



BANGLADESH

COUNTRY PROFILE



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The country context

Bangladesh is home to 38 million child brides. Of these, 13 million married before age 15. Today, the prevalence of child marriage stands at 51 per cent of all young women in the country being married before their 18th birthday, putting the country among the top 10 countries in the world in terms of child marriage prevalence. However, the practice of child marriage is less common today than in previous generations: the prevalence of marriage by age 18 was over 90 per cent around 1970. However, meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) target to end child marriage by 2030, or the national target to end child marriage by 2041, will still require a major push. The rate of progress must be at least 8 times faster than the rate observed over the past decade to meet the national target, or 17 times faster to meet the SDG target.¹

Globally, over the past decade, the proportion of young women who were married as children decreased by 15 per cent, from nearly 1 in 4 to 1 in 5 girls becoming child brides. This means that, over the last 10 years, the marriages of some 25 million girls have been averted. This remarkable accomplishment, with progress observed in for example Bangladesh, is now under threat due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the next decade, UNICEF estimates that up to 10 million more girls across the world will be at risk of child marriage as a result of COVID-19.² The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) further estimates that nearly 24 million children and adolescents, including 11 million girls and young women, may drop out of school due to the pandemic's economic impact.³ During 2020, UNICEF Bangladesh adapted the ongoing research, 'Keeping girls in school to reduce child marriage in rural Bangladesh', to the realities of COVID-19 to test interventions aimed at keeping girls in school and measure the impact of the pandemic on the prevalence of child marriage. Early evidence prompted the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child

Marriage (the Global Programme) to connect with 50 per cent of the targeted adolescent girls through mobile phones to provide remote learning support in the form of customized lesson plans and content. The education sector will further use the research findings to select and introduce evidence-based interventions with the potential to keep girls in school longer, thereby reducing the likelihood of child marriage.⁴ The economic impact of the pandemic also needs to be addressed, as it is a key risk factor for child marriage. In Bangladesh, the decline in child marriage has been observed across wealth groups, but with more progress seen among the richest quintile.⁵

Despite these challenges and setbacks, the elimination of child marriage by 2030 remains a priority under goal 5 on gender equality in the SDGs. This monumental task puts pressure on the global community to deliver on effective interventions and policies at scale, generating calls for coordinated efforts and renewed commitments from stakeholders, particularly governments, to invest more to accelerate an end to child marriage.



Key highlights



88,770
adolescent girls and



29,473
adolescent boys aged 10–19 years engaged in life-skills training and comprehensive sexuality education in **1,695 adolescent clubs** (of which 193 were virtual safe spaces in line with COVID-19 pandemic restrictions). Among the adolescent girls empowered, **3,633 are living with disabilities**.

A national adolescent strategy with ending child marriage as a key priority area has been developed.

In addition, a Costed National Plan of Action for the Adolescent Health Strategy 2020–2030 was finalized, and training for health service providers on gender- and age-specific adolescent-friendly health services was initiated. The Global Programme also supported the costing and the development of a monitoring and evaluation framework for the national action plan on ending child marriage.



Given the pandemic restrictions, the Global Programme continued to model gender-transformative programming by engaging **44,529 men and boys** in dialogues on positive gender norms.

Close to **130 social workers** were recruited and trained and reached more than **306,000 vulnerable girls** and boys. In addition, **65,683 adolescent girls** and **33,242 boys accessed adolescent-friendly sexual and reproductive health services**, while child protection case management supported **75,013 girls**.

An estimated

11.3 million

individuals engaged in regular dialogue through online platforms and community networks created during the pandemic so as to prevent and respond to child marriage, violence, exploitation and abuse of children.



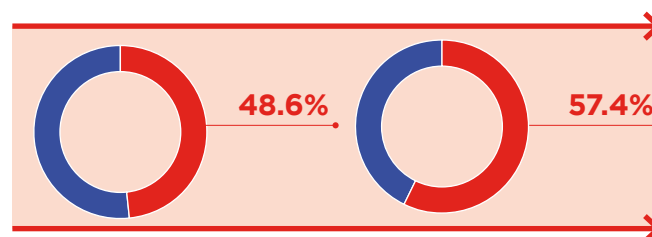
The **'#Raisethebeat4ECM/Dhol Campaign'** continued broadcasting of the existing public service announcements to foster public resistance against child marriage, reaching over

136 MILLION
people and engaging over

94 MILLION
through mass and social media.

The second season of the 'Icchedana' ('On the Wings of Wishes') drama series has been broadcast on four television channels and social media platforms, reaching more than **67 million people** and engaging about **17 million people**. Further, community engagement initiatives using alternative platforms (e.g., interactive radio programmes and local media activities and participation of adolescent radio listeners groups) reached over 260,000 people.

The entertainment–education campaign end-line survey results show a significant increase in knowledge on the legal age of marriage among targeted groups from **48.6 per cent** prior to the campaign launch to **57.4 per cent** by the end of the campaign.



In addition, there has been a **10 percentage-point** increase in knowledge on emotional changes of adolescent girls and a **5 percentage-point** increase in knowledge on punishments for sexual harassment among boys and girls.



During the year, the report on **'Ending Child Marriage: A profile of progress in Bangladesh'** was launched on the Day of the Girl by the State Minister of the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs – a welcome addition to the evidence-based planning and programming approach.

2020 Achievements



During the year,

88,770

adolescent girls benefited from life-skills training and comprehensive sexuality education, through 1,695 adolescent clubs (of which 193 were virtual safe spaces).

