

**Adolescent-to-Adolescent Development:
A Pilot Assessment of Adolescent Peer Organised Network**

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Contents

Abstract	iii
Introduction	1
Adolescent development programme of BRAC	2
The adolescent peer organised network	3
The issues of adolescent-to-adolescent development	4
Objectives	4
Methodology	5
Limitations	6
Findings	6
The respondents	6
Knowledge acquired through APON course	7
Assessment of attitudes	12
Dissemination of knowledge	17
Leadership development	18
Perception about course contents	20
Discussion and Conclusion	21
<i>Bibliography</i>	24
<i>Annexes</i>	25

Abstract

This is an early assessment of BRAC's Adolescent Peer Organised Network (APON) programme – an initiative towards adolescent-to-adolescent development in order to acquire and share knowledge through peer organised network. This study aimed to examine the knowledge of the participants of this programme, measure changes in their attitude, know status of knowledge dissemination, whether leadership skills are developed, and know perception of the course participants and others. Data were collected from 200 adolescents from two areas (team offices) of two regions under BRAC Education Programme. A half of the sampled adolescents was programme participants and the rest non-participants. The selected adolescents were interviewed using structured questionnaire, which contained a test and related questions. Focus group discussions were also held with the programme participants and their mothers separately. Findings reveal that the APON course participants had significantly better knowledge than the non-participants in different social, legal, health and environmental issues. Their attitude on some issues was positively different than the non-participants. The course participants disseminated their knowledge to others, especially among the peer adolescents. The initiative developed leadership quality among the participants to some extent. The course is being accepted gradually in the society. This course would benefit the adolescents if they can implement their knowledge in real life situation, for instance, through linking this course with occupation and everyday life and continuing the network for longer period.

Introduction

Adolescence is demographically dense stage of life when individuals make a series of highly consequential life course transitions. The issues of adolescence have recently emerged as a distinct phenomenon in the development discourse. It is a transitional period of life that occurs between childhood and adulthood. Consequences of this stage vary from culture to culture. However, it is a time when individuals learn to be socially responsible for themselves and for their actions (Bnacroft and Reinisch 1990). The timing and the nature of these transitions from school to work to marriage and childbearing can have important implications during adolescence and later in life.

The number of young people on earth is more than ever before. Over a quarter of the global population (1.7 billion) belongs to the age group 10-24 years. Eighty six percent of them live in the developing world, often with limited access to basic education, economic opportunities, and health care, including family planning and reproductive health information and services. They are often denied basic rights, and needs, and face a unique set of challenges in their transition to adulthood (UNF 2003).

Adolescents today constitute more than a fifth of the population of Bangladesh. While data on this group is scattered and patchy, a recent review by UNICEF Bangladesh highlights some disturbing facts about the situation of adolescents, especially the girls (UNICEF, 2003). It shows –

- More than a half of the adolescent girls are illiterate.
- Almost a half of the girls are married by the age of 15, and 60 percent become mothers by the age of 19.
- Sixty percent of the girls of age 15-19 years are employed, predominantly in low-wage and insecure sectors of the economy.
- More than a half of the adolescent girls are under-nourished and suffer from anaemia.
- The majority of adolescent girls are uninformed or insufficiently informed about reproductive health and contraception.

Considering the backward situation of the adolescent girls, the government of Bangladesh, in collaboration with UNICEF, introduced a project called 'Empowerment of Adolescent Girls' or '*Kisohri Abhijan*'. The objective of this *Abhijan* is to promote a gender equitable environment where girls can widen their choices, participate in empowering social and economic processes and realise their potential as agent for social change. This project is based on the expectation that effective education and livelihood experiences are essential for the well being of adolescents. Adolescent groups or networks in some rural districts are supported under this project. These are implemented by two non-governmental organisations (NGO), BRAC and the Centre for Mass Education and Science (CMES). The BRAC part is called Adolescent Peer Organised Network (APON) and the CMES part is called Adolescent Girls' Programme (AGP) (Department of Women's Affairs, 2002). The objective of the project is to increase visibility of adolescent girls as a special interest group in the media and in national policies and programmes.

Adolescent Development Programme of BRAC

BRAC has long experience in providing basic education to adolescents. The Adolescent Development Programme (ADP) arose out of BRAC's education programme. ADP aims to develop leadership and professional skills among the adolescents (Draft proposal Phase IV, 2004-2009, BRAC Education Programme). The specific goals of the programme are to (i) empower adolescent girls and develop their confidence and leadership skills; (ii) provide life skills to become responsible members of their families, communities, and the country at large; (iii) change traditional rural perceptions of the capabilities and value of girls; (iv) provide adolescent girls with a network of peer support; and (v) encourage adolescent girls to continue their education. The programme targets the adolescent girls who did not continue schooling after completing three-year basic education course in BRAC schools.

Reading Centres (RC) were opened under this programme to help the girls retain their literacy, numeracy, and life skills knowledge. Over the time, these centres became a safe place for the participant girls where they could socialise, play indoor games, sing, dance, and gossip. It created an open space for their own which they can enjoy outside their homes. Adolescents who did not study in BRAC schools are also welcomed in

these centres. Similar but separate initiative for the adolescent boys was also taken later. APON is an added component of BRAC's ADP. In addition, some livelihood training on journalism, photography, computer, poultry, and sewing are offered for the members. They are also developed as peer educator and supervisor of APON course, monitor of reading centres, and librarian for reading centres.

