings, BRAC redesigned the APON project so that adolescent girls - not adult teachers - would be trained as peer educators to carry out the learning exercises in the Reading Centres.

Peer education

The over 5,000 young (average age 17), unmarried young women peer educators are the frontline workers of the APON project. They are based at Reading Centres established and supported by BRAC. In September 2002, over 6,000 Reading Centres with a total membership of 221,326 in 58 districts had either completed or were still running the APON course.

APON members are encouraged to share their new knowledge with their peers and others in the village. They are also encouraged to record their activities. Twice a month, they meet to compare experiences, make suggestions and reinforce one another's knowledge and communication skills. They also plan and carry out collective actions, such as working together to prevent early marriages and oral divorces.

Trainee peer educators, students from Class 8 between the ages of 14 and 18, are chosen from among the participants in the Reading Centres. Special preference is given to girls who have attended a BRAC basic education school, or who are divorced, belong to an underprivileged minority, or are from a particularly poor family. The peer educator training, for the specifically selected trainees, is a five-day, participatory workshop, facilitated by adolescent and adult trainers at a BRAC Team Office, focusing on course information and leadership skills.

APON STRUCTURE AT FIELD LEVEL

BRAC Education Programme Office
Reading Centre Supervisors
(each responsible for about 20 Reading Centres)

Adolescent Monitors
(each visits about 8 Reading Centres per month)

Adolescent Supervisors
(each visits 7 or 8 Reading Centres per month)

Peer Educators
(two per Reading Centre)
APON participants
(about 25 adolescent girls per class)

Every adolescent leader supervises seven or eight Reading Centres, including her own, and also doubles up as a peer educator at her own Reading Centre. One-day refresher training workshops for peer educators are held once a month. The most able adolescent leaders are trained to become supervisors and monitors. By the end of 2001, the APON project trained 5,200 peer educators, 444 adolescent leaders, as well as 850 adolescent supervisors and monitors. Female Adolescent Monitors are employed by BRAC to visit eight Reading Centres per month in their regions. They review attendance, record the activities being carried out, take note of problems encountered and discuss these with the peer educators.

2. Advocacy to overcome parental resistance

Initially many parents voiced their opposition to the idea that their daughters would be exposed to information about sensitive issues such as sexual and reproductive health and women's legal rights. To overcome this opposition, BRAC staff went door-to-door, explained to mothers, fathers, grandmothers, mothers-in-law and other relatives how the classes would help rather than harm the girls. Monthly parents' meetings were also instituted to answer questions and allay fears. Once parents realised that the project did not support risky sexual behaviours and promiscuity, and that their daughters would also learn useful income-generating skills, they started to support the project.

3. Empowerment through livelihood programmes

BRAC's programmers recognised that to be really empowered, girls needed access to employment opportunities, livelihood training

and micro-credit. The APON project itself provides many girls with part-time employment. By July 2002, for example, 5,374 girls were paid a small sum for working as peer educators; another 344 were working as adolescent leaders and 856 as adolescent supervisors. Their performance has been almost uniformly excellent, and the fact that they are regularly bringing money into their families has boosted their self-esteem and status within their families.

In addition, BRAC has trained a total of 411 girls in photography, computer data entry, journalism and in agricultural areas such as dairy, poultry keeping and nursery management. They are given with loans to start their own businesses, for example, as photographers. A local television network, ETV, trained girls from the APON project as journalists and reporters, and several episodes produced or researched by the girls from APON have been broadcasted on a local television programme.

APON for Boys is an initiative to improve the quality of life of BRAC male graduate adolescents who are currently studying in high schools. The program aims to raise the boys' awareness of issues relevant to them and to build their skills to make the right choices. The curriculum, designed for the APON boys, has an emphasis on male puberty and reproductive health but also deals with issues such as acid throwing, abuse, dowry and other culturally relevant issues. Issues related to family planning, sexual abuse, HIV/AIDS and drug use will be added to the curriculum.