About

4,200

adolescents were trained to disseminate COVID-19 messages and messages on staying vigilant against gender-based violence and child marriage via a mobile application called 'Digital Application for Adolescents', with

132,846

adolescents (70 per cent girls), **27,962 parents** and **63,517 other community members** subsequently reached.

Providing intensive support to marginalized girls

Global evidence on good practices in gender-responsive and gender-transformative programming, as well as findings from a Global Programme-commissioned review⁶ underline the importance of interventions that enhance girls' human capital (such as schooling, life-skills, livelihood and gender rights training) and their employment opportunities. In Bangladesh, life-skills trainings continued to be delivered in 2020 through a COVID-19-adapted approach (ensuring adherence to physical distancing protocols) to equip adolescent girls with the knowledge, attitudes, skills and values to make appropriate and healthy choices that will empower them.

The Global Programme has adopted life-skills training as a key strategy to strengthen adolescent girl empowerment and to create an enabling environment by engaging parents and community members in support of girls. During the pandemic, life-skills programmes were used as conduits to communicate awareness messages on COVID-19 prevention and response services, including messages on violence against children. During the year, 88,770 adolescent girls benefited from life-skills training and comprehensive sexuality education, through 1,695 adolescent clubs (of which 193 were virtual safe spaces). In addition, 13 individual lessons from the life-skills curriculum were video recorded and aired on national television, along with the Ministry of Education's regular education programme, to reach adolescents all over Bangladesh during the COVID-19 lockdown.

About 4,200 adolescents were trained to disseminate COVID-19 messages and messages on staying vigilant against gender-based violence and child marriage via a mobile application called 'Digital Application for Adolescents', with 132,846 adolescents (70 per cent girls), 27,962 parents and 63,517 other community members subsequently reached. Additionally, over 13,500 parents and caregivers, adolescents, child rights facilitators and social workers received, through 966 community-based child protection committees, information on violence against children, and support with referrals to services for responding to violence. Approximately 227,000 adolescents received online safety training across the country. In a similar activity, in partnership with the Bangladesh Scouts (a network of 2 million young people), 40 adult leaders (19 female) were trained as trainers for life skills-based education to support youth groups. Some 2,000 young adolescents,

368 scout officials and 270 Rover Scouts were also oriented on the U-Report mobile platform through a community-based camp. A storybook written and illustrated by adolescent girls was printed by the Department of Women Affairs for distribution to adolescent girls from adolescent clubs to keep them engaged during the COVID-19 lockdown.

“Adolescents are excellent in providing support for child protection through awareness-building activities on violence against children, gender-based violence, child marriage, mental health and psychosocial support, livelihoods, etc. I am really very happy to see the adolescent empowerment through adolescent clubs. I wish them success in the future.”

– Child rights facilitator

While life-skills training provided a critical conduit for reaching vulnerable girls in the context of COVID-19, they also provide strong pathways for building adolescent girls’ agency. Through the engagement of boys, parents and families, life-skills training provides a platform to revisit unequal gender norms. For instance, the life-skills sessions in the adolescent clubs (both offline and virtual) show a change in the mindset among boys towards girls and women in society, with the boys becoming friendlier and more respectful towards the girls in the clubs and in their communities. It has been reported that in many cases the boys are more protective and were found to work ‘together’ in all the club activities with the girls. Both girls and boys together have protested to stop child marriages through the child helplines and by communicating with the local administration.

Challenges, lessons learned and next steps

The main challenge in 2020 was the closure of all schools due to COVID-19, with UNFPA having planned to implement all empowerment activities through the school system – which meant that these were interrupted until adaptations to the plans and strategies could be made. Eventually, online mechanisms were developed to reach adolescent girls virtually through mobile phones and social media; gatherings continued in open spaces in smaller groups, and printed communication materials were developed to support self-paced distance learning. However, having many of the activities conducted through online modalities created new challenges for the programme in terms of reaching the target audiences – such as having to consider continued internet connectivity in remote locations. Many of the adolescents did not have their

own phones; therefore, they are connected via their family or a neighbour’s mobile phone, which meant it took longer to conduct programmes. Sharing phones with family members was encouraged, while in other cases financial support was provided to the girls to buy a phone for their household.

An early rapid assessment of the situation regarding child marriage during the pandemic supported a lot of the decision-making in terms of revisions of design of interventions and their timelines. One important aspect emerging during the year, in terms of education, was that risk-informed design of interventions and research is critical to ensure smooth implementation, achieve expected outcomes and benefit from the investment, whatever the context. Flexibility in design facilitates quick analysis that supports adaptation in any situation or emergency as early as possible. The rapid assessment showed an increase in the risk of child marriage, and that around 50 per cent of the targeted adolescent girls were out of reach from the planned online interventions, hence at higher risk of child marriage and violence. This targeted group belongs to the most marginalized group in the country, as the national rate of possession of a mobile phone is over 95 per cent of households.

Despite the challenge with access to phones for some of the girls, where this challenge could be overcome, the use of digital and mobile platforms to engage adolescents turned out to be a cheaper and more effective approach as adolescents showed keen interest in these activities. Life-skills education through single-sex and mixed adolescent clubs – maintained even during the pandemic (including virtual safe spaces) – is an approach that aims to be gender-transformative as it works on changing the mindsets of boys and engaging them as allies for girls. Hiring social workers, strengthening child helpline facilities and linking with adolescents through the child rights facilitators also contributed to strengthening services and adolescents’ access to these services. This approach shows a lot of potential for scaling up. However, engaging with adolescents living with disabilities required new, innovative ways during the pandemic.