The Adolescent Peer Organised Network

This is basically a five months course for the members of the Reading Centres. However, other interested persons including married adolescents are also welcomed. The course contains life skill issues that would teach the adolescents the facts about many issues that are taboos in traditional Bangladeshi society. The contents taught in the APON course can be classified into four broad categories – health, environment, legal and social issues. The health section includes reproductive health, family planning, birth registration, sexually transmitted diseases, maternity and childcare, and consequence of iodine deficiency. The environmental part contains air, water and soil pollution. The legal section include, laws relating to marriage registration and divorce, inheritance law, acid attack, early marriage and child trafficking. The social issues are gender equality, attitude towards disable persons, importance of women's involvement in income generating activities and bad affect of dowry and polygamy.

Number of adolescents in each course is 20–30, who participate in 40 classes. Duration of each class is two hours and the classes held twice a week. The participants are encouraged to disseminate their learning among family members and other adolescents who did not participate in the course. On completion of the course ideas sharing meetings are arranged once a month for the next 13 months.

APON classes for the girls are held in the Reading Centres, while boys' APON classes are held in the secondary schools. Any adolescent girl in the community with some education can join the course. However, only the boys of secondary schools can join the course. This programme is running in 26 regions, and 3,260 courses have been completed so far.

The Issue of adolescent-to-adolescent development

One important feature of BRAC Adolescent Development Programme is that a significant portion of the activities of the Reading Centres are operated and managed by the adolescent girls themselves. They are preferably the graduates of BEOC schools staying in the nearby areas of the Centres. For instance, two adolescent girls, known as Adolescent Leaders (AL) operate each Reading Centre. There are *Kishori* Supervisors (KS) who are responsible to supervise the activities of 5–6 Reading Centres. Adolescent Monitors (AM) frequently monitor the activities of the Centres. All of them are selected through training on the basis of their performance. They are considered as part time staff of BRAC.

For facilitating the APON course, two adolescent girls – called Peer Educators are also selected through the same training. The girls showing very good performance in the training are selected for the tasks. In some cases the same girls act as Adolescent Leaders and Peer Educators. It depends on their willingness and performance in the training. This basic training helps the selected adolescents understand what basically they would do with their assignment. The peer educators are given refreshers training on a monthly basis.

During the follow-up period, the participants of the course and the Peer Educators meet regularly once a month and revise what they taught earlier. They discuss about the demonstration activities, its pros and cons, and try to find out the solutions if any problem arose.

The above description gives an idea how the adolescents play roles in their own development – from facilitating in APON courses to supervising Reading Centres and disseminating their knowledge to the peers.

Objectives

The broad objective of this study was to assess the effectiveness of the APON course. The specific objectives were to:

- examine knowledge retention of the course participants over time
- measure changes in attitude of the course participants

- know whether the course participants disseminated knowledge to others
- know whether leadership skills have been developed among the adolescents
- know perception of the course participants, their mothers and community people regarding the issues taught in the APON course.

Methodology

Both quantitative and qualitative research techniques were used in this study. Data were collected from two teams¹ – Feni Sadar of Feni region and Boraigram of Natore region. Except in one region the APON course was mostly arranged for the girls, thus the study covered them only, not the boys. Number of courses completed under these teams was 22 in Feni Sadar and 36 in Boraigram. From each team 10 courses were selected randomly – five from the first batch and five from the second batch. The courses of the first batch completed in the first quarter of the year 2002 and the second batch in the fourth quarter of the same year. Under each team 50 course participants equally distributed by batch were selected for interview. The BRAC graduates especially the girls of similar age, live in the programme villages but not participated in the course were chosen as comparison group. Selection of the adolescents was not random; availability in the villages was the main concern. Table 1 gives a distribution of sample by team. Two hundred adolescents were interviewed through a structured questionnaire to measure their knowledge, attitude and extent of knowledge dissemination.

Table 1. Sample distribution by team office

Name of the team	Programme group		Control group	All
	First batch	Second batch		
Boraigram	25	25	50	100
Feni sadar	25	25	50	100
All	50	50	100	200

In addition, five Focus Group Discussions (FGD) (three in Feni and two in Boraigram) were held with the course participants and four with their mothers (two in each of Feni and Boraigram). In total, 46 adolescents and 39 mothers attended the FGDs. Checklists were used in the FGDs. Opinions of the community members were not sought directly;

¹ Team is the lowest management setup in BRAC Education Programme.

the adolescents and their mothers' observation regarding community people's attitude was collected through the FGDs.

Temporarily recruited four female field investigators did the structured interviews and the concerned researchers conducted the FGDs. The field investigators were provided adequate training before sending them for the actual work, however the researchers supervised them in the field. Quantitative part of the data was analysed through computer and the qualitative part manually. Conceptualisation, data collection and analysis, and report writing took only five weeks starting from 1 July 2003.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations. Firstly, it was done within a short period, thus a limited number of issues were explored. No statistically valid estimates could be generated due to smaller sample size. This study covered only two of the 179 teams. However, authenticity of information collected was not compromised. Secondly, boys were not considered because of their limited activity in only one region. Thirdly, a significant proportion of the course participants got married and was not available in the areas during the fieldwork. Thus, no random technique was possible to apply for their selection.

Findings

The respondents

This section presents background information of the respondents of both the groups i.e., the APON course participants and the non-participants. Mean age of the respondents of both the groups was mostly equal, 16.2 years for the course participants and 16.1 years for the non-participants. This course was offered for those having some years of schooling. Mean years of schooling for the course participants were 6.9 years, which was 6.3 years for the non-participants. A third of the APON course participants and 44 percent of the non-participants were currently enrolled in various kinds of educational institutions. Ninety two percent of the APON course participants and 79 percent of the non-participants were unmarried during data collection. Thirty five percent of the course participants and a quarter of the non-participants regularly enjoyed programme on TV.

