

Impact of adolescent's skills building programs on child marriage in Bangladesh

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Introduction:

Bangladesh has the second highest rate of child marriage in the world and has the world's highest rate of marriage involving girls under age 15 (UNICEF 2014). According to UNICEF's 2011 State of the World's Children Report, about a third of women in Bangladesh aged 20 - 24 are married by the age of 15, and 66 percent of girls will marry before their 18th birthday (UNICEF 2011). Most of the adolescent girls in Bangladesh lack adequate knowledge, education, life skills, and livelihoods opportunities pertinent for the development of their lives. The situation is even worse in the rural areas where poverty, lack of awareness places girls at high risk of child marriage and sexual violence. Being married usually means taking on significant responsibilities in the marital home and thus a sudden change in roles and responsibilities at the time of marriage. Young girls are forced to take on roles for which they are not physically and emotionally ready. They are forced into sexual activities and child bearing starts soon after marriage. Early marriage deprives young girls of opportunities for personal development their rights to full reproductive health and well-being, education, and participation in civic life (Amin and Das 2012; Amin, Mahmud, and Huq 2002).

There is little evidence on whether and how programs that empower girls by building their skills and assets can influence the timing and nature of marriage (Amin, S et al. 2014). A review of programs suggests that offering incentives and attempting to empower girls can be effective in preventing child marriage and can foster change relatively quickly (Lee-rife, S et al. 2012). A project in Bangladesh entitled "Kishori Abhijan" utilized livelihoods and life skills training. The evaluation showed increased participation in economic activities among participants compared to non-participants, and increases in reproductive health (RH) knowledge (Amin, S, 2011). However, change in marriage age was detected only for a subset of the girls. A study in rural India found that when given job opportunities, young women in treatment villages were significantly less likely to get married or have children during this period, choosing instead entering the labor market or completing schooling or training (Jensen, R 2012). "Berhane Hewan" project in Ethiopia is one of the few programs in Sub-Saharan Africa that systematically measures the impact of an intervention to increase the age at marriage based on formative research. The project combines community mobilization and sensitization, safe spaces, incentives, asset transfers to keep girls in school and unmarried. It made significant delays in marriage for girls aged 10 to 14 and significant increases in school enrollment (Erulkar A, Muthengi E 2013). Most skills development programs that offer incentive to girls or their families are not cost effective and thus not sustainable. Rigorous evaluations of the impact of these interventions are limited. Programs that have been evaluated have multiple components that make it difficult to isolate the impact of each component. Thus the existing programmatic evidence does not allow us to identify what type of skill development matters most.

The BALIKA (Bangladeshi Association for Life skills, Income and Knowledge for Adolescents: *Generating Evidence to Delay marriage in Bangladesh*) project design offered three distinct types of skills training to girls aged 12-18 who are at high risk of child marriage and live in the highest child marriage areas in Bangladesh. The project is designed to generate knowledge about factors underlying early and child marriage, through an integrated intervention and research study to build an evidence base for alternative strategies for effective, replicable programs to delay marriage. The project offered three distinct interventions and assessed their impact relative to a control population. The baseline survey was conducted before implementation began and an endline survey using the same research methodology is being undertaken after 18 months of implementation. This paper explores marriage related outcomes from a four arm randomized controlled trial offering skills training to around 9000 adolescent girls aged 12-18 at 72 village centers (located in government primary schools known as safe spaces) across three districts (Khulna, Satkhira, Narail) of Bangladesh.

Participants in the three arms meet regularly in a safe space to get basic life skills using computer and tabs with digital contents. All intervention arms were offered basic community awareness and basic life skills.

Arm 1: In the education arm in-school girls receive educational tutoring on mathematics and English and out-of-school girls receive financial skills and communicative English learning sessions. Here the interventions were aimed to increase their educational capabilities and confidence to delay marriage.

Arm 2: In the gender rights arm girls receive information on sexual and reproductive health gender rights, negotiation, critical thinking, decision making skills, and gender based violence. Total 44 hours of lessons per participants were given aimed to educate about gender rights and awareness, SRHR related issues to change the values regarding gender roles by changing power dynamics and by changing gender-based division of labor.

Arm 3: In the livelihoods arm girls received training on computers, mobile based application selling, photography, health and entrepreneurship. 100 hours of lessons were given and intervention was targeted to promote opportunities and skills to girls for continuing their education and to engage in income generating activities.

