Article

Shonglap: An innovation to break conservativeness and agent of change in rural Bangladesh

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Shonglap means dialogue. It is a one year program to develop lives and livelihoods of adolescent girls. *Shonglap* program increased education, life skills, and income generation activities of adolescent girls of Ukhiya and Teknaf sub-districts, religiously conservative communities, in Bangladesh. It improved knowledge about personal cleanliness, menstruation management, HIV/AIDS, water-borne diseases and provided information to reduce health risks, especially in the areas of reproductive health. Adolescent girls advocated with parents, community leaders, and duty bearers should stop early marriage, dowry and protect and promote rights issue. The program increased their employment, mobility and linkage with service providing institutions. *Shonglap* program was new in these communities. Religious leaders were gateway along with other stakeholders to drive the program. Efforts of adolescent girls gradually break conservativeness. But it is difficult to work out the sustainability of their actions due to only one year project interventions. Such *Shonglap* program should be continued in these communities for bright and promising future.

Key words: CODEC, conservativeness, empowerment, *Shonglap,* well-beings.

INTRODUCTION

The overview of this article is based on project interventions of "Improvement of Human Security in the Communities of Ukhiya and Teknaf sub-districts, Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh" funded by Austcare. Based on the primary research done by the author, this article explores potential role of adolescent girls to break conservativeness through *Shonglap* and its challenges. It highlights how such innovative approach has effects on their empowerment and well-beings. This article also insights on major learning, community mobilization process, management practices, and sustainability of project, which can be useful information for others to work in future in such community.

Ukhiya and Teknaf sub-districts

Ukhiya and Teknaf are sub-districts of Cox's Bazar district. The total area of Cox's Bazar district is 2,492 km^2. It is a famous tourist spot in the world for long and unbroken sea beach. The literacy rate of the district is about 31% and among them female literacy rate is 25%, whereas the national statistics is both Sex-47.5 Male-53.9, Female-40.8 (BBS, 2001).

Ukhiya and Teknaf sub-districts are adjoined with Myanmar border. Myanmar refugees, popularly known as *Rohinga*, are large community in Ukhiya and Teknaf who fled due to racial and religious discrimination in Myanmar's Northern Rakhine state in 1991. Till now, they are coming and live in two official registered camps and other places with unregistered status. The migration has various impacts in their livelihood and social consequences for both the local and *Rohinga* communities. The children, adolescent and women are very much vulnerable in this area due to illiteracy, smuggling of arms and drugs, fundamentalists, lack of awareness, very little occupational scope and mental and physical disabilities. Violence, early marriage, dowry, child labor, abuse, sexual harassment and exploitation occurred frequently among children and adolescent.

Project overview

Over the past 25 years, since its establishment in 1985 as a people cantered development organization, Community Development Centre (CODEC) has been growing and evolving into efficient and effective non-governmental development organization in the coastal area of Bangladesh. CODEC has been tracking to a holistic approach towards poverty alleviation in the coastal area through intensive participation of underprivileged men, women, adolescents and children.

"Improvement of Human Security in the Communities of Ukhiya and Teknaf sub-districts, Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh" project was launched from 20 January 2010 and ended on 31 December 2010. This project works with 3,889 households at eight villages of Ukhiya and Teknaf sub-districts and respective stakeholders. It provides vocational training and material supports to 144 vulnerable women, adolescent boys, girls and youths on sewing, motor mechanics, electric and electronics. This project addresses Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) issue through capacity development of women and awareness building, and sensitization of relevant actors. It has arranged 22 workshops for respective stakeholders and religious leaders and 50 awareness sessions at educational institution. SGBV issue has also been addressed through women group meeting, leadership development training, Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials distribution, campaign, and access to justice for survivors. There are total of 20 Shonglap centers in eight villages with 500 adolescent girls.

Shonglap

Shonglap is a Bengali word, which means dialogue. It is a one year program that educates and empowers adolescent girls to develop their lives and livelihoods. The transition of childhood to adulthood is difficult in a society as adolescents are no longer children, but are not yet considered by society to be fully adult. They can neither mix with children nor are they acceptable to adult discussion. Even in many societies, the period of adolescence is not recognized, children are regarded as adults once menstruation begins or when they have passed through a ritual ceremony or marriage (Khan, 2000: 176). The age range from 10 years to less than 18 years is treated as adolescent age in Bangladesh (MWCA, 2010). Adolescents today constitute more than a fifth of the population of Bangladesh, with 13.7 million girls and 14 million boys in the 10 to 19 year age-group (UNICEF, 2010).