Table 2. Background information of the respondents

Indicators	APON	Non-APON
Mean age (years)	16.2	16.1
Mean years of schooling (years)	6.9	6.3
Current in any educational institution (%)	33.0	44.0
Unmarried respondents (%)	92.0	79.0
Watch programme on TV regularly (%)	35.0	24.0

Knowledge acquired through APON course

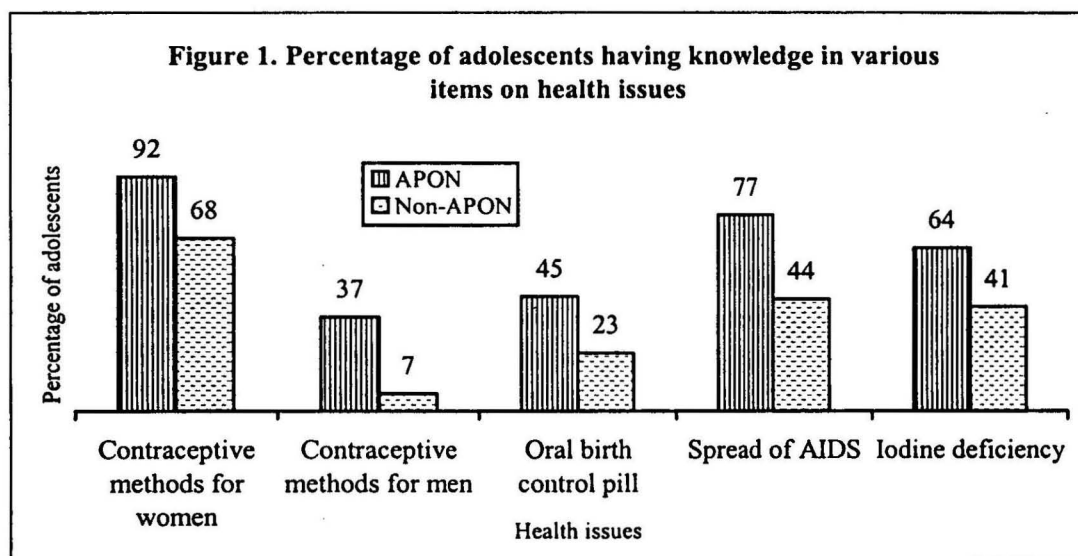
Adolescent girls' acquisition of knowledge through their participation in the APON courses was assessed. Their knowledge was also compared with a similar group of adolescents of similar age and living in the same areas. The test instrument was developed containing 18 questions covering all the major issues taught in the APON course. The issues were related to health, environment, legal and social.

On health related issues

Five questions on health related issues were placed in the test. These were:

1. What are the temporary contraceptive methods for women?
2. What are the permanent contraceptive methods for men?
3. How many oral birth control pills should be taken at a time if it is not taken for the last two consecutive days?
4. How does HIV/AIDS is spread?
5. What are the diseases occurred due to iodine deficiency?

The adolescents who participated in the APON course did significantly better in all the five questions than those who did not. The course participants did much better in temporary contraceptive methods for women, and worst in male contraceptive methods. Ninety two percent of the course participants had knowledge about temporary contraceptive methods for women; on the other hand, only 37 percent of them had knowledge about permanent contraceptive methods for male. Seventy seven percent of the course participants had knowledge about ways of spreading HIV/AIDS virus while it was 44 percent for the non-participants. Similarly, 64 percent of the course participants had knowledge about the diseases occurred in the human body due to iodine deficiency, it was 41 percent for the non-participants. Figure 1 presents percentage of adolescents having knowledge in various health issues.



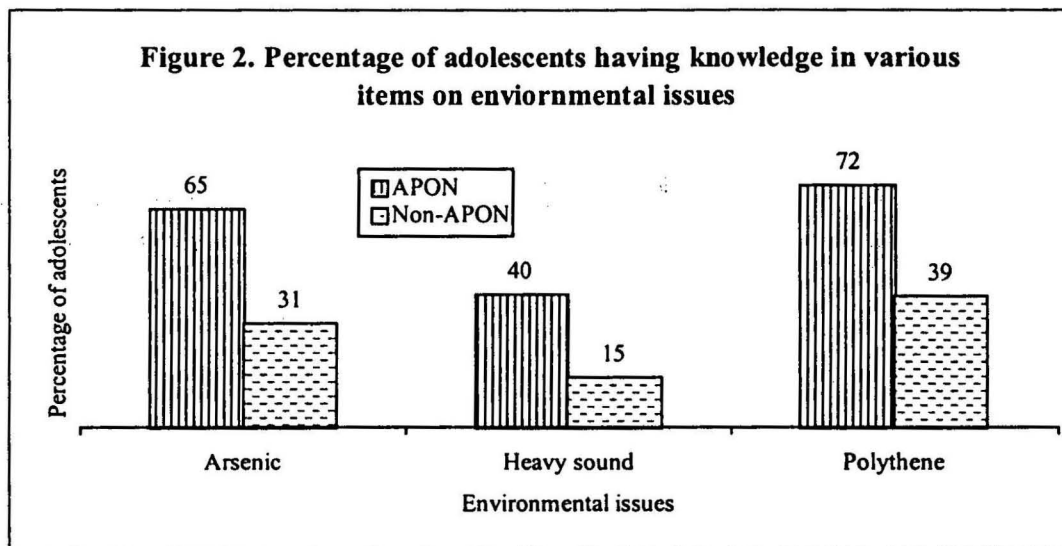
Annex 1 provides this analysis in detail. It shows that the APON course participants of both the batches did equally good in three items of birth control methods, i.e., contraceptive methods for women, contraceptive methods for men, and oral birth control pill. On the other hand, the participants of the first batch showed better performance in the question on HIV/AIDS than the participants of the second batch (90 percent vs. 64 percent, $p < 0.001$). The course participants of the second batch did better (76 percent) than the course participants of the first batch (52 percent) on the knowledge about iodine deficiency. The participants of the second batch showed significantly better performance in all the questions than the non-participants. However, the performance of the participants of the first batch was equal to that of the non-participants in two items (oral birth control pill and iodine deficiency). The participants had better performance than the non-participants in the remaining three items.