Keeping girls and their family members motivated to continue education after the schools reopen will be a big challenge, as multiple factors – such as learning loss, economic stability of the families, prevalence of marriage – will push for discontinuation.

In 2021, the programme aims to roll out the ‘Standardized Adolescent Empowerment Package’ across the country, following a cascading model for a multiplier impact. Integration of the package into the national curriculum will ensure that it reaches 10.5 million adolescents, 1,000 adolescent practitioners and actors at a grass-roots level.

The programme will also support the dissemination of the National Adolescent Strategy to all divisions and districts in the country.

In terms of life-skills education, the programme will enhance the scope of the 'Digital Application for Adolescents', incorporating more innovative features in the adolescent clubs (e.g., providing tablets, having IT support, buying talk time for internet connection), ensuring the integration of two-way communication and increasing the usefulness of the application for all users. Developing e-booklets on life-skills, violence against children, child marriage, child rights, etc., would be an added advantage for reaching more adolescents in remote locations, and opportunities will be sought to engage non-governmental partner organizations with diversified implementing plans to accomplish this. The programme will also support empowerment of adolescents with market-driven occupational and transferable skills and job placements.

Enhancing the family and community environment

Global evidence has shown the negative consequences of COVID-19 on gender equality – increasing vulnerabilities and risks that drive child marriage. However, the Global Programme in Bangladesh has continued to work to ensure an enabling environment through social and behaviour change communication and advocacy strategies. The community engagement initiatives in the targeted districts did slow down at the beginning of the year due to COVID-19. However, alternative modalities were quickly adapted. Behavioural, social and gender norms issues were largely covered by the national multimedia campaign and community engagement initiatives. Given the need for in-depth, participatory and iterative dialogue required to influence positive gender norms, including preventing child marriage during COVID-19, longer and extended work is expected over the years.

Among the key accomplishments in 2020 for the country programme are:

- 38 million adolescents and young people were reached through social media with key messaging on issues related to gender, and over 5.5 million of them engaged in online conversations on their rights;
- 660 child journalists from across the country and from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds were trained on reporting on child marriage, girls' empowerment, gender inequality and other gender issues during the year;
- The programme produced video documentary series, collected photo assets and organized round tables, featuring child marriage in light of COVID-19, and good practices such as the benefits of sports for girls' empowerment.

The national '#Raisethebeat4ECM'/'Dhol' campaign continued broadcasting existing public service announcements (PSAs) to foster public resistance against child marriage, reaching over 136 million people and engaging over 94 million through mass and social media in 2020. The second season of the adolescent-focused television drama 'Icchedana' ('On the Wings of Wishes'), complementing the communication campaign, has been broadcast on four television channels and social media platforms that reach more than 67 million people, and has engaged about 17 million people to date. An end-line study of the first season of the series measured its effectiveness and showed a significant increase in knowledge and positive attitudes around the issues covered. The community engagement initiatives using alternative platforms, such as interactive radio programmes, local media activities and adolescent radio listeners groups, reached over 260,000 people.

Another initiative to support an enabling environment reached 15,702 fathers and male family members linked to adolescent clubs in all zones. The fathers were sensitized on their daughters' schooling and on the importance of delaying marriage. With these interventions (including community-based child protection committee meetings and bimonthly parents meetings), they become more aware of issues related to violence against children and children's rights. The fathers also demonstrated a change in mindset related to the mobility of girls outside of their homes, to attend adolescent clubs and life skills-based education – for example, using bicycles. Some 510 gatekeepers and stakeholders in the communities were also provided training on the prevention of sexual harassment and child marriage, resulting in the active participation of male community members in dialogues on preventing sexual harassment against adolescent girls, engaging adolescent boys.

The Department of Women Affairs developed a guideline on community engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was used to engage 954 community stakeholders in community meetings to address child marriage in two target districts (Bogura and Jamalpur).

Partnerships with the Bangladesh Cricket Board and the Bangladesh Football Federation were scaled up during the year, in terms of their 'sports for development' activities for adolescent girls to ensure girls' empowerment and participation in outdoor sports. While this year's programme activities were initiated in January, training and country-wide tournaments were on hold until 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, multimedia documentation on the impact of the intervention on girls and their communities has been initiated, with several photography and video assignments conducted to gather evidence.

The Global Programme in Bangladesh has continued to work to ensure an enabling environment for girls through social and behaviour change communication and advocacy strategies.



Challenges, lessons learned and next steps

COVID-19 impacted community engagement initiatives for addressing behavioural and gender norms. The interpersonal communication and community dialogues were initially postponed, before being reinstated on a limited scale with safety measures in place tailored to the local context. Alternative modalities have been adopted, such as engaging people through community radio and adolescent radio listeners groups.

The use of U-Report for quick assessment polls on violence against children issues and social norms was widely taken up to adjust to digital communication and social mobilization activities, while social media was an effective communication channel in the pandemic context. A private sector partnership was a great support to address some specific issues, including online safety and prevention of violence against children and women.

In terms of social norms work, social and behaviour change interventions will continue to integrate issues and messages related to the emerging risk of violence against children and women, with efforts to strengthen the outreach to marginalized adolescent girls, including those living with disabilities, on social norms and children's rights issues. Communication and advocacy priorities for 2021 will further explore virtual modalities of generating conversations and disseminating content around child marriage, as COVID-19 restrictions may continue. In addition, the programme hopes to explore with its sports for development partners how training programmes with girls may be safely facilitated, or how the girls can be kept engaged, so that they are not negatively impacted by the long break in these vital activities that empower them and have a huge impact in the lives of particularly the most vulnerable and at risk.