CODEC started 20 Shonglap centers at the beginning of the project. Shonglap sessions are facilitated by Shonglap apa, that is, animator. The term apa is used to address an elder sister. It embodies the notion of respect. Animator facilitates the learning process and educates

about personal hygienic, health and sanitation, puberty, behavioral change, reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, child rights, women rights, birth registration, marriage registration, early marriage, polygamy, dowry, divorce, gender equity, local arbitration, environment and disaster, Income Generation Activities (IGAs), linkage with local government and non-government organizations. The center organizes various cultural activities and provides livelihood training. Inter center based networking meeting, leadership training, poem reciting, songs, dram addressing domestic violence and eve-teasing, news writing course have been arranged. Adolescent girls published news bulletin and disseminated them to community people. Shonglap Support Team (SST) is the management body comprised mainly of guardian, teacher, and representative of civil society to run center effectively and efficiently.

METHODOLOGY

The primary research has been conducted in four villages of Ukhiya and Teknaf sub-districts during November 2010. Four Shonglap centers, out of 20 centers, named as Purba Para Shonglap Center, Jumer Chara Shonglap Center, Fulerdail Shonglap Center, and Ali Khali Shonglap Center have been selected from Kutupalong, Balukhali, Fulerdail and Jadimura villages respectively under Ukhiya and Teknaf sub-districts. The Shonglap center selection is done by random sampling from a random table. The main methods used in this research are observation of respondents, Focus Group Discussion (FGD), complemented with semi-structured interviewing from 100 adolescent girls.

ANALYZING SHONGLAP EFFECTS

Schooling

The main target group of Shonglap is adolescent girls who dropped out from formal schooling. Illiterate adolescent girls have also room to participate in the program. In all, 25.00% of total respondents dropped out from class five (Table 1). Poverty is the main cause of drop out of adolescent girls from educational institutions. Moreover, the location of high school is far from living place of average number of adolescent girls. The vehicles are not available and gender-friendly as well. However, lack of awareness, religious beliefs, early marriage and social insecurity lead to drop out. In such circumstance, Shonglap provides them with education on life skill development. However, it was found that their participation in Shonglap has effect on re-admission of 4.00% of the total respondents to school.

Personal cleanliness

It is found that 94 (94.00%) respondents have sound knowledge on personal cleanliness. They are conscious

Table 1. Dropped out rate of adolescent girls.

Dropped out	Name of *Shonglap* centers				Total (%)
	Purba Para (%)	Jumer Chara (%)	Fulerdail (%)	Ali Khali (%)	
Illiterate	-	-	8.00	12.00	5.00
From class one	-	-	4.00	-	1.00
From class two	-	12.00	12.00	4.00	7.00
From class three	-	16.00	20.00	8.00	11.00
From class four	-	8.00	8.00	8.00	6.00
From class five	32.00	20.00	16.00	32.00	25.00
From class six	12.00	-	8.00	-	5.00
From class seven	28.00	20.00	4.00	8.00	15.00
From class eight	-	16.00	4.00	20.00	10.00
From class nine	24.00	8.00	16.00	8.00	14.00
From class ten	4.00	-	-	-	1.00
From college	-	-	-	-	-
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Table 2. Change the pattern of tooth clean.

Participation	Change the pattern and product use		Total (%)
	Use the powder of firewood coal and ash (%)	Use the toothpaste and powder (%)	
Before participation in *Shonglap*	59.00	41.00	100.00
After participation in *Shonglap*	12.00	88.00	100.00

to clean their tooth, nail, hair, other organs and menstruation management. They know why cleanliness is necessary, and if any one remain dirty, the type of diseases he or she had to face, such as anemia, skin diseases etc. In every aspect, they give right answers and know very well about all these things. It was discovered that 59.00% of total respondents used powder of firewood coal and ash to clean their tooth before participation in *Shonglap* program. Now the rate reduced to 12.00% (Table 2). Most of the respondents now use toothpaste and powder to clean their tooth. However, the rate of cleaning tooth after taking routine meal is low.