Data and methods:

The paper uses baseline data from a random sample of 11,609 adolescent girls between 12-19 years living in 96 villages. Villages were randomly assigned to four possible arms, the three arms described above and a control in a randomized controlled trial (RCT) to generating evidence to delay marriage in Bangladesh conducted by the Population Council. The sample was collected from one village per 96 unions in three rural districts of Southern Bangladesh in 2013. Respondents were selected randomly from sample clusters of approximately 700-1000 households living in the surrounding of 96 schools of the study areas that were designated as the site for intervention. After 18 months of intervention the same respondents of the baseline survey were followed up for endline survey. A total of 3,615 respondents have been interviewed so far, preliminary results are presented in this abstract. The analysis is based on marriages that took place since the baseline. Impact of intervention is measured by comparing marriage rates at the village level. All girls in the village were given an opportunity to participate in programs. On average about half of all girls who were eligible participated. This is thus an intent to treat analysis. In further analysis, we will explore the impact on the population that the interventions intended to treat (ITT) further to explore the program impact accounting attrition over the period as well as effectiveness of three intervention arms and the pathways through which change occurs.

Preliminary results:

Table 1: Background characteristics of adolescent girls across arms in percentages

Variables	Education	Gender	Livelihood	Control	Overall
Mean Age	15.0	15.0	14.9*	15.0	15.0
Girls who are married	19.7	20.5	17.5	18.5	19.1
Age at first marriage	15.1	15.2	15.3	15.3	15.2
Schooling status					
Out school	23.6	22.2	21.1	21.3	22.1
In school	76.4 *	77.8	78.9	78.7	77.9
Average number of years in school	7.2	7.2	7.1*	7.2	7.2
Father's education					
Average number of years of education	4.2	4.2	4.3	4.2	4.2
Mother's education					
Average number of years of education	3.5	3.6	3.7	3.6	3.6
Have a birth registration card	92.5	90.3***	94.0	93.8	92.6
Religion	***		***		
Islam	75.2	80.9	67.3	81.9	76.3
Hindu	24.7	18.6	32.0	17.5	23.2
Christian	0.1	0.5	0.6	0.6	0.4
Average number of elder sister	0.6*	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7
Average number of elder brother	0.6***	0.6***	0.6***	0.7	0.6
Total number of siblings	2.3***	2.4**	2.3***	2.6	2.4
Wealth Index	***		***		
Poorest	22.3	16.7	24.3	16.8	20.0
Second	21.8	18.8	19.1	20.0	19.9
Middle	18.4	21.3	18.8	22.1	20.1
Fourth	19.1	21.5	19.6	19.8	20.0
Wealthiest	18.5	21.8	18.2	21.4	20.0
N	2950	2886	2885	2888	

*Significant at P<0.05, ** Significant at P<0.01, Significant at P<0.001

Table 1 shows the socio-demographic characteristics of the study participants at baseline survey across arms. No significant variations were found respondents marital status, age at first marriage, schooling status and average number of years in school of respondents as well as parents education in all three intervention arms when compared with control arm. Respondents had similar age distributions in all arms compared to control except a very small difference exist between livelihood and control arm. Majority of the respondents' were Muslim although significant differences were noted in the livelihood and gender arm against control. Overall about one-fifth of the girls were reported to be married in the survey but significant differences observed between livelihood and gender arms. But, there exists negligible variations between livelihood over control arm. Education and livelihood arms significantly vary from control arm. Control villages are less poor, since marriage, SRHR and learning outcomes are worse for the poor so that by doing the treatment control comparison as a way of measuring program impact we are holding a higher bar.

Table 2: Changes in marriage related knowledge and rights, perception and attitudes towards marriage