Funding

The APON project is part of BRAC's Adolescent Development

Programme, through which roughly 5,000 Reading Centres are being funded by a consortium of donors consisting of UNICEF, the Royal Netherlands Embassy, NOVIB (Oxfam Netherlands), the European Commission, the Aga Khan Foundation, CIDA and DFID; an additional 2,000 are funded separately by UNICEF through the Kishori Abhijan Project, which grew out of the APON project

Achievements and lessons learned

1. Increased knowledge and strengthened life-skills: About 200,000 adolescent girls attended APON training courses between May 2000 and September 2002. Though no formal impact evaluation has been carried out, the adolescent girls have during focus groups discussions and interviews indicated that they have increased their social skills and self-confidence and know more about sex and sexuality, health in general and sexual health in particular, women's rights and other important but sensitive issues. Girls trained by APON have been able to use their knowledge and social skills successfully to influence important decisions affecting not only themselves but other members of their extended families.

An adolescent leader in Natore region explained: *"We discuss the things we have learned with our peers in the community, and somehow the information spreads to the next village, where there is no Reading Centre. Married adolescents from that village come to me to learn about family planning methods, sexual infections and so on. When I help them I feel useful and productive."*

Girls who have taken on leadership roles in APON have also developed

critical thinking skills. While adolescent girls generally spend a lot of time thinking about their impending marriage, girls involved in APON tend to have a much broader perspective. A peer educator from Natore region described how she is trying to change the fatalistic approach which most girls have towards early marriage: *"I have taken on the responsibility to create awareness among girls. If I get married at this stage, who will listen to me? The members of the Reading Centre regard me as their role model."* Girls trained by APON are also able to address very sensitive issues, such as sexual abuse of girls by men from within the extended family.

Working for APON has given many young women a degree of mobility which previously was unthinkable. Using bicycles provided by the project, they are able to travel well beyond the confines of their own local communities. This has not always been easy, as one adolescent supervisor explained: *"When I started riding a bicycle around, our villagers made various negative comments about me. But I respected them as much as possible and continued my job. Now they say that if their daughters had studied in a BRAC school they could have had the same opportunities as I've had."*

Girls involved in APON are becoming more ambitious. A peer educator in Gazipur region described her aspirations: *"I want to work equally with men and reduce discrimination in society. With my earnings I will be able to re-enrol in school"*

2. Changes in family and societal attitudes: An important outcome is how the attitudes of the girls' own families and their communities have changed towards them. This is

especially the case for girls who have directly or indirectly gained employment through the project. In the past, their parents and other members of their extended families would have regarded them as a burden that should be hidden from sight in the family home. Now, however, because they are bringing money, information and social skills into the home, they are valued by their parents as competent, knowledgeable individuals who are capable of adding to the family's resources. Morshed Begum, a Reading Centre Supervisor in Sherpur region explained:

"My earnings, though not very much, helped my sister and myself to pay our exam fees. They also paid for the cost of my mother's medical treatment. Also, I am now able to talk freely about all my problems with my father. I don't give money directly to him but he considers me as an earning member of our family. Nowadays he involves me in all our family level decisions. I've also noticed a big difference in the community, where people now respect me a lot and listen to what I have to say, because I am the only female High School graduate and I also have a job."

As girls become valued income-earners for their families, the pressure on them to marry early decreases. At the same time, they find themselves consulted by their parents on family matters and even on issues concerning agriculture or animal husbandry. Their increased status within the family has enabled many girls to delay marriage and complete their secondary school education, while further developing their knowledge and skills.

Nevertheless, many girls still face pressure from their parents to marry young, even if this means ending

their schooling. The project has devised a Delayed Marriage Scheme to enable girls to complete their secondary school education before being married. Through this scheme, the project pays Tk 700 to girls for their Senior School Certificate examination providing they do not get married before the age of 18. By September 2002 a total of 89 girls had received this payment and none had broken their promise not to marry before 18 years of age.

