Report of a Field Study to Shariatpur, Bangladesh

Learning as we go?

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Introduction

In preparation of taking over of a project focused on supporting adolescent girls and young women in Shariatpur, Bangladesh, a number of reports and other texts were reviewed. Sketching the issues at stake, quite quickly a list encompassing phenomena such as child marriage, eve teasing, domestic violence and unequal access to education took a shape. Such a list itself is hardly a surprise for anyone. At the same time it is recognized that 'the extraordinary role played by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the country' and 'family planning empower[ing] women' are among the main reason for the substantial progress the country has booked in terms of human development[1]. Given these successes what does explain the persistence of problems such as child marriage, eve teasing and unequal access to education for adolescent girls? Is there something that is maybe overlooked or underestimated? Reflecting specifically to the NGO work: what exactly is done (or not done) and can something be done better? These and similar questions led to the initiative for a small field study that took place during a visit to Shariatpur in August 2013.

Methodology

The research question that guided the study was: What are the overlooked/ignored but important phenomena (or overlooked/ignored aspects of the well-known phenomena) that affect the well being and healthy development of adolescent girls in the area of intervention?

The main method for data collection used in the study is focus group discussion (FGD); in addition a number of individual interviews were conducted. Why FGD? For two reasons: firstly, this was the most feasible method given the limitations in terms of time and resources. Secondly, but equally important, this is considered the most effective approach in such kind of studies: *'[t]he single most effective, powerful and low-cost and relatively simple tool available for this kind of action research is the focus group. At each step the particular task could be discussed with small sets consisting of people who are in one way or the other involved with the subject matter.'*[2]

Altogether 103 participants took part in the FGDs; in addition, nine individual interviews took place. Some of the interviewees already took part in a FGD and they provided deeper insights into issues and perspectives brought during the FGD. There were also interviews with respondents who did not take part in a FGD. The profile of the participants in the FGD varied per focus group. There were a couple of FGD with adolescent girls, one with boys and one mixed, with both girls and boys; in addition FGDs with teachers and school principals, parents, CBO/NGO staff and civil servants took place. All FGDs took place in the six *upazilas (sub-districts)* in the district of Shariatpur, Bangladesh.

The researcher is aware of the limitations of the research and its findings. The study was conducted with quite limited resources with a restricted scope and time frame.[3] The researcher's intention was not to conduct an academic study and no claim is made to this effect. Rather the objective was to

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[1] The Economist 2012: The path through the fields Bangladesh has dysfunctional politics and a stunted private sector. Yet it has been surprisingly good at improving the lives of its poor, The print edition, 3 Nov 2012.
[2] Van Oudenhoven and Jualla: The cultural context of young boys and girls: home, neighborhood and school (upcoming publication in Journal of Playwork Practice, April issue, 2014
[3] Another detail to be added here is that the overwhelming majority of respondents spoke in Bengali language, not English3 and to this end probably not all the richness of their responses was captured.

conduct an action research which is 'simply defined as 'a process of finding useful answers to practical problems faced by practitioners in their work'.[4]

Findings

Child marriage

A great deal has been written about child marriage and instead of reiterating the well-known facts, trends and conclusions described in the literature,[5] the focus here is on some specific aspects that might be relevant to improving the effectiveness of ongoing and future interventions.

The first point of attention boils down to the efficiency and impacts of the measures against child marriage in the country. Child marriage is illegal in Bangladesh; arrangement of child marriage is criminalized and is punishable with one month imprisonment for the parents of the bride. The sanction is imposed only occasionally and it tends to be ignored by parents. A lot of NGO- and CBO-workers, educators and other stakeholders believe that the punishment is not sufficient: they plead passionately for higher sanction(s) and their stricter applications. However, it is questionable if the proponents of harsher approaches consider how such measures might impact on the lives, let alone the wellbeing, of the girls who need protection. With the current regime prospective brides feel guilty that their parents (might) go to prison; they believe that any potential misery that the family has to endure will be their fault; they understand-all too well- that the economic position of the family will be jeopardized (the poorer the girl the higher the chance she is forced to marry at early age; many of these girls come from the poorest families of farmers without land: these families are referred to as 'the ultra poor'). This probably explains reports concerning many girls who, despite being subjected to a forced marriage by their parents, are willing to obstruct its prevention.

