

Adolescents of Bangladesh
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The background information

Bangladesh is situated to the eastern side of India and is surrounded by it in the West, North and East. It is situated between 20°34' and 26°38' North Latitude and between 88°01' and 92°41' East Longitude. It has an area of 147,570 sq. kilometers and a population of 160 million by the year of 2005. It has a population density of about 900 persons per sq. kilometer, which is the highest population density in the world.

Bangladesh is a tropical country washed by many rivers, largely covered with paddy fields and green vegetation. With all these Bangladesh is famous for its natural beauty. Due to the monsoon rainfall and the silt carried by the three great rivers, the *Ganges*, the *Brahmaputra* and the *Meghna* Bangladesh became a fertile and naturally peaceful land.

The country has a history of Mongoloid, Austro-Mongoloid and Austro-Dravidian settlers. The people have however, come to be known as Bangladeshis after a nine month war of liberation with the former military government of Pakistan.

With the highest density of population in the world, low level of literacy and slow economic progress, the people of this country are trapped in sort of vicious cycle of poverty and malnutrition. About 50 percent of the people who live below the poverty line are not able to provide for their basic needs and amenities. Despite many odds Bangladesh has shown a steady progress in national income, world trade and manpower supply in external world.

Similar to the adolescents of many other countries children in Bangladesh are submissive and quiet but creative and industrious. About 17 percent of total population of Bangladesh belongs to this highly potential and energetic

group; unfortunately this group unlike primary age group children did not receive much attention from the government to enhance their health, education and quality citizenry.

Period of adolescent

Since the beginning of late childhood, at the age of six, the child tends to be industrious and capable of learning the tasks and values imposed by the society. While proceeding towards puberty he gradually overcomes the anxieties and complexes of the preceding phase and reaches to another uncommon and challenging period of life. Like most other countries in the world puberty occur at age 11 to 14 in girls, and 12 to 15 in boys, or later where nutrition and living conditions are deficient. In Bangladeshi society these years may apply with little modification. Bangladeshi children are socialized to take up their respective male and female roles well before puberty sets in (Aziz and Maloney, 1985). This happens mostly due to their life styles that they live in extended families. For this reason, they face fewer problems in their puberty. A girl is expected to begin learning proper decorum for a female before the end of childhood so she can play the part well once puberty sets in. A Bangladeshi girl is in this stage from about age 9, 10, 11, or whenever her growth spurt begins, and until she attains menarche. In comparison to girls boys are less concerned about the preparation for adult life in this stage. Instead, he expected to learn the tasks of his father's occupation.

The beginning of puberty marks an important transition in life for the people Bangladesh. A pre-pubertal boy is known as '*nabalak*', but one who has semen is called '*sabalak*'. A pre-menarchal girl is termed as '*nabalika*', but one who has had her first menstruation is called '*sabalika*'. However, these terms have equivalent Bangla names in Hindus communities. Getting the exact age at menarche for Bangladeshi girls is difficult but different studies with smaller samples indicate it to be 12.6 years to 15.8 years. Among a selected group of school going girls Haq (1984) observed it to be 12.6 years while in his different study among illiterate rural women it was found to be 13.4 years (Haq, 1986). Another significant study conducted in a controlled research field in Matlab, Bangladesh Chowdhury et al. (1977) found the age of menarch at 15.8 years. The higher age was due to famine in the area. From these research it is safely stated that most of the girls in Bangladesh menarche between their 12th and 13th birthday. Like other countries information regarding adolescent boys is very much scarce in Bangladesh.

This stage is the time for growth spurt and production of semen, which may occur two or more years later in Bangladesh than in well-nourished Western populations (Aziz and Maloney, 1985).

There is no public ceremony in Bangladesh for a girl on her attainment of menarche neither she gets any formal education from any source regarding her problems arises from menarche. Here in Bangladesh menarche is a private matter only mother or elder sisters help the girl to manage her problems in more informal and crude ways. In rural areas there are some rituals associated with the menarche like special washing afterwards etc. but in urban areas there is no such ritual among the girls.

After the pubertal stage boys and girls gradually attain the age of early and late adolescence between 14 and 16 respectively. This period is more important to girls than boys because at this age most of the girls marry in their middle or late teens. At this age the secondary sex characteristics become prominent in both boys and girls and they start to attain their adult roles from the society.