3. Empowerment through capacity building and opportunities for income generation:

Monitoring has shown that 319 of the girls trained and assisted by the project have been successful, for example, in starting a photo, sewing or poultry business, or getting a data entry job in an office. Nearly 100 of the girls trained, however, have so far been unable to find employment. This is partly because many are still attending school and are seeking part-time work, for which there is only limited demand from employers. Another reason is the fact that many employers are looking for girls with formal qualifications (e.g. High School Certificate) rather than practical skills. The project is now following a policy of first identifying particular employment gaps and then training girls to fill these.



4. **Community support:** Parents and community leaders are often distrustful of initiatives to educate young people - especially girls - about sexual and reproductive health. Their opposition can paralyse a programme. But their support is critical in creating supportive environments for girls and boys, to reduce young people's vulnerability and risk to HIV infection as well as unwanted and early pregnancies. The APON project has dealt successfully with this problem by informing parents and community leaders about the programme before it started. Monthly meetings were held to foster friendly and open working relationships and to maintain community support for the peer educators. The major lesson learned is the need for on-going advocacy with parents and community leaders to gain and maintain parental and community support.

5. **Young people valued as peer educators:** The project demonstrates the importance and effectiveness of peer educationⁱ. The young girls clearly preferred learning about sexual and reproductive health issues, including those related to HIV/AIDS, from their peers. The project implementers have learned through use of the peer education approach that:

- **Payment of peer educators ensures loyalty:** The project has paid a modest honorarium to all peer educators and other part-time staff to recognize and reward their efforts. This has also promoted loyalty and continuity amongst staff. The APON project has also learned that paying an honorarium has been vital to win parental support for the project as well as to raise the status of girls within their own family.

Importantly, it helped the girls to continue schooling and to delay marriage.

- **Peer educators require regular support and supervision** to maintain the quality of the programme and to avoid incorrect information being taught. Support should start by introducing the Peer Educators to the other participants and emphasising that they have been trained to run the APON course at the Reading Centre. If this is not done, the peer educators might not be sufficiently respected by their peers or by community leaders and parents.
- **Adolescents and peer educators should be involved in decision-making:** The project has benefited greatly from involving adolescent girls in decision-making about all aspects of the project, especially curriculum development, training needs, teaching materials, organisational arrangements, and liaison with parents and community leaders. Initially this was done through focus group discussions. As the project unfolded, it has been done through routine monitoring by project staff and additional focus group discussions with girls at the Reading Centres.

Challenges for the way forward

- **Reducing peer educator and staff turnover:** Peer educators as well as other staff continued to leave the project, due to migration to other areas after marriage. These losses are being reduced by the Delayed Marriage Scheme, which enables girls to stay at school until they have completed their

ⁱ Annex 9: 'At a Glance: Young People and Peer Education'

Senior School Certificate examination. However, any programme which works with young people as peer educators should seek to address these needs and realities to avoid high turnover.

■ **How to reach married adolescent girls:**

In rural areas of Bangladesh most adolescent girls are married before the age of 19 and, on an average, their spouses are several years older. The health and well being of married adolescent girls are at greatest risk through sexual activity but they often have little or no access to the knowledge and life skills available to unmarried girls through the APON project. They also have fewer opportunities for social interaction and exchange of information with their peers. BRAC has therefore started a pilot APON project for married adolescents and their husbands. Both spouses are asked to attend the sessions, which deal with issues such as reproductive health, relations with in-laws, domestic violence and communicating skills. However, it remains a challenge to involve husbands, as they generally come expecting training in income-generating skills and stop attending when they realise that this is not the case. Project staff conduct outreach visits to persuade them to return. More effective ways need to be developed to integrate and maintain the involvement of adolescent girls' husbands in the project.

