

ARSHI-ITSPLEY (Mirror)

Adolescents' and Women's Reproductive and Sexual Health Initiative & Innovations through Sports: Promoting Leaders Empowering Youth

The ARSHI project works in the northeastern district of Sunamganj, one of the most hard-to-reach, under-served and disaster prone regions in Bangladesh. The project aims to decrease maternal mortality, morbidity, and disability of adolescent girls and women and create leadership and empowerment of youth through creative sports based innovations. Through ARSHI, CARE has established a number of youth centers, built the capacity of local health posts to provide youth-friendly services, and developed a life skills curriculum for adolescents. While this program seeks to empower females and improve their health, the project also works strategically with men and boys to end discriminatory, unfair, and abusive social norms that affect women and girls. ARSHI means "mirror" in ancient Bengali which is conceptualized as the basic tool for essential self-discovery and transformation of individuals and the community. This program has proven itself as a promising approach to integrate men and boys into women's empowerment programming.

Q & A with Imtiaz Pavel

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Why did you choose to integrate young men into the program?

Girls' and women's mobility and participation in day-to-day activities are heavily controlled by unfair masculine norms. Our long-term engagement with South-Asia regional and international forums on gender justice through addressing masculinities gave us opportunities to look into these issues more deeply. Meeting the goals of ARSHI was in no way possible only focusing our work with girls and women.

What objectives did you have for the young men's component of the program? How did you choose these objectives?

Our major strategy was to critically promote the idea of justice, equality, and peace among both men and women through reinforcing the need for regaining the decaying process of voluntarism and activism. We were very clear that conventional operational strategies to engage community educators in exchange of money would not work here, rather it would cause complex problems. From the very beginning we tried to keep our approaches simple, but integral and deep.

What challenges have you faced that are unique to the integration of men and boys into ARSHI?

We have found that problematizing men's privilege and entitlement can be risky if it is not done very carefully and strategically.

Do you have any testimonials from the young men that are participating?

One of our youth activists, from who we learn a lot, said, "Among men it was very difficult to develop the eyes and heart through which they could see and then analyze their unfair actions and unjust attitudes that kept affecting others. Once this is developed, then they are in positions to change themselves and others."

Rationale

After conducting formative research for the project with men, women, girls and boys, project planners saw a pattern of discrimination against women due to harmful social norms that prevented them from realizing their potential. Some key findings stood out:

- Almost 95% of girls faced forms of teasing and sexual harassment simply because they were female
- Men and boys thought girls provoked them through dresses, movements, etc.
- The men and boys treated sexual & gender based violence, including rape, as means to teach girls and women a lesson
- Parent's insecurities about their pre-adolescent daughter's potential sexuality is one of the key root causes of child marriages and discontinuing a daughter's education

Due to these harmful social norms, ARSHI included men and boys in their strategic plan to change these gender norms. By working with both genders for gender equality, ARSHI program coordinators hope change can come about more rapidly.

Young Bangladeshi men learn through role-plays



Strategies

Because of some findings by CARE Bangladesh staff during a Strategic Impact Inquiry, ARSHI engages men and boys as a central strategy to empower girls and women. One way they engage young men is through the formation of adolescent boys groups in order to foster exchanges of knowledge, insights and experiences among group participants. ARSHI has been building capacity of these adolescent boys by using participatory visual exercises including: body mapping, violence tree, future visioning, relationship and risk mapping, and snakes and ladders exercises (see box on Board Games at right).

Other ARSHI strategies to engage men and boys in the women's empowerment process:

- Utilizing indoor and outdoor games (e.g. Board Game, see box at right) men and boys are initially sensitized and are able to analyze how their usual practices, including sexual and gender based violence, affect girls and women adversely
- Engaging men and boys in monitoring sexual gender-based violence and analysis of true incidences of violence
- Men's rallies and demonstrations to protest against violence towards women
- Participation in Forum Theatre to sensitize and engage greater community to social issues and norms that affect women and girls (pictured, bottom right).

Results

As of 2009, a total of 1,207 boys' groups have been formed with 17,589 adolescent boys. Fifty-two percent of these groups are in the knowledge gathering stage; about 29% groups are in knowledge dissemination stage through one to one sessions, courtyard sessions, tea stall discussions, etc.; and nearly 16% groups are involved with some sorts of social initiatives. These social initiatives include: stopping early marriage/pregnancy, discouraging unsafe abortions, stopping teasing, sexual harassments and mental and physical violence, tree planting, drama/folk song performance on ARSHI, and promoting savings. Three percent of the boys' groups are already involved with establishing linkages with service providers and taking initiatives on social security for adolescent girls during transitions from school to college.

One boy from the adolescent groups notes:

"I am one of the members of a adolescent boys' group...Now I share this message with my other friends. We are now working for the social security of the girls"
 – Prashanto, 16 years old boy from Datta gram

Challenging Gender Norms with Board Games

Combining recreational activities with learning is often one of the best ways to reach adolescents. Since the ARSHI project focuses on adolescents and youth, they have developed an ARSHI Board Game. Different board spaces like puberty, early marriage, dowry, family planning, menstrual hygiene, etc. create learning opportunities for the game's players. The board games are being used in the boys and girls adolescent groups, as well as with mother's groups and in schools. By engaging in this game, the players are learning and being made aware of important issues to their growth and development. Though the ARSHI Board Game has been developed for this particular project, it's demand is increasing each day by different stakeholder groups that would like to integrate this successful tool in their own programming.



Significance:

The ARSHI project demonstrates that programming that engages young males to reconstruct gender norms can be part of a larger program for girls and women's empowerment. While work with young girls and women is extremely important for women's empowerment, gender roles are defined by males and females. Working with both genders, especially at a young age, is a powerful strategy to help redefine a society's gender norms in favor of gender equality.