Beliefs

Bangladeshi adolescents are socialized to take up their respective male and female roles from the beliefs and rituals of the people. Girls from the very beginning of their late childhood start facing the restrictions in her manners and movements. During her early adolescents girls are believed not to roam alone in the evening, should wear long dress and cover her body with additional piece of cloth. If the girl belongs to a conservative Muslim family then the restrictions become more stronger. The girls are asked to speak softly and not too much, behave politely, and in some families to perform compulsory prayers and fasting. She may be expected to work in the kitchen and at other domestic chores for hours together.

There are beliefs in rural communities that a girl with menarche should not walk over a bridge, eat fish or take betel leaf. If she eats fish then a bad odor comes out of her body; if she eats betel leaf then the spot of menstrual blood on her clothes cannot be removed (Aziz and Maloney, 1985). Contrary to such beliefs boys do not have to face any odd restrictions. At this stage a girl is not expected to be caressed by her father, and a boy approaching adolescence is not expected to be caressed by his mother. A child above 9 is

no longer considered suitable to share a bed with either parent. During this stage children learn whatever they know of sex from their peers or older children, or by observation.

In the late adolescence girls tend to worry about the conjugal life with an unknown male. The common belief among the mature girls is that if they remain virtuous they will get good husband. On the other hand the adolescent boys remain less concerned about their marriage and do not have such beliefs regarding their conjugal life. Both the boys and girls have fantasies about opposite sex and dream of each others' face, body and genitalia but it is conceived sinful among them so they hardly discuss the matter publicly. Masturbation is frequently practiced by males and females but it is more common in males than females. Masturbation is thought of as a fault or bad habit and marriage is the best way to get rid of it. It is also thought to induce physical weakness among the users.

There are differences in beliefs among the urban and rural adolescents. Urban educated adolescents have fewer problems with such beliefs and practices. They have opportunities to learn about their life style from different source of mass media and knowledgeable senior friends. Schools also sometime disseminate some knowledge about malpractices and wrong beliefs about sex and adolescence. However, girls who take Home Economics in their course of study receive some knowledge on adolescence formally but that is also delivered in a very conservative way.

Gender

Gender roles among adolescent boys and girls are distinctly separated in Bangladesh. These roles are set by culture, customs and religion from the long past. Masculinity and femininity are determined by physical attributes like; muscular build, appearance of mustache and beard and deep voice are perceived as attributes of masculinity while long hair, appearance of breast and a high voice are perceived as feminine. A girl is expected to learn the proper gender role before the end of childhood so that she can play the part well once puberty sets in. A girl in the pre-adolescent period wears pants and blouse, or a skirt, but as she grows up she must change her dress into long gown like clothing. There is no such restriction for the boys regarding short or long dresses. A boy in rural setting or poor communities may play naked while swimming in a pond or canal up to the pre-adolescent stage, but after

that he becomes ashamed to do so. He is expected to learn farming tasks such as plowing, or other work of the family occupation.

Gender role expectations are more prominent in the rural communities. To the rural people's expectation girls are likely to remain engaged in domestic chores, i.e., should help her mother at home for household work or keeping herself busy in sewing knitting etc. Once she is grown up she must wear *sari* or a gown like dress to keep her bodies and heads covered. Girls are not supposed to loiter around in the roadside or involved much in the outdoor activities, should not dress like boys or engaged in fight in public places. She is not allowed to go outside the dwelling alone during the nights and if it is necessary for her to go, she should be accompanied by an elderly woman or an adult relative (man). Girls in conservative families are expected to perform *parda* or seclusion with veil in front of unknown men. It should not be assumed that *parda* is just imposed by males on females rather it is observed by culture and religious faith by women and grown-up girls in significant number of middle income group of families. The observance of *parda* or seclusion is not at all prominent among the hardcore poor class people who live either in rural or urban sites.