On environmental issues

Three questions on environmental issues were placed in the test. The questions were:

1. What food is preferred if someone is affected by arsenic?
2. What health hazard is there among the labourers if heavy sound occurs in workplace?
3. How does polythene affects environment?

A significant proportion of the APON course participants had knowledge in all the three items on environmental issues than the non-participants (Figure 2). Seventy two percent of the participants had knowledge about bad effects of polythene on environment, 65 percent knew about preferred food for arsenic affected persons and 40 percent knew about potential health hazard due to heavy sound at work place. These rates for non-participants were 39 percent, 31 percent and 15 percent for the respective issues.



Annex 2 shows that the participants of both the batches showed equal performance in all the three items. The non-participants did worse than the course participants of both the batches.

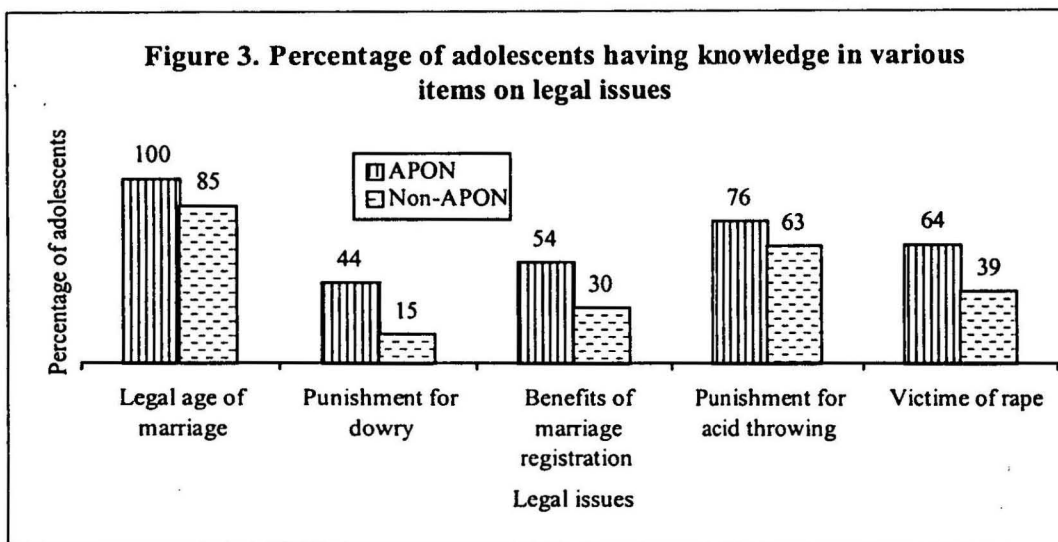
On legal issues

The following five questions were asked in the test on legal issues:

1. What is the minimum legal age for girls to marry?
2. What is the punishment for dowry?
3. What is the benefit for women if marriage is registered?
4. What is the legal punishment for acid throwing?
5. What should be done if someone is victim of rape?

A significantly higher proportion of the adolescents who participated in the APON course had knowledge in legal issues than those did not participate in the course. The

highest performing item for both the groups was minimum legal age of marriage for girls. All the course participants knew the correct answer to this question. However, it was 85 percent among the non-participants. Of the items on legal issues, poor performing item was 'punishment for dowry'; only 44 percent of the APON course participants knew the correct answer to this question, which was only 15 percent for the non-participants. Figure 3 provides percentage of respondents correctly answering the items on legal issues.



The APON course participants of both the batches showed equal performance in all the five items in legal issues (Annex 3). The participants of the second batch showed better performance in all the items than the non-participants. However, the participants of the first batch were ahead of the non-participants in four items except knowledge about punishment against acid throwers. An equal proportion of the course participants of the first batch and the non-participants had knowledge in punishment for acid throwing.

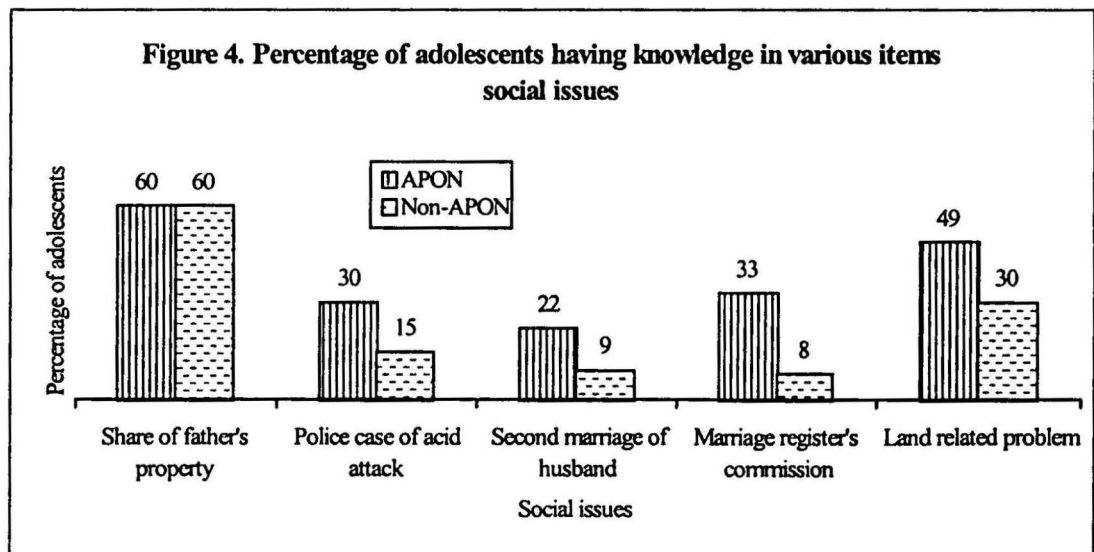
On social issues

The following five questions were asked in the test on social issues:

1. What are the shares a sister and a brother get from father's property?
2. What should be done if police does not record a case for acid attack?