Another specific aspect that deserves to be mentioned refers to the perceptions and explanations that exist in the society, and certainly among NGO workers and educators, about the root causes of child marriage. The negative consequences of the child marriage are well recognized and an increasing number of people is aware of them; still child marriage continues to be a wide spread problem and therefore many people are trying to understand -and explain- what contributes to the sustainability of this harmful phenomenon. Observing debates on the issue and asking feedback from people who work in the field of child protection and education during the course of this study provides interesting insights. The dominant explanation for child marriage goes like this: it is the lack of security faced by girls who attend school that forces parents to arrange their marriages as soon as girls might start attracting the attention of boys and men. The widespread phenomenon of eve teasing contributes to maintaining this perception. Still in every single community where interviews and focus group discussions took place the cases of rape (and other serious forms of sexual harassment) were hugely outnumbered by the cases of child marriage. In practice, it means that parents trying to prevent a sexual assault (rape) of their daughter choose to subject her to a kind of 'legal rape', marrying her to an- often - much older man, whom she never met before. When confronted with this observation literally all respondents reluctantly admitted that actually parents may not much be motivated by the best interest of their daughters as by 'economic reasons'. A logical assumption is that 'economic reasons' is an euphemism for poverty. But actually the respondents explain that girls are often seen as

[4] Van Oudenhoven and Jualla: The cultural context of young boys and girls: home, neighborhood and school (upcoming publication in Journal of Playwork Practice, April issue, 2014

[5] A recent review on the issues related to Gender Based Violence in general and child- and forced- marriage in particular can be found in Tajul Islam and Rokkon Uddin (2013) Customary Laws, Norms and Practices in Bangladesh. Perspective: Gender Based Violence. Dhaka: Plan International Bangladesh/GPP

a 'burden' and the money spent on their education is considered a 'lost investment' since if anyone would gain from it – this might be the family of the future husband; and then it comes the issue of dowry, etc. These findings are not shockingly new, but here comes the twist: some NGO workers and educators made the point that child marriage was neither a phenomenon restricted to the poor who couldn't provide for their families; nor was it limited to the rural areas. A colleague shared that a well-off family living in his neighborhood married their 12-year old daughter; and it is not that their daughter was in any way or form harassed or threatened, nor that her family couldn't pay for her education or in need of dowry to survive economically. Others added that this was by far not an exceptional case; 'it is a matter of mentality' was their conclusion.

There could be hardly any doubt that both safety and 'economic' consideration play a role when an adolescent girl faces the prospect of early marriage. There are other - social, cultural – factors that work to maintain this tradition; understanding the survival mechanisms of the social institution 'child marriage' may help the process of designing more effective intervention and prevention strategies.

The child marriage casts a long shadow over multiple aspects of the position of adolescent girls in Bangladesh; many of the examples, observations or arguments presented below are related in one way or another to this tradition.

Eve teasing

Just like the child marriage, much has already been said and written about eve teasing. Here too, the focus is on some specific aspects.

One can be forgiven if, after spending a couple of days in Bangladesh talking about teenagers, one gets the impression that every encounter between boys and girls constitutes some form of sexual harassment. The term *eve teasing* is very often used and apparently covers quite a wide range of accidents, incidents and encounters. Along with accounts for serious sexual harassment cases, the respondents gave examples which might occur in any school or school surrounding area anywhere in Asia, Europe or Africa (such examples include seemingly harmless jokes, invitations or attempts to engage in a talk).[6]

The possible overuse of the term *eve teasing* should not disguise the fact that the phenomenon exists in quite ugly forms, too. There are regular incidents involving adolescent boys and girls which even by most minimal standards should be qualified as sexual harassment. Apparently a major motivation for such behavior by adolescent boys is their desire to avenge 'a refused friendship'. The respondents (both boys and girls) provide numerous anecdotal accounts that point to increased probability of *eve teasing* if a girl 'turns down' one boy but 'accepts the friendship' of another. The respondents were quick to emphasize that here 'friendship' does not refer to an intimate relations. Apparently *eve teasing* serves also as a mode to express hurt feeling, jealousy and probably a large scope of other negative emotions. There is an apparent lack of possibilities to ventilate stress, unmet expectations and complex emotions that young people may experience. This combined with the clear lack of possibilities for communication between boys and girls, and the associated with it skills and attitudes, goes some way to explain (but not justify) the *eve teasing*.[7] The true psycho-social roots of the

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[6] See also below the section on the segregation between boys and girls; probably it is indeed the segregation, the norms it stems form and the impacts it has that explain the broad interpretation of *eve teasing* as well as why it occurs.