A boy would help his father in the field or do the manly jobs either at home or outside. During adolescent age a boy of low income group has to work outside home and often contributes more to the family income than he consumes, unless he is a student. In middle to richer families boys are more associated with study. But it is considered disgraceful if an adolescent girl has to work outside; even poor families will hardly permit it unless it is a dire necessity. People think that if a girl works in the field or outside home in the odd hours sexual mishaps are bound to occur. Adolescent girls are not permitted to mix-up with boys or elderly man not connected by blood relationship in secluded places.

Smoking is very much associated with males rather than females. Though, the adolescent boys are not expected to smoke before any respected persons known to him or elderly relatives. Girls are not at all permitted to smoke before any one in the society. Smoking by girls is taken as a bad indication of her character. However, in higher and affluent societies smoking by boys and girls are not taken as serious offence. Drinking alcohol in average Bangladeshi culture is always forbidden for the adolescents irrespective of gender.

Gender of adolescents also plays a very important role in education and sports in both rural and urban areas. There are separate schools for boys and girls at the secondary level though girls can attend to some boys' schools and colleges but boys can not attend to any girls' school or colleges. Even in schools where boys and girls study together they sit apart in the same room. Curricula also differ according to the gender differentials. Boys can take agriculture, carpentry or some other income generating activities while girls can take home economics, cutting, knitting etc. which are perceived as their discipline. In sports boys and girls have different events provided it is not a unisex school. Even in jobs girls prefer teaching, office work or nursing but for boys there is no limit of choice.

Though the gender roles are not strictly followed in urban setting yet majority of the girls in adolescence try to abide by the rule. Parents take more care of their adolescent girls to protect them from any societal evils than the boys. Loitering in public places like shopping mall, cinema hall etc. is more common in boys than girls. Unless there are many girls in a group they would not stay outside home or in the evening. Free mixing among boys and girls is a common cite in urban college universities than in rural colleges. But for the young adolescents in schools free mixing is not admissible to the society at large.

The self

The beginning of puberty makes an important transition in life of the Bengali adolescents. From around the age 11 the boys are known as '*kishor*' and the girls is called '*kishori*' (synonymous to '*shabalak*' and '*shabalika*') and these identifications of the adolescents control the opportunity of building their selves. Their selves start to develop from the interaction with the family and the society but adolescents in Bangladesh have limited scope of such interaction. Research shows that parents hardly value their teenagers and never recognize their needs (Haq et al. 2003), such boys and girls are considered minor to offer their opinions in determining social norms and values in the family. The school going adolescents have greater opportunity to develop their selves than the unschooled adolescents. Boys are more extroverts than girls and the rate of extroversion is more common in school goers than the out-of-school adolescents (Haq et al. 2003). Most of girls' social activities, apart from visiting the neighborhood, take place within the home, allowed them negligible interaction with the outside world and again

this interaction also decreases with age. While having restrictions on the girls' mobility, boys have more active social life than girls in Bangladesh.

Psychological development of adolescents receives no attention from the parents, teachers or social workers in Bangladesh. Sporadic studies on the topic of adolescents' self have been done by psychologists and indicated their life as normal, confident, happy and self-sustained. Psychologically the teenagers are quite sound, they have good control over their impulses and emotions and they are satisfied with their body and self-image (Haq, 1986).

Family

Boys and girls in their teen age develop a kind of loose bond with the family. Parents see their offspring first as child and then adult ignoring their adolescence (Haq et al 2003). This creates a counter image among parents and adolescents about their family relationship. Adolescents get very little time on social and personal ground from their parents compared to their younger siblings. This is common in both rural and urban communities. Adolescents from working parents are the worst sufferers. In general, girls in poor families do not have as much access to basic human needs like food, clothing, treatment etc. as boys in a family. This disparity is seen in the most rural families. Many parents have a mentality that there is no benefit to educating girls as girls will go away to husband's home after marriage. So parents look after their sons and educate them in the hopes that when they will be grown they will earn and take care of their old parents. Thus parents deprive their daughters of various services in the families (Zaman, 1998). [Zaman, M A (1998) A Concept on Adolescent Development. Dhaka: USC Canada Bangladesh]

Economic status of the family and the earning capacity of the head in particular contribute to the formation of family. Men's role is very crucial for family development as most of the families in our society financially depend on men's income. Majority of the adolescents do not have any earning, they remain dependent on their families. Other than providing food, clothe and shelter few demands of the adolescents are fulfilled by the family. In this regard boys' receive greater attention from their families than their girls' counterparts. As soon as the teen age girl gets married, she lives the family and get rid of her dependence on her father's family. On the other hand marriage of an adolescent boy increases the dependence on family

provided he is not earning. So marriage is the turning point of developing a family and its dependence on the father's family.