3. What is the legal punishment for a husband if he gets a second marriage without having permission from his first wife?
4. What is the rate of commission for marriage register if the ceremony is held at home?
5. Who should be consulted for land related problems/dispute?

Of the five questions on social issues, the APON course participants showed significantly better performance in four items (Figure 4). The course participants and the non-participants showed equal performance in knowledge about sisters' and brothers' share of father's property. Majority of the APON course participants had very poor knowledge in three items of the social issues. A third of the course participants knew the rate of commission for marriage register if the ceremony was held at home, 30 percent knew their doings if police did not record a case for acid attack, and only 22 percent knew about legal punishment for husband if he got a second marriage without having permission from his first wife (Figure 4).



Annex 4 shows that the APON course participants of the second batch had poor knowledge in 'brothers and sisters share of fathers property' compared to other two groups. An equal proportion of the course participants of both the batches had knowledge in other four items. The participants of the second batch showed better

knowledge than the non-participants in all five items. On the other hand, the participants of the first batch showed better knowledge than the non-participants in four items. An equal proportion (difference was not significant) of the respondents of these two groups had knowledge in the item on second marriage of husband.

Mean number of correct items

Earlier analysis showed that of the 18 items in the test, the APON course participants did better in 17 than the non-participants. Almost equal performance was observed only in one item (share of sisters' and brothers' on father's property). Mean number of correct items in each of the issues by sub-groups of respondents is provided in Table 3. The programme participants showed better performance in each of the areas of assessment. Of the 18 items in the test, on average, both the groups of APON course participants correctly answered over 10 items, which was 6.2 for non-participants. This means that on average, the course participants of the first batch made correct answers to 57.2 percent of the total items, second batch made correct answers to 56.7 percent of the items and the non-participants made correct answers to only 34.4 percent of the items.

Table 3. Mean number of items correctly answering by study groups and assessment issues

Issues	Number of questions	First batch of APON	Second batch of APON	Non-APON
Health	5	3.1	3.3	1.8
Environment	3	1.8	1.8	0.9
Legal	5	3.4	3.3	2.3
Social	5	2.1	1.8	1.2
All	18 (100%)	10.3 (57.2%)	10.2 (56.7%)	6.2 (34.4%)

Assessment of attitude

One of the objectives of the Adolescent Development Programme was to bring positive changes in attitude of the course participants that can help them play progressive role in their personal and social lives. Scanning the texts used in the APON course, eight statements were made on different issues and the respondents were asked to provide their opinion in a five-point scale. The statements were as follows:

1. Women should not get out of home during menstruation.
2. If there are two daughters in a family, a third pregnancy should be considered for a son.

3. AIDS can affect one if he/she works or seats together with an AIDS patient.
4. Cooking, child rearing, cleaning are women's responsibility only.
5. In a farmer family men should take more food than women, because they work in the field.
6. Men cannot do hard work if vasectomy is done.
7. Dowry can be considered okay if the bridegroom uses the money for business purpose and get it back later to his wife's family.
8. Use of polythene bag is convenient for carrying purposes, so it can be used.

It can be seen that all the above statements were negative in the sense that the programme does not want to have such attitude among the course participants. Again, general attitude in the community is in favour of these statements. Thus, disagreeing with the statements was considered as positive change in attitude. Table 4 presents a summary of the findings and Annex 5 provides the findings with some details.

Table 4. Percentage of respondents who did not agree with the given statements

Issues	Sub-groups		Significance
	APON	Non-APON	
Women should not get out of home during menstruation	72.0	49.0	p<0.001
If there are two daughters in a family, a third pregnancy should be considered for a son	80.0	66.0	p<0.05
AIDS can affect one if he/she works or seats together with a AIDS patient	77.0	43.0	p<0.001
Cooking, child rearing, cleaning are only women's responsibility	63.0	51.0	ns
In a farmer family men should take more food than women, because they work in the field	79.0	46.0	p<0.001
Men can't do hard work if vasectomy is committed	33.0	11.0	p<0.001
Dowry can be considered as all right if the bridegroom uses the money for business purposes and get it back to his wife's family	63.0	59.0	ns
Use of polythene bag is harmonious for carrying purposes, so it can be used	71.0	43.0	p<0.01

Of the eight statements placed to the respondents, significant difference in attitude was observed (at different levels in different issues) between the course participants and the non-participants in six. These are on menstruation, son preference, AIDS, food distribution, vasectomy, and the use of polythene. In case of household work and dowry

no significant difference was observed between the course participants and the non-participants. More respondents (67 percent of course participants and 89 percent of the non-participants) of both the groups had negative attitude about physical strength after vasectomy. The reason may lie that all the respondents were girls, so they might not give adequate attention on this, as it was men's issue. However, significant variation in attitude among the sub-groups of the respondents indicates the positive role of the course in this regard. It is interesting to see that over three quarters of the course participants had positive attitude towards son preference, food distribution, and spread of AIDS.

It was observed that six percent of the non-participants had negative attitude in all the eight issues; there was none in APON group in this category. On the other hand, 15 percent of the APON course participants had positive attitude towards all the eight issues; however, it was only five percent in case of non-participants.