[7] Maybe not surprisingly the phrase 'adam teasing' was mentioned too: girls too 'ventilate', are interested in communicating with boys, but do not have the experience of such communications and the skills that it generates. They apparently replicate the practices to which they are subjected. The great difference is of course

phenomenon require much deeper analysis than this text can provide; those presented here hint, rather, to possible intervention strategies.

The segregation between girls and boys

There are girls who are unaware why boys eve-tease and believe it is because 'boys are like this' or 'boys are bad'; fortunately, many other girls are not satisfied with simplistic explanations such as these. Many female respondents, without always formulating it in clear language, showed understanding that boys are eager to communicate with girls but do not always know how to do this. They realized, all too well, that any attempt for such communication was strongly discouraged by the adults and that boys were caught between the strong social norms and their desire and impulses and that this antagonism often has an impact on their behavior. Girls readily admit that they, too, are interested in boys and would like to have meaningful communication with them.[8]

Girls clearly see a link between the *eve teasing* and the lack of communications between boys and girls; both boys and girls understand that the lack of communication is directly associated with lack of communication skills and variety of prejudices. The apparent response to this situation is to stimulate the communication between adolescent boys and girls, to open up 'social spaces' where they can meet each other, develop the necessary skills and start challenging the social perception that every encounter between boys and girls is *eve teasing* that probably would end up with a rape. It is also clear that such an change might provoke a lot of social debate and thus has to be to introduced in a delicate, gradual manner.

Schools seem a good place to experiment with this idea. But there, too, the segregation between girls and boys is strong. Large numbers of girls and boys study in separate schools (respectively 'girl schools' or 'boy schools') but even when they are in the so called 'mixed schools' girls and boys do not actually mix. The photo is telling: they sit apart in the classroom, and in the breaks between the classes entertain themselves apart too. If a mixed school has some additional facilities, they only reinforce the segregation; more than that: as a rule they are for boys only. This is often 'explained' with 'poverty': 'Bangladesh is a poor country, we can't afford to build a separate facility for the girls', 'we can't afford to have also a scout organization for girls due to the lack of resources'. The fact that usually the extracurricular services are only for boys, of course, points to deeply rooted social inequalities. Poverty is often used excuse to justify inequalities but apparently the reverse connection is not contemplated: no one reflects on the well known studies demonstrating that gender equality contributes to decrease in poverty.

The observation about unequal investment in boys and girls might be easily misinterpreted. It, almost intuitively, provokes the question: 'why do you always invest in additional facilities for boys, and not for girls?'. This is a legitimate question too but probably the better question to be asked in the given

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that the worst forms of 'adam teasing' do not go further than mocking and mild forms of emotional abuse and are not comparable with the negative effects of *eve teasing*.
[8] 'Going beyond hi- hello', as one of the girls expressed it.

context is: 'why are the existing facilities not made available for both boys and girls?'. Often only minor rearrangements will make it possible to extend the use of the existing facilities and services to girls; minimal amount of resources are needed to provide access of girls to variety of services, and to disarm the poverty argument. Instead, there are signs that existing inequalities are being addressed by creating separate services and facilities for girls: sport facilities, girls clubs etc. The benefits of the existing girls clubs are not disputed here but a critical question is if it is not time to go beyond 'girls only' provisions in order to overcome the segregation between boys and girls.

Girls themselves tend to underestimate their position and rights

The number of these girls is apparently not inconsiderable since they clearly come in sight even in the framework of a short term field visit. The most clear illustration to this are the reactions of some of the adolescent girls – respondents who think that their parents are better placed to choose a husband and know better what it is the right time to get married. It sounds like a cliché: the less educated, the poorer and from the more remote areas these girls are, the higher the chance that they accept, or even, expect that their parents will make the most important choices for them. As sad as it may sound it is not a really unexpected finding. It also reaffirms the perceptions of the majority of the respondents with different backgrounds. Many commented that such girls feel that they do not contribute sufficiently to the family wellbeing (working in the household somehow doesn't count). Interestingly enough though, also some respondents- adolescent girls who work and earn money independently (i.e. their incomes are completely independent from the activities of their parents[9]) believe that their parents know better whom they should marry and when. This raises the question to what extend the assumption that young women who achieve (a degree of) economic independence are able to emancipate themselves from the dominant role of their parents (or husbands). Given that this assumption is already applied in designing interventions probably further research on the factors that support adolescent girls and young women on their path to self-determining socio-economic participation will increase the effectiveness of the ongoing and future programs.[10]

The fear of the 'neighbor'

As already pointed out the term *eve teasing* covers a wide semantic area and can refer to a variety of encounters that might be interpreted differently by different people.