Strengthening systems

During the year, the Global Programme maintained continuity in systems-strengthening interventions across the sectors of education, child protection and health.

The Global Programme provided support to the Government's efforts to continue education during the pandemic through remote learning platforms for more than 12 million secondary school students. Reaching the most marginalized, including girls, with regular, remote learning was a big challenge but addressed through low- or no-tech options. A key focus of the programme was efforts to keep girls in school (beyond COVID-19-induced closures) and ensuring that they would return and not be subjected to harmful practices such as child marriage. Thus, the programme focused on creating access to and an enabling environment for girls' education as a fundamental foundation for any transformative gender

norm change. Alternative learning programmes for the most marginalized out-of-school adolescents, especially girls, through informal apprenticeships have been developed, positioned as a key strategy to reach the national targets set for the 'Generation Unlimited' initiative. Adaptations to the alternative learning programmes are being considered to address the changed context and impact of COVID-19 on skills and employment.

In the light of COVID-19, a key strategy that was used for supporting adolescent girls' access to education and retention in school was preventing sexual harassment in and around school premises. Anti-sexual harassment committees were established in 122 secondary schools in target districts during the year. To strengthen referral linkages between services, the capacity-building of 432 community stakeholders (including locally elected district-level government officials and religious leaders) was supported in 17 subdistricts in target areas.

The Global Programme supported the Ministry of Education to coordinate with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare to establish a system to reach adolescent girls and provide a package of nutrition services in a sustainable manner through secondary schools, colleges and madrasas.

The Global Programme also supported the development of the Ministry of Education's school reopening guidelines, which covered safe operation with water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), as well as menstrual hygiene management, facilities and safe learning by addressing child protection concerns. As part of a gender-responsive approach to education, the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education was supported with implementation guidelines for WASH interventions in secondary schools.

In the health sector, the Global Programme supported 65,683 adolescent girls and 33,242 boys to receive adolescent-friendly sexual and reproductive health services. A module on psychosocial issues has been finalized to enable health service providers to detect and counsel adolescents to support their mental health. Accreditation guidelines were further endorsed in 2020 to ensure the quality of care of adolescent-friendly health services.

In Bhola District, a partnership with a local non-governmental organization was initiated to support the government health system to restore services and meet the needs of adolescents. A round-table discussion was also organized with Prothom Alo to bring the discussion on mental health to the national agenda for essential services within the primary health-care system. To further provide more comprehensive

counselling and referral services to adolescents, the adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights helpline was expanded and capacitated throughout 2020. A total of 16,305 adolescents and youth were counselled and referred to services in 2020 (data to November). In addition, live counselling sessions were conducted on Facebook twice a week from June 2020 to increase the awareness among adolescents and youth around mental health, sexual and reproductive health and rights, child marriage, gender-based violence and COVID-19. So far, a total of 35 live sessions have been conducted, with more than 421,000 views and engagement of more than 43,000 people.⁷

In terms of child protection, an additional 127 social workers were recruited and trained to reach a further 306,000 vulnerable girls and boys. The Global Programme supported the Department of Social Services in strengthening the toll-free child helpline, resulting in a 40 per cent increase in calls. In a related intervention, child protection case management reached 212,627 children (75,013 girls) in 2020. During

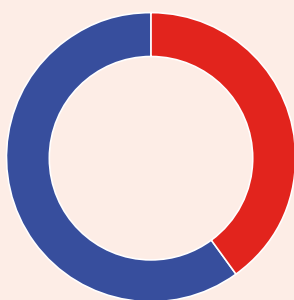
the year, the Government together with the child protection and education humanitarian clusters also supported the response to monsoon flooding that affected almost 445,000 children and 3,960 schools, with provision of non-food items and community-based messaging to prevent harmful practices.

Challenges, lessons learned and next steps

Schools have been closed since March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, none of the planned school-based activities could be implemented. Given such a long time of closure there is a possibility that existing WASH facilities in schools may require substantial repair and maintenance, which will require adequate funding.

Inclusive WASH facilities that address gender and disability issues will be built at scale by the Government with advocacy and technical support from the Global Programme. Guidelines for a 'three-star' approach, including a gender-responsive approach, have been developed, with implementing partners

The Global Programme supported the Department of Social Services in strengthening the toll-free child helpline, resulting in a **40 per cent** increase in calls. In a related intervention, child protection case management reached **212,627 children (75,013 girls)** in 2020.



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being oriented on the approach. Work with the Government will push for the three-star approach to be adopted in all schools on a phase-by-phase basis. Documentation of lessons learned will be prioritized for 2021 through convening at national level.

As part of the regular education programme, the Global Programme will continue to work with the National Curriculum and Textbook Board to develop gender-transformative skills-based curriculum, materials, pedagogy and assessment mechanisms to start national roll-out from January 2022. Through this effort, transferable skills and well-being (health, mental health, nutrition, adolescent sexual and reproductive health, menstrual hygiene management, and safety and security both on- and offline) of adolescents will be mainstreamed through the formal education system. Initiatives for creating and institutionalizing the alternative learning programme for the most marginalized out-of-school adolescents, especially girls, will also continue.

Demand generation for adolescent-friendly health services is still weak and needs further collaboration between schools and adolescent clubs. Implementation research on adolescent-friendly health services showed a link between promoting and creating awareness about these services at the community level and the effectiveness of the health services: key interventions for improving service utilization among adolescents included dissemination of adolescent-targeted messages during a school assembly, a special day at a health-care facility for adolescents, and courtyard sessions with parents to promote positive parenting. The interventions have minimized the gap between girls and boys in terms of utilizing health services and have now been scaled up to all targeted districts.