Respondents argument behind their attitudes

This section presents respondent's opinion and/or arguments behind their positive and negative attitude on the given issues. The course participants who did not agree with the statement "women should not get out of home during menstruation period" told that *"It is mandatory to get out of home for study or for work and there occurs no problem in doing these during that period."* Some of them strongly mentioned *"It is not a diseases, so why shouldn't we go out?"* A few of them mentioned that they should move around during this period with some precautions. The respondents from non-participant group placed a number of similar points. Some of them added a new point as *"It is nothing but a prejudice."*

On the other hand, the course participants who had similar attitude as it was in the statement told that *"There might happen some catastrophes (such as Batash laga) if someone get out during the menstruation period."* Second most popular opinion of this kind was that *"Body becomes contaminated during menstruation, so the ghost, by chance, could capture one if she remains out of home."* Some of the negative attitude holders were prone to accept the respectable elder relatives advice that *"It is not good at all to go out in that critical time."* Most of the non-participants with negative attitude voiced similarly.

Most of the course participants who had positive attitude on the statement "if there are two daughters in a family, a third pregnancy should be considered for a son" told that *"It is better to content with two children whether these are daughter or son."* They further added *"It is not sure that the next child is going to be a son, so the risk should not be taken."* Majority of the same group mentioned, *"If daughter could be brought up and educated well they would not be less than a son."* Some of them feared the plight of a big family. Along with similar points some of the non-participants who had positive attitude opined, *"It is sufficient to have two children."* The respondents of both the groups who nurtured negative attitude on the issue told that *"To perpetuate the family tradition there requires a son and usually son is regarded as pride of a family."*

The course participants who did not agree with the statement "AIDS can affect one if he/she works or seats together with an AIDS patient" told *"It is not infectious."* Interestingly, despite their attitude, some respondents had wrong perception regarding way of transmission of AIDS. For instance, some of them thought AIDS transmits only through sexual intercourse and some other thought it transmits through food. The non-participants with positive attitude had also limited knowledge about the way of transmission of AIDS. Most of the respondents having negative attitude told *"It is an infectious disease"* and some even resided *"It can be transmitted through respiration."*

Most of the respondents who were not in favour of the statement "cooking, child rearing, cleaning are women's responsibility only" said that *"These are the duties of both men and women to share households activities."* On the other hand, the respondents who supported this statement mentioned that *"We see, from our early life, women are doing household activities. So these activities are only for women and they should do it."* Some of them conceived that *"Man can not do these activities, so women should do these."* Some of the respondents with similar attitude pointed out that although it was women's work, men could help them, and some of them perceived that *"Men work hard in the fields, so women should do the household activities."*

On the statement "in a farmer family, men should take more food than women, because they work in the field," majority of the respondents of both the groups with positive attitude told, *"As man work in the field women work at home, none is less important"*

and less industrious. Thus both should take equal foods." Some respondents of this group argued that women's work at home are more industrious than men, defying the statement they suggested "*Women should take more foods than man*". The respondents with negative attitude pointed out that men do more laborious work than women in the field, thus men should have more share on foods than women.

"Men cannot do hard work if vasectomy is committed" was the next statement the respondents were asked. Majority of the respondents of both the groups having positive attitude perceived that "*There occurs no effects on the working ability of man on account of this small operation.*" Some of them clearly mentioned, "*It is a very trivial operation and after few weeks, a man can do all his normal work.*" Some prejudice free respondents also have very vague conception in this regard. On the contrary, those having negative perception on the issue perceived that "*It has some detrimental effect and it reduces working ability of man.*" Although some of them were not aware enough about this, they had fear about it and told that "*Some unexpected and unknown effect may occur from the operation.*" They were found convinced with a rumour and they said, "*We heard that men lost their physical strength as a side effect of this operation.*"

On the statement "dowry can be considered okay, if the bridegroom uses the money for business purposes and get it back to wife's family" the respondents of both the groups who had positive attitude mentioned that "*Receiving and giving of dowry – both are unlawful act.*" Some others, a big number, said, "*Although they are promised to give back the dowry, it is almost certain that they would never do so.*" Similarly, some of the respondents of this group mentioned that "*There is no certainty of returning and perhaps would never be returned the asset which is given in name of dowry.*" A few of them considered that "*if someone is asked to dowry back, more problems would be created.*" In their own language they told that "*If my father asks to give back the dowry, they would return the dowry and me also.*" On the contrary, the respondents who had negative attitude favoured dowry on condition of return. They wanted to keep faith on the promises of the bridegroom. They also expect welfare of the husband who makes use of the dowry.

The last statement was "use of polythene bag is convenient for carrying purposes, so it can be used." The respondents who had positive attitude sensibly pointed out that *"Polythene creates bad effect on arable land and it has a devastating impact on overall environment."* Some described it as *"The greatest threat to humanity."* In some others' words, *"Polythene has a very harmful effect on environment which creates many disadvantages for human livelihood."* Although some of the respondents hold environment-friendly attitudes but many of them had misconceptions and misunderstanding. For instance, some respondents said, *"It transmits many diseases like cancer."* A small part of the respondents who was in favour of using polythene gave reasons behind their attitudes. Some of them told that it was very useful in rainy season for carrying books and other materials. Sometimes it was helpful if someone forgot to carry bag for bazaar.

Dissemination of knowledge

Attempt was made to know whether the course participants disseminated their knowledge to others in their family as well as in the community. Eighty six percent of the participants told that they have disseminated their knowledge to others, 88 percent among the first batch and 84 percent among the second batch. A similar finding also came out from the group discussions with the course participants.