As per the Bangladesh marriage law the marital age for a girl is 18 and for boys is 21. Marriage before this age limit is regarded as early marriage and treated as punishable offence. The punishment for early marriage is Tk. 1000 fine or one month imprisonment or both. Guardians, match-makers and other concerned persons involved in early marriage will get this punishment. Besides all these laws, marriage among adolescents is quite high. Marriage rate of both male and female at the age 10-19 is about 53% (NIPORT, 2001).

Despite negligence from different quarters the adolescents possess good feeling about their parents, siblings and other relatives (Haq, 1986). In the absence of social security poor parents want to get rid of their young daughters by putting them on early marriage. Dowry is still a factor in marriage. It is very surprising to note that poor parents view education as a threat to dowry – more a girl educates higher dowry is needed for her appropriate bridegroom.

Friends and peers/youths

Like many other nations Bangladesh is a male dominated country, here boys enjoy more opportunities in the society than the girls. Boys can socialize them and enhance their knowledge and skills, while girls are kept confined at home. As a result many girls become indifferent to their rights and dignity and swindle at every step. Most adolescents have friends of their own sex though friendship with opposite sex in this age is not very much appreciated by the society. Adolescents prefer to trust their friend more than parents. They like to make friendship with the like minded peers of similar age.

Adolescents achieve friendship through school, outdoor activities, gossiping centres like tea stall, cinema hall and neighborhood. Boys have access to the above place while girls mostly remain isolated in someone's house or to a solitary place in the neighborhood. In rural areas, girls also meet in the public washing spots at a pond, river or tube well sites. Most of girls' social activities, apart from visiting the above places take places within the home, allowed them negligible interaction with the outside world. This interaction also decreases with age. One baseline survey conducted on rural adolescents

in Bangladesh indicated that 6 percent of girls compared to 64 percent of boys reported visiting a tea stall in the past one week. Similarly, 3 percent of girls compared to 23 percent of boys reported going to the cinema. Girls, main outdoor activity is visiting friends and neighbors. Nearly one in three girls reported having done so in the past week. Boys were more than twice as likely to report this activity. Girls of any age rarely reported to be involved in outdoor games as the boys do (Department of Women's Affairs, 2002).

Watching television has now become a major indoor entertainment for rural adolescents of both sexes as is listening to the radio. Thirty seven percent of girls compared with 67 percent of boys reported that they watch television and 33 percent of girls compared with 58 percent of boys reported that they listen to the radio. Low proportion of adolescents plays indoor games and read newspapers, probably because few households subscribe to newspaper in rural areas or have amenities available for indoor games (Department of Woman's Affair, 2002).

Unlike rural adolescents boys and girls living in urban areas particularly in bigger cities have much limited scope of making friendship with boys and girls other than the school mates or neighbors. Due to unsecured life in city dueling parents do not allow their adolescents to move freely without their notice. However, in late adolescence such restrictions gradually starts disappearing and only boys enjoy more freedom than the girls in the same household.

Love and sexuality

The terms love and sexuality both are considered as taboo during the period of adolescence. Parents always want to keep their young adolescents away from these two acts in different ways, sometimes through advice and sometime through punishment. More adolescent girls than boys are concerned about their physical developments, manners and movements what makes them shy and isolated. Girls' sexuality and love is more restricted in the society; they cannot mix-up with boys openly in front of elderly persons. Though the situation is now gradually decreasing among some educated and most affluent societies. Minor sex offence or expression of unapproved love in pre-adolescence or early adolescence is not considered serious but during late adolescence that goes with heavy punishment. Societal approval in this

matter goes in favour of boys than girls. Study shows that, it is not shameful for a male to look at the body of a female with sensuous eyes, on the contrary, if a girl expresses pleasure at seeing a male's physical feature, her girl friends would criticize her for being shameless (Aziz and Maloney, 1985).