The quality of adolescent-friendly health services is, however, still a challenge, and an accreditation system has therefore been initiated for the Government to ensure adequate quality of the services. Another challenge is that mental health is still a relatively low prioritized area – further investments are required to identify and integrate services for psychosocial support, albeit technical assistance provided to develop and finalize the psychosocial training module for the Government. Inclusion of gender-based violence services within interventions is still a challenge and needs further attention.

A key lesson in terms of menstrual hygiene management in schools – coming from the support provided to implementing partners to install menstrual hygiene management facilities in eight secondary schools, including low-cost sanitary incinerators and

sanitary pits – is that this intervention can be replicated at scale. For sustainability, the intervention should be implemented directly through government partners.

In the health sector, technical assistance will be provided to the Government for the scale-up of adolescent-friendly health services in all 64 districts. Support will also be provided to integrate mental health services, such as psychosocial counselling services, within the adolescent-friendly health services. The COVID-19 context has raised a concern about using digital platforms for alternative services such as telemedicine, and support will be given to the development of a website and apps for connecting adolescents to digital services. Advocacy will continue nationally for prioritizing adolescent health – especially for vulnerable adolescents, sexual and reproductive health services, and gender-based violence services – through round-table discussions, social media, and by strengthening coordination between the ministries of health and education.

Addressing poverty

Two training centres of the Department of Women Affairs in target areas have been capacitated to provide computer training to adolescent girls. The trainers at the centres were trained to provide market-oriented updated computer training to adolescent girls to enable them to seek paid work without mobility restrictions.

The trained officials from the Department of Women Affairs will be able to enhance the computer training capacity of the training centres and include marginalized adolescent girls in training programmes. It is expected that adolescent girls with basic computer knowledge will be able to access more information and enhance their education and employment opportunities.

Challenges, lessons learned and next steps

There has been a lot of interest from adolescent girls and encouragement from families of adolescent girls to attend the computer training centres. Training officials at the centres were also keen to learn and impart new skills. A key lesson learned is that it is important to provide these practical life-enhancing skills along with comprehensive sexuality education to keep adolescent girls engaged and the community supportive of girls participating in empowerment programmes.

The programme will continue to support the Department of Women Affairs in providing high-quality economic empowerment programmes for vulnerable adolescent girls and their families, and continue to engage communities in innovative ways, within the

current COVID-19 situation, to create an enabling environment for the empowerment of adolescent girls. Further, the programme will initiate the design and piloting of a comprehensive skills package linked with jobs/employment for the most marginalized out-of-school adolescents, including widowed, married and divorced girls under the child marriage programme.

Facilitating supportive laws and policies

An analysis of longitudinal data on child marriage policy by the World Policy Analysis Center found that the rate of child marriage reduced by an average of 6 per cent in countries that enforced child marriage laws. The same study found that child marriage laws, combined with advocacy efforts for their enactment, foster improvements in gender-equitable attitudes.⁸ This is consistent with the hypothesis that gender egalitarian laws positively impact norms regarding women's equality and empowerment at national and subnational levels.⁹ However, governance also entails increased accountability of national systems to deliver sustained preventive and mitigation efforts. In Bangladesh, the Global Programme continued to strengthen robust systems and law enforcement, with a focus on the Marriage Restraint Act and the Children's Act.

The programme saw the development of a number of policy and strategy framework documents in 2020, including the National Adolescent Strategy – where ending child marriage is a key priority area – and the costed National Plan of Action for Adolescent Health Strategy (2020–2030), under the leadership of the Maternal and Child Health Services Unit of

the Directorate General of Family Planning. The programme also supported the Local Government Division of the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives in developing a national menstrual hygiene management strategy, including an implementation plan in line with existing policy documents – mainly the national hygiene promotion strategy – through consultations with key stakeholders within the Government, civil society and the private sector. The strategy was shared with the national working committee and a final draft will be submitted to the National Forum for Water Supply and Sanitation for approval. A key highlight of the Global Programme's efforts to strengthen national and subnational action plans and systems was the costing and the development of a monitoring and evaluation framework for the National Plan of Action to End Child Marriage. London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine was awarded the contract to assist UNFPA and UNICEF in developing the monitoring and evaluation framework for the national action plan, conducting its costing, and arranging workshops for the Government and relevant stakeholders on the monitoring of the plan.

Through the 'Strengthening Parliament's Capacity in Population and Development Issues' (SPCPD) project, parliamentarians have been engaged in national- and subnational-level interventions to end child marriage. As part of the SPCPD project, an advocacy plan has been developed that includes eliminating child marriage and gender-based violence. The Eliminating Child Marriage and Preventing Gender-Based Violence Sub-committee, formed under the SPCPD project, put forward some recommendations to the Parliamentary Standing



Committee on the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs to promote education as a means of preventing child marriage and empowering girls. One outcome was that the Parliamentary Standing Committee adopted the decision that the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs will work with the Ministry of Education to introduce compulsory education for poor female students in class 12 as a part of women's development and empowerment and to prevent child marriage. Moreover, thanks to interventions of the parliamentarians, local-level administrations included an agenda to end child marriage and promote maternal health in district- and upazila-level monthly coordination meetings. This ensures discussion, continuous follow-up and regular monitoring of the work. Parliamentarians also took the initiative to support community-based child protection committees in their local constituencies and support and encourage efforts by subdistrict-level committees to prevent child marriage and raise community awareness on girls' rights.