Variables		Education	Gender	Livelihood	Control	Education vs Control	Gender vs Control	Livelihood vs Control
Marital Status	Married	15.9%	18.2%	18.2%	22.6%	-6.70%*	-4.40%	-4.40%
	Never married	84.1%	81.8%	81.8%	77.4%	6.70%	4.40%	4.40%
Age at first marriage		16	16	16	16	0.00	0.00	0.00
Age of husband at marriage		30	29	28	30	0.00	-1.00	-2.00
Reason for Marriage	Parents said proposal too good to refuse	61.9%	67.2%	64.3%	75.9%	-14.00%**	-8.70%	-11.60%
	No prospect of continuing school	3.2%	5.6%	10.2%	.0%	3.20%	5.60%	10.20%
	Parents felt pressured	8.7%	6.1%	5.1%	2.4%	6.30%	3.70%	2.70%
	Parents afraid about sexual security	3.2%	7.2%	5.1%	4.8%	-1.60%	2.40%	0.30%
	Own choice	21.4%	13.9%	14.3%	16.9%	4.50%	-3.00%	-2.60%
Legal age for marriage	18	97.7%	98.1%	95.5%	97.3%	0.40%	0.80%	-1.80%
Suitable age for marriage	18	55.1%	50.5%	51.2%	57.1%	-2.00%	-6.60%***	-5.90%*
Rights to divorce	Yes	56.3%	54.5%	49.9%	43.2%	13.10%***	11.30%***	6.70%***
Why age suitable for marriage	This is our social custom	10.7%	6.4%	13.0%	27.2%	-16.50%***	-20.80%***	-14.20%***
	She is prepared mentally	55.8%	53.5%	65.7%	70.8%	-15.00%***	-17.30%***	-5.10%*
	She is prepared physically	82.7%	78.1%	82.1%	84.6%	-1.90%	-6.50%***	-2.50%
	She would be able to do household work	38.7%	44.9%	33.8%	51.7%	-13.00%***	-6.80%***	-17.90%***
	She would be able to run a family	37.0%	38.7%	24.0%	23.0%	14.00%***	15.70%***	1.00%
	She can finish her study at that age	23.5%	17.9%	19.8%	11.2%	12.30%***	6.70%***	8.60%***
	She would be at marriage age legally	13.3%	11.5%	6.0%	6.5%	6.80%***	5.00%*	-0.50%
Disadvantages of marrying at an early age	Life risk of Baby	58.9%	58.0%	61.0%	56.2%	2.70%	1.80%	4.80%
	Life risk of mother	90.7%	91.9%	91.1%	94.2%	-3.50%	-2.30%	-3.10%
	unable to do household work	55.7%	51.0%	53.7%	56.2%	-0.50%	-5.20%*	-2.50%
	Education can end	25.1%	18.1%	30.1%	17.6%	7.50%	0.50%	12.50%***
	frustration	10.7%	9.7%	10.8%	2.6%	8.10%***	7.10%***	8.20%***

In the above table the changes in the three intervention arms have been compared with the control arm. In future more advanced statistical methods will be conducted to explore the impact of the program. Table 2 shows the proportion of adolescent girls who are married in the study areas. The changes in the three intervention arms have been compared to the control arm. Data from the endline survey shows that the intervention arms have a positive impact on marriage. The proportion married was lower in all the intervention arms compare to the control arm and the decline was significant greater in the education arm. The percentage of marriage was higher in the control arm (22.6%) relative to the intervention arms with 15.9% in education arm, 18.2% in gender and livelihood arm. In order to explore how girls themselves view patterns of early marriage, they were asked what they think is the ideal age of marriage for girls. The reported ideal age at marriage is higher than the real ages in the areas. Half of the adolescent girls in the intervention arms said that 18 was the ideal age for getting married compared to 57.1% in the control areas. There was a significant decrease of -6.60% in the gender arm relative to the control arm. Significant differences

were found between the intervention and control arm when girls were asked if women have the right to divorce. 56.3% girls said positively in education arm, 54.5% in gender arm and 49.9% in livelihood arm compared to 43.2% in the control. 75.9% girls in the control arm said that reason for their marriage was their parents found the proposal too good to refuse. On the contrary, the percentage was much lower in the intervention sites with 61.9% in education, 67.2% in gender and 64.3% in livelihood arm. Girls were asked about their perception of the disadvantages of early marriage. Significant positive differences were found from the girls in the intervention areas over the control areas with respect to depression / frustration as a consequence of early marriage. Only 2.6% girls said depression was a consequence as compared to 10.7% in education arm, 9.7% in gender arm and 10.8% in livelihood arm. The life skills training have increased their awareness level and improved their self-esteem and confidence about themselves.

Table 3: Changes in the working and earning pattern and working hour

Baseline							Endline					Means of differences		
												Edu vs control	Gender vs control	Livelihood vs control
		Edu	Gender	Livelihood	Cont	Total	Edu	Gender	Livelihood	Cont	Total			
Ever Worked for Earning	Yes	10.7%	10.2%	8.5%	10.2%	9.9%	13.4%	12.4%	15.9%	8.2%	12.9%	5.20%	4.20%	7.70%
Currently Working	Yes	7.4%	7.4%	5.5%	7.7%	7.0%	11.0%	10.7%	12.1%	8.3%	10.8%	2.70%	2.40%	3.80%

The survey on adolescent girls collected information about their work status and income earning pattern. The changes in the three intervention arms have been compared with relative to the control arm. Table 3 shows an overall increase in the work pattern for adolescents in endline from the baseline and significant changes have been observed in education and livelihood arms. The increase in education arm can be explained as girls who improved their Maths and English learning skills are more likely to work as private tutors for younger students in their community. Only an average of 10.8% girls reported having worked in the month preceding the survey. This lower percentage can be attributed to the persistent rainfall over the last few months that limit agriculture related work in the outdoors. This percentage is likely to increase later after analyzing the full sample. The endline survey of the BALIKA program is ongoing. Only one third of the data from the android based mobile survey has been received so far and has been analyzed for this paper. This paper is an intent to treat analysis. The full analysis will include pathways of influence.

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