Sexual life of adolescents is greatly influenced by religion. They are taught to remain virtuous often with temptation for the creator will give them the best reward for this. However, besides all these social and religious bindings a good number of boys and girls fell in love or express their likings about opposite sex in their early and late adolescence. But very few of these relationships finally sustain and transformed into marriage.

Information about adolescents' health and sexuality is very limited. Scattered reports exist about sexuality (Aziz and Maloney, 1985) and nutrition but there is little to no information about other issues. It is generally recognized that other issues identified in the international literature i.e., smoking, substance abuse and violence are also problems of Bangladeshi young people. It is also perceived that these problems are far more prevalent in the male section of this population (Talukder, 1999).

A recent study (Haider et al. 1997) on adolescents in Bangladesh has observed high rates of pre-marital sex among male unmarried adolescent while husbands of adolescent women also reported high level of both pre and extra marital sex. Of those men who had sex with partners outside marriage, 71 percent mentioned commercial sex workers.

Media

Adolescents are largely associated with many sectors like, cultural programmes, educational activities, games and sports, religious institutions and even with television channel. We do not have any statistics about their involvement in those sectors but in many times they are reported as cases in the printed as well as in the electronic media. No cultural programme is complete without the performance of these older children. There are national competitions for music, dance or debate for the adolescents. These programmes are very popular and large number of boys and girls of different age including adolescents take part in those competitions. We have "*Shishu Academy*" i.e., Children Academy in every district of the country. This is a

government department under the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs. This academy holds various programme and national competitions for the development of both children and adolescents.

Other than the government organization various social organizations meant for the children and adolescents run various developmental and cultural activities for them. Amongst them Central '*Kachi Kachar Mela*', '*Mukul Fauz*', etc. are the renowned ones engaged adolescents for their future development. These young people brought out rallies or perform in pared grounds during the celebration of national days. Nation wide various organizations hold art competitions for the children and adolescents on various occasions.

Adolescents in Bangladesh are not very much highlighted in any media unless there is anything special. Most of the cultural organizations have opportunity for the young and older adolescents to participate. Every TV channel hold separate programme on the adolescent life and amusement. One of the TV channels had a group or worker who belonged to adolescent age and they produced different programmes by themselves. They had journalist, camera crew, producer, and director. That channel is now disband for political reason. This group was very popular for their classic performance. In another TV channel a group of adolescents produced a drama which won the International Emmy Award for their success.

Education

There are 27 million adolescents (13 million girls) in Bangladesh. Their literacy rate is 53 percent for girls and 54 percent for boys compared to the adult literacy rate of 56 percent for men and 35 percent for women. The total enrollment of these adolescents in secondary school is 7.3 million i.e., less than a third of the adolescents are currently enrolled in secondary level (35.5%) and over a tenth in higher secondary level (14%) (Watch, 2001). The gross enrollment rate among the 11-15 years age group is about 54 percent (EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2002) but the net enrollment rate is not available in the country but it is assumed to be around to one third.

Girls are largely deprived of education in poor families. In some families, education for girl-child is thought to be useless and unproductive. So girls remain illiterate which result in their lower status. Male child are treated by

their parents as their old age shelter. This traditional outlook leads parents to provide education for the male adolescents. However, such attitude is not evident in the educated families and in the higher income groups.

Considering the educational situation of the adolescents particularly of the lower income group and working adolescents large number of NGOs and government came forward to provide them some education. So non formal education programme for the out-of-school adolescents and adolescents who are hard to reach due to their involvement in the working force were considered. Non formal education for the children and adolescents are famous for its magnitude and quality. Many NGOs bring the illiterate adolescents to a learning centre for about two hours in a day and teach them functional literacy and life skills. This education not only provides the adolescents literacy skills it also allows them to avail the second opportunity to learn and continue their education to the mainstream schools up to whatever level they can go.

Politics and anti military activities

In Bangladesh, adolescents' involvement in politics is not very much appreciated. Though many political organizations have students' front for college and universities yet none of them maintain any front for the adolescents. However, in national crisis all students irrespective of their age and level get involved in demonstration and protest. There are some street adolescents known as '*tokai*' help the protesters in crisis such as carrying arms, bombs or other band materials. *Tokais* are the rootless or floating younger and older adolescents who loiter in the street and collect saleable garbage. In political protest sometime these young men give lives in street for some important national issues.