In the context of COVID-19, UNFPA and UNICEF ensured strong positioning of child marriage and gender-based violence in all internal United Nations plans, as well as the COVID-19 preparedness and response plans of the Government (namely the socioeconomic response framework, the Bangladesh Preparedness Plan and the COVID-19 education recovery plan). The national risk communication and community engagement strategy also addressed the heightened risk of child marriage and gender-based violence for adolescent girls during the pandemic, as well as the unique sexual and reproductive health needs of women and girls, including the need for gender-based violence services. This advocacy also made sure that the COVID-19 work was in line with the Government's various sectoral development frameworks within the context of the United Nations Sustainable Development Framework, in which child marriage is positioned as an outcome area under strategic priority 5 on gender equality and gender-based violence.

Challenges, lessons learned and next steps

Weak coordination among relevant ministries and a lack of understanding of child protection issues are basic challenges for the implementation of the Global Programme in Bangladesh. This is partly due to a lack of reliable data and evidence on adolescents for proper planning and programme design. Moving forward, efforts will focus on building a basic understanding of child protection among all actors working with and for adolescents, while simultaneously increasing collaboration among them. Strengthening the evidence base on the situation of adolescents is also very important.

A key lesson from the year is that the work with parliamentarians has shown that they have strong influence in their local constituencies and can therefore work with the administration and local people to bring about change. Capacitating parliamentarians to support the elimination of child marriage in their areas and to advocate for policy implementation can bring about positive change faster with enhanced political and administrative accountability.

The main priorities of the Global Programme in terms of creating an enabling environment for girls' empowerment will be to:

- Further work on the monitoring and evaluation framework together with a monitoring dashboard for the National Plan of Action to End Child Marriage;
- Build capacity of the Government and relevant stakeholders to implement guiding strategies, plans and frameworks;
- Implement a comprehensive capacity development programme in partnership with relevant ministries for the relevant stakeholders on the Child Marriage Restraint Act and the Rules 2018 (including training module development, training of trainers and a roll-out plan for the district level supported by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs);
- Roll-out of the menstrual hygiene management strategy with its complementary costing plan.

Generating and applying data and evidence

Progress was made under this outcome around supporting evidence generation to support policy and strategy decisions. Capacity-building and technical support are provided to the Government and civil society organizations to generate and use quality data and evidence on what works to end child marriage and support married girls. A key accomplishment during the year was the launch of the report 'Ending Child Marriage: A profile of progress in Bangladesh' on the Day of the Girl by the State Minister of the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs that will support an evidence-based approach to reaching marginalized adolescent girls. Following the dissemination of the findings from the report, the ministry used this new evidence to revise the national targets for ending child marriage for Bangladesh's 8th Five Year Plan. During the year, the regional study 'Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in South Asia', in which Bangladesh is a case study, was supported with technical assistance and the results were disseminated through a national webinar.

The Global Programme also undertook a number of other pieces of research during the year. For instance, implementation research on 'Keeping girls in school

to reduce child marriage in rural Bangladesh' was conducted to test a few standardized interventions through the education system to keep girls in school/learning and to try to measure education's impact on reducing child marriage. The research was adapted to COVID-19 and hence also generated evidence on the impact of COVID-19 on adolescent girls and their schooling. The findings from this implementation research will support the education system to introduce evidence-based interventions to keep adolescent girls in school/learning, which is expected to have a positive impact on reducing child marriage.

An end-line survey was undertaken to measure changes and outcomes that result from phase II of the education-entertainment campaign on selected adolescent-related knowledge, attitudes and practice areas, with a focus on child marriage. Overall, 1,163 households from Tangail, Nilphamari and Kushtia districts were targeted. The survey reflected a significant increase in knowledge and positive attitudes. For example, knowledge around the legal age of marriage increased by 8.8 per cent, there was a 10 per cent increase in knowledge on emotional changes in adolescent girls and boys, and a 5 per cent increase in knowledge on punishments for sexual harassment.

For better menstrual hygiene management programming for disadvantaged adolescent girls, a study was launched to examine the local market for menstrual hygiene management products, in terms of pricing and availability to match with the affordability, accessibility, suitability and desirability among adolescent girls in disadvantaged communities in Bangladesh. Data collection is completed and a draft report is expected to be available in 2021.

Based on a revised workplan to address the challenges and new context due to COVID-19, a rapid survey was undertaken on the impact of COVID-19 on targeted adolescent girls, with three phases of data collection being done so far. The assessment generated detailed information on the impact of COVID-19 on girls and thus supported revisions of research and data collection plans along with customization of interventions for alternative delivery during the pandemic.

Challenges, lessons learned and next steps

The COVID-19 lockdown and other restrictions delayed necessary consultations with government entities and halted non-essential evidence generation for months. However, with remote modalities and safety precautions/procedures put in place, the work was able to move ahead at a slower pace with accepted limitations. Due to the COVID-19 restrictions and initially slow adaptation of government officials to virtual working modalities, it was difficult to reach subdistrict-level government offices and to monitor progress of implementation during the pandemic.

With a three-month extension of the partnership with the Population Council, concluding the implementation research on keeping girls in school is the priority for 2021. Also in 2021, the focus is to revitalize work to gather case studies on interventions that work to end child marriage, featuring the girls and communities involved, and develop communication products on these interventions, including leaflets and infographics, which can be disseminated to amplify the findings of the evidence generation across communication channels.