Management of menstruation

The maintenance of hygiene during menstruation is a vital aspect of Adolescent Reproductive Health (ARH). Almost 71.00% of total the respondents were not aware of the need for maintaining some cleanliness during menstrual period; these adolescent girls note that they understood only after discussion at *Shonglap* center that a clean pad or cloth is very important. Most of the adolescent girls used pieces of old rags *(nekra)* as pads during menstruation that were wet or had been not dried in a hygienic fashion. These were usually kept beside fence of latrine, dark and dirty places. All respondents mention

that now they use clean cloth with hygienic manner. They also mention that they can not buy pads from the market due to lack of money, shyness and conservativeness though it is better and comfortable to use.

Increased health knowledge

Shonglap sessions provide information to reduce health risks, especially in the area of reproductive health. It gives knowledge about menstruation management, how a person is infected with HIV/AIDS, gonorrhea, syphilis, other diseases and behavioral change. Respondents have good knowledge on these issues. They also know about water-borne diseases like diarrhea, cholera, dysentery and so on. 85.00% of total respondents can describe about necessities of immunization for children and vaccination for adolescent girls and pregnant women. They can explain about the danger signs associated with pregnancy and childbirth. It is noted that only 39.00% of total respondents used soap after latrine use. Now the rate has been increased significantly after participation at *Shonglap* center. The respondents mention that they will transfer their knowledge to future generations as a change maker. However, it is reported from the *Shonglap* animators that adolescent girls feel shyness during discussion about reproductive health, puberty, HIV/AIDS,

gonorrhea, syphilis and such diseases though *Shonglap* is run by female animator.

Marriage and dowry

Many Bangladeshi girls married immediately after puberty, partly to free their parents from economic burden and partly to protect the girls' sexual purity. Where a girl's family is very poor or she has lost her parents, she may be married as a third or fourth wife to a much older man, to fulfill the role of sexual and domestic servant (UNICEF, 2001). It is noted that religious superstition and social insecurity are major causes of early marriage in these communities though income poverty is the general cause of early marriage in Bangladesh. Polygamy and domestic violence occurred frequently. Dowry is a common practice that is materialized by cash and kinds. It is reported by the respondents that BDT 50,000 is a common amount of dowry, which a poor family has to pay. The amount is reduced if the girl is beautiful. The *Shonglap* adolescent girls have good knowledge about bad effects of early marriage. They also know about health risks due to early marriage. Some of them advocated with their parents through sharing earned knowledge to stop their own early marriage. They also went to neighbors and collectively raised their voice against early marriage. In few cases, they became successful. However, it is reported that a total of three respondents became victim of early marriage. Fellows of *Shonglap* center failed to motivate their guardians and proceed for legal assistance. Adolescent girls perceive that schooling of girls, social security, and self-reliant can reduce early marriage and dowry.

Rights issues

The Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees equal rights for men and women irrespective of caste, creed, and color. All citizens are entitled to equal protection under the law. The respondents have basic ideas on child and women rights and areas of rights violation. They are also aware of the advantages of birth and marriage registration. However, it is found that respondents have relatively high levels of knowledge about child marriage and the legal age of marriage for girls and boys. There are some knowledge deficit among respondents on laws pertaining to dowry, marriages and child rights. The respondents know how to claim rights from duty bearers and community leaders. Some of the respondents went to the representative of the local government, health care center, police station, family court, and service providing departments.

Income generation activities

Household conditions of majority the respondents represent poor and hardcore poor status. A total 400 adolescent girls received livelihood training on sewing and 50 adolescent girls received training on beautician to work at beauty parlor. It is thus expected that the training will have an impact on adolescent girls' engagement in IGA. However, it is needful to review the relevance of such training in future as per a bulk number of trained-up adolescent girls and market opportunities of sewing work. It is observed that some participants will not be involved in IGA after receiving training due to lack of money and poor linkage with financial and advisory institutions. A total OF 96 adolescent boys and youths received vocational training on motor mechanics, electric and electronics under this project. It is expected that they will not only contribute towards household income, but also to decrease unrest in the society. However, adolescent boys and youths have conservative mind set about employment of adolescent girls and females. They perceive that girls and females should work at home. They will encounter problems when they go out to do business and work. In contrast, adolescent girls and females have interest to go out and search for employment. The respondents believe that if they become self-reliant, then others can not dominate them. They would like to help the whole family, that is, parents, husband, and children in the future.