Some Islamic fundamentalist groups recruit these young men from the religious educational institutes called '*Madrassa*' for their own political agenda. As most of the madrasa students live in student hostel and many of them are either orphans or have less connection with their family, they are easy prey for the fundamentalist group to motivate them in favour of any anti social activity in the name of religion. There are approximately 6,500 *madrasas* for children and adolescents in the country of which about 760 are exclusively for girls. Boys who take part in protest sometime become violent in the street and cause damage to the public properties. A significant number

of adolescents are involved in antisocial activity and crime but in the absence of appropriate juvenile court and law they cannot be treated accordingly.

Rural adolescents compared to their urban counterparts are less involved in the above activities. In remote rural areas adolescent boys are largely either involved in education or engaged in income generating work along with their fathers. Poor parents are more interested to send their older children to the field rather than to school. When the girls reach their adolescence they become fit for the household work so parents involve them in domestic work which always keep them busy at home and also save them from any other evil deeds.

There is no national level data on substance misuse in young people but there is increasing concern about the use of indigenous cigarettes (*Biri*) which are extremely cheap and widely available. Similarly there is no data on violence, suicide and accidents in young people but there are frequent reports of rape, acid throwing and violence against females in the press. Recently political violence has become more prominent among young men, especially in institutions of higher education such as colleges and universities. Student politics is commonly perceived as a system of protectionism against violence and more recently rape of young women on campus. Young men supplied by political parties with guns and money for drugs, alcohol and women have unleashed a reign of terror on campuses throughout the country. Some of these young men may be from poor backgrounds and hence need the support of political parties as the only alternative in the ever-growing competition of the job market in this country.

Unique issues

Bangladesh is a country where a significant number of adolescents lead a vulnerable life in the community. Their rights are not protected, do not get appropriate wage for their work and are prone to disease and malnutrition. Statistics shows that about 59 percent of the adolescent boys and 47 percent of adolescent girls are engaged in various income-generating works outside home in various working conditions. Over 41 percent of the working children (5 to 15 years) work over 8 hours a day for earning for family outside home.

Another unique issue among the Bangladeshi adolescents is that even in the beginning of 21st Century a significant number of adolescents get married within this young age. Statistics shows that about 2 percent of 10-14 years age group and 19 percent of 14-19 years age group adolescents are married all over the country. Exchange of dowry among rural poor is still evident in Bangladesh (Government of Bangladesh, 2002).

In 1996 the Institute of Child and mother Health (ICMH), Dhaka in collaboration with the Centre for International Child Health (CICH), London carried out a nutrition survey on adolescents (10-17 years old) in four villages in Rupganj thana, Bangladesh. This study observed that 67 percent of these adolescents were thin (defined as BMI < 5th centile of WHO recommended reference), 48 percent were stunted and 75 percent had hemoglobin < 10.5 g/dl. Though this finding cannot be generalized for the whole country yet the health condition of the adolescents of Bangladesh can be obtained from such survey.

Work

Working adolescents remain one of the main groups excluded from formal education. There are approximately 5 million children in Bangladesh, most of whom are poor working in the informal sector. While there are more working children in rural areas, there are also 1.1 million boys and 0.4 million working girls live in urban areas (UNICEF, 2003). Among these workers the large majority is adolescents. Though these young workers earn for their families yet their wage is not sufficient for the purpose.

Large number of adolescents' work is hazardous condition and there is a potential threat for health and accidental death. These works include brick breaking, welding, bus and other motor vehicle helper, domestic work etc. While doing these works many adolescents meet accidents frequently but no employer takes the responsibility of such occurrence and bear the cost of treatment.

Adolescents are easily exploited through work, they work over time but do not get any extra allowance. Most of the motor garages are filled with young adolescents and many of them work there for many years (ranging from 5 to 10) but do not get any wage. It is mentioned that these workers work there for the whole day and in the absence of any salary they survive on own

expenses. However, this free work does not make any worker unhappy because they feel that it is their learning time, if they can learn motor mechanism at their own cost then in future they will be benefited.

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