The programme also plans to:

- Undertake quantitative research on regional trends in child marriage in Bangladesh, including risk and protective factors, and relevant structural changes, using available data from Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys;
- Do a qualitative study on the context of child marriage, including social and gender norms and other contextual factors influencing the practice;
- Develop guidelines for consideration in the designing of new survey tools, data collection and data analysis based on an analytical review of the existence of gender biases in existing surveys used in the country (e.g., the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, the national survey on coverage of basic social services, and other surveys and evaluations conducted by UNICEF in Bangladesh);
- Build a common understanding of social norms, gender norms and child marriage among stakeholders, including the Government, through workshops, and continue to support evidence generation to inform existing data gaps and advocacy asks.

Partnerships and working as one

In 2020, the Global Programme engaged 304 partners across regional and country offices – an increase from 249 partners in 2019. UNFPA and UNICEF in Bangladesh worked with 35 partners during the year. Of these, 9 are government bodies (across the sectors of, for example, health, education, gender, social protection and justice), 17 civil society organizations and 6 media institutions. The Bangladesh Football Federation, the Bangladesh Scouts and the Bangladesh Cricket Board are youth-led organizations engaged by the programme. A lesson from the year was the importance of diversifying the pool of partners to ensure flexibility and sustainability of programme implementation, also during challenging times.

The close partnership between UNFPA and UNICEF in the country continued during the year, with enhanced results as a result – for example, the joint development of learning and training tools and their planned roll-out has helped to produce high-quality products that are embedded in the systems of the Government through joint advocacy and technical support. One example is the standardized adolescent empowerment package, which is a common package to be used by all adolescent clubs supported by UNFPA and UNICEF, with master trainers coming from clubs supported by both agencies as well as the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs project directors. In 2020, some 55 potential master trainers were engaged by the programme, led by the Child Protection team in UNICEF Bangladesh. The two agencies also worked closely on the completion of the National Adolescent Strategy, which was developed in a thorough process that included consultations with diverse partners and networks of UNFPA and UNICEF, resulting in a product of solid quality.

In terms of evidence generation, a memorandum of understanding has been signed between the two agencies for a joint institutional contract with London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine on data, evidence and research, to ensure enhanced technical support to the institution for all the planned deliverables and their wide dissemination and use. UNFPA and UNICEF are also jointly working with the Girls Not Brides secretariat and the national non-governmental organization Manusher Jonno Foundation to do a rapid analysis of the child marriage situation during COVID-19, which will help in jointly assessing the work of the two agencies and adapting it to the new context. The findings will further support joint advocacy for an evidence-based 8th fiscal year plan and the new United Nations development framework for Bangladesh. Joint advocacy was also conducted around the launch of the new data on child marriage in Bangladesh in 2020, led by the State Minister of the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs.

The plan for 2020 was to jointly develop a common approach and implementation plan for each of the outcome areas of the Global Programme but due to the focus on COVID-19 this was not possible. In 2021, both organizations will prioritize this within the newly emerging context of the country.

Due to the nature of 2020 and the focus on the COVID-19 public health response, there was little focus and time for strengthening the capacities of the partners and internal staff to further enhance the implementation of interventions to end child marriage. In 2021 this will be another important area of focus.

Communicating the need to end child marriage

The Global Programme aims to ensure the participation of children, adolescents and youth in the development of programme strategies, in advocacy and communication, and in research initiatives – to make sure that their voices are heard and taken into account. In terms of communication, the Day of the Girl and linked advocacy events specifically provided various ways and platforms to lift girls' voices in 2020. For example, UNICEF Youth Ambassador Raba Khan published a letter to her teenage self on Instagram.¹⁰ Two live events during the year focused on understanding adolescent girls' perspectives as key actors in shaping the agenda to

eliminate child marriage, including key investments and support required to set girls on a path towards empowerment. A round-table event with child journalists also took place focused on the rise in child marriage due to the pandemic.¹¹

Another example of lifting girls' voices was the participation of Nusrat Islam Trisha, a child journalist, in the UNICEF-produced video series 'Coping with COVID-19', a global production that ran over five weeks of the summer in 2020, showing the lives and experiences of adolescent girls during the pandemic.

A local follow-up documentary series, also featuring Trisha, is currently airing in the country. Trisha is among the child journalists supported by the Global Programme. During the year, news reports on the state of child marriage in the country and on the impact of school closures on child marriage were published on the child journalist platform of bdnews24.com.¹²

In terms of social media, the programme continued to ensure year-round communication on child marriage across the platforms and accounts of UNFPA and UNICEF, with messaging in line with communication for development interventions. Specific messages on gender and child marriage in the context of COVID-19 were also produced and shared.¹³ The programme further published a press release linked to the release of the new data on child marriage from Bangladesh during the

year,¹⁴ and published a story on the impact of COVID-19 on child marriage from the lens of the child helpline.¹⁵ For the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence (25 November–10 December), UNFPA conducted an art competition with the partner organization Mukthi, where girls from Cox's Bazar were asked to draw their bright futures as they see them.¹⁶

To document good practices and the impact of the sports-for-development interventions to end child marriage, a series of photo and video documentation activities were initiated in 2020, including capturing photos, videos and case studies on girls from vulnerable and at-risk communities who have been integrated into the national-level training and tournament programmes for football. These are currently pending review and further processing before publishing.

