

Adolescent Empowerment Project in Bangladesh

KEY STATISTICS

Basic data	
Estimated number of adolescent (10-19 years)	28 million
Maternal mortality ratio (per 100,000 live births)	320 deaths
Secondary school net attendance ratio (boys/girls)	36/41
Percentage of women aged 15-49 married before their 15 th birthday	33
Percentage of women aged 20-49 married before their 18 th birthday	74

Source: MICS 2006 and SOWC 2008

BACKGROUND

Adolescence, defined by WHO as the period between 10 and 19 years, is an important, formative time which shapes the future of girls' and boys' lives. There are 28 million adolescents in Bangladesh, 13.7 million of them are girls and 14.3 million boys.

The situation of adolescent girls in Bangladesh mirrors that of adult women. It is characterised by inequality and subordination within the family and society. This inequality leads to a widespread practice of child marriage, marginalization or exclusion from health, education and economic opportunities, and a vulnerability to violence and sexual abuse.

ISSUES

In Bangladesh, the legal age of marriage is 18 for girls and 21 for boys. However, 33 per cent of adolescent girls are married before the age of 15; and 60 per cent become mothers by the age of 19. Girls are considered eligible for marriage at the onset of menstruation. Boys however become ready for marriage only after several years of adolescence and young adulthood, which is often linked with financial independence.

When a girl marries, she usually drops out of school and begins full-time work in her husband's parents' household. In the in-laws' house, she often lacks status and bargaining power. She is more vulnerable to all forms of abuse, including dowry related violence. In

Bangladesh, it is still common for a bride's family to pay dowry, despite the practice being illegal. Dowry demands can also continue after the wedding.

For adolescent brides, even if her in-laws' are supportive, there are greater health risks in terms of pregnancy and child birth. The majority of adolescent brides and their families are uninformed or insufficiently informed about reproductive health and contraception. The maternal mortality rate for adolescents is double the national rate.

When adolescent girls are pulled out of school, either for marriage or work, they often lose their mobility, their friends and social network. The lack of mobility among adolescent girls also curtails their economic and other non-formal educational opportunities.

Adolescents lack information about health issues. Roughly, only about three in five adolescents have even heard of HIV. It is also reported that more than 50 per cent of adolescent girls are undernourished and suffer from anaemia.

While the situation for adolescent boys is somewhat better, many are also vulnerable and lack the power to make decisions about their own lives. Many out of school boys, for example, are unemployed, unaware of social or health issues and are at considerable risk of being drawn in to criminal activities.

ACTION

UNICEF and its partners have developed the 'Kishori Abhijan' Project, which translates as an "adolescent girls' expedition". The project is funded by the European Union through a grant of Euros 5.85 million. Kishori Abhijan project interventions are being carried out by implementing partners BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) and CMES (Centre for Mass Education) in 2860 adolescent centers in 28 districts of rural Bangladesh, targeting a total of 100,000 adolescents. The project aims to empower adolescents - especially girls, but also involving boys - to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect their lives and to also become role models for the community and other adolescents. The project works to create and sustain a supportive environment for adolescent girls' development at a household and community level.

The underlying principle of the project is to build self-esteem, confidence, knowledge and skills in the adolescent community. Such qualities encourage adolescents to intervene in socio-economic and political structures, take control of decision-making processes within and outside the family and community, enter domains conventionally seen as exclusively male, and, finally, access available natural, financial and intellectual resources.

The project focuses on providing adolescents with life skills to boost their self-esteem. Through a peer-to-peer participatory education approach, adolescents obtain life skills, such as critical thinking, negotiation and decision-making. Sessions are usually based around different social issues, such as puberty, reproductive health, hygiene, child marriage, birth registration, dowry, HIV/AIDS, acid attack and divorce. Groups of peer leaders are



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trained to facilitate discussions on these topics. Teenagers also come to the centers simply to get together and socialize with their peers.

UNICEF trains and supports peer educators and adolescent leaders to convey social messages to other adolescents and the community. These girls and boys also take the lead in social actions, such as protesting against child marriages and dowry payments and in building adolescent networks to exchange views and advance opinions and suggestions.

These activities, in turn, enhance the adolescent leaders' confidence and their visibility in the community.

Through the centres, adolescents receive practical and non-gender stereotyped livelihood skills (journalism, photography, garments, bee-keeping, computer skills, etc) and business skills training (basic economics and market knowledge, how to start a small businesses, interview skills and linking local production to global market). By giving girls these livelihood options, it increases their social worth and strengthens arguments against child marriage and dowry.

The project also aims at creating an enabling environment through parents' involvement and the creation of child marriage and dowry prevention committees. At orientation sessions and regular discussion meetings, parents and community leaders become more aware of the critical factors affecting adolescents' lives. They are encouraged to support adolescents' participation, girls' schooling, delaying the age of marriage and protecting children from abuse and violence.

Local and national level policy makers are sensitized on adolescent and gender issues and encourage to move forward with policies and programmes that are supportive of adolescents. Communication strategies and advocacy tools have been developed to promote the rights of adolescents and encourage corresponding behaviour changes within the community.

Through the extension of the project interventions to the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), indigenous adolescents will be given a voice to address their rights and issues.

The project has developed a solid behavioral monitoring plan to track social and behavior change among adolescents, mothers, fathers and community influentials. The combination of evaluation processes including a baseline, endline research along with periodic behavioral monitoring allows the project to make a causal link between Kishori Abhijan implementation and changes at both the individual and community level attributable directly to the project. All qualitative and quantitative research and monitoring is highly participatory.

To create wider awareness on adolescent related issues, especially child marriage and



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dowry the project utilizes Inter Popular Theater (IPT) and documentaries contributing to further enhance interaction between adolescents and their parents and community members.

IMPACT

During the project's first phase (2001 - 2005), more than 140,000 adolescents (including 12,500 boys) took part in Kishori Abhijan. These adolescents were equipped with knowledge on social issues and life skills-based education (including negotiation skills, self esteem, parental care, practical business and economics).

20,000 rural adolescents girls became role models for their community and other adolescents as peer educators and leaders.

More than 3,000 adolescent networks were established to give adolescents space to exchange views and suggestions.

7,500 adolescents now have their own businesses after receiving livelihood training.

Attending regular meetings and trainings has increased girls mobility. Increased mobility in project areas has allowed girls to travel further from home to access other education and employment opportunities.

Sporting opportunities have been developed for 2,000 adolescents, as supplement to centre-based activities. Cycling, for example, increases girls mobility.

There have been a number of national exchange programmes, facilitated and directed by adolescent girls, for stakeholders to share views, concerns and feedback.

Around 92,000 duty bearers (including parents) were given opportunities to raise issues of concern for adolescents, such as dowry payment, mobility, delaying marriage and safety.

2,000 local officials and elites were oriented with information on critical factors affecting the lives of adolescents (including issues such as early marriage, discrimination, violence, sexual abuse and exploitation).

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