But the consequences of the encounters between girls and boys go beyond the semantics. Interestingly enough many girls report that they are more afraid of what the neighbors will report to their parents about encounters and talks with boys on the way to school than the encounters themselves. The main fear is that if a girl is seen to speak with a boy (and not only on the way to and back from the school) the 'neighbors' might get 'concerned' about boys being interested in the girl or 'even worse' the girl having interest in boys. Once this happens her parents (should) consider her safety endangered and the 'classical' protection strategy should be applied: namely, to arrange (quickly) her marriage. A substantial number of girls report that it is not the reaction of the parents but the influence of the neighbors that they fear most; this finding is corroborated in another recent study (Islam and Uddin, 2013). If a girl is approached by a boy and no action by the family is taken (i.e. attempt to arrange a marriage) it is feared that the family reputation might suffer; the less urbanized the area the more

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[9] The girls run the shop on their own; they were supported by a NGO initiative to set up the shop.
[10] To this end the role of education might turn out to be of crucial importance: interviews with girls who study in college and girls who have dropped out but already work and contribute to the financial wellbeing of the family show strong differences in opinions and attitudes. Such differences might turn to be even bigger when it comes to girls who dropped out of school and are 'confined' to household work or are subjected to child marriage.

likely this scenario is. This way the figure of the 'neighbor' comes to personify harmful 'traditional' attitudes. Ability to resist negative (peer) pressure is probably a skill which needs to be stimulated not only among the adolescents but also among adults, especially –parents.

Sexual harassment by teachers and caregivers

This topic is not a popular one; one reason might be that such incidents happen relatively rarely, or rather, are reported rarely; it is possible explanation but it is difficult to say if it is a probable one. The topic was addressed openly only at one occasion during this field study, in a focus group discussion with well educated respondents, conscious of the importance of the issue and open to the challenges facing the Bangladeshi society. The respondents admitted that abuses by teachers and caregivers were always there, although never a popular topic for discussion. An adult participant shared some first-hand accounts from her own past as a school girl and no one in the group doubted that 'such things' take place nowadays too although no one would try to speculate on the scope of the problem. More and more specific research is clearly needed here.

Recommendations

Joint activities for boys and girls. This recommendation is based on the understanding that providing space for normal communication between adolescent boys and girls has the potential to decrease the level of eve teasing. It will change boys' understanding on what is a normal way to approach a girl and will teach them the necessary skills to communicate with girls. It will do the same to girls, since apparently girls too – as they themselves readily admit - are not always able or have the skills to approach boys or to respond in a proper way. And here it is meant not only to learn to say ''no'', to resist negative pressure, to stand one's own ground but also to learn not to assume always aggressive or abusive intentions on behalf of the boys. Girls need to have the esteem to perceive themselves equal to the boys; part of it is also to be able to respond in a positive, open-minded way. No training, sessions of the girls clubs or any other initiative that takes place in a segregated environment will be able to replace the skills and self-esteem they can acquire in a face-to-face exchange with boys. The same for boys: only the real-life experience can provide them with the skills and attitudes they need to communicate in a positive and respectful way with girls (moreover given that they have to do this in an unfavorable social environment).

Probably the most logical place to start is the school. Of course not all school staff will be immediately open to this suggestion but there are definitely sufficient number of educators who see the problems created by the segregation between boys and girls. They together with the members of the girls' clubs and the first boys that are willing to attend the open sessions of the girls' clubs are better positioned to come up with specific suggestions for activities than any outsider.

Addressing the concerns parents' fears and prejudices vis-à-vis child marriages. Hardening sanctions against parents or stricter reinforcement of existing ones most probably won't help. The parents and caregivers should see the NGO and CBO staff as their supporters, not opponents. The NGO and CBO workers and local administration should realize what it means for a girl that her parents are sent to prison because of her marriage: what the effects of parental imprisonment are on the girl herself, her siblings still dependent on the parents, and on the welfare of the family in general. It is understood that this recommendation is very difficult to be operationalised. Most probably the best way is not to design a special activity for it but rather to change the attitude in the field work with the parents, to show them that their concerns are taken seriously. Parents have to understand that forcing their daughters into marriage instead of letting them to finish school leads to the outcome they (supposedly) try to prevent as well as to substantial decrease of the developmental chances of their daughters. To this end it is necessary that active (field) work is conducted with the parents (e.g. as part of the existing and proposed below activities, e.g. see below the *Bollywood evenings*) as well as that there is strictly imposed zero tolerance policy towards sexual harassment and assaults; in practice it means that all cases of sexual abuse have to be vigorously reported and prosecuted.