The respondents told that they discussed mostly all the issues they learned with female members of their family or community, such as friends, sister-in-laws, grand mothers, elder sisters and neighbours of similar age group. They informed that it was difficult for them to discuss some of the issues such as STDs, reproductive health, family planning and issues related to sex with their parents, elder brothers and the male members of the community. Thus, most of them did not discuss the above sensitive issues with the male members in the community either they were senior, junior or of similar age group. Mentioning the reason they told that they felt shy discussing these issues with the males and the elders. The course participants added that they openly discussed the issues related to common diseases, laws, environment and social issues with all members in the family and community. In some cases the family members and others, whom they discussed, showed their enthusiasm on the issues and asked questions to know more. Some of them showed their interest about the APON course.

Leadership Development

Development of leadership skills among the adolescents is one of the objectives of ADP. The aim of the programme is to develop these girls as community leaders and role models capable of undertaking community level campaigns and mobilising adolescents to have a voice in their communities (BRAC, 2002). Under this process, the APON course participants were engaged in raising awareness among other adolescents in their communities.

Attempt was made to understand whether leadership skills had been developed among the adolescent girls through the programme. In response to a relative question, they confessed their limitation of knowledge and skills in this field, at the same time they told that they got some extent of self-esteem due to the intervention. They also told that they were confident enough to struggle with the foes of social systems. Unfortunately, it was revealed from the group discussions that they still lack in conceptualising some issues of the course and yet to devise their own ways to struggle against and break down the traditional practices of the society. They pointed out that they had confronting many problems, which could be overcome through the knowledge gained from the APON course, but some crucial matters such as early marriage, dowry at marriage, polygamy, violence against women, etc. were beyond their control to deal with. Actually it was not only for their lacking in conceptualising the issues but also lack of scopes of participation effectively with the issues at the community level. As they were adolescents, they could not play effective role against the social immoral and traditional practices nurtured by adult members in the community.

A number of incidences of early marriage and dowry practices occurred in the selected villages. Even a significant number of course participants were victims of early marriage. The course participants told that they had nothing to do with this. They just tried to convince their parents showing the dreadful consequence of the early marriage. A victim of early marriage (aged 15 years) told that *"I was not interested to get married at this age, but I was forced to do it."*

Attempt was also made to understand the extent of confidence of the course participants on the peer educators as well as other adolescent girls involved in the

programme from the leadership point of view. An opinion from the course participants was sought on an indirect question that "the course would be more effective if a higher educated and elder woman would be employed as peer educator to conduct the APON classes." In response, 44 percent of all the course participants agreed with this and 42 percent did not (the response was recorded in a five point scale) (Table 5).

Table 5. Percentage distribution of the course participants by opinion about the statement on peer educator

Sub groups	Strongly disagree	Disagree	No comment	Agree	Strongly agree
First batch	24 %	26 %	8 %	22 %	20 %
Second batch	26 %	8 %	20 %	34 %	12 %
Both	25 %	17 %	14 %	28 %	16 %

Participants those agreed with the statement were asked about the logic behind their comment. Some of them told that higher educated and elder women might have more knowledge and experience on the issues taught in the APON course. They are supposed to be more capable in conducting the classes more effectively. At the same time, they had doubt that the participants might not deal the sensitive issues friendly with them. They further pointed out that the existing peer educators are their friends with of same age and live in the same villages. Thus, it is easier for them to discuss any sensitive issue openly in a friendly environment. The course participants opined a similar view about other adolescents involved in the programme, for instance, the KSs, AMs, ALs. It was understood that the peer educators, ALs, KSs and AMs had higher level of acceptance to the course participants. The findings indicate that adolescents' involvement in the process of their development seemed to be effective. In some discussions the adolescents opined that if guest speakers having practical experience in dealing with such issues can be invited in their classes, the participants might be encouraged at this.

Perception about the course contents

Attempt was made to know perception of the course participants, their mothers and community people regarding the issues taught in the APON course. The adolescents and their mothers' views were collected through focus group discussions.

The course participants and their mothers highly appreciated the course contents. Early marriage, dowry, family planning, physical violence against women were the issues which they found very important to learn. The participants informed that at the beginning of the course they did not clearly tell their parents about the contents, because they thought that their mothers would not like the sensitive contents and would ask them to discontinue classes. However, they discussed these with their sister-in-laws, friends, relatives of similar age, and grandmothers. They also mentioned that some of the girls had to leave out of the course because of family pressure. They said that some conservative families did not welcome the course contents of APON.

While discussing with the mothers it was understood that the mothers liked their daughters participation in APON course. According to the mothers, issues like first time ministration and reproductive health are very much useful for their daughters. They further added that if their daughters discuss the matters with others in the community, they (both younger and adults) would also be benefited from the course. The mothers pointed out that issues like early marriage, dowry, inheritance law, childcare, family planning, and other social issues would be useful for the course participants when they would be married and enter in the family lives.

The respondents informed that some of the community people had negative attitude about the course; however, they have changed their mind over time. Some of them now realises that issues taught in the course are necessary for all, not only for the adolescents. The respondents opined that social malpractices could be reduced if the community people become aware of these.

Discussions and conclusions

Adolescent issues have emerged as increasing concern throughout the world (Islam 1999). The government of Bangladesh and some national and international NGOs have undertaken development interventions targeting the adolescents, especially the girls. BRAC as a leading NGO in Bangladesh has also initiated programme for the development of the adolescents. BRAC's programme called Adolescent Development Programme (ADP) has two major components – Reading Centre and Adolescent Peer Organised Network (APON). One interesting feature of BRAC's programme is that it emphasises adolescent-to-adolescent development, meaning – development for the adolescents and by the adolescents. This study did not look at the entire activities of ADP, however, focus was only on the APON activities. More specifically, how the adolescent girls are working in their own development towards knowledge acquiring and sharing, and empowerment. Both qualitative and quantitative research techniques were applied for this study.