■ **Strategies to involve boys:** Boys involvement and support is critical for girls' development to succeed, particularly in conserva-

tive rural societies. BRAC Programmes which aim to reduce girls' vulnerability and risk to HIV infection should involve young men in a way which is culturally appropriate and addresses male fears and needs. BRAC has made a commendable start by piloting an APON course for adolescent boys in six regions. This uses the same organisational structure as APON for girls, and is carried out mainly by boys who have been trained by the project as peer educators. The process has to be accelerated and BRAC needs to ensure that equal effort is put in to reach both married and unmarried men and boys.ⁱⁱ

■ **Access to friendly services:** So far the APON project has not established linkages or a referral system to health and social services. However, for projects working to improve young girl's and boy's sexual and reproductive health, access to services is critical. The project would benefit from exploring possibilities of linkages with government/private health services to enable young girls and boys access for treatment of sexually transmitted infections, for voluntary testing and counselling and for condoms.ⁱⁱⁱ

A study on health seeking behaviours would provide the necessary information on barriers and ensure that services meet the differential needs of adolescents, young people both married and unmarried. The findings will also enable the project to deal with issues which will influence sexual and overall health and

ⁱ Annex 7: 'At a Glance: Gender and HIV/AIDS'

ⁱⁱ Annex 8: 'At a Glance: Young People Friendly Health Services Framework'

development such as dynamics and communication within families, power relations and violence among males between sexes, alcohol and drug use, harmful traditional practices. Such a study should include community perceptions and attitudes to young people's sex and sexuality and risk taking behaviours and to HIV/AIDS/STIs.

- **Taking further efforts to empower girls through livelihood training:** APON's strategic approach of providing livelihood training and income earning opportunities has changed the lives of some of the girls. But to better translate livelihood interventions into income generating opportunities for the girls requires a thorough evaluation of and interaction with market needs, contacts and networks. APON has already initiated this to a limited extent. But to better market the training, skills and products, it might be worthwhile to conduct a market assessment. This would require technically qualified staff and effective tool kits that go beyond gender-biased traditional skills and incorporate knowledge of market assessment and opportunities.
- **Sustainability:** Funding for the APON project is limited to five years,^{iv} but efforts to empower adolescent girls will have to continue for much longer. The sustainability strategy being followed by APON is to involve the community at every step of the project, and to train adolescents to take over the management of the activities when project funding stops. Local adolescents are already responsible for the day-to-day manage-

ment of the Reading Centres and the APON training activities. It is expected that Reading Centre management committees, chaired by local community leaders, will take over the responsibility for managing and financing APON activities. This strategy has not yet been tested in practice.

The future

The Adolescent Peer Organised Network in Bangladesh has demonstrated that, even in a conservative rural society, it is possible to empower adolescent girls with the attitudes, knowledge and skills they need to take greater control of their lives. Moreover, adolescent girls themselves, provided they are properly trained and supported, can become main change agents in the process of empowerment, which can also help to protect them from the threat of HIV/AIDS and other STIs.

It is envisaged that the APON project will continue for another five years, starting in January 2003, but that the concept and organisation of the Reading Centres will undergo substantial changes. Originally, the Reading Centre used the buildings left behind by BRAC's Basic Education for older Children project, which routinely closed after operating for four years. The Reading Centres themselves, however, closed down after another three years, leaving the APON project without a home, despite protests from local communities. In view of the demand from communities for APON training, BRAC proposes the following changes in the Reading Centre concept:

- Adolescent Development Centres (ADCs) should be housed in their own rented premises so they can be open for a longer period and

^{iv} UNICEF funding is for a three-year time period.

be used whenever needed for training purposes.

- ADCs should be opened wherever surveys indicate that there is a demand among adolescent girls.
 - ADCs should run for as long as the community wishes instead of automatically closing down after three years, providing the community can agree on a plan for financial sustainability. This
- could include, for example, recovering the operating costs of the centre through small user fees.
 - The curriculum and teaching materials need to be reviewed and consideration given to including issues such as equity and gender, social harmony, civic consciousness and religious tolerance.

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¹ Nashidan Ahmed and Anwara Begun (2000). *Level of Knowledge, Attitudes and Skills of Adolescent Leaders and Peer Educators: an Evaluation*, BRAC, Dhaka, Bangladesh