Bringing to the surface the discussions that take place in segregated circles. Eve teasing, child marriage, poverty and how families deal with it are, of course, issues discussed in the Bangladeshi society. However, girls talk about these topics with girls, boys with boys, and adults with adults. If ever these themes are addressed among adults and youngsters (the perception is that) the talk is more hierarchical rather then an open exchange of opinions. Changing the communications patterns requires deep changes in the social texture and will be naïve to claim that things will change radically as a result of several year of intervention aiming at improving the position of the girls. But such a process can be given a start, or where it is already taking shape – to be supported and accelerated. To this end, the following initiatives might be considered:

Opening the girls' clubs to boys. In a large number of schools, and not only in Shariatpur, girls' clubs are established and function. The girls who attend these clubs demonstrated clear signs of improved self-esteem, more open attitudes towards the world and their own future, and leadership skills. Some of them already intuitively understand the limitations of the girls' clubs; when they discuss issues such as eve teasing, the obvious absentees are boys.

Most probably the best first step to 'open communication channels' between adolescent girls and boys will be to open up the girls' clubs to boys; for example, twice a month there could be club sessions for all adolescents (thus not specifically naming boys as a group and provoking negative reactions). At least in the beginning such session have to be well structured, monitored (supervised) and with quite straightforward agendas. This is required not so much to guide the discussions but rather to reassure the local communities ('the neighbors', see above) that opening sessions of the girls' clubs to boys will not 'demoralize' youth and destroy the 'healthy social fundaments'. Once such meetings take root and the participants start feeling confident about attending them hopefully they will lead to improved communication between adolescent girls and boys and widen the scope of encounters. This is turn will open the doors for more initiatives aiming at desegregation.

Bollywood evenings. Watching Bollywood movies in Bangladesh is quite a popular leisure time activity, but apparently this too happens in a segregated environments. Tellingly, girls and their mothers might watch the same movie at the same time but in different physical spaces (and men apparently like Bollywood productions too: see the picture). Apparently a large number of popular Bollywood stories circles around the theme of forced marriage and these scripts are also commented upon but again in segregated settings.

Why not together? Of course this is easier said than done but in any case organizing evenings where (parts) of popular Bollywood movies are screened and then jointly discussed might prove an promising way to initiate an open discussion between generations and between sexes on the important issue of forced marriages.

Bringing together school going girls and their peers who dropped out and married, might be another way to address the issue of segregation, this time in relation to its socio-economic dimension. The specific design of this activity, also here, can be better provided by the girls themselves (e.g. the girls who attend the girls clubs). The point here is that supporting the female school drop outs to stay in touch with the school environment might have a number of beneficial effects, and hopefully for at least some of them might result in an effort to return to school. It might also have an effect to reaffirm the commitment of girls who are still at school to stay there.

Evening and out of school-time classes for parents (especially for mothers). The primary objective would be to provide the most disadvantaged parents with basic literacy and numeracy skills, which in turn should have a positive effect on their self-esteem, ability to communicate and conduct their economic activities. Given that the lesson on the 'Returns of Female Education' made it to the English textbooks for grade 10 of the Bangladeshi schools (see the picture), probably the time has come to learn this lesson. But probably the more important objective is to convince the parents in the added value that a completed course of education might have on the developmental chances of their daughters.

Further research. The section on the findings already outlined several areas where further research might lead to better design of intervention strategies. Here only two of these topics are underlined specifically.

A topic where further inquires could result in better future interventions is the issue of *sexual harassment by teachers and caregivers*. This is a difficult theme, neither adolescents nor adults will be eager to talk about it and any further research on the subject has to be performed in a ethically sound and responsible way.

Another potentially fruitful area, from the point of view of future interventions, is developing further understanding of parents' decision-making process when it comes to child marriage. The phenomenon of child marriage and the related social norms and practices are well studied; it has been on the agendas of NGO and policy makers for years and but the child marriage is still a major issue. So probably future studies should be centered around questions like: what makes child marriage such a persistent social institution? What are the mechanisms that shape the parental decision making process? What is missing in the existing intervention strategies and how to design more successful ones?