Innovation and breaking conservativeness

Innovation means anything from doing old things in new ways and doing something substantially different. *Shonglap* has the sense of innovation in process, management, and approach of implementation in the community. *Shonglap* is not a lecture method system. It is a participatory process so that adolescent girls can identify problems and find out ways of solution through brain storming, group discussion, case study and exposure visit. However, such adolescent program, that is, *Shonglap* is new in these communities. Earlier, no development organization works particularly on adolescent girls issues in such way.

Cox's Bazar area is religiously conservative enough to maintain distinction between male and female (CDMP, 2008). Out of 100 respondents, 82.00% are Muslim, 1.00% Hindu, and 17.00% Buddhist. There is no respondent who has no religious preference. It is found that 57 Muslim adolescent girls, out of 82 Muslim respondents, wear *hijab*. There are two types of *hijab*, such as 1) *hijab* (covering of the body except the face and hands), and 2) *hijab* (covering of the body except the eye and hands). Majority of Muslim respondents cover their body except eye and hands. Some adolescent girls mention that they wear *hijab* to protect themselves from social insecurities and odds. They cover their face to protect it from eve-teasing. Communicating, advocating, and engaging the religious leaders were important part of the project implementation strategy. Sharing meetings have been

done with all religious leaders including Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist. Religious leaders from all respective religions participated jointly.

At first, the guardian of adolescent girls discouraged them to go into *Shonglap* program. To some extent, religious leader criticized *Shonglap* activities particularly about drama and inter *Shonglap* networking meeting. When guardian of adolescent girls and religious leader understood the positive aspects of *Shonglap* by attending a session of the program, sharing knowledge and exposure visit, then they assisted in running *Shonglap* activities. Some of them became member of *Shonglap* Support Team (SST). It is known that religious leader discussed in favor of *Shonglap* activities and against eve-teasing at different religious ceremony in the village. They attended rally on violence against women. *Shonglap* program increases mobility of adolescent girls, that is, encourages them to go to representatives of local government, NGO office, health care center, police station, family court, and service providing departments. *Shonglap* adolescent girls received residential training on leadership development.

Agency and empowerment

Sen (1985) defines agency as 'what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important'. In his view, it constitutes a 'process freedom' (Sen, 1999). Ibrahim and Alkire (2007) draw attention to 'the opportunity structure and the institutional environment' that act as prerequisites for the effective deployment of agency. However, a functioning agency itself is considered central to well-being or its absence to ill-being and a critical component of empowerment – to be able to make choices and translate into desired outcomes. Increased knowledge of adolescent girls and its practices have positive effects on their quality of life. Gained knowledge will be transferred to increase well-beings of future generations. Mobility of adolescent girls has been increased and their communication with different service providing institutions has been established. Their endeavors gradually break conservativeness though the degree is still tiny. With stiff historical traditions of social exclusion in Bangladesh, it is difficult to fathom how the actions of the *Shonglap* adolescent girls can influence it directly. They demonstrate the potential to be instrumental with sound knowledge on health and education, rights, engaging income generations and actions to reduce their vulnerability. But it is needful to strengthen institutional arrangements for their empowerment with sustainability.

CONCLUSION

Adolescent girls of *Shonglap* program play the role of a change maker in the society. Gained knowledge on life skills and occupational skills has positive effects on their empowerment and well-beings. They prove their potential by ensuring mainstreaming education for dropped out girls, advocating and communicating with parents, community leaders and duty bearers. Their efforts gradually break conservativeness and increase mobility. But it is difficult to work out the sustainability of their actions due to only one year project interventions. Thus, such *Shonglap* program should be continued in these communities and should be funded by Austcare or other donors. It is also needful to establish *Shonglap* center for adolescent boys to change their mind set and employment with bright and promising future.

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