Summary of output indicator performance (2020)

Indicator	Target	Result
Indicator 1111: Number of adolescent girls (aged 10–19) who actively participated in life-skills or comprehensive sexuality education interventions in programme areas	209,086	88,770
Indicator 1121: Number of girls (aged 10–19) supported by the programme to enrol and/or remain in primary or secondary school	N/A	N/A
Indicator 1211: Number of boys and men actively participating in group education/dialogues that address harmful masculinities and gender norms	260,029	44,529
Indicator 1221: Number of individuals (boys, girls, women and men) who participate in group education/dialogue sessions on consequences of and alternatives to child marriage, the rights of adolescent girls, and gender equality	594,037	11,301,743
Indicator 1222: Number of individuals (boys, girls, women and men) reached by mass media (traditional and social media) messaging on child marriage, the rights of adolescent girls, and gender equality	8,000,000	38,497,147
Indicator 1223: Number of local actors (e.g., traditional, religious and community leaders) with meaningful participation in dialogues and consensus-building to end child marriage	26,722	13,510
Indicator 1231: Number of civil society organizations newly mobilized in support of challenging social norms and promoting gender equality by the Global Programme	0	5
Indicator 2121: Number of primary/secondary/non-formal schools in programme areas providing quality gender-friendly education that meets minimum standards	50	0
Indicator 2131: Number of service delivery points in programme areas providing quality adolescent-responsive services (health, child protection/gender-based violence) that meet minimum standards	572	182
Indicator 2211: Number of partnerships (both formal and informal) established to deliver adolescent-responsive social protection, poverty reduction and economic empowerment programmes and services	1	8
Indicator 3111: Number of policies or legal instruments addressing child marriage drafted, proposed or adopted at national and subnational levels with Global Programme support	3	0
Indicator 3211: Number of pieces of evidence and knowledge that focus on what works to end child marriage generated	7	4
Indicator 3212: Number of pieces of evidence and knowledge generated that apply a gender analysis	N/A	N/A
Indicator 3221: Number of South–South cooperation (conferences, expert visits, peer consultations, study tours, communities of practice) supported	N/A	N/A

N/A, not applicable.

ENDNOTES

- 1 United Nations Children's Fund, *Ending Child Marriage: A profile of progress in Bangladesh*, UNICEF, New York, October 2020, <<https://data.unicef.org/resources/ending-child-marriage-a-profile-of-progress-in-bangladesh/>>, accessed 17 August 2021.
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- 5 *Ending Child Marriage: A profile of progress in Bangladesh*.
- 6 Malhotra, A., and S. Elnakib, '20 Years of the Evidence Base on What Works to Prevent Child Marriage: A systematic review', *Journal of Adolescent Health*, vol. 68, no. 5, 2021, pp. 847–862, <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.11.017>>.
- 7 See some of the online counselling sessions with adolescents and youth here:
 - Anxiety during COVID-19: <www.facebook.com/konnect.edu.bd/photos/a.1855393954781954/2658661244455217/?type=3&theater>
 - Gender-based violence: <www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3357996747570232>
 - Maintaining relationships: <www.facebook.com/watch/?v=190474892347907>, <www.facebook.com/watch/?v=307341040397700>
 - Mental health (depression): <www.facebook.com/watch/?v=284394119429531>
 - Life-skills: <www.facebook.com/watch/?v=879418185914937>
 - Self-esteem: <www.facebook.com/konnect.edu.bd/videos/3583264121702807/?v=3583264121702807>, <www.facebook.com/konnect.edu.bd/videos/709045933248863/?v=709045933248863>
 - Work after education: <www.facebook.com/konnect.edu.bd/videos/1516031368587661/?v=1516031368587661>
 - Changes during puberty: <www.facebook.com/konnect.edu.bd/videos/836411700221714/?v=836411700221714>, <www.facebook.com/konnect.edu.bd/videos/3080796788636228/?v=3080796788636228>
 - Misconceptions about COVID-19: <www.facebook.com/watch/?v=580624535949418&extid=jC4YYJ5pzBFqaoWv>
- 8 Omidakhsh, N., and J. Heymann, 'Improved Child Marriage Laws and Its Association with Changing Attitudes and Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence: A comparative multi-national study', *Journal of Global Health*, vol. 10, no. 1, June 2020, art. 010707, <<https://doi.org/10.7189/jogh.10.010707>>.
- 9 Harper, Caroline, et al., *Gender, Power and Progress: How norms change*, Advanced Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms and Overseas Development Institute, London, December 2020, <www.alignplatform.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/align_-_gender_power_and_progress-singles-digital.pdf>, accessed 17 August 2021.
- 10 <www.instagram.com/p/CGNatIzDqRH/>.
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- 12 See some of the coverage here: <<https://hello.bdnews24.com/onvachokhe/article21608.bdnews>>; <<https://hello.bdnews24.com/amarkotha/article21329.bdnews>>.
- 13 See some of the social media messaging: <www.facebook.com/unfpabangladesh/photos/3833018810097003/>; <www.facebook.com/unfpabangladesh/photos/3682653325133553/>; <www.facebook.com/unfpabangladesh/photos/3767591706639714/>; <www.facebook.com/unfpabangladesh/photos/3764761380256080/>; <www.facebook.com/unfpabangladesh/photos/3764761210256097/>; <www.facebook.com/unfpabangladesh/photos/3581333445265542/>; <www.facebook.com/unfpabangladesh/photos/3583523011713252/>; <www.facebook.com/unfpabangladesh/photos/3589177594481127/>; <www.facebook.com/unfpabangladesh/photos/3649324081799811/>; <www.facebook.com/unfpabangladesh/photos/3582724181793135/>.
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- 15 Chowdhury, Iftikhar Ahmed, 'Pandemic-induced Poverty Pushing up Child Marriage', United Nations Children's Fund, New York, 13 September 2020, <www.unicef.org/bangladesh/en/stories/pandemic-induced-poverty-pushing-child-marriage>, accessed 17 August 2021.
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ACT NOW:
Accelerating gender equality
by eliminating child marriage
in a pandemic

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