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How Teenage Girls in Bangladesh are Working to End Marriage

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Huffington Post

Adolescent girls in Bangladesh face severe threats to their health: Two-thirds marry by age 18, and a third of girls are mothers before age 20. A national network of teen girls called Shornokishoree aims to improve girls' health through peer-to-peer advocacy.

Bangladesh has made important progress towards improving maternal health in recent years. Nearly half of women [gave birth with a medically trained attendant](#) in 2014, up from just one-fifth in 2007. This week, the World Bank announced it will [lend \\$150 million](#) to help Bangladesh improve its health systems, including care for pregnant women in state hospitals.

But pregnant women in Bangladesh are often just teenagers.

Despite a poorly enforced law prohibiting marriage before age 18, [65 percent of girls are married](#) by then – and 29 percent by age 15. [One-third](#) of girls aged 15 to 19 have been pregnant. Since 2012, a growing national network of adolescent girls called the [Shornokishoree Adolescent Health Network](#) has been working to combat that through peer-to-peer health education.

“School textbooks talk about health, but dowry, child marriage – these are not in our books,” said Oyshi, 16, a Shornokishoree leader in Rajshahi district. “Teachers talk about health, but sometimes they are male, so girls feel shy.”

Shornokishoree – which means Golden Girls – operates adolescent health clubs for students aged 10 to 19 in 64 schools nationwide, in every district of Bangladesh. Girls meet biweekly to learn about physical and reproductive health and develop leadership skills to transmit that knowledge throughout their communities. They produce a [video series](#) that airs on Channel i, one of Bangladesh's largest television broadcasters, released an [Android app](#), and operate a 24-hour hotline to answer health questions and help stop child marriages. Shornokishoree aims to reach 20 million girls by 2018.

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“We are the future mothers of Bangladesh,” said Anika, 15, a leader in Gazipur district. “If we girls don’t know information about our own health, we will not be able to take care of ourselves – and we will not be able to give birth to a healthy child.”

Oyshy, Anika and two other young Shornokishoree leaders – Monami, 17, from Dhaka, and Noshin, 15, from Bagerhat district – spoke with Women & Girls Hub during their [trip to Women Deliver 2016](#) about the power of adolescent advocates.

Women & Girls Hub: As a group of girls, you have stopped child marriages from happening. How do you achieve this?

Monami: Our network works layer by layer. There are the clubs in the schools, which are organized by district, and we operate as a national network. Within those layers – school, district, nation – we have members and levels of leadership, called network chiefs.

When things happen, we just get connected in a moment. We are on Skype, we are on Facebook, we have shared Outlook accounts, and the Shornokishoree network has given us all phone numbers as well.

Whenever there is news of child marriages, we spring to action.

There was an incident last year: The Shornokishoree girls told me of a child marriage that was about to happen, with a girl who was 13 and a guy in his late 20s. She wanted to get married! She was poor, and the boy, well, they were in love.

I went to her family home and first I just tried to speak to them, the parents. I told them about the law, I tried my best in every way, but I couldn’t persuade them by myself to stop the marriage because, in their eyes, the girl was ready.

When I tried verbally and they didn’t hear, then I had to be strict.

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I got connected to my network chief and she contacted the district commissioner. After receiving her call, he went there himself and he stopped the marriage – because the parents cannot speak over the commissioner. The commissioner said, “If you get married, I will lock you up in jail.” The law is strict: child marriage is an illegal thing.

The girl hasn’t joined our group, but she understands the law now, and she goes to school every day. We keep an eye on her, we get updates about her progress and we watch over her.

Anika: I had a friend whose family was preparing her for marriage; she was only 11 years old. I informed our local leaders who took steps to stop the marriage – and she is now back in school, studying in grade seven.

If the network was not beside me, I would not be able to have any effect, because no one would give any importance to me. Now I can tell them, “I am a Shornokishoree and my network is with me.” They listen to my speeches very carefully now, and they pay attention to me.

Women & Girls Hub: How do you and your peers learn about health issues?

Anika: I learned many things from my mother. I’m grateful to my mother for being so friendly with me; I think every family should inform their girls.

But reproductive health is a very sensitive issue in our country; we can’t talk about this to other people. Shornokishoree teaches us that it is our right to know about sexual and reproductive health, and we can find out all of that information from our network.

Our network runs a 24-hour call center. If any girl has any problem, she can call in to our network and we will listen to her problem. And we’ll talk to the health specialist, they will give the solutions, and we will tell her the solution. If we can disseminate information among all adolescent girls, we will build a healthy nation.

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Monami: I live in Dhaka and I am from a very educated family; my mom and dad are very friendly with me and share information with me always. Girls in remote areas often don't get information about menstruation. There is a taboo during this time. The girl is not allowed to go outside, she is not able to clean herself properly because she cannot get proper privacy.

After I joined our network, I heard their stories. In one village, a girl the local Shornokishorees knew died from a health problem brought on by poor menstrual hygiene.

This incident just moved me. How can a girl like me lose her life, when I am living a healthy life? Why couldn't that girl live? That could be me, that girl could be my sister. She is my sister because she is a girl of my country.

I feel very much connected to these girls after learning these things, hearing about these incidents. This is one incident, just one, and so many things like this happen in our country. I got impassioned by the mission of this network to spread knowledge about adolescent health through the country.

Women & Girls Hub: What has been the best experience you have had as a Golden Girl empowering fellow adolescents?

Noshin: In my school, there were many girls who didn't know anything about puberty. One time a girl came to speak with me, since I had been sharing information at school as a Shornokishoree leader: she was facing her first period. She was scared and she didn't know what she should do. She asked me, "What should I do? Should I say something to my mother, or anyone else in my house?" I told her, "Listen. There is nothing to be scared of. This is a normal thing. It's the power that you can be a mother in future – not a thing you should be scared of." It was the best experience of my life!

There are many kinds of girls in Bangladesh, but without sufficient knowledge about adolescence, they become shy. Once they get that knowledge, they become so outspoken. They have knowledge to share, they have knowledge to enlighten others. I think all the girls of Bangladesh are so courageous.

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There are many remote corners in the country; I want to reach each one of them with our network, to enlighten girls with the knowledge about healthy adolescence and secure a healthy Bangladesh.