The grassroots level implementation of the programme is done by the adolescent girls. The adolescents earn some amount of money in return to their involvement with this programme. This supports them (who are currently students) in continuing their school education. BRAC provides leadership and management training to the adolescents, which makes them more capable in their livelihood. These trained adolescents conduct courses, as peer educators, for other adolescents. Such courses created opportunity for the adolescents to learn about social, environmental, legal and essential health issues. The participants also discuss the issues with the non-participants in the community, especially with the adolescents. This created a chain of knowledge sharing and dissemination. These allowed the adolescents to create a network among themselves through which they can enrich their knowledge and build leadership capacity and ultimately can work as a team to fight against social disorders – which they are victim to. It can be expected that if stronger network can be developed – this may contribute in their empowerment to create more space in family and social life.

The findings of this study reveal that the adolescents who participated in the APON courses were more knowledgeable about various issues (related to health, law, environment and society) than their non-participant peers. Of the 18 items put in the



test, on average, the participants correctly answered over 10 items and the non-participants 6.2. This shows that the course has contributed in acquiring knowledge of the participants. As was seen that in most of the cases the performances of the participants of the first and second batches were similar, indicating that the learners did not forget what they learnt some months ago. In some cases the participants showed good performance in the test, however in some they had to do better than this. The following eight issues, where the participant adolescents did poorly, need to be taken more care in the classes – men's contraceptive methods, oral birth control pill, health hazard due to heavy sound, legal punishment for dowry, what to do if police does not file case for acid attack, legal punishment for husband for second marriage, commission of marriage register, and land related problems. These came out from the questions we put in the test. There might have more issues with poor performance which were not put in the test.

During focus group discussions with the adolescents and separately with their mothers it was revealed that both the parties felt the need of such a programme. However, at the beginning, some of the mothers had reservation in sending their daughters in such a course. They had some misunderstanding about the course contents and actual aim of the programme. Such an attitude has changed over time. According to both, the contents of the course are important for family and social life. Especially the mothers said that such knowledge would help their daughters during married life. However, they felt the need to strengthen/spread similar course for the adolescent boys. Some of them viewed that both the boys and the girls should know each other's issues. However, we see that a smaller proportion of the participant girls knew about the given men's issue, for instance men's contraceptive method was known to 37 percent of them. The programme should look at this issue carefully and take necessary step.

The course not only contributing in providing knowledge to the adolescents, their attitude is also changing through the process. It was observed that the course participants had progressive attitude in some social, legal and health issues which the non-participants did not. One interesting finding is that the course could not change attitude of some of the adolescents even they have completed the course. Some of them

are still holding traditional views and attitudes of the society. The programme needs to see the issue carefully.

It was understood that the participating girls liked peer education provision. As they said that it helped them discussing all types of issues with the educators, especially those cannot be discussed with the elders. It was revealed by the adolescents that in most of the cases they could not take any effective step against the bad social practices, even when some occurred against them. However, they understood that knowledge is a part of a whole. The issue comes here is that if the knowledge of these adolescents could not be linked with their future life or even with their occupation no fruitful result can be expected. There is a provision in the programme to continue linkage between the educator and the participants for next 13 months after the course. This linkage should carefully be observed in order to see how it works in dealing with practical life situations. Broader networkings incorporating all the adolescent leaders, peer educators and the participants can be think off. If such networking at national level is not possible at this stage, regional level workshops/conferences can be arranged, where national level women activists can share their experiences.

This study is a pilot one, which looked at a very small portion of the whole picture – the Adolescent Development Programme. The methodology was not strong enough to say more about the impact of this initiative. Further studies are needed to have better understanding of the issue – adolescent-to-adolescent development.

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Annexes

Annex 1. Percentage of adolescents correctly answering in various items on health issues by sub-groups

Items	Sub-groups			Significance of differences		
	First batch of APON	Second batch of APON	Non-APON	1 vs 2	1 vs 3	2 vs 3
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Contraceptive method for women	94.0	90.0	68.0	ns	p<0.001	p<0.01
Contraceptive method for men	32.0	42.0	70.0	ns	p<0.001	p<0.001
Oral birth control pill	36.0	54.0	23.0	ns	ns	p<0.001
Spread of AIDS	90.0	64.0	44.0	p<0.001	p<0.001	p<0.05
Iodine deficiency	52.0	76.0	41.0	p<0.01	ns	p<0.001

Annex 2. Percentage of adolescents correctly answering in various items on environmental issues by sub-groups

Items	Sub-groups			Significance of differences		
	First batch of APON	Second batch of APON	Non-APON	1 vs 2	1 vs 3	2 vs 3
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Food for arsenic affected person	64.0	66.0	31.0	Ns	p<0.001	p<0.001
Health hazard for labour	40.0	40.0	15.0	Ns	p<0.001	p<0.001
Affect of polythene	72.0	72.0	39.0	Ns	p<0.001	p<0.001

Annex 3. Percentage of adolescents correctly answering in various items on legal issues by sub-groups

Items	Sub-groups			Significance of differences		
	First batch of APON	Second batch of APON	Non-APON	1 vs 2	1 vs 3	2 vs 3
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Legal age for girls marriage	100.0	100.0	85.0	ns	p<0.01	p<0.01
Punishment for dowry	46.0	42.0	15.0	ns	p<0.001	p<0.001
Benefit of marriage registration	54.0	54.0	30.0	ns	p<0.01	p<0.01
Punishment against acid thrower	74.0	78.0	63.0	ns	ns	p<0.05
Victim of rape	68.0	60.0	39.0	ns	p<0.